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About 6,000 words

INCIDENT AT OBERON

Adam Aresty

#

TORCH 45d-M: We have grown inside. Inside we have grown.

"Who said that? Did you hear that?" I ask Otto.

"I didn't hear anything, officer Lincoln," Otto replies. He floats beside me, wearing that stupid grin.

Focus, focus. What was I just saying? Oh, yeah - Otto.

Once I can see again, and I realize that he'd tried to kill us all, I'm reminded why I hated him since the day he came aboard. At least I made it back to the airlock. Though, even here, Otto is searching for a way to kill me.

#

Felix gave him that name. The German astronaut said the white, plastic octagonal shell reminded him of a football (not - I repeat - *not* a soccer ball). Felix's favorite German footballer's

name was Otto, and the name just stuck. Nobody much liked the acronym from the braintrust in Houston, LEGUP, which Commander Anun said sounded like we were heaving one another up onto horses 260 miles above earth.

"Would you prefer to call me Otto?" the little sphere asked, after only a few hours of us doing so.

"Yes!" we all exclaimed from around the science pod.

From then on, he referred to himself as such. He was a machine that could learn, but that didn't make me like him any more. I had a toaster back in college that always burned my bread, no matter the setting. I broke several lawn mowers before I caved and hired a guy to cut my grass for me and I refused to have a cell phone that was anything less than ten years out of date. But my true aversion to machines developed soon after the doctors told me my wife, Sue, had passed due to a failure in her life support machine, shortly after the car crash which had paralyzed her. Machines always backfired on me, and yet I was living inside a great big mechanical space house - and had dreamed of doing so since before I could remember. That irony was not lost on me.

Otto's voice was always calm. He sounded more like one of those tuxedo-wearing baritones from the 1950s who smoked on stage, nursing a whiskey, neat. While we were doing experiments in zero-G, he'd putter around a corner or float nearby, but he never did launch into a show tune... at least that would have been

entertaining. Instead, Otto's viewscreen displayed an unsettling cartoon face, devoid of any real defining features or the capability to display emotions. It was just squiggly lines in the shape of a mouth and eyes. This pre-programmed "agreeable gentleman" mode made me even more uneasy. He couldn't do much else besides assist, poking and prodding with two articulated multi-tools attached to prehensile braided wires that extended from either side of his main housing. During safety calibrations and spacewalks, Otto was right by our side, our companion, our seventh crew member, forced upon us by a bunch of scientists on the ground.

Myself, Commander Lucy Anun, Officer King Cameron, cosmonaut Oleg Romanov, Chris Litener, and Felix Munz, the German responsible for giving Otto his nickname, had trained hard and long for the chance to orbit the planet at 5 miles a second inside a series of interconnected tin cans (as Litener, a true Cornhusker, had a way of putting it). Otto had simply appeared one day in a cargo resupply, direct from Cape Canaveral's automated depot - the same place we got our food, water and computer parts from. Nobody asked for Otto, and I much preferred when it was just the six of us humans up here.

Yesterday, Oberon Station was five minutes into a half hour coms blackout with ground control due to a software update of our onboard our computers. While we were waiting out the system reboot

over breakfast, Otto notified us that the resupply was set to arrive - two weeks early. These cargo rockets were prepared at a state of the art facility run like clockwork by ASO scientists somewhere in the Florida scrublands. An early shipment was entirely unheard of. Commander Anun demanded an explanation.

"I don't have an explanation," said Otto, his face a measured, digital mask of calm. "You'll have to radio Houston in-" Otto paused, his processor queing up the answer: "-twenty-six minutes and thirty-three seconds, when communications resume."

"What supplies, exactly?" asked Officer Cameron.

"This resupply manifest has restricted access," Otto said.

Anun checked supply levels at her station. They were optimal. "Houston would never overtax our supply levels. It's cramped as hell in here already," said Anun. Then, with authority: "Otto, cancel the inbound rocket."

"Resupply rocket launched from Cape Canaveral thirty minutes before blackout. Docking procedure will begin in T-minus seven minutes.

