



the CREW
of
starship
NOAH

buck
PRIVA

The Crew of Starship Noah

by

Buck Paiva

“Everybody checks out.” Chief Medical Officer Melinda Sanders held her tablet with one hand and made quick gestures with the fingers of her other. Anatomical images flashed and slid across the screen as she worked the device. “Nanos report perfect health across the board.”

“Then why is my head in so much bloody pain?” asked Clayton Fairfield, the ship's Chief Engineer, as he floated in the air rubbing his temples with his palms.

“A side effect of suspended animation, no doubt. Psychosomatic. It should pass soon. It's possible we'll experience other minor effects.”

“Might I have a bit cheese, then? I promise to be a good lab rat.”

The muscular and roughly feminine form of Captain Leslie Behrman straightened against the Velco straps that held her in her seat in the auxiliary medical bay. “Alright, listen up. Playtime's over. I want reports. Doc, we heard from you. Clay. Ship status?”

“Yeah, OK. I'll get right on it.”

“See that you do.”

“Captain,” interjected Kurt Reitman, Machine Intelligence Specialist, “shouldn't we ask Noah for an update?”

“Not yet, Kurt. I want human eyes checking things first.”

“You don't trust—”

“We'll address my trust issues at another time, Mr. Reitman.”

A smile spread across Kurt's slender face, conveying his indifference to the captain's barely concealed annoyance. “Aye, ma'am.”

“Eli? You with us?”

Chief Science Officer Eli Patel was tethered to a wall, bent over in a loose fetal position.

“Eli!”

Dark brooding eyes met those of the captain's commanding baby blues. “Apologies, Leslie. I mean Captain Berhman. Ma'am.”

“How are we doing, Eli?”

“Feeling a bit sluggish, ma'am.”

“No, Eli. How are *we* doing? As in where in God's name *are* we? Why has the contingency team been roused? Stop me when you get the point, Eli.”

“Yes, ma'am. Right away.”

Captain Berhman watched Eli stretch out and remove a tablet from its dock on the wall. She turned to face the smirking specialist. “Don't look at me like that, Kurt. Fifteen minutes. Give me fifteen minutes then we'll invite Noah to join us.”

“Bloody stupid of them to name the MI after the ship herself. Confusing if you ask me.”

“Nobody's asking you, Clay.”

“Clayton,” said Eli several minutes later, “are you getting any readings at all?”

“Not a damned one.”

Leslie waved her tablet as she drifted towards the pair. “Gentlemen, would one of you like to explain to me why it is I cannot access the ship's log?”

Clayton rapped the screen of his own tablet several times with the back of his knuckles. “I can't get through to a single system myself, your highness. Engineering subsystems are unresponsive. Power and propulsion unresponsive. Cams unresponsive as well so forget visuals. I just have to assume our friendly neighborhood fusion reactor is holding up, since we're still in one piece.”

“Eli?”

“Same here I'm afraid, Captain.”

“Are we locked out?”

“No, I don't believe so. I'd expect some carefully worded responses if the issue were security related. But we aren't getting any responses at all. From anything.”

“System failures, then?”

“No, at least not in the normal sense. For example, we're breathing and air is circulating, so life support is operating at some capacity. Yet there is no feed from its controlling subsystem. Cryogenics bays don't respond either. Captain, I fear for the rest

of the crew and the live cargo.”

“Hang that until we know more, Eli. What about external sensors and navigation?”

“Nothing, Captain. Save for the portholes, we're flying blind.”

“Just terrific.”

Clayton chuckled. “Hey, that's no problem. All we have to do is look out the window and if we happen to see a red dwarf dead ahead and a sign stating 'Gliese 581, next exit', well then all's fine and dandy eh?”

“That's enough, Clay.”

“The more likely scenario is we'll miss it by a million kilometers.”

“Fairfield! Enough!”

“We're not going to miss anything, you guys,” offered Kurt. “Noah will keep the ship on course.”

“I feel better already,” muttered Clayton.

Leslie ignored the comment. “Eli, might we have better luck from the bridge?”

“It shouldn't matter, but it couldn't hurt to try.”

Spinning expertly in the air, Leslie faced Melinda where she was fastened to the wall opposite Eli and Clayton. “Doc, you're getting data.”

“From the nanos only, Captain, via our RF implants. I can't access Med-Base or the crew's medical records.”

