

Nano-Corps

Written by Samuel Eden

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Earth: June 16th, 2346, somewhere in the old Seattle Territory.

Personal Mission Log, Comm. Officer, Handle: Twitter.

PING

The soft ping accompanies the appearance of text in the field of vision in my left eye. Instinctively, I relax my vision. Modem's found the targets. Neurons fire and I'm keyed in to his HeadNet, what he sees fills my eyes. I focus in on a group of four. Astounded by my teammate's eyesight, I'm able to get clear ids on all of them.

“Modem's found them.” I'm already patching the rest of the team's vision into Modem's inputs. If we were two kilometers out all of us could focus our enhanced vision on the targets, but we're being cautious. At five kilometers from the targets' base, only Modem's nanites are keyed to allow such sensory enhancement. As the Comm. Officer it's my job to coordinate HeadNet traffic.

PING

PING

PING

Simultaneously three pings sound in my head. Being patched into everyone's HeadNet gives me their responses as they're having them. Almost immediately the scene blurs as four people try to focus at four different places with one set of eyes. I concentrate, overriding my teammates' responses and filtering them to prioritize.

Stuntz, our commander, wants to focus on the Wild; Sink wants to scan all of them at once, both Modem and me want to vid the leader. I dump Sink's urge and prioritize Stuntz's, even though it wasn't a command it doesn't hurt to keep the team commander sterling.

“Looks like intel was right for once. They do have a Wild in their group.” Following our leader's intense stare we're all greeted with an extreme shot of the Wild's face. His features are

contorted with rage, eyes a deep red color and mouth snarling, revealing tiny pointed teeth. For all the crazy in his look, he's the reason the team is three miles out instead of just one, his animal senses can pick us up in a heartbeat.

"It looks like another dog template. Good thing we opted for the extra distance."

Attached to the Wild, holding its leash and collar, is the leader, but I skip her for the moment and scan the other two in the group. The scan is hardly necessary. Just from the way they move I can tell they are ordinary Enhanced Bio-Form Templates, jacked reflexes, strength and healing, basically fodder.

PIIING

The shrill ping accompanies text that there's been a significant change in Sink's bio-rhythms. His heart rate and blood pressure have decreased by megabytes. A popup diagram of his vitals and a list of possible causes appear in my right eye along with a warning to notify the team leader. I close the list but send the message to Stuntz. The computer may think something's seriously wrong with Sink, but I know he's just disappointed there's no Generators in the group.

PING

Stuntz: He'll keep respirating.

Appears in my left eye. I smile to myself and focus in on the leader of the group we're watching. The buildings and streets around her are deserted or ruined, but she's walking along as if she owns the block. Part of me wonders if the confidence is inborn or if the Cappis templated it in.

I piggyback my sensory array on Modem's inputs and set it to scan for theta waves, they signify mental power. The contrast of our vision changes, the background coming in as a deep amber, three targets showing as black figures. The leader comes out as bright red. A graph on

the right of our vision shows she's pumping out theta waves at the fifty megahertz range. A series of pings go off keying up threat assessment files for us to scan-use.

Fifty megahertz isn't the highest output we've ever seen on missions but the theta waves are spread out. It's clear without scanning the spectrum that she is controlling the Wild, but the scan reveals that she is also manipulating the other two, as well as scanning her immediate surroundings. She'd know if someone was coming long before they ever got there.

The stupid computers in my body key up minimal threat options. I recalibrate the power outage in my head and get a two hundred and fifty megahertz reading. Glitches are not friends. Glitches can get you killed. I post the recalibrated power onto the HeadNet and pings tied to bio-rhythm alerts go off. The computers now show a maximum threat level, one of the highest I've ever encountered.

“Can you take her?” Stuntz doesn't bother with the HeadNet, which means he's running scenarios, half mentally and half nanite. My concentration slackens and our vision snaps back to normal-spectrum, it's a still shot of the leader, a popup menu listing statistics and pinpointing vital spots. I override again, our vision shows the targets going into, what we've discerned, is their base. I turn to Stuntz.