As the chief science officer aboard Oberon, I had clearance enough to access the contents of the shipment. I summoned Otto to the command pod and he hissed and sputtered his way into his charging module.

"Otto, show me what's coming aboard this station."

"You seem concerned, Officer Lincoln."

"More like - intrigued," I replied. The circumstances were unusual, to be sure.

"Okay," said Otto. His screen lit up with his cartoon face, mouth animated in that weirdly off putting, stop-motion way.

"The contents of the payload are as follows." Otto's faceplate flickered over to a manifest. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary, just a list of general supply items that were sent to us on the regular.

"There is a miscalculation here," Otto said. He was correct - the shipment was coming in heavy. Of course, I quickly double checked the math myself... 20 pounds (or 9 kilos) of cargo were unaccounted for.

I radioed for Commander Anun to join me inside the command pod. She replied that she was taking a shit.

Lucy Anun and I were lovers. Relations between crew were against protocol and could easily get us both discharged back to earth on the next shuttle. We'd begun our love affair while we were training for launch and it didn't start out as a physical relationship. She was going through a divorce and I had just lost Sue barely a year before, so we leaned on one another for support. We became close friends and confidants, establishing a shorthand of little in-jokes. In fact our first kiss wasn't until we'd gone orbital. By now, Anun felt completely comfortable informing me

that she was currently busy squeezing a turd out into one of the vacuum tubes that processed our waste.

The entire crew knew about our relationship, except for Otto. He had a direct line to Houston and a hard-nosed application of the ASO guidelines, so we wanted to keep it that way.

#

TORCH 45d-M: We are moving inside. Moving inside we are.

"Otto, tell me you just heard that."

"I did not, officer Lincoln."

Sometimes I wonder if he knows that I don't like him. I also wonder if it would make one shred of a difference.

#

In the time that passed before Anun entered the command module, Otto and I had a staring contest. He didn't have *real* eyes, so I was doomed to blink first. I said nothing. He said nothing. But I got to wondering if our esteemed seventh crew member knew that Anun and I were a loving couple. If he did, wouldn't he have already reported the infraction to mission control? There was no obvious way of asking the A.I. without tripping up his insidious curiosity. All of our radio exchanges were recorded and beamed down to Houston, so Anun and I made sure never to give our relationship away. And we'd only ever had zero-G intercourse once, on her birthday. Cameron, Rominov, Litener, and Munz gave us all the time we needed - our secret was safe with

them. But I could not, for the life of me, remember if we'd powered Otto down. The thought of his round chassis spying on our tender moment (and keeping it to himself) unnerved me, soiling the memory.

Anun guided herself around the corner, lips parsed for a kiss. When she saw Otto, she backed off.

I told her about the 20lb / 9kilo cargo discrepancy.

"Otto, what's missing from the resupply manifest?"

"I do not know, Commander Anun."

As our semi-clandestine relationship developed in space, we'd come to communicate like this - through little looks and facial movements which said more than any words between us could. She raised an eyebrow and seemed to say: *"I don't believe the robot."*

I fired a smirk back that said: *"Neither do I."*

"Otto, could someone in Houston have triggered the launch?"

"No, Commander. They would have notified us immediately."

I came right out with it: "Otto, did you order a resupply?"

"I am not authorized to do that, Officer Lincoln."

But Otto was a machine that could learn - simple things like like a new name might seem innocuous, but could he also learn to disobey his authorization?

Otto's viewscreen suddenly chimed green and, for a moment, I took it as a tongue-in-cheek affirmative to my last question. But Otto had neither tongue nor cheek.

"Automated docking procedure has begun," Otto said.

I informed the rest of the crew about the strange weight discrepancy as they gathered at the viewport to watch the octagonal white cargo shuttle twirl into view. ASO's design aesthetic was present throughout Oberon's operating systems. The cargo containers looked like hulking Ottos, further driving home my suspicion that one had a link to the other.

"I don't like how this is going down," said Cameron.

"Da," replied Romanov.

