

## **Boston Tsunami - Narrative**

Pauli's phone buzzed in her pocket.

*Odd*, she thought. Last time she checked it was still in airplane mode.

A man stopped beside her seat, ushering her to get her bags from the overhead before he passed. She smiled and gave a quick nod of appreciation.

Her phone buzzed again, this time more furiously than before. *Just give me a minute*, she thought. It was her vacation, anyways — and the only time of year she got to visit her family these days. Whatever business emails that her boss was blasting into her account could wait until she at least got off the plane.

She grabbed her suitcase, threw on her backpack, and started making her way to the front of the plane. Five hours of uninterrupted flying in economy was not for the weak. Almost at the exit, her legs were just starting to gain feeling again when she heard the man behind her gasp. Pauli turned around to find him dead in his tracks.

“Oh my God,” he said, staring at his phone.

Further back, similar cries of disbelief followed.

Pauli immediately understood that something was wrong, but she couldn't have possibly guessed what. She let go of her suitcase and dug frantically into her pocket. Her stomach dropped when she read the message that flashed across her screen.

*Emergency Alert: TSUNAMI WARNING*

*This is a warning for the area(s) of BOSTON, MA. Tsunami danger on the coast. Move inland or  
find high ground.*

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Miles let the rhythmic jolting of the ride rock him to sleep. He was always complaining about why more money wasn't budgeted towards 'shocks', but today he simply didn't have the energy.

It had been almost a week since his unit had been activated, and yet he still hadn't stepped foot within the city limits. The two airports closest to the city weren't viable options for landing. Logan International had been practically razed to the ground, or at least that's what Miles had been told. And the other airport — the name escaped him, not that it mattered much anyways — had simply fallen too far into disrepair to be safe for use. That's why he had been shipped to Worcester, and a combination of bureaucracy and poor planning were to blame for him having to sleep in baggage claim for three nights.

Truth be told he was grateful for every day that he didn't have to spend in the city. The stories that he had been told and the pictures he had seen left him with a sinking feeling. That kind of despair, he knew, was contagious.

He must've fully drifted off into sleep at some point, because before he knew it he was being shaken awake.

"Come on, time to go," Aria said. She shoved a respirator and a geiger-counter into his hands as he stepped out of the truck. Miles accepted them apprehensively. She looked at him hard. "I know you probably have some reservations about going in there, but *in there* is where we're needed most," she said.

Miles nodded. She was right, of course — those people needed help.

But it didn't make walking into what was essentially a biohazard zone any easier.

They trudged through mud and debris for half an hour before they finally made it to where they were needed. A small strip of road had been cleared of debris and a Red Cross tent had been set up in the center of it. People scurried back and forth about the clearing — some shouting, some crying, and others silent. Those wearing red volunteer t-shirts distributed masks to the newly arrived group of evacuees.

One of the evacuees, a thin boy who couldn't have been more than fifteen, was arguing with a woman who was helping him into his mask.

“What do you mean I can't leave?” he asked, jerking away from the woman before the mask was properly on. “I haven't seen my family in days, I don't even know if they're alive.” His voice rose in intensity with every word he spoke. Miles could only guess what kind of stress-induced mania the kid was fighting against.

The woman, who had clearly had this conversation multiple times already, couldn't hide her own exhaustion. “I know,” she said, “and I'm sorry, but the entire city is under quarantine — we're all doing the best we can.”

“Well you need to do better!” the boy yelled, catching the attention of everyone who wasn't already listening. A big-shouldered man wearing scrubs walked up to him. He laid a hand on his shoulder and whispered something in his ear so that no one else heard. Then he led the boy away as he broke down into sobs.

*Quarantine.* It was a word that hadn't meant anything to Miles in years. To hear it again brought back all kinds of unpleasant memories. *Just how bad is this?* he wondered.

Listening to the wails of desperation and the violent coughs that echoed off the buildings, he realized that he *knew* just how bad it was.

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Over the course of several hours Miles guessed he escorted close to a hundred people back to a nearby FEMA camp or Red Cross tent.

On what must've been his dozenth trek into the city he stumbled across Jonah.

He heard the cries before he saw the man.

Aria, who was in front, stopped first. "Did you hear that?"

The question didn't need to be asked. Miles nodded, and the entire unit headed towards where the calls of help were coming from.

The building the man was trapped in was a deli, a small family-run one by the looks of it. The tsunami had left it partly collapsed. A car had been thrown through the front window of the store — half of it was left protruding into the street.

They found the man lying in a puddle of water. A beam had fallen across him, pinning him to the floor. He smiled at Miles when he finally saw him. "Was starting to get worried no one was gonna stop by — surprising too, because I make the best hoagies in town." His voice was hoarse and croaky, likely from the days without water. His white beard was smeared with mud and matted to his face.

Aria shot Miles a glance. "I'll be outside, I'm going to request a stretcher."

Miles nodded, then turned his attention to the man. "Can you tell me how you're feeling right now, sir?"

Jonah managed a coughing laugh. "Well I can tell you I've been better for sure." He extended his one free hand to Miles. "Jonah," he said.

Miles smiled at him. "Miles," he said, "and I'm glad you're in good spirits."

"Yeah, yeah..." the man said, "honestly not so bad down here, except for the water."

Miles arched an eyebrow. “The water?”

“It burns,” he said.