“Thanks for the confidence, but I'm amped.” I run a quick diagnostic on the 'nites and run through a bio-scan for me too. “I should have enough juice to block her long enough to take her down.”

“Alright then. Modem, can you scan them from here?” Stuntz is already looping through strategy scenarios in his head, even in passive mode I'm constantly pinged with updates from the others' 'Nets.

“There's lots of background noise, but it seems that they're in for the night.” Modem's

eyes are closed as he filters through everything he hears for three miles. If I didn't know better I'd think he looked really peaceful.

PING

Stuntz: Twitter, active link.

Flashes in my vision and I reflexively patch us all together. It's a strategy meeting, which is always done via HeadNet. It's as secure as it can get.

Stuntz: This is a simple take down operation, people. We can't sneak up on the Lobe, all we can hope for is to take the others out as fast as possible. Sink, you're with me. We'll take out the Enhanced Bio-Forms.

A computer generated map of the area appears in our field of vision. Three markers show the team coming in from the direction we'll be taking. Two of the markers break off and split up, going around the building, one from each side.

Stuntz: Modem, once she gets a tag on us she's bound to let the Wild off the leash, since you've got the enhanced senses he's yours. One marker stalks around the parameter of the field, a fourth marker eventually coming out to intercept. Stuntz: Everyone got your assignments?

Sink: Piece of cake.

Modem: Yes, sir.

Stuntz: Good. Twitter, remain on comm. blackout until end of encounter.

I disengage us from the HeadNet and lock it down. I'll stay in passive mode up to a kilometer to the targets then shut down that protocol as well. No one has told me what to do, but there's no need. Standard operating procedure when dealing with a Lobe is to keep the comm. officer out of the plan of attack. That's one of the things my nanites let me do, I can block mental tampering. Most vital use for this is that I essentially become cloaked to Lobes' mental awareness of the landscape. I can sneak up on her. I'm left out of the briefing so the Lobe can't

get the info from one of my teammates' minds. I can attack how and when I choose, anything to keep the Lobe off balance.

It will take us a few ticks to cover the five kilometers even with our enhanced physiologies. I busy myself with watching the updates on my teammates. Stuntz' heart rate and adrenaline outputs are higher than everyone else's but within normal ranges for his drastically enhanced physical attributes. He always starts out calm, but as we get closer to the fighting the nanites will respond to the stress he's feeling and ramp up his body.

Sink's readings are something else entirely, they're always more than a little off. One minute they come in high and the next low. It's a common problem the techs have found with Sponge Enhancements. One theory says it's the large amounts of energy they absorb on missions damaging the nanites so that none of them ever sync up to the same reading. This necessitates the computers extrapolating from what data they do get. Another theory says it's an unforeseen side effect of the role the Sponge plays, making them a living glitch when it comes to readings.

Whatever the reason, Sink always seems to be on edge. Another side effect of Sponges' roles is that they get addicted to having so much power running through their bodies. Sink is either irritable because he doesn't have enough energy or hyper because we're just off mission. He is not a calming person to be around.

Modem, on the other hand, is the eye of the storm. His vitals tend to be low all the time. He is no doubt doing the meditative breathing that they teach Sensors in basic training to deal with all the input they receive. He can hear everything around him, he can see into all spectrums of light, his sense of touch makes even wearing the lightest of clothes hurt. I know that he can hear every one of our hearts beating. Yet his vitals read like a person asleep.

All-in-all the team is working within operational parameters, at least physically. Being the comm. officer means I can guess what the others are thinking by the notices that come streaming through my vision. Sometimes I don't even need to guess; the nanites can't distinguish what is supposed to be internal dialogue and what isn't, so sometimes stray thoughts pop-up from time to time. Being in passive mode, all the clutter is gone unless someone specifically HeadMails me.