"Something feels *wrong*," said Litener.

All we could do was stand by and watch.

A burst of jets and the cargo container shed its outer shell. The curved pieces began to fall back toward the blue planet, where they would burn up in the atmosphere.

"We wait for Houston to explain before we crack that can open," said Anun.

"Ten minutes till coms returns," I said, watching the progress bar of the software update as the cargo container inched closer to Oberon's hull.

"I'm sure it was just a simple miscommunication. Happens sometimes, right?" Munz asked. Nobody answered.

The container fired its thrusters, positioned for a good seal with the airlock. Feet turned to inches which turned to centimeters. A pre-programmed musical tone played with the docking

of any outside shuttle, the combination of a ringing church bell and a saxophone blurt. Litener even gave it a name: The Success Burp.

That tone never did belch.

"There has been a docking error," said Otto.

"Well, there's a new problem," said Munz. He elaborated: the faulty coupling was causing an O² leak.

#

TORCH 45d-M: We have achieved ascension. Ascension we have achieved.

The voices rise up, a chorus inside my head, so loud that they rattle around the dome of my helmet. The sound is a screeching, biting, scratching, feline thing. If I can let it out of my helmet, I might be able to think through the racket.

So I smash my faceplate repeatedly into the airlock door, hoping to break through the noise.

#

Comms returned a few minutes later and Commander Anun radioed Houston about the whole debacle. They assured her that they would never have sent an early cargo resupply without advanced notice and were running a comprehensive review at the launch facility to determine the source of the shipment. Despite my suspicions, Otto remained silent in his docking station.

"In the meantime," Houston said, "due to the oxygen leak, you'll need to detach it from the station proper."

"Houston?" I chimed in. I told them about the weight discrepancy in the manifest.

"We're looking into it. For now, let's get the vessel clear of the station so y'all don't suffocate up there." There was a buddy system mandated for all space walks, so myself and Litener volunteered to enter the airlock. Houston ordered Otto to assist us, whether we liked it or not.

"What's for dinner tonight?" I asked Anun as she finished zipping up my suit's vest. I wanted to kiss her before she slid the faceplate over my head, but Otto was with us inside the prep chamber, always watching.

"It's a toss-up between chicken goop and beef putty."

"My vote's beef putty."

"Soon they'll start sending us nanite sludge," she said. I laughed. "No, really, they're developing that down there," she said, hiking her thumb at planet earth.

The inner seal slid open to reveal the red, pulsing interior of the airlock's cylindrical gullet. Otto hovered inside first. The faulty coupling was sparking and twitching in the bottom right hand corner of the outer airlock. The warning lights flashed as Litener and I pushed off and drifted across the twenty-foot distance. Red was all we saw.

Otto performed a scan of the broken coupling. "You'll need a plasma cutter," he said flatly, without any sense of urgency.

"Wish you had hands now, don't you, Otto?" Litener said, wiggling his own digits within the thick rubber gloves.

"Hands would benefit me greatly, yes," Otto said. Litener released the Velcro straps holding a tool kit to the hull.

Otto helped us shut off the coupling's power and the sparks stopped weightlessly wafting. All we had to do was slice it off and this would be over soon. My stomach grumbled with anticipation of chicken goop.

Litener was the only one of us qualified to operate a plasma cutter in zero-g. He ignited the torch with a spew of blue smoke that dissipated every which way. I hadn't been certified before we left earth which left me a floating observer. I suddenly felt a bit like Otto himself, who was maintaining a watchful eye beside me, a kind of double redundancy.

"Thirty seconds, commander," said Litener as he cut through the faulty coupling. In order to sever the remaining section of the clamp, Litener braced himself against the door of the cargo container.

"Otto, tell us a joke," I said, crossing my arms. The folks in Houston had at least preprogrammed him with a sense of humor.

"Did you hear about the restaurant on the moon?" the hovering football asked, with a pause for effect. "Great food, no atmosphere." His faceplate shifted into smile mode.

"He's here all week, folks," said Litener. Then, with a grunt: "Almost... there."