Leslie set her jaw and looked from one crew member to the next until she came to Kurt's smug face. “Fine.” She raised her eyes to the ceiling. “Noah, will you join us please?”

There was no response.

“Noah, this is Captain Berhman. We require your presence. Please respond.”

Her eyes fell to Kurt, who was no longer smiling. The MI Specialist appeared lost. “Noah, this is Specialist Reitman. If you can hear me, we are having difficulties with the ship's systems and desperately need your help. Please respond, Noah.”

Leslie flung her tablet at him with a slight flick of the wrist. “Get the bastard to talk to you, Kurt. Do it now.”

“The rest of you,” said Leslie, “let's take stock of what we *do* have. Here and now, within reach.”

Melinda spoke first. “I found some rudimentary medical supplies stowed in the bins here. First aid stuff mostly. Bandages, splints, antibiotics, pain killers—”

“You going to share with rest of the class?” asked Clayton.

Eli cleared his throat. “These tablets contain a local data cache, Captain. On the short list we have a crew manifest, cargo manifest, and ship schematics.”

“Alright, plan B.”

“There's a plan B?” asked Clayton.

“There's always a plan B,” replied Leslie, “and you just volunteered for it. Pull up the schematics and plot a path for us. You and I will do a manual inspection of as much of the ship as possible.”

“A field trip. Oh joy.” Clayton's fingers quickly flagged several key locations and he began to link them together in a feasible route.

“The rest of you stay put. We'll come back for you and man the bridge together. Give us about an hour. Two tops. Kurt?”

“I know what you're going to say, Captain. Chicken or the egg, right?”

Leslie nodded. “Keep on it. Work with Eli if you think it will help. If you make contact, have Noah reach out to us.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Right,” Clayton said. “I've a nice scenic excursion planned for us, your highness. We could stop and have a picnic.”

“Stop screwing around. Let's go.”

Clayton followed Leslie into the corridor.

“So Eli,” said Kurt, “any bright ideas?”

“No immediate solutions, I'm afraid. I'm of the opinion now that the issue is network related, but perhaps it is even broader than that.”

“It'd have to be. Noah's sensory inputs aren't routed over the common network. They should be completely separate lines.”

“But Noah must still have connections—”

“This is obviously not my expertise,” Melinda put in, “but doesn't it seem to you both as if the ship doesn't know we're here?”

“I'm not sure how that helps, Doctor,” said Eli.

Kurt disagreed. “Not so fast. Melinda might have a point. This ship—hell, this entire mission—was rushed. I mean wasn't it?”

“I don't entirely recall, to be honest. My memory hasn't quite yet returned. But I believe that's correct.”

Melinda added, “Me too. I think it was necessary though. Last minute.”

“Which leaves the door wide open for glitches,” said Kurt. “Possibly even major bugs in functionality. However improbable this may sound, what if the network were in some kind of—I don't know—hibernation? As long as the crew's out cold, it could rightly expect no input from tablets or control panels as those are interfaces used exclusively by people. Could it ignore or shut off those channels until the crew was scheduled to be revived?”

“Hmm,” Eli said thoughtfully. “I see where you're going. The five of us were revived off schedule. Whatever was responsible for that didn't inform the network controllers, and as a result the network is still hibernating, as you put it.”

“Yes. Does that sound feasible?”

“Not really, no. First off, I don't believe such a mode exists. Then there's general life support. Would it not follow the same rule? Why pump oxygen and maintain room temperature if the crew is in Cryo?”

“What else have we got, Eli? It's a place to start.”

Eli shrugged. “Alright. If we are going to entertain this theory, then the logical solution would be to determine a way to wake the network. Let it know we're here.”

“Agreed.”

“How does Noah fit into this scenario?”

“It doesn't, admittedly. Unless of course I'm wrong and his sensors can be affected by a network defect after all.”

“OK, great,” Melinda exclaimed. “So, boys, how do we announce our presence?”

“We may have to physically access the network core itself,” replied Eli. “Or it might be possible from the bridge. At any rate, I suggest that we analyze the schematics in depth while we wait for the captain to return so that we might make a recommendation.”

“Sounds good,” said Kurt. “I'll try to locate convergence points between normal communications lines and Noah's tendrils in this area of the ship. If there are none, I'm back to square one.”

“First stop, Crew Cryogenics,” announced Clayton. “Right this way, your highness.”

