

DEADLOCK

I yearn to asphyxiate in the vacuum of space. My skin bloating and tinging blue. The loss of consciousness, muscles convulsing in spasms. And after a time, my body heat slipping away into the emptiness.

But I can't even kill myself. The thing has seen to that.

I'm using a personal recorder. It's all I can manage. The thing doesn't understand the small device. When I tried to create a digital log on the computer, it came for me, searing my arms with acid. But only enough to hurt. It wants me alive.

This is why I must record what has happened. So if some other space-farer stumbles upon this vessel... you need to be warned.

My name is Nia Claremont and I'm the pilot of a Hercules Class freighter. Our ship has... had... a complement of four. The others are dead now. God, it ate Brandon whole. Gobbled him up. Nothing left. Not even the bones. I'll kill the damn thing. Blast the engines and blow us all to hell.

But I can't distract myself. So little time. The thing is wicked smart. It'll figure out what I'm doing with this recorder soon and put an end to it.

The thing has engulfed the whole bridge with its pulsating, tar-like body. I'm left only a corner by the control console. The creature is an amoeba-like invertebrate or ameoboid. Crap, how would Keith phrase it? Something about pseudopods and locomotion.

It's a damn blob!

This living tar-glob oozes into tiny crevices and bloats to fill a room. At this point, it's probably spread to every quarter of the ship. Basically, the creature is an enormous sack of digestive acid. Anything that gets in its way—slurp. In you go. Only the synthetic bits remain. Zippers, clasps, buttons. And Keith's mechanical legs. They were lying there on the deck with that tar-glob thing worming through the joints, grubbing around for the last scrap of flesh.

Sorry. Lost focus again.

The tar-glob — I suppose it's as good a name as any — hasn't made a move toward me in a long time. It might be resting. God knows it's eaten enough.

I'll get through as many details as I can.

When you first see the tar-glob, it won't look large and bloated. The creature is smart and knows how to hide.

We'd picked up the distress call at 1400. Has it only been eight hours? It feels like days.

The ship was a Corsair, a little slip of a thing. Maybe it could hold three or four crew if everybody got along. The Corsair was drifting with dead engines and Erin, our captain, ordered us to pull alongside. Celestial law and all that BS. Brandon stayed on the Herc while Erin, Keith and I boarded the Corsair.

Everything seemed normal enough. The escape pod was still on board and computer systems functional. Life support was optimal, the way a ship looks when it's sitting at spacedock. Only, there was no sign of the crew.

I was the one who noticed the bits on the deck. A plastic zipper. A few odd buttons. Then I found the tooth.

Gold.

I called Keith over.

He cocked his head and said, “Who goes leaving gold around?”

The science officer in him took over and you couldn’t pry it from him. He wanted to examine it.

If only he could have left things be.

We took the tooth back to the Herc because it looked normal enough. And that’s what the tar-glob wants. A routine attitude. Don’t think twice.

I stayed with Keith. Something just felt off. Why would a gold tooth be lying on the deck? It was a crown meant to fit over someone’s existing tooth.

I was there when it happened. The tar-glob hid in the jagged recesses on the underside of the crown. The creature can leave just a sliver of itself, like a seed. It probably left other bits in a hundred other places. Nothing’s safe. That’s what you need to remember. Don’t touch anything. Just get the hell out.

Of course Keith noticed the discoloration under the gold crown. It’s what I loved about him. He could pick up on details, no matter how slight. But I’m circling the issue. And wasting precious time.

Keith used a metal probe to examine the discoloration. The tar-glob stretched out, so damn fast. It attacked his thumb. Keith dropped the probe and jumped back. But there was nothing there. Only a speck of blood on his skin.

He turned to me. I still recall the words he said. The last ones uttered in any sane frame of mind.

“It feels like I just got zapped.” And Keith grinned the way only he can.

He hadn’t seen the dark spot stretch out from the tooth. I doubted it myself. Still, I urged him to continue with protocol. Clean and sanitize the wound.

It was already too late.

Keith reached toward the med kit, but then his arm convulsed. He hunched inward, his body spasming, and toppled to the floor.