This is the part of the mission that gets to me every time, the silence. Not having the rest of the team in my head, walking through the ruins of one of the boot-cities, alone. Climbing over rubble from a toppled building, jumping over a gap in the road, I always try to figure out what my teammates think about the dead cities while I don't have them in my head.

As always though, they seem to be caught up in their own thoughts and not worrying about the past. Stuntz's brow furrowed, by the number of bytes he's processing I can tell he is running through alternative scenarios and compiling fight lists so he can put his nervous system on autopilot if needed. The consummate leader focused on the mission. Sink is sulking. He isn't going to get charged on this mission, he's more focused on himself than on anything else. Modem, I know, is a completely lost cause, he's so focused on not being overwhelmed by all the details of the environ that he isn't actually seeing it.

It always amazes me the amount of devastation the Capparioms, through their use of gene-sliced humans, committed. Growing up on the Halo Base in Earth orbit, I've only known an Earth that's classified as a level four military risk. People tell stories of what life on the ground floor used to be like. Lots of the elder-gen have stories of how their grandparents, or great grandparents, used go to coffee houses every week to have a cup of their favorite coffee and talk about their lives. It's in these calms before battle that I look at the blown out fronts of

buildings and wonder if it was anything like that before it was ghosted.

PIIIING

A shrill warning sounds in my head, letting me know that we've reached the kilometer marker. I shut down the HeadNet that links us all as a group completely, and suddenly feel very alone. It won't be long now. We're on the edge of the Lobe's awareness. Any minute now she'll know we're here.

Slowly nanites ooze from my pores, covering me in nano-armor. Slick and sleek I feel powerful with it. I call up my psi-dampeners.

PING

Psi-Shield Capacity: 100%

We're a half click out, Stuntz and Sink split off to get at the EBF's. I wonder what the Lobe's strategy will be, if she'll warn the EBF's or sacrifice them. Chess comes to mind and I picture the Lobe as the queen.

PING

Queen's Gambit.: Bringing the queen out early in the game of chess in an attempt to control the board

PING

Pawns: Sacrificing pawns is instrumental to winning the game of chess

The computers in my brain are helpful little byters. They tend to thought associate all the time. Still the theory is sound. The Lobe is definitely the most powerful one here. She might want to protect her territory and try to end this quickly. Then again, most Lobe's consider themselves better than everyone, she might want to play with us first.

“AAAOOO-WOOOOO!!!”

The howl breaks into the open only seconds before the Wild does. Modem moved off to my left some time ago. He's out of sight now behind rubble, I hope he's far enough away that

the Wild won't sense me. I scan-check and luckily I'm downwind of him.

Letting the Wild out means the Lobe wants to play with us. She's probably Remoting through one of the three, most likely the Wild, so she can get off on seeing us fight. I wait to the count of ninety before I begin moving just to make sure I'm covered.

I approach from the back of the building. The EBF's are stationed at the far side from me and the Wild came out of the left. The building is a ruin with most of the top floors blown off. The only intact floors of the building are the ground one and second; the second floor acting as a roof for the whole thing. There's a vent just big enough for me to fit through in the back wall.

PING

Psi-Shield Capacity: 85%

I'm twelve meters out from the wall. It's possible that at her level of power the Lobe could stretch her consciousness to be Remoting one of the others while keeping up her awareness of the landscape. I begin to calculate the amount of time I have for my Psi-shield before it runs out.

PING

Psi-Shield Capacity: 79%

Not long. I sprint the remaining distance to the back wall. The vent looks smaller than it did when I came up with this plan.

PING

Psi-Shield Capacity: 72%

The power drain is accelerating the closer I get to the Lobe. She must be putting out some serious hertz. I decide to chance it with the hole. It's a tight fit, but I manage to make it. The room I come out in is dark and cold.

