

Wren, the shiny otter, burrowed through the overgrown corridor into the depths of the ship's network. Half-illuminated cable looms hinted at some theoretical past, where maybe there had once been order. Now, the infrastructure was coated in a thick haze of new, individual cables, each of varying brightness: patches, repatches, temporary fixes made permanent. To Wren, it resembled how they imagined their own mind worked, and so the otter liked being here. It wasn't tidy, but it was cosy.

Today's job was hidden away under cables that draped and blanketed like vines. Wren shuffled and unplugged and replugged until they revealed the ancient core switch: a pleasingly tall and opaque box with hundreds of connections sprouting from it like quills. The machine was running in a degraded state and so not too busy, aside from a single thick cable with an intense, flickering glow. That grabbed the otter's attention, and they traced the cable through the maze of machines until they found it led to another core switch: newer, busier.

After retracing their steps, and finding the nearest chair to sit in while they worked, Wren plugged one end of a debug cable into the impaired switch. The other end went into the port just behind their left ear.

[link link link link link]

The otter sat back in the chair with a happy sigh. They loved their work. Quite literally: conscious thoughts went through diagnostics, while below that, every frame of data through their circuits was a burst of pleasure. Wren had turned their line speed right down by necessity, so that they could actually get things done, although console access didn't need much throughput. The otter could work, and also be pleasantly hazy, with enough room in their mind to fondle the very bright cable and daydream.

Running it through their paws. Powerfully bright, but not too warm. The flickers were so quick, but Wren could see and feel them; they could freely fantasise about what that intensity might do if the otter plugged in. When they plugged in. The urge was building to try it out.

The old core switch was powered down, which made the cable go dark, but Wren could still feel its warmth. All that lovely data had to go somewhere, so it may as well go into the otter, right? Just for a few minutes, with a safety timer. Out came the debug cable, and with a moment to check they were still set to minimum line speed, the connector went in behind their ear with a satisfying click.

[syn synack ack]

Wren took a sharp breath, trapped their paws between their legs, and closed their eyes. The other core switch was much chattier, making full use of the limited bandwidth, and the otter basked in it. Not just a pleasant haze, but a thick fog, with peaks and troughs that drew the occasional chirp. No thoughts, only data. Packets into frames into signals into otter brain. Confused exchanges happening somewhere in higher layers, but Wren was perfectly happy down here.

Until the flow stopped, and the otter was lucid again, feeling beads of drool at the edge of their mouth. That felt short; Wren's clock said the link had only been up for less than a minute. Now it was down.

[nic firmware upgrade complete]

Oh? Oh, that was a problem. Wren's line speed was likely back at defaults again: maximum. Too quickly to do anything about it, the first flickers of amber light came from the otter's plugged-in port, and everything vanished into pure pleasure.

[drop drop drop drop drop]

Happy warmth spilled out into sights, sounds, sensations, all the senses melting together synaesthetically. The otter's eyes were bright, full of static and colour that lit up its smooth, shiny hide. It didn't move, it couldn't move, it couldn't think. Data came, and Wren was gone.

[drop drop drop drop—]

The otter's timer went after a few minutes, hard-stopping the busy networking processes, and Wren was suddenly back, panting and squirming and unplugging and then hugging itself. Fuuuck. That was so good. So good. The colourful haze hadn't left its eyes. Nothing but data. Wren's entire world was signals and frames and packets. It was an object, a thing for moving data. Network kit shaped like an otter. It panted; it felt so useful, so complete. Its sense of self had changed, and already its eyes were back on the dropped cable. Right there. Plugging back in would be so easy. Yet, before that, there was still work to be done.

It took a good while for Wren to swap each cable from the old switch to the many ports down its back, along its body. Part otter, part porcupine, now electrically touching other machines all across the ship. A few other Wrens out there too, already installed, full of data and bliss. The otter knew it would be installed eventually, but it hadn't expected just how delightful this would turn out to be. The background haze of its many edge switches was there, like a soft fuzzy blanket. The two uplinks were all that were left to connect, one in each paw for the fast ports behind each ear.

Wren took a seat, checked all its settings once again, and then plugged both the cables in together; click-click. Link traffic buzzed to and from the otter, sharing and discovering. Its switch pair wasn't a Wren, not yet at least, but that might change in time. Another cute network creature to meet. For now, the data started to flow, and the otter lit up, warmed up, and descended into blank, hazy pleasure; soft fast chirping, thoughts gently deprioritised in favour of all that wonderful data coming in and going out—

[rewrite forward drop rewrite forward drop]

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