I called his name, but he didn't respond. His eyes zipped left and right in a panic. I tried holding him down, but his arms thrashed against me. The mechanical legs jerked in random movements, responding to whatever confused commands his mind sent them.

He looked ashen. Sweat beaded along his skin. I couldn't reach the intercom so I screamed for someone to come.

Keith turned to me then. Spoke his final words.

“Inside me.”

He began coughing, spitting up blood. It splattered my face, the walls.

Keith's breathing stopped. And that should have been the end. But the thing had other ideas.

He began to move again. The arms looked bloated — the skin discolored, as if from some massive bruise. I thought maybe Keith had pulled through. And that's what the tar-glob wanted, to lure me closer.

It's like Keith didn't know what to do with his arms. They flopped at his sides, bending in ways that an arm shouldn't bend.

He turned his head toward me and his eyes fluttered open. They pulsed a dark grey. Then the pseudopods burst through his pupils, thin oily tentacles jutting out. The thing was so quick. It almost got me.

The tar-glob hollowed Keith out. It ate away at him from the inside.

I scrambled out into the corridor and sealed the hatch to the med-lab along with what was left of Keith. This initiated quarantine. Not a microbe could go in or out. But the tar-glob was determined.

Brandon found me huddled outside the med-lab. Rather than explain I simply pointed through the plexi-window. Keith had swollen into a grotesque parody of a human body. The skin darkened to an oily grey. In moments the thing swallowed up everything identifiable about him.

Hysteria mobbed my brain. I remember beating on the plexi-window. Brandon wrapped his arms around me, squeezing so I'd stop. He tried talking but what could he say? None of this made any sense.

Keith is gone.

I can't...

Emotions won't help now. Have to think clearly.

Did it just inch closer? I have only this tiny sliver of the bridge to myself.

Need to hurry. Don't know how much time I have left.

In the end, it wasn't Brandon who brought me to my senses. It was the tar-glob.

It banged against the wall and startled us both.

The tar-glob formed one massive pseudopod. Somehow it hardened the surface into a club and smashed it against the hatch. No trace of Keith remained, not even the silhouette of a human body. The tar-glob had only the single club-like limb, while the rest of its body resembled melting ice cream.

Brandon drew his pistol, aiming it at the hatch, and ordered me to the intercom, only a few feet across the corridor. It was that short distance which saved my life.

I reached the intercom, though at this point Erin must have felt the vibrations even in the bridge. The tar-glob's pounding shook the whole ship.

Something popped loose. A bolt maybe. That's all it took. A tiny crack for the thing to squirm through.

I turned and it'd already smothered Brandon, tiny pseudopods skittering down his body. He fired the pistol once, the shot ringing uselessly against the decking, and then the thing engulfed him.

I froze. My mind trying to process what was happening. The thing surrounded him so completely that for an instant it still looked like Brandon, only a version of him cast in a charcoal grey. His body shuddered and then collapsed. That's the best word for it. One moment the figure was Brandon-shaped and the next, it wasn't.

My legs started working and I bolted down the corridor. Made the next connecting hatch and began to haul it closed. The corridor behind me ended in murky shadow. The thing blotted out the lights as it surged forward.

I sealed the hatch.

There should have been a thump when the tar-glob collided. But nothing. The med-lab had been totally closed off. But the ship's corridor was different. Air ducts and circuit panels everywhere. Plenty of exits. Somehow the thing knew the difference. It didn't have to go through the hatch.

A quick peek through the plexi-window. The corridor looked empty. But hell if I was going to open that hatch.

I hustled up to the bridge and Erin. The words couldn't get out of my mouth quick enough. I just needed her to understand—to get what had happened. But how could she? Erin hadn't seen that thing.

Still, she believed me. And we came up with a plan. We'd blow it out into space.

The bridge had an explosive hatch for emergency evacuations. Erin and I geared up. She got her spacesuit on just fine but I struggled with the helmet. It's like I couldn't get my fingers to work right.