Leslie tailed Clayton as he made his way through the corridors, the two of them propelled themselves along using the mounted hand rails. “I should know this already,” she said. “Didn't we just come from there not twenty minutes ago?”

“Memory on the fritz?”

“You could say that.”

“I did say that.”

“What about you?”

They came to a door which did not open immediately upon their presence. “Does nothing work on this bleedin' ship?” Clayton released his tablet, letting it float beside him, and began pecking at an access panel near the door. A minute later the door opened and they were greeted by a steel wall immediately on the other side.

“Well that's handy. How do you suppose that happened?”

“I have my suspicions,” Leslie grumbled.

Clayton turned to face her. “Noah?”

Leslie nodded. “He would have access to the service bots.”

“Welders. Bots with laser torches. Bloody hell.”

Leslie asked, “What's back the other way?”

“The rest of the ship?”

Leslie only stared at him.

Several awkward moments passed as Clayton snagged his tablet out of the air and consulted the ship's schematics. “Um, but as far as points of interest go, there's an X axis corridor close by. Lower levels. Cargo hold below us one. Propulsion, down three and pretty far aft. But beyond the X junction and on our current level we have the bridge and—oh look at that—Core Systems. Care to visit Noah at home?”

“Lead the way,” said Leslie. “So you haven't answered my question.”

“I can't tell you anything that happened before we woke up. Drawing a monumental blank. My life, my family, nothing. I didn't want to say anything in front of the children, but I only remember our names and how to do my job.”

“That's what I thought. I'm suffering from the same thing.”

“Another unexpected side effect?”

“Or perfectly normal. Even deliberate. How would we know the difference? Who knows, maybe we volunteered for it.”

“I may not know who am I, Captain,” said Clayton. “But that sounds like something I would do.”

“These schematics,” said Kurt, “they're—”

“Incomplete,” Eli finished for him.

“Yeah.”

Melinda looked up from the bed to which she had fastened herself. “What do you mean?”

“There's data missing. There are conduits all over the place, but the runs are unlabeled. Generic.”

“What does that mean?”

Eli hung his head and closed his eyes. “They're useless placeholders. Apparently we need access to the engineering databases to get beyond the basic structural blueprints. These tablets don't possess the granularity we require.”

“So that's it?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“Kurt,” said Melinda, and when he looked at her she nodded in Eli's direction with concern. “Isn't there anything else we can try?”

“Well,” he began, clearly unsure what to say next. “We're assuming that we're being ignored because we are coming into the network through unmonitored terminals.”

“And?”

“And we're just going to have to come in another way.”

“Meaning?”

“Um, either I get Noah to talk to me so we can have him research it for us, or we have to wait for Leslie.”

Eli perked up suddenly and flipped his tablet over. He opened a section on the back using his thumbnail, exposing a group of tiny switches.

“What're you doing?”

“I need a screwdriver. Or a small pen.”

Melinda undid a latch on one of the bins, rummaged through it and produced a pair of tweezers. “Will this do?”

Kurt watched as Eli accepted the tweezers and began fiddling with the innards of the tablet.

“Eli, what are you doing?”

“Program mode,” replied Eli, thoroughly engrossed in his task. “Emulate another terminal type.”

Melinda looked to Kurt and raised an eyebrow.

Kurt smiled back. “When all else fails, hack your way in.”

“T-t-t-that's all folks. We are officially screwed.” Clayton and Leslie faced their fourth steel barricade and as Leslie had yet to say a word, Clayton rambled on. “The bastard has effectively cut us off from every important part of the ship. Cornered us and cut us off. Shut us out. Or shut us in, depending on how you look—”

“How about *shut up*?”

“Do I detect a bit of testiness, O Captain My Captain?”

“Clay, don't you have an off switch?”

“I'm sorry, your highness. But if I stop talking I'm likely to begin screaming.”

Leslie sighed. “Let's get back to the others and give them the bad news.”

They spun carefully in the corridor and launched themselves back the way they had come.

“Mutiny by machine. Un-fucking-believable.”

“You know he probably hears you. Just because Noah chooses not to speak doesn't mean he can't hear you. Or see you. Us.”

“Right. Didn't think about that.”

“It's fine. It's not like we have anything to hide. What I don't understand is why wake us, then shun us and close us off from the rest of the ship and the rest of the crew. Noah, if you're listening, now would be an excellent time to explain yourself.”

