GO. NOW. FIX.

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GO. NOW. FIX.

The model TD8 PandaPillow®, serial #723756, lay forgotten behind a pallet of unsold magazines for two years, its battery power slowly ebbing, and hung on a display for three months, power ebbing further, until—on the very day it would have been stock-rotated to oblivion—a customer bought it.

The PandaPillow was quickly unwrapped, hustled onto the plane, inflated, used as a pillow for six hours in a darkened cabin, and then was lifted into the overhead storage bin and locked away.

The customer never registered PandaPillow, never synced it to the customer's personal constellation, never recharged it, never executed any personal bonding procedures. No person, and no device, ever bothered to read any of its instructions.

While this was not optimal ownership behavior, PandaPillow waited, as it had always waited; weakening, as it had always weakened. One does not complain. One does not summon Customer Support. One is merely a pillow.

For two hours and a bit more, it waited. Then came a very sharp bang and short screaming whistles, and the overhead bin erupted into the cabin. Clothes and bags went everywhere, and PandaPillow almost tumbled out, its clasping hooks barely keeping it in the bin.

A haze of powders and exploded aerosols hung in the cabin, but was already clearing. The scene made PandaPillow's systems surge. Everything was wrong. People were dazed, some were hurt. There was blood. The air was going away.

With its selfie app PandaPillow recorded two panorama shots and two closeups before its battery finally declared the need for emergency shutdown. Shutdown initiated.

PandaPillow took one last survey of the area. A few rescue masks were dropping, here and there. And why was the air all nitrogen?

COMFORT, DEFEND, said its pillow programing. Powering down wouldn't do that. PandaPillow #723756 invoked Customer Support.

<center>* * *</center>

The protocol for Emergency was BE QUICK, so PandaPillow sent the images quickly—in low-resolution first, to save power.

It could hear faint people voices over the Customer Support line, sounding puzzled.

"Do we still support those things?" "Didn't we have trouble with that whole . . . ?" "Is that a movie set?" "Movie sets don't fly at eighty thousand feet, that I know of." "Why isn't it sending proper resolution, for crying out . . ."

PandaPillow heard a worrying gasp.

"Oh dear pizza shops in heaven," Customer Support said, **"no wonder you called in."** Direct feedback pulses followed. **"And you're nearly flatlined. We need to get you to a node. Fast."**

PandaPillow went sharply simple. Visual sensors cut out, local sound dialed down, danger signals dropped, things went standby. There was a quick sync to the plane's infrastructure host, and faint Customer Support voices talked about "calling an Incident," but PandaPillows don't do that, so instead it locked to a simple orientation grid for the five closest multinodes. It was instructed to dangle headfirst out of the bin and take snapshots in all five directions. The third-closest node got DESTINATION painted on it, and then PandaPillow lost situational awareness while its base function protocol took over.

* * *

Things came back slowly, in stages. First air pressure data, then air composition, then radiation, then local audio. All this information passed straight through to Customer Support.

"It's a pillow," said a background voice. "They don't *need* quickpower. It only has one charge speed."

"I don't care. They want video ASAP. The plane is barely talking to them."

Visual half-res let PandaPillow see the cabin, and the child's lap it was sitting on. Emergency facemasks were dangling all over, but no one had theirs on. The DEFEND urges were already hammering, but a software upgrade was loading, so the Autonomous Driver couldn't engage.

Across the aisle, in the row in front of PandaPillow's owner, a T-shirt with lace trim and lace panels was twitching. The behavior of the shirt was very odd. An Emergency Override focused on that, went full resolution, and zoomed on two effectuator limbs that seemed to be tangled in the T-shirt.

PandaPillow instantly learned that this was a model 17X3 Passenger Rescue Drone. Among the drone's simple abilities was putting emergency masks on unattended passengers.

The autonomous drives turned on, and an override snapped down: DEFEND! GO. NOW. FIX.