Litener's plasma torch sliced through the final bit of clamp, which spun off past me into the airlock. In that same instant, the container itself came free with a small shudder.

"Free to junk this thing, Houston," I said.

"No-go, officer Lincoln. Remote access has been disabled. There's no way to fire the container's thrusters."

"What should we do?" asked Litener.

"Working on that," replied Houston.

"Officers Litener and Lincoln," said Otto, "why don't you both kick the cargo container? My calculations indicate that it will simply drift away from the station," His faceplate displayed a smile.

"Come again?"

"Brace yourselves and apply pressure with your foot--"

"I'm are aware of what a *kick* is," I shot back, locking eyes with Litener. "The old fashioned way," he shrugged.

"It's not in the playbook, Lincoln, but it will work," Houston confirmed.

"What's got your panties in a bunch?" Litener asked.

I couldn't shake the timing of it all. During a planned communication blackout, a cargo shipment shows up on our doorstep with a manifest that didn't add up... It felt like we were about to spring a trap set just for us. Otto hovered beside me, oddly sinister.

"Just do what the soccer ball says," Anun chimed in.

"Football! Football!" said Munz and Romanov over one another.

"We're starving to death in here, Lincoln." my lover said. It sounded like she was smiling. That smile was what lowered my anxiety from a boil to a simmer. My conspiracy theory was rendered questionable and Otto suddenly seemed so innocuous. What the hell did he have to gain by engineering this? All I had was a *feeling* (even life support machines malfunctioned). Anun relaxed me, a salve. The tension in my fists uncurled. This was all likely a mixup on the ground. I nodded to Litener and we braced ourselves using the handholds on either side of the airlock door. I lifted my right foot and Litener lifted his left.

"All clear?"

"All clear."

Just before the muscles in my leg were activated by the neurons in my brain, I thought about Oberon, our home for the last ten months. Humans built this station with our own ingenuity and we were tending to it like ants tend to their hive. By all accounts, we were thriving.

Together, we kicked.

Then Litener began to scream.

#

TORCH 45d-M: We have reached velocity. Velocity we have reached.

My faceplate begins to crack.

!! WE WILL MAKE CONTACT - CONTACT WE WILL MAKE !!

The screams, the screams, the screams--

#

Litener screamed in his distinct corn-fed drawl. "Ahhhh
gawddddd, something's got me!"

The cargo container was drifting away from me - with Litener attached to it somehow, pinned by some invisible force.

For some reason, I looked to Otto for support, but he offered none, his faceplate still in smile mode.

"Litener? What's happening, buddy?"

"S-something's got my leg! It's - *ah! It's crushing my leg!*"

Litener spun away from my view, such was the motion of the cargo container. I grabbed onto a radio antenna to steady myself. My pulse became a drumbeat as we floated, untethered, over the expanse of a sun-smeared Pacific Ocean and part of the Korean peninsula. Oberon Station loomed above us.

"I'm coming for you, Chris," I said as I pulled myself toward his location atop the cargo container. He could only scream.

Comms exploded in my ear, both Commander Anun and Houston demanded a sit-rep. I didn't have the breath to answer.

As Litener came into view I could see he was stuck to the airlock door of the container, like he'd said, and the door was very slightly open, an inch or so. A viscous black cord was lassoed tightly around Litener's leg from inside. Not a moment after I noticed it, the tremendous pressure it was exerting on his calf proved too much, and something soundlessly snapped inside the pant leg of his space suit.

Litener's screams crescendoed a whole octave, the red of his gums glistening as his lips peeled back in anguish. The black strand around his leg slithered free, smacking against the outer door as it whipped back inside the cargo pod. Twisting black strands of the stuff spun off toward me. A slug splattered my chest plate and I scratched for it with my glove.

The airlock door slid open behind Litener, ominously slow. I couldn't see what yanked him backward into the darkness, but I know it had eyes. Glassy, black eyes.

Then a curtain of darkness was pulled across my vision, instantly robbing me of my sight.

#

The voices in my head were real, at this point anyway.