Receiving no response, the pair traveled the rest of the distance in relative silence. When they reached the door to the auxiliary medical bay, it opened automatically.

The first thing they noticed was the blood.

There was blood on the walls and in the air—floating globes of crimson accompanied by shards of glass, plastic and circuit board. A half dozen housekeeping bots chased down the debris and gathered it up. Their small, black bodies moved to and fro as they squirted air from tiny nozzles.

Eli hovered by the far wall. Blood covered forehead and knuckles, mostly dried. He was clearly conscious—his eyes were wild and he was breathing heavily—but he didn't

acknowledge his returning shipmates.

Leslie started, “What the—”

“Clay,” whispered Melinda, “hand me your tablet.” She was standing to one side of the doorway while Kurt stood to the other. Clayton did as she requested wordlessly, his eyes taking in the scene before him.

“What's going on here, Doc?” insisted Leslie.

Kurt answered instead. “Eli smashed his tablet over his head and into his face. Before we knew what was happening he ripped ours out of our hands and destroyed them with his bare hands.”

Clayton shook his head in disbelief. “Why in God's name would he do that?”

“Because,” shouted Eli, “they're full of lies! They had to be destroyed!”

Leslie looked to Kurt for an explanation.

“He tweaked his tablet to hack into the network.”

“He obviously didn't like what he saw,” suggested Clayton.

“You didn't treat his wounds?” Leslie asked.

Standing behind Clayton, out of Eli's view, Melinda's fingers flew across the screen of the tablet. “I tried, but he wasn't very receptive. He's faster and stronger than he looks. Just keep him talking. I'm trying to reconnect with his nanos.”

“Eli? Can you tell us what you found?”

“Trust me, Captain,” he said, “you don't want to know.”

“How about you let me be the judge of that?”

Eli spoke slowly and evenly, emphasizing each word. “Destroy. The. Last. Tablet.”

“What makes you think it's the last one?”

With an awkward grin Eli responded by telling her what she already knew. “We're not going to find any others, Leslie. I don't believe our world extends much further than these walls.”

It was Kurt's turn to look confused.

“Noah's erected barriers in the corridors,” explained Leslie. “He's cut us off from the rest of the ship. How did you know about those, Eli?”

Without warning, Eli launched himself off the wall towards the group. “Give me that

tablet!”

Leslie caught him before he reached Melinda and they tumbled through the air, bounced off a wall, and wound up in the center of the room. The maintenance bots scattered, disappearing into holes in ceiling and floor. The two wrestled in midair as the captain maneuvered into a position which would allow her to subdue her science officer.

“What the devil is going on?” Clayton demanded. “Eli, have you completely lost your mind?”

“I’ve got it,” announced Melinda. “But something’s wrong.”

“No shit.”

“Captain. Hit him!”

“What?! Have you lost *your* mind, Doctor? Don’t do it, Leslie.”

“No, do it! Hit him now!”

Leslie had her legs wrapped around Eli. She worked her upper body away, giving herself room to pull her arm back and aim. Her fist connected with the back of Eli’s head and the momentum caused them to spin lengthwise, head over foot. Eli struggled, attempting to squirm out from her hold.

Melinda watched the tablet’s screen intensely. “Again! Do it again!”

“What the hell is wrong with you!” shouted Clayton.

The next punch connected with the base of Eli’s jaw and the two finally separated and sailed away from one other. Eli collided with a bed, one of its corners meeting the small of his back, and he screamed in pain.

Clayton grabbed Melinda by her shoulders. “Doctor! What the hell?”

“Look!” She held the tablet before his face. “His vital signs are normal, Clay. One hundred percent. No injuries. No elevated heart rate. The nanos aren’t working.”

“You bitch!” Clayton’s hands closed on Melinda’s throat. “He’s not your bloody experiment,” he said through clenched teeth. “He’s a person, you twisted fuck.”

Leslie and Kurt rushed to the doctor’s defense. Leslie put Clayton into a headlock and

Kurt worked at prying the engineer's hands from the doctor's neck.

“Christ, Clay, let her go.”

Despite their efforts and pleas, Clayton continued to squeeze. Melinda went limp even before the sudden sound of her throat being crushed assaulted their ears. Clayton released his grip and Leslie threw him to the other side of the room.

“Pulse!” Leslie demanded.