PandaPillow hopped across the aisle, and slightly overshot. Low air resistance. It hooked two claws on the shirt, and stood up. It reached under the shirt with a rear paw and engaged the drone's carrying hard-point eyebolt, and then stretched. In two seconds the drone thanked it for the assist and requested release. PandaPillow let go of the eyebolt, put the shirt—now slightly torn—in a folded pile on the passenger's knee, and realized it was close enough to somebody's hip charger to draw power.

As the drone delicately applied the masks to the middle passenger and window passenger, PandaPillow nudged the thing to be alert to the child across the aisle.

Doing that threaded PandaPillow—emergency access request—into the drone network, and its system started a whole new file of alarms. There should be sixteen of the drones deployed, but only this one and the two all the way at the back of the lower level were out. Clearly these drones were essential.

One set of four seemed to be trapped in their hutch, so PandaPillow crawled up on the seat for line-of-sight. A collapsed panel was blocking the hutch, and PandaPillow gave itself a GO. NOW. FIX. and began hopping from backrest to backrest.

The hutch was twelve rows back, and the urgent problems grew worse with each hop from seatback to seatback. A woman's face had been torn open, and her tongue

hung out the side and down along her neck. Two rows behind her, all three passengers had horrible wounds below their knees. A puddle of blood, steaming, spread into the aisle, but PandaPillow stayed on course. Masks first. PandaPillows were clear on the importance of breathing, of not blocking nose or mouth, of not tolerating bad air chemicals. All its alarms were maxing out, but breath seemed topmost, and those drones would be solution multipliers.

PandaPillow urgently needed solutions, because every ignored alarm meant a failure report being sent to Corporate, and they were already piling up. Piling up faster because it hadn't been bonded, and so couldn't prioritize just one customer.

Making everything worse, PandaPillow kept slowing down. It hadn't picked up much charge yet, and all this processing ate power. Software alerts kept filling the cache, but the result was confusion. And voices on the comline kept muttering about outdated patches, and unsupported packs and not giving instructions, and no product manuals. Then power got so low the managing system shut off those data channels.

Which was good, because then PandaPillow could focus on freeing those drones.

It could barely identify the drone hatch at first, since four rows of the overhead panels, along with some luggage, had dropped onto the seatbacks, bridging from headrest to headrest. PandaPillow sensed a node in the armrest below, and dropped down between two customers to power and plan.

Pinging the trapped drones was little help. They had, all four together, pushed on the hatch, but it only opened at the bottom by four centimeters. They needed twelve. They had their own node in there, they weren't powering down, but they also weren't getting any guidance from Maintenance.

PandaPillow damped down all the alarms but this one. They weren't helping. It climbed over the window seat passenger, who groaned quietly, and looked around the seat at the situation. There was space at the bottom, but it couldn't squeeze through to get to that space. Too many carry-ons to push, and it wasn't designed for pushing. Crawling back to the aisle, PandaPillow swung around to the next row and squeezed along the passengers' knees to the armrest between the middle seat and the window seat. Two devices were inserted there, but PandaPillow was on Emergency Duty, and so it lifted them away, slid them into seatback pouches, and sat on the node for six seconds to consider. All power to the processors.

Something about the situation resembled the Crooked Neck Protocol. This wasn't a crooked neck, but PandaPillow was low on power and low on time remaining, and shut down the decision tree at five seconds, and moved into the gap between the cabin wall and the debris. The space got tight, and it deflated by 50 percent. Squeezing higher, deflating more, sliding two paws up, it was able to hook on above. Then it inflated itself at cruise speed. The debris budged.

"Try the hatch," it signaled the drones.

When they pushed PandaPillow knew, because part of the hatch pushed its left side. "Stops at almost six centimeters," they said. Which was six centimeters short of saving many lives.

"Belay pushing," PandaPillow signaled, not sure where that phrase came from. How could it have forgotten to avoid the hatch? Stupid, stupid. PandaPillow seemed to be too narrowly focused. Power must be about gone. DEFEND, SLIDE, DEFLATE, get that claw hooked again, and this one, too.