Miles clicked on his flashlight to get a better look at him. Sure enough, his skin was red and blistered, even bleeding in some places. Burns? No — *chemical* burns.

Miles turned to face the rest of his unit. “We have to get him up, *now*.”

They worked urgently to lift the beam off the man. No more had they gotten Jonah on his feet before Miles heard the rapid beeping. Then another source. Then another, until there was a cacophony of alarms echoing within the deli. Miles checked his geiger-counter. It was flashing red.

“We need to go,” he said, “there’s no time to wait for the stretcher.”

The group silenced their geiger-counters and rushed back to the nearest camp, carrying Jonah between them as gently as they could while not sacrificing pace. Miles tried to ignore the water that had seeped into his pant legs above his boots. Jonah’s blistered and bleeding skin served as a grim reminder as to what he had likely been exposed to.

They met the team of first responders at the halfway point back to camp. They loaded Jonah onto the stretcher with groans — from both the unit and Jonah.

Aria stopped one of the paramedics. “Chemical burns,” she said breathlessly, gesturing towards Jonah. “And you need to send in *only* hazmat teams from now on, we were all exposed to radiation just south of Chelsea.”

The paramedic nodded, absorbing the information. He looked tired. “I’ll update everyone else on the situation. Until then, you all will need to get anti-radiation meds ASAP.”

It was silent the rest of the walk back. Miles felt tired, inexplicably tired — and he had only been in the field for a day. A natural disaster and the damage it caused on its own was hard

enough to deal with. But this — this was worse by tenfold. Too many things to compensate for, too many things complicating the rescue efforts. It seemed hopeless, and he knew that there were still more people out there — a lot of them probably in worse states than the one Jonah was in.

He sighed and set his jaw.

There was still a lot of work to do.

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The Secretary of Defense was cursing over the phone.

Emilia listened patiently as he continued his tirade. “Yes Mr. Secretary, I *do* understand how this is a matter of national security, and I can assure you that we are doing everything in our power to solve the probl—”

A dial tone sounded in Emilia’s ear. She sighed.

Spencer approached from behind her. “So, it went well I’m guessing?” he asked.

“Went great actually,” Emilia said, letting her head fall in her hands. “You would think the three dozen search-and-rescue robots that we expedited and shipped out would be enough, but apparently not. Where’s the ‘Thank you for making sure no one else has to wade through chemical-laced waters and radiation-ridden streets anymore?’”

Spencer set a cup of coffee down on her desk and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. “We know that our technology is saving lives,” he said, “that’s all that matters.”

She took a sip of the coffee. “You’re right, and I know you’re right, but...”

“We still haven’t gotten the data breach under control,” Spencer finished, nodding.

She nodded. “Our system *was* secure, probably the most secure in the world — there’s no way *we* can be blamed for such a one-in-a-million disaster like this one.”

Spencer pulled up a chair and sat beside her. “Any update on who’s responsible at least?”

Emilia threw her hands up in an exasperated gesture. “Russia, China — could be Anonymous for all I know. What I do know — and what the Secretary of Defense seems determined to remind me — is that the most cutting-edge AI technology is now just... out there,” she said, waving her hands in the air.

Ironic, she thought, that the AI tech which had been stolen was the same AI that the robots were using out in the field to conduct rescue missions.

Spencer looked at her thoughtful for a moment. “Well all things considered, it could be worse,” he said, “at least your coffee isn’t cold.”

Emilia couldn’t help but smile.

“So,” he said, “are you going to ask why I stopped by in the first place?”

“You mean it wasn’t just to drop this off?” Emilia asked, holding up her cup.

It was Spencer’s turn to smile. “No, I’m good for more than just coffee,” he said. “In the case that we didn’t get the breach under control—” he gestured vaguely in front of him, an unspoken, *like the situation right now*. “I had some of our engineers start reverse-engineering and rebuilding the leaked program from scratch, so now—”

“The Secretary of Defense will finally get off my case?” Emilia provided.

“That,” Spencer continued, “and as an added bonus, all the super-secret government tech that uses our AI won’t be vulnerable to security breaches much longer. But mostly the Secretary of Defense will finally be off your case.”

Emilia let herself relax a little bit. That was the first piece of good news that she had heard in days. “What would I do without you?” she asked.

“Probably have to make your own coffee,” Spencer said, standing up to leave. “Anyways, I just wanted to drop by and give you an update on things. Good luck over here — and don’t let Mr. Defense give you too much trouble.”

Emilia gave him a warm smile. “Thanks for the coffee, Spencer.”

He smiled back and gave a mock salute, walking backwards out of the door.

She sighed and allowed herself to fall back into the chair. In a few minutes she would pick her phone back up and dial the Secretary back up to relay the good news, but until then she enjoyed the minute’s respite.

The military choosing to contract with her company had been a game-changer, the kind of opportunity that only came around once in a lifetime. Now — knowing how things would turn out — she wondered if she still would’ve taken the offer. *Yes*, she realized. *Of course I would*. Despite the circumstances, she was in the ideal spot to help clean up the entire mess — and that was what mattered. The data breach would be secured, given some time. In the meantime, she would get back to what she considered the more pressing matters.

She reviewed the plans she had been sent for a repurposed search-and-rescue robot, one that was able to analyze — and hopefully neutralize — any harmful chemicals found in the water or the environment.

Optimism was in short supply recently, but she found herself feeling moderately upbeat nonetheless.

She took another sip of her coffee and picked up the phone.