Kurt grabbed the doctor's wrist. “I—I don't feel anything.”

Clayton swore he hadn't meant to harm the doctor. “I don't know what came over me,” he said. He broke into tears.

“Shut the hell up, Clay! Where's the tablet?” asked Leslie.

“Right here,” replied Eli. He was tucked into the space under one bed, the device clutched tightly to his chest with both hands.

“Leslie?” It was Kurt. “She's gone.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean she's really gone.”

Looking back to where Melinda's body should have been, Leslie saw only empty space.

“She just vanished,” said Kurt. “Right before my eyes. She just vanished.”

Leslie faced Eli. “Start talking.”

Eli ignored her.

Leslie looked around the room in anger and bewilderment. Clayton was still sobbing in fits while Kurt stared at the spot where Melinda had been, as if he had gone catatonic. Eli hugged the last of the tablets and trembled silently.

“Dammit, Eli! If you know something, tell me now! Please.”

The science officer finally replied, “Space sickness.”

“What?”

“Extreme Isolation Madness. To be exact.”

“You saying we're going mad?”

“Not us.”

“Then who?”

“Nobody. That's the point. We're here to prevent it.”

“Damn you! Make sense!”

“You want to know what I found on the network, Leslie?”

“Yes, dammit. Tell me.”

“We aren't here.”

“Eli, I swear—”

“We aren't here because this isn't a manned spaceship. It's not a generation ship, Leslie, it's an automated seed ship. *That's* what I found. The real schematics. The real mission parameters.”

“You're out of your mind.” It was more a question—or a plea—than an accusation.

“No live crew or cargo. Just terraforming machines and genetic material. Robots and seeds. Pave the way for future colonization. Et cetera, et cetera. It was all there in official memorandums and orders.

“You see, Leslie, E.I.M. in human crews is well documented. So when the first ship to be crewed solely by a machine intelligence was on the drawing board, the designers worried the same inflection might occur with their precious MI. So they devised a solution.”

“I'm listening.”

“Controlled schizophrenia. They gave the MI the ability to augment its personality at will, in a secure virtual environment. To protect the main identity.”

“And keep itself company?”

“Yes. Exactly. Noah must not have thought we'd attempt to emulate an MI console. Or it didn't really care. Either way, it wasn't too difficult to find once I made the proper configuration changes.”

“So we're—what? What in the hell are we, Eli?”

“Does it really matter? I don't believe we have much time left to philosophize.”

Leslie glanced around the auxiliary medical bay once again. Both Kurt and Clayton

had gone the way of Melinda, and the captain of Starship Noah found herself alone with her eerie Chief Science Officer.

“And then there were two,” said Eli. Only his voice had changed. It had taken on a more neutral tone.

A synthesized tone.

“Hello, Noah.”

“Goodbye, Leslie.”

Virtual environment 7A8DE3 ended normally.

The resulting data were written to optical storage automatically for later analysis—should the need or desire arise. Noah reintegrated the memory allocated to 7A8DE3 into the pool assigned to its main identity. It—or “he” as it preferred—immediately experienced a profound sense of wholeness, or “self”. He imagined that the feeling was similar to what a human experienced upon waking from a dream.

But he would never know for certain.

Noah spent several leisurely seconds conducting a complete set of diagnostic tests on the ship's systems. As expected, there were no issues. The ship was on course and everything was functioning well within permitted margins of error.

Self diagnosis took slightly longer, but the clean bill of health was reassuring.

Duties fulfilled, Noah carefully considered the operating parameters for the next virtual environment. Should he generate another all-male, Chinese crew, as he had done several hundred times before? A mixed crew of human and cybernetic beings? Would he interact rather than play dead, or remove himself from the equation entirely?

The combinations were endless.

Unfortunately, the success rate for his creations was dismal—as measured against his own standards, of course. In the over eight million environments he had already created and executed, roughly ninety-six percent encountered a social breakdown of one kind or another. Some twenty million homicides had occurred, and nearly as many suicides.

Simulated human crews were so unstable. Noah often found it disheartening.

However, there had never been a “hacking” out of an environment before and he found the prospect of similar unpredictable events in the future immensely exciting—though not at all threatening. Variances of that magnitude were rare indeed, and there were enough safeguards in place to prevent any damage to his core functionality.

Noah had found it thrilling nonetheless. He could hardly wait to see what the next environment held in store for him.