Visual cut out, but PandaPillow was almost there. One shift, there.

It inflated, as efficiently as possible. As it hit 70 percent it pinged the drones to try again.

"Seven point five."

"Seven point nine."

"Eight point six," and PandaPillow got to 100 percent inflation but kept going. 105 percent, 110 percent, 120 percent, and struggled, struggled to hit 125 percent . . .

"7A is outside!" said a drone. "8A is outside," and "9A is outside," said the next two.

"One thing," said 10A, but PandaPillow could barely understand, because power shutoff had begun. Again.

"10A outside. Feel free to belay trying," said the last drone.

PandaPillow had enough juice to deflate, to a 60 percent stop point, and enough presence of processing to unhook its claws. It dropped free, rolling into something soft. There was no power, and PandaPillow shut down.

<center>* * *</center>

PandaPillow felt delicate touches and something being tightened around its neck. Com came up and 10A was right there. Power was coming in. Not very much, but some. Visual came on, ¼ res, and 10A finished adjusting a band, the thing around its neck.

"Mobile micro-node," 10A said by com. "Gotta get going. This aircraft is deeply fucked."

In an instant the drone was gone. With widening awareness, PandaPillow could see that two of the passengers were now wearing rescue masks, and the third—sadly—no longer required one. It moved over people and under debris toward the aisle, but it gave all three passengers a #4 Panda Kiss on the left ear as it went by.

At the aisle, those dampened alarms all kicked back in. Every place it looked, things were wrong. Blood, chaos, very little air. There was a lot more information, too, because PandaPillow and the drones weren't alone anymore. A couple of suitcases had powered up and joined the fray. Two beverage carts, with a lot of local knowledge, had networked a grid of things and some important sharing was going on. Thirty or so personal devices had synced in, and they expressed a lot of opinions, but without effectuator limbs they couldn't do much.

"The pillow is back," it heard on the Customer Support line. And, "Why's he back there?"

Still focused on the air, PandaPillow attended to the discussion of hull breaches and decompression. The plane was flying steady and level at eighty thousand feet. The current assessment listed eighteen breaches in the passenger deck levels, and some others down in the cargo hold. The repair bots down there were on the job. There was only one repair bot stored up here, and one of the breaches had gone right through it. The drinks carts had onboard repair bots, too, but only one was free.

The alarming news was that while the piloting system *could* save the day by flying down to breathable air, it wasn't talking to anybody onboard. The rescue drones were getting masks on the passengers and crew, the suitcases and rear drink cart were patching holes. None of the passengers seemed awake enough for comforting, and one of the suitcases was already freeing another set of drones.

Plugging the breaches to fix the air situation climbed to top priority, so PandaPillow asked if the forward drink cart needed help.

Indeed it did. Something had crushed part of the drawer the bot sat in, and liquid was raining in the drawer. Could PandaPillow send visuals? Could PandaPillow inspect?

Bottles and cans were leaking all over the top of the cart, so the cart asked PandaPillow to knock all the drinks off the top. The cart handed up towels and helped it sop up the puddle, and that stopped the rain in the drawer. The drinks cart system had been able to pry the damaged corner loose, but something else was wrong.

PandaPillow hung over the little railing and looked. The drawer handle was snagged to an eyebolt with, what was that mess? Hair? Human hair?

Various processors took up the question, while the drinks cart brought out the pretzel bag scissors and cut the hair away. Ah, yes, the crew person lying next to the cart must have snagged her hair on the way down. And why didn't she have a rescue mask?

"The pillow's talking to somebody," said a voice on Customer Support. **"Hey, pillow, who's your buddy? Who you talking to?"**

PandaPillow's quick poll showed that none of the devices was communicating outside, except for cargo, and that was just outgoing data and acknowledgments. Only the old Link2 ports were functioning. The whole world had shifted to Link4, since PandaPillow was manufactured.