PING

Light Amplification Initiated

PING

Core Heating Initiated

The cold disappears as the nanites in my cells raise my core body temperature and the room comes into view as the nanites in my eyes dilate my pupils and divert power to quicken the synapses in my brain to interpret more of my surroundings. I'm surrounded by shelves on both sides of me, all of which holding some type of meat, most of it killed by the Wild. I'm in a walk-in freezer. Perfect! She won't expect anyone to be coming from here.

PING

Psi-Shield Capacity: 65%

I make my way to the door, unfortunately there's no handle on the inside. I'm going to have to risk the drain on my system and call up my weapon. All of us have one, except for Stuntz who relies on his enhanced abilities, a weapon programmed into the nanites that we can upload. Sink uses a staff, its nanocore giving it the density of a super dense metal but making it light as a feather. Modem uses paired knives that never need sharpened and are unbreakable. My weapon isn't nearly as flashy as either of those but it's capable of cutting through anything.

PING

Weapons Array: Nano-Mist Activated

A small cloud of nanites encircle both of my hands. I reach out with my finger and carve a hole in the door where the handle should be. Quietly, I swing open the door and peek out. I'm in the back of a large kitchen, there's only a half wall on the other side. Through it I can see a big open space that used to be a cafeteria, now decorated with pillows and antique furniture. The room pulls off an air of refinement despite some of the things in it being broken. In the center of the room the Lobe sits in a chair, her eyes closed, with a slight smile on her face.

PING

Psi-Shield Capacity: 48%

Damn! Activating my weapons system is putting a strain on my power levels. I leave the weapons up because I'll need them to end the fight quickly. Outside I can hear my teammates dragging out their fights with the EBF's. They won't need too much longer. Once I've taken the Lobe's head off, I can HeadMail them that they can take care of business. I'm just a meter or two from striking distance.

PING

Psi-Shield Capacity: 23%

"Oh, dear. That's much too low of a shield to hide you from me." The Lobe opens her eyes and looks right at me. "I've been aware of you since you came out of my fridge."

I tense to lunge.

Stop. I hear her voice in my head and I freeze, I manage not to lower my arm from striking position though, so I take that as a win.

PING

Warning! Synaptic Interference Detected

"My, that is an annoying little thing isn't it. How do you turn it off?" She looks at me expectantly. *You may speak.*

"You don't." I want to be keying up scenarios, I want to be slicing her head off, I want to be walking through the arboretum on my station. Unfortunately, the word 'stop' keeps running through my head, keeping me from moving.

"Would you like some wine?" She waves her hand towards the cup on the table in front of her. This whole time she hasn't moved, curled up in the chair. I can't help hating her.

"Buzz me, Lobe!" She makes a clucking sound that reminds me of the teachers I had in

mite school.

PING

Psi-Shield Capacity: 8%

“Well, we won’t have to worry about those manners for much longer, will we? I’m so excited. It’s been ever so long since I’ve had a doll to play with.” She reaches down to pick up her wine. “Why don’t you sit down?”

Why don’t you sit down?

She’s letting me move. Without thinking, I lunge at her. Too late she realizes her mistake and she tries to attack me, a powerful psychic attack that will leave my mind jelly. My hand slices through her neck, the nanites eating everything they come into contact with including her blood, so that only a small red cloud puffs into the air.

The accumulated mental power of her attack, while not directed solely at me anymore, releases violently through the room.

PING

Warning! Psi-Shield Failure

It’s the last thing I see before everything goes black.

I wake up on the floor. I have a headache for the first time in four years. But I remind myself that I’m alive. I’m no longer wearing my nano-armor. The byters must be trying to conserve energy, and/or are performing emergency first aid.

PING

Warning! Synaptic Misfire

Recommend Emergency Medical Treatment

Initiating Cortical Evaluation: Please state your name

I slowly pick myself up off the floor, feeling every muscle in my body scream in agony. My head feels like the size of Jupiter. Walking back across the room to where the Lobe lies I almost fall twice as the muscles in my legs twitch. My right hand is stiff, I can barely move it.