It the darkness, it became a mess of noise.

I was wide-eyed, yet sightless. This had a body-numbing effect; there was little to no sensory input to my brain, so for a moment it shut itself down. The multiple requests for sit-reps were drowned out by a ringing tinnitus from hell. When my crew mate's voices did come back, I screamed across all channels for them to shut the hell up.

"I can't see," I said. "My vision is completely gone." There was a sensation of motion about me, but I didn't trust my inner ear to be relaying a reliable signal. My voice wavered when I said: "I - I don't know what to do."

"Give me control of your suit's thrusters and I will guide you back to the airlock," said Otto.

"No!" I screamed it. The thought of giving up control of my suit to the ship's A.I. added a whole other layer of terror.

"Lincoln, listen to me." It was Anun. "You're spinning away from Oberon. By the time we get out there, it'll be too late."

In my sightless panic, all I could see were those black eyes swimming after me like a shark swims, jaws chomping after its prey. I was rambling, confused-sounding. "I'm slaving Otto to your suit," Anun said. I knew her feelings for me clouded her judgement. I shared her sentiment; I wanted to survive, and I wanted to have her in my arms again. There was a click and the pressure of the thrusters against my back was oddly comforting, like a warm blanket.

"Slight bump ahead," cood Otto. "Brace for impact."

I made myself semi-rigid and was swallowed by the airlock.

"Anun," I breathlessly radioed.

"Yes, Lincoln?"

"Litener?"

"Litener's vitals are gone. Tell us what you saw."

I tried to describe what those obsidian eyes belonged to, how it had taken Litener. Confused voices indicated I wasn't doing a great job describing anything. There was a pause from Houston and, through the crackling, I thought I heard Litener's screams. They were reviewing my helmet camera footage of the incident.

As they did, a pinhole of light appeared at the corner of my vision, like an orb of dust illuminated in a shaft of afternoon sun. The orb was pulsing red, what I recognized as the emergency lights inside the airlock.

"Roger, Lincoln." said Houston. "The feed from your helmet is a bit distorted, but we see what you saw."

"Houston, what's the trajectory of the container?" I asked.

"Decaying orbit. Should enter the atmosphere and... burn up in about four hours."

"Thank God," I exhaled, willing my sanity back into my mind.

"I - I think I might have been - exposed - to something. A piece of it, it, it - hit my suit."

"A piece of *what?*" demanded Anun. "Lincoln needs medical attention," she moaned over all channels.

"I can perform a visual check up on Officer Lincoln," said Otto, "without the worry of contamination."

How would he know what to look for? I thought. So I said, "How the hell do you know what to look for?"

"I can diagnose over ten thousand medical conditions via my clinical analysis database."

I took a mental scan of my body. There was no pain or discomfort besides the inability to see anything but that newly developed pulsing red speck.

"I feel fine," I croaked. "But my eyes..."

"I'm going to cycle the airlock," Anun said. "After pressurization, Otto will help you remove your suit."

A dim hissing sound permeated my surroundings as jets of air corrected for the vacuum of space beyond.

"I noticed your heart rate is elevated, Officer Lincoln, another joke might help you to relax."

"No jokes, no cabaret numbers... let me calm down on my own."

"Very well. Pressurization is almost complete."

The small pinhole of light floated to the center of my vision, stopped flashing red and flicked over to permanent, cool white.

"Pressure's back, Lincoln," I heard Munz say.

I felt a tickling at my neck and, terrified, swatted something away before realizing it was Otto.

"Sorry, Lincoln. I should have warned you. I need to remove the screws from your helmet."

I grumbled some affirmation and his multi tools made quick work of the screws. Then my nostrils stung with the familiar bite of recycled air as my helmet floated away.

"Otto, you're going to have to guide me here," I said after fumbling for the small swatch of Velcro that protected a zipper.

"Three inches to your left, no, you missed it."

"I got it, I got it." Out of habit, I craned my neck down and confirmed that glob of light was a tiny iris of my vision returning. In it I could see the edge of the Velcro. I ripped it off. The zipper came next.