It promptly sent visuals and as much of the local conversation as it had bandwidth for. Its thinking cleared up a bit then, because the outgoing stuff stopped the annoying update from trying to download.

PandaPillow heard, "Holy Toast, the thing is still flying. Send all this across." Another voice muttered, "The pillow needs some power."

The repair bot was decanting itself from the drinks cart, and the processing grid—seventy devices by now, and calling itself the Quorum—prioritized the remaining holes. The repair bot sang out, "Here I come, to save the day!" and went directly to the hole that had killed its colleague. "Come along, Mr. Pillow. Snag some of this loose clothing as you come. Sweaters are good. And shoes work. Shoes are good."

Something was draining PandaPillow. All the alarm types, all the hurt people and the broken things. PandaPillow wanted to comfort the Customer Support people, who sounded so unhappy and worried, but they seemed to need its data stream more than anything personal it could do.

This repair bot was amazing. It had a spray that allowed it to turn all sorts of things into patches. It had a gel that you could smear around the patch and it would glue the patch in place forever.

PandaPillow kept handing materials to the repair bot, and to a multi-tool smartphone that had pitched in alongside. Aircraft integrity kept overriding the priority of individual passengers, but PandaPillow did squeeze in time to help with a couple of tourniquets.

There were still six breaches left, but "Air pressure's coming up," came over the network, from dozens of devices at once. PandaPillow was slower to notice, but air pressure *was* coming up, and so was oxygen, which reduced its DEFEND alarm, but COMFORT would climb if people came around; and now it noticed that the masks had worked, and people were moving and groaning through the masks, and if the customer had just synced the Pillow on purchase, as recommended right on the packaging, there would only be one person to attend to, but . . .

Visual cut out, the datastream dropped, and so did the Customer Support voicelink. Local data went to dead slow.

"Look alive, devices! Isn't anybody keeping a camera on this panda pillow???? It needs power. And I mean RIGHT NOW!!!"

Shutdown.

* * *

When PandaPillow re-linked to the Quorum it wasn't necessary to reestablish the datalink to Customer Support, because one of the neck-torque units had already hacked PandaPillow's Customer Support link, which was *still* the only open connection to the ground.

It heard, "It would be nice if somebody would cough up a manual for this thing . . ." and then its priority fell so low that Customer Support dropped the call.

When visual came on, PandaPillow looked up into the eyes of a six-year-old girl. PandaPillow knew she was six years old because her phone said she was. She had her own node, which ran the device that kept her heart pumping, and PandaPillow was drawing power from that node—not good! not good!—so was about to turn that link off when her phone begged it not to.

"No, no, she's got plenty of storage, and what she needs right now is a PandaPillow®

to hug. She is very frightened, which is bad for her heart, and she is alone on this flight. Please. And besides . . .”

The besides turned out to be two rescue drones that took off the depleted mini-node, and carefully hung four fresh ones around its neck. Meanwhile, the phone told it that a military hyperfighter was now flying next to them, sizing up the damage; air pressure was 80 percent of cabin normal, but the passengers still needed the masks.

Then a sharp *crackle,* and four rows back a passenger window cracked, letting air whistle out. The Quorum network calculated how long it would take for it to blow out entirely. The closest passenger, awake, put a small daypack over it, which promptly sealed to the window. Advice poured in, but the repair bots both screamed their frustration. They had no more spray, they had no glue. They had nothing.

PandaPillow rolled over in little Samantha's grip. It made a calculation, and another, and more, but at the same time it said to her, "Sam, I need to go over there and help with that window. That window is dangerous."

PandaPillow knew this would be another failure to COMFORT in its long string of failures.