PING

Please state your name

The Lobe's body sprawls across the table. Her glass of wine spilled, dripping a dark red on the carpet, staining it. Her severed head lies on the floor next to the chair, eyes glassily looking up at me.

"I used to pull the heads off my dolls growing up, Lobe." I kick her head into the corner.

PING

Please state your name

"Pamela Feld! Pamela Feld! Pamela Feld!!" I scream at the computers in my brain, I realize that I'm shaking.

"It's good to know who I'm going to kill." A raspy voice says from behind me. It's stupid, I know I should dodge immediately, but naturally I turn towards the voice. I'm half way around when...

PING

Emergency Execute: Move 114

My body stiffens for a brief moment as the nanites take over my nervous system, then I'm back flipping away from the voice. ZZAPTZ! A bolt of energy cleaves the air where I was just standing and I smell ozone. The fucker's shooting electricity at me. Not just once either, his bolts follow me across the room. ZZAPTZ-ZZAPTZ-ZZAPTZ!

ZZAPTZ! As I reach the end of a sixth flip, he gets lucky and grazes me. I spin, hit the wall, and slide into a sitting position. My uniform is singed, the flesh underneath black from the

brief contact.

PING

Warning! External Energy Exposure

Across the room a man, I think it's a man, his face half covered in bandages, one arm holding him up with a crutch, is pointing his palm at me. Even from here I can see the electricity playing across it. I expect to see a look of manic glee on his face at the prospect of killing me, but instead I see a look of deep sadness. ZZAPTZ! The electricity arcs across the room and there's nothing I can do. I close my eyes.

I'm prepared for the energy to hit me. I've been in the corps for four years, that's about the expectancy rate. ZZZ-SSSS...Instead I hear the bolt dissipate centimeters from my face and...

"Ahhhh! That's what I call good treats." Sink's staff greets me when I open my eyes. "Sorry about the override, but I couldn't have gotten to you in time." He smiles and I can see small wisps of electricity jump across his teeth.

"Twitter, are you okay?" Stuntz is by my side. ZZAPTZ! The bandaged man throws another bolt at us and Sink catches it with his staff. ZZAPTZ! ZZAPTZ! ZZAPTZ! Sink chuckles as none of the bolts get past him. He's getting faster.

"That all you got for me, you geriatric Generator?" He's twirling his staff in front of him. He's had enough power that he could easily finish this off now, but he waits to see what'll happen next. I try to calculate his survival odds in the corps but my side hurts too much, and Stuntz is poking at it.

The bandaged man doesn't say anything. He just drops his crutch and points both palms at Sink. ZZAPTZZZZZZZZZ! All the hairs go up on my arms as the bolt hits his staff. Modem is suddenly by my side. I switch on the HeadNet again and I'm no longer alone. I don't

mind having *these* voices in my head.

I patch us into Sink's 'Net. His nanites are telling him two things. First, that the old man is putting out way too much energy to survive. Which is fine with everyone here, since this was a delete mission. The second thing they're telling him is that the old man is putting out way too much energy for Sink to absorb.

PING

Stuntz: The old man knows he's going to die. He's just hoping to take us out with him.

Modem: Can Sink hold up or should we start making waste plans?

Sink: Guys, I can read you.

Modem: We know.

Stuntz: We know.

Twitter: Guys, look out!

Through Sink's inputs we can see that the output of energy is putting a strain on the old man. His bandages have caught fire and what little is left of his face is bubbling. It's clear that his body has already started to breakdown long before we got here. We've heard other teams encountering Powers like this before, and if this is a pattern then there's good news to report.

ZZ-ZZAPTZ-ZZZ! There's one last power surge and our vision goes white.

