

they cut back the carpet and rolled it away to reveal a hatch.

This time, when Nick tried the manual lever, it opened.

"Awesome!" said Oliver. "So we can go."

"Go? Where, exactly?"

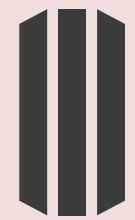
Carol stood up. Amira did too, carefully, with her bad ankle.

"We must get to the reactor and stabilize it."

Her tone was enormously matter-of-fact.

"But... but... I'm only a journalist."

"And we're only crypto-nerds. But unless I am mistaken, we have approximately two hours before the reactor explodes and blows up the entire station and all the docked ships. And of course, kills the at least sixty thousand people aboard. So would you rather stay here?"



Any space station, any spaceship, is actually a great deal of empty space divided by bulkheads. The tangle of corridors emptied into several larger spaces. Only, as well as the classic passageways for staff and visitors, every station and every ship is interlaced with thousands of kilometers of service corridors for maintenance and technical robots. They are the blood vessels in the space station's gigantic body.

And Nick Gramo and his three companions from different hacker firms were now trudging through one of these tunnels.

The corridor's ceilings weren't *that* low. However, they all still had to crouch, particularly Oliver the beanpole. So they weren't actually crawling, it just felt like it to Nick.

*The thing that always fascinated me about journalism was the opportunity to meet people from different fields, he thought to himself. Expand my horizons, discover new information, send it over the airwaves. I never had the investigative journalist's urge to go undercover in gangs or obscure religious groups, roll around in the mud with militias or run naked through the forest with some cult.*

*So how did I end up crawling through this duct here?*

The hackers didn't complain. Maybe because they were climbing a narrow shaft and at the same time were still constantly typing away on their tablets.

Sometimes they found a closed hatch, which Oliver quickly hacked into and opened. The manual backup didn't always work, but Oliver always successfully broke into the system another way.

But then things began to get complicated.

"The fucker has thoroughly blocked the emergency hatch to the reactor!" said Amira, who was limping slightly on her ankle.

She had taken some painkillers before they set off. "It burned everything," she continued. "It knows we're going to the reactor!"

"Could the bastard, virus, AI, whatever you want to call it, could it also release the oxygen from here and kill us?" asked Nick, not sure that he wanted to hear the answer.

Carol leant on a piece of pipeline and tapped at her display. "It could, and it wants to. I'm preventing it from doing so rather effectively, however. My Imat scripts have confused it a little."

Nick really hadn't wanted this answer, but the word Carol used at least diverted his thoughts.

"Imat? That's the Ralgars' symbiotic race?"

"Yeah. Neither they nor the Imats are any freaking good at programming, but my obfuscation is precisely what's confusing the virus. It's like someone going for you with a super-modern computer and you're fighting them off with a program that runs under T-602."

Nick had no idea what T-602 was, but before he could ask, Amira took over.

"That next hatch ahead of us has a vacuum on the other side. It's let out the air from the rest of the way."

"Yeah, I thought as much," said Oliver. He wasn't as calm as he seemed, but all of them were obviously kept rational by their

work and the consciousness that they could somehow influence the situation.

Unlike Nick.

"I suggest we go back thirty meters and through that hatch to the left. It goes further from the reactor. We'll see if it expects that."

"There's a hatch there. I'm already working on it," said Oliver. "What's on the other side?"

"We won't get to the reactor, but there are other options which the AI maybe hasn't thought of."

"So what is there?" wondered Nick.

"A locker room."



By "locker room", Amira meant a changing room for spacesuits, in front of the airlock. A room that led *out* of the station.

Only they couldn't go any further.

"All the compartments around us have depressurized," said Carol. "I tried to stop it, but it didn't work. I'm attempting to put together a program that would stop the fucker and sandbox it in the entire system, but it's taking a while. And for the time being I'm entirely

sure that it won't reduce the pressure here. And it won't open the airlock's internal or external doors either, in case you were worrying."

Nick had been worrying about that very much indeed.

"How long will the reactor still hold out for?" asked Oliver.

"Maybe an hour," said Amira.

Nick looked around. "Is there anything we can do? Anything at all? Maybe the station's security units have managed to do something already."

Amira shook her head. "No, they're even deeper in the shit than we are."

"There's something that might work," said Carol. She was sitting on the floor, her back against the wall beside the spacesuit cupboard. Her tablet pressed against her knees.

"What?"

"I think I know how to stabilize the reactor. I'll set up a bypass of the reactor's main control routines and throw them into a special sandbox. I'll put it on a chip to get it there. If it works, I'll be able to manually simulate the input parameters from the sensor and the reactor will think that everything is going back to normal. But I'll need help with the manual, Amira. I've never controlled a reactor. And meanwhile I still need to distract the bastard before

it overturns all the security systems again. The bypass won't destroy the mofo, but at least it will no longer be able to get to the reactor, and we'll need to find a solution for getting it out of the system until then."

"Awesome. Do you want me to create a DDoS distraction for two AIs? Finally something decent. I will turn every thermometer and sensor in this station against the fucker. And combined with my hand-held conductor, we'll be able to attack it in a thousand places at once," said Oliver. "Even the most advanced AI must get overloaded with time."

It sounded good. "And how will we get the chip to the reactor?" asked Nick.

"That will actually be quite simple," said Amira. "I did my homework before coming onto the station and I have the complete system documentation. That's where I learned that the main part of this reactor is beneath the station. It's possible to get to it from outside. Then all you have to do is locate the access port, stick the data chip with Carol's bypass into it and we are in business."

"While I put pressure on the fucker," added Oliver.

Nick felt his insides cramping.

"So someone has to put on a spacesuit, crawl through the airlock and go—or rather fly—to the reactor to stick the data chip into a slot?"



They all nodded.

"It'll be like putting the chem into a golem," said Amira. "Do you know the legend of the golem?"

"No. But otherwise it sounds fine. If you all think that we can save the station this way, then I definitely believe you. And who's going?"

They all looked at him.

"No!"

Oliver burst out laughing. "I know that you've been writing a news report all this time, but the rest of us have important work. I can't fly through space and type on my tablet at the same time."

"But I'm not right for this! I've never been in EVA!"

"None of us has," said Amira. "But a spacesuit has buffer thrusters, a safety cable with ascenders and there are rails all around the station's external perimeter. So you'll just need to go hand over hand to the reactor and stick in the chip. It's quite simple. You can do it!"