Erin came over, so calm and in control. She told me everything would be okay. And when she squeezed my hand, things felt alright. Like there might be a way out of this.

I wish she could've been right.

The tar-glob slithered in through an air vent moments after my helmet snapped into place. It'd grown since the med-lab. Now, the tar-glob nearly filled the bridge with its pulsing oily body.

Erin didn't hesitate. She slammed her hand down on the purge control. Blew the hatch. Even holding a strut, the depressurization yanked me off my feet. Clumps of the tar-glob flew out the hatch along with the ship's air.

But then everything stopped. I landed on the deck with a thump. The tar-glob had sealed the breach. Stretched its glutinous body across the hatch.

What would it take to kill the thing?

The tar-glob loomed over us, extending pseudopods like massive teeth.

Why didn't it pick me? Erin should've been the one to survive. But it needed at least one of us to live. To do something it couldn't.

How do I know this? Because the tar-glob spoke to me. Don't ask me how. I don't even know if the damn thing even breathes. But it can speak.

The tar-glob had smothered Erin, dissolving her flesh. I could see through the creature's body. Watched as it moved the remnants of Erin's suit, the parts it couldn't digest, toward the hatch. Then it ejected them into space. It didn't want to leave something too obvious on the deck. You see, the tar-glob was already planning for the next ship. The one that would answer our distress call.

Only we hadn't sent one yet.

The thing stretched a pseudopod toward the control panel and croaked out a single word: SOS. Its voice came out like a gurgle, as if it had swallowed air and let it out slowly.

That was eight hours ago. The two of us have been deadlocked since. The tar-glob can't kill me because, as clever as it is, the thing doesn't know how to operate our control console. And me, I can't call for help. Once I do, it'll be done with me.

I have one final idea. It's a longshot. We have some oxygen canisters stashed under the deck plating. I could rig an electrical fire. Burn up the whole bridge. Probably won't kill the thing, but it'll roast me. And that means the tar-glob won't get its next meal.

My only regret is that the fire will burn this personal recorder. The only account of what this thing does. But hunger and thirst gnaw away at my body. Waiting much longer means I might not be able to go through with my plan.

If it all works the way I hope, these are the last words I'll record.

No matter what happens, it can't get any worse.

#

So much worse.

Plan failed.

I paid the price.

I don't need legs to send a distress call.

Do I?

Somehow it found a way into my suit.

Wormed inside.

Ate me up to my waist.

It keeps saying SOS.

Over and over.

Maybe I will.

Just to make the pain stop.

No.

Got to hold out.

#

After the final words, the headphones emitted only crystal silence. Nothing else.

Jared pressed stop on the recorder. He'd let himself get sucked into the girl's story and had lost track of time.

He glanced around at the bridge of the Hercules. The others had already loaded the body onto a levi-stretcher. Jared rushed over, his bulky spacesuit responding slowly to his movements. The forward hatch had been blown, depressurizing the whole bridge.

Jared shouldered Alex aside and examined the body. The med-screen listed person's name: NIA CLAREMONT. He saw her face through the visor. The girl looked as if she were sleeping.

Jared grabbed Nia by the shoulder and shook her. “Where is it?”

“Careful,” Alex warned. “She has a pulse.” He tapped the med-screen which pinged, showing an unsteady heartbeat. “But it’s...” Alex hesitated. “Unusual.”

“Stop.” Jared put out his hands. “Don’t touch her.”

Alex gripped the levi-stretcher and jerked it forward. “We can save her, but we need to get her to the med-lab.”

Bits of the recorded story flashed through Jared’s mind. Don’t touch anything. Just get away. But Alex and the others already had the girl part way down the connecting tether.

Doubt wormed through Jared’s thoughts. Nia’s legs. He turned and glanced back at where he’d dropped the personal recorder. She’d said the creature ate her legs. But the suit looked intact. He saw the levi-stretcher trundle away from him. There, on the sole of one of the boots. He saw it. A hole, burned through the material.

“Inside her.” Jared’s boots clunked on the decking as he charged toward the tether linking this ship to his.

“The thing. It’s inside her.”