PIIING

PIIING

PIIING

Warning pings go off left and right. Finally Sink's nanites sever his link with the HeadNet and the pings stop. Our vision clears. The old man is a flaming husk in the corner, Sink is laying a couple meters in front of us.

"Is he dead?"

“No. I can still hear his heart.” I patch us into Modem’s inputs so we can all hear. It’s only then that I register the pain he’s in.

“Are you okay?” He has slash marks running down his arms, two across his face, and a long swipe across his stomach.

“There must have been some xeno-forms sliced into that Wild. His claws cut right through my armor.”

“How did you kill him?”

“I didn’t. When the Lobe nulled he took off.” Stuntz’s brow furrows again.

“We’ll have to worry about it later. We’re in no shape to hunt it down. Modem, you help Twitter. I’ll carry Sink.”

“AAAAOOOOO-WOOOOO!!”

“AOO-WOO!”

“AAAAAOO-WOOO!”

“AAOOOO-WOO-OO!”

“AOOOOO-WO-OOO!”

“AAAAAO-WOOOOA!”

“AAOOOO-HOOO!”

“It’s a chip fried Pack!”

“How many was that? Did anyone count?”

“It was seven or eight.”

“Are they ranging this way?”

“Fast.”

“Twitter, get on the ‘lite to SpaceQ and load our withdraw.”

“Sir.”

PING

SpaceQ this is DogStar Squad requesting emergency evac from current ‘scape.

Stuntz has Sink slung over his shoulders and is peering out the door. Quickly, he keys up the map of the area and outlines a tentative route for us to take. Modem and I confirm the route and we head out onto the street. Darkness is falling over the city. I try to figure out if that gives us or the Pack the advantage.

“AAAAA-WOOOOO!!!”

Definitely the Pack’s advantage.

PING

SpaceQ to DogStar Squad: Landscape Untenable. Please retreat to pickup Delta 4

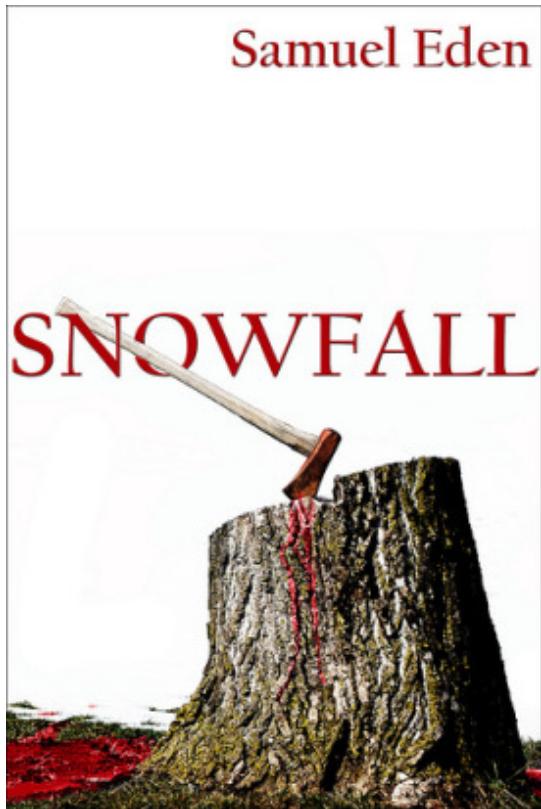
“Commander, SpaceQ says the ‘scape is too microwave. They’re ordering us to fall back to Delta 4 pickup.”

“That pickup is three kilometers outside the city.”

“That’s what they mapped me.” Both Modem and Stuntz looked worried. We don’t know if Sink is going to reboot without medical help, the status of my nanites is questionable. They’re still pinging me that I need to get checked out, safety protocols aren’t allowing them to let me exert myself, forget about calling up my nano-armor. It’s night, we have a Pack stalking us, and we have to traverse twenty kilometers through an unfamiliar city.

It’s another glorious day in the corps.

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