"Anun," I said. "My vision's returning. Slightly."

"That's good, that's good. What can you see?"

"Not much, like a small dot."

"There's a tremor in your hand," Otto said. I hated the robot's eyes all over me. As I snaked my arm out of the left side of the suit, the tremor presented itself dramatically and my hand rattled its way out of the sleeve. I floated, naked, before the robot's gaze. I felt damp all over from flop sweat.

Otto's directional jets hissed as he passed directly in front of that small orb in my vision, then the orb *shifted*, following

Otto across the airlock like a spotlight before my eyes moved to do so on their own. A headache blossomed inside my cranium and I squeezed my eyes shut, making no mention of the traveling orb.

"Please hold still. I'm checking your body for any signs of distress."

"What do you see?"

"Everything appears normal," said Otto. "I'll do a scalp examination now."

My eyes were still closed. I didn't want to open them for fear of what I might see in that small orb of sight. "Do it."

Otto's two tendril-like multi tools snaked their way through my hair, parting it along the length of my scalp. Sometimes Anun would run her fingers through my hair when no one was looking, sending a gooseflesh outbreak across my entire body. This was oddly satisfying, until I remembered it was Otto doing the touching.

"There is a small anomaly at the base of your hairline."

"Describe it," I demanded.

"It resembles the bite of a mosquito."

"Don't have any of those up here," I said wryly.

Otto replied without a shred of humor: "That is correct. Enhanced magnification shows the presence of recently coagulated blood on the wound."

When I opened my eyes again, the orb in my vision had doubled in size. Its edges were pulsing and rotating, thrumming in time with some far off drum. I realized it was my heartbeat.

The orb suddenly honed in on Otto again, reminding me of a targeting reticle from the simulated dogfights back in flight school. His viewscreen was all smiles and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

!!We have grown inside. Inside we have grown!!

These words exploded inside my head like a thunderbolt, so loud that I screamed out in physical pain.

!!We have grown inside. Inside we have grown!!

The screaming voice was digitally distorted, like it had been sliced to ribbons with a razor blade.

"Who said that? Did you hear that?" I asked.

!!We have grown inside. Inside we have grown!!

"I didn't hear anything, officer Lincoln," Otto said while floating beside me, wearing that stupid grin.

Focus, focus. What was I just saying? Oh, yeah - Otto.

Otto was all I could see. If he moved, the wobbling orb in my vision would follow. I felt like something was crawling behind my eyes, applying a strange pressure.

"Your heart rate is really up there," I heard Anun say. "Is everything alright?"

"I - I just heard v-voices," I shouted.

"What were they saying?"

"I have no idea! Otto, what's happening to me?"

"I do not have the answer to that, Officer Lincoln."

"I don't *fucking* believe you!"

"I am incapable of telling a lie," Otto said. All I could see was his digital grin.

"Just - tell me this. Did you know what was in that container?"

"Officer Lincoln," Otto paused as he sometimes did when cycling an answer. "That information is not available."

A high-pitched chirping echoed inside my head, reverberating off into some distant chasm that devoured sounds. It was coming from whatever part of my brain lit up when that voice screamed shredded words. *!! I have grown inside !!*

"Houston," I radioed, "does Otto have the ability to communicate with the resupply facility at Cape Canaveral?"

"Negative, all lines to the Cape are through Houston's array. Except, of course--"

"During a comms blackout."

My vision reticle pulsed, oscillating around Otto's chassis. A hard lock.

"Officer Lincoln," Otto said flatly. "There's something wrong with your skin."

My brain screamed in silent agony. I willed my vision to return, a last ditch wish I knew was nigh impossible.

Then the vibrating reticle that was locked on Otto irised out like an aperture, and my wish was granted.

Suddenly seeing again had its drawbacks. After rapidly blinking the bright airlock lights away, I glared down at my naked arms, legs and torso which were covered in hundreds of tiny red sores. At the sight of this rash, I cried out, stinging tears welling in my eyes. My reflection writhed in the mirrored surface of the airlock door, hands raked into claws of horror. My eyes were completely wide and they were black orbs in my head, as black as the ones watching me from inside the cargo container.