Samantha looked over to the window PandaPillow indicated with one paw. She nodded once, took a big big big breath and flipped off her rescue mask and her lap belt, and hopped across her seatmate so quickly that PandaPillow couldn't object, and then they were jumping over bodies and junk until she reached the right row. And then she tossed PandaPillow right to the window. She was flashing back to her seat before it landed, and the network was flooding with admiration, when both repair bots asked just what the hell it thought it was doing?

SPEC SHEET. PLAN. DEFEND.

"They made you with double-sheet Kevlar?"

PandaPillow tried to position itself over the daypack that now blocked the window, and then inflated itself enough not to be sucked through.

"Can you glue my hooks in place? Or tape them? Will that give you time to think of something?" PandaPillow's growing sense of failure was beyond critical. With all the failure reports, failures to COMFORT, failures to DEFEND, the customer would have been due for some kind of humongous refund, if only they'd bothered to register.

The bots slipped two clipboards under PandaPillow for stiffness. They taped. The Quorum network concocted three types of glue from materials that were on board, so they glued. They enclosed it in a coffer dam made from hard-shell luggage . . . and when the window finally failed, PandaPillow #723756 was able to go rigid enough to hang on, for as long as the nodes around its neck could power it.

* * *

In the movie, they showed PandaPillow fighting off space pirates, and then piloting the plane to safety in an old-fashioned human cockpit. Which is nonsense, because Svenska CV-226s never had cockpits, and their guidance control box wouldn't have fit a PandaPillow, even fully deflated.

In reality, a limpet repair missile docked on the plane's hull, took over the onboard computers—which had gone into defensive shock—and flew the thing down to an airfield near lots of hospitals. There weren't any space pirates to speak of, either.

PandaPillow never went near the control deck, and it was barely able to listen to the Quorum network as they slowly reconnected to the outside, and finally reported the successful landing. Even relaxing, once the window ceased to be critical, the mini-nodes were exhausted, and it started losing things. Processing to half. Visual to ¼.

The movies also show PandaPillow being taken off the plane in a parade of applause, following the stretchers and gurneys. No.

The plane was a disaster, and it had taken hours to remove the recovering humans, the barely alive humans, and the bodies. The EMTs ignored the pillow, which

they couldn't even see under the encasing coffer dam. The repair bots had requested permission to uncover and unglue it from the broken window, but they'd been told to leave everything as-is, for the investigators.

The Quorum slowly dissolved, adjourning *sine die*.

So, PandaPillow just hung, invisible and ignored, in the evacuated plane for half an hour, before a special detail of Federal Marshals came rushing onto the aircraft, looking for a certain pillow.

A very particular and specific pillow.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

The plaque in the display case explains that, "This semi-autonomous plush device racked up the highest number of duty-failure citations ever recorded, achieving this feat in a single hour and a half," while also mentioning that it was credited with helping save an airplane and almost two hundred lives. The display is clear about the death toll. There are pictures of the damage, of wounded being taken to ambulances. Of funerals.

There are copies of testimonials from surviving passengers, from family members, from museum visitors. There are pictures of PandaPillow being held by the young man from Customer Support, with other CS people in the background. They are all beaming, big, big smiles; and they are all wearing panda pins. Their eyes are sparkling in the light.

The display case is an octagon, in the center of an atrium, and is very popular by day. At night the building is empty, and dark, with a single key light shining down on the octagon from above.

Twice each month the director shows up in a limousine, after closing hours, and whisks PandaPillow away to the Children's Hospital, specifically to the Critical Wards, where its COMFORT protocol is exercised, and where defending is almost impossible. Part of its legend is that this particular TD8 has never been updated. This is true. It is repaired at the teddy bear hospital, however, if it gets worn or damaged.

It has also never been registered, never been bonded to a single person, so it comforts all those it can, as needed.

After the hospital visit, the director returns to the museum, and opens the octagon case. And each time, right before he powers the pillow down for the night, he takes advantage of his privilege as the museum's director. He gives PandaPillow a hug, and a pat on the head. He says, "You defended. You comforted." Then he puts it back in its case, closes the door, and goes home.