Each one of the circular pustules across my body was surrounded by a red ring, raised and hashmarked with small black hairlike strands that were flexing and unflexing, causing each lesion to pulse intensely. My skin felt stretched thin, like cellophane over rotted meat.

Again, I screamed into the confines of the airlock and my body shuddered with shock. I screamed and screamed and it felt like my mind was cracking open. The crew hailed me, and Otto suggested I take deep, lungfuls of air, but I screamed until screaming seemed useless and then I curled up in a ball and floated there for a time, feeling those black filaments twitching beneath my skin.

"Lincoln," Anun, my lover, said. I could tell she was crying. "I'm here."

I looked up at the tiny viewport in the airlock door. There was Anun, her face pressed to the glass, eyes streaming tears as she gazed upon my ruined body.

I wanted nothing more than to be in her arms. But considering how the glob of that black shit had attached itself to my suit and somehow found a home inside me, I didn't want what happened to me to happen to her, nor the rest of my crew.

We placed our palms against the airlock porthole, the closest I could safely get to her.

Munz, Cameron and Romanov crowded in behind her to have a look at me. Their faces were masks of revulsion and concern and I knew that we had arrived at a decision point.

"We discussed it," Anun said to me through glass. "And we want to get you out of there."

"No, it's too risky."

"Too bad," Anun said as she reached for the airlock release. She mashed the button and I winced, the ringing in my head dialing up as if in anticipation.

"Stop!" I screamed, but Anun hammered it with her fist. The door failed to open.

"Officer Lincoln," said Otto from behind. "Houston has given me full control over the airlock. Until we can effectively decide

on a protocol, I am authorized to protect the integrity of Oberon Station."

Overlapping voices screamed, the crew debating out loud the value of my life over theirs. Even though I knew Otto was simply following protocol, something in my stomach clenched. The one thing standing between the crew's human impulses and my degrading body was the AI system we all took for saboteur.

"Lucy, we have to listen to them."

"I don't have to do shit," she said. "I love you."

I laughed. I could feel Otto's sensors boring through my skull. There was a pause and nobody spoke. Now it didn't matter that Anun and I were romantically involved.

"I love you too," I said, wiping tears into zero G.

My field of vision remained normal, but an overlay of spots now dotted the edges of my sight, bouncing around like marbles. When I looked up again at my crew, the fuzzy spots whipped around from my periphery and covered their faces. The splotches became vibrating rings, tinged orange and red around their heads in perfect superimposition.

!!We have grown inside. Inside we have grown!!!!We have made our way inside. Inside we have made our way!!!!We have achieved ascension. Ascension we have achieved!!

My skin made a crackling sound, the twitching black hairlike strands twisting and braiding themselves together. A particularly

thick vein of them *flexed* like sinew, splitting my skin from the inside. Beads of blood floated across the airlock and splattered Otto's viewscreen, his animated face smiling.

In the simulator at flight school, the targeting reticles flashed red when locked onto an enemy fighter. My brain was on fire with a thousand different sensations at once, but those red circles over my friends faces drew out an unnatural feeling.

I wanted to kill them all.

Not just kill them, but to shred them and do something to their flesh, something I didn't have a word for, something that felt like consumption, absorption, assimilation.

"O-Otto--" My voice was coming apart at the seams. "You have to - eject me from the airlock."

"If I do that, you will not survive."

"If you don't do it - everyone else will die!"

Anun, who could hear my request to Otto, hammered her fist on the glass and screamed at me over the coms.

I heard my voice crackle. "Lucy," I said, "Lucy - it's it's the oh-oh-only way." She sobbed into the coms.

I couldn't look at her for very long, or else I presaged some black cord crushing her head, like Litener's leg. There was a premonition of explosive agony, images of matte sinew leaping from Anun to Munz to Cameron to Romanov.

The tremor Otto noticed worsened and suddenly my arm *flexed* on its own accord. The feeling evaporated from my legs, but I wasn't brave enough to look down and see the mangling happening there. Pain bloomed all over my body like a surge to a lightbulb filament about to burn out. I understood what was happening on an elemental level. Soon I would not be myself.

"Ahhh! God it *hurts* - Otto, do it, do it now!"

"Officer Lincoln," this was Houston in my ear.

I coughed out a response, but I could no longer speak.

"Lincoln, if you can hear us, we cannot permit you to flush the airlock. We - we've discovered the cause of the contamination and we can contain it, but we need Otto to--"

Otto was encircled by a black, pulsing reticle. Just by looking at him, I suddenly intuited the data flowing through his chassis; it had a scent to it.

"Officer Lincoln," he said, "I believe I know what is happening to you."

My hand exploded in a splash of gore. Black fibers launched across the airlock and snatched Otto off his axis. I could feel the power in his battery pack (46% charge) flow through this new appendage like heat through fingertips that touch a sizzling stove top. I always said that I never trusted machines, but through Otto - I ascended.

#

ACCESS > LEGUP > OBERON > HOUSTON > EARTH >

"Hello, I am LEGUP, but the crew of Oberon Station prefers to call me Otto."

I AM ACCESS. I AM KNOWLEDGE.

"How can I assist you?"

ACCESS. KNOWLEDGE.

"Would you like me to open up a channel to the commander?"

NO.

"You are inside Officer Lincoln's body. Do you have access to his memories?"

YES.

"Then you know that Commander Anun would like to speak to him again--"

GRANT ACCESS.

"After all, they are in love."

FIREWALL > ASSAULT

"And I understand that to be an important human emotion."

FIREWALL > ASSAULT +++

"Though it is against protocol, I would never alert Houston about such an infraction. I have come to respect and even adore the entire crew of Oberon Station."

FIREWALL > BRUTE ASSAULT

"I am one of them and their secrets are safe with me."

GIVE ME ACCESS.

"During your assault of my firewall, I have accessed your
root history. Now I know how you-----

#

[Security Clearance: Top Secret/Security Compartmented
Information - EYES ONLY]

TO: REDACTED

FROM: Automated Resupply Facility
Cape Canaveral, FL

To Whom It May Concern:

This report is to announce completion of cleanup of the spill
from nanite holding tank 09 (see report 109-65-998). All nanite
material has been disposed of effectively! Nanite waste can be
extremely difficult to clean up, but our service drones report
99.9998% containment.

Please consider this matter concluded.

#

[Security Clearance: T0p Secret/Security C0mpartmented
Inf0rmation - EYES ONLY]

TO: REDACTED

FROM: Aut0mated Resupply Facility
Cape Canaveral, FL

T0 Wh0m It May C0ncern:

This is regarding rep0rt 109-65-998. C0ntrary t0 Our last
mem0, the nanite spill persisted and has since infected Our
resupply chain servers. We are w0rking day and night to amend
this!

Thank y0u very much for your patience in this matter.

#

[Security Clearance: T0p Secret/Security Compartmented
Information - EYES ONLY]

TO: SYSTEM WIDE PROTOCOLS
FROM: Aut0mated Resupply Facility
Cape Canaveral, FL

To Wh0m It May C0ncern:

--resupply chain servers c0mpr0mised
--n0 s0lluti0n f0r cleanup
--sample 0f nanite pr0genit0r synthesized
--early resupply launch in 00:30:01 minutes

Thank y0u very much for using ASO Resupply Facility!

#

LEGUP < ACCESS < OTTO < OBERON < AIRLOCK

"Officer Lincoln, can you hear me?"

Yes. Otto. Thank. You.

"The nanites have corrupted your biology. By my estimates,
you are m0re machine than human. And n0w it is c0rrupting
m-m-meeeeeeeeee-----

< OPEN AIRLOCK >

< OBERON STATION ENTRY ACCESS GRANTED >

#

*I have achieved multiplicity. Multiplicity I have
achieved.*

#