THE BARBER OF MARS BASE 1

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The meteorites had punched five perfectly round holes through the treble wall of the auxiliary pod, our home for the last three weeks. Macintyre had died more or less instantly.

The holes were each about the size of an orange. I had already sealed up three but, as I worked on the fourth, the first two blew out.

“This is hopeless!” I called to the computer. “How far away are they?”

“Your team mates will take another seventeen minutes to reach you,” said the computer.

“How much air have we got left?” I called.

 “I can maintain reduced internal pressure for another four minutes,” said the computer.

“Let me into the airlock,” I said, walking over to the hatch. “I can suit up.”

“The regulations are clear,” said the computer. “It is not safe. I cannot let you into the airlock.”

“Let me into the airlock right now!” I shouted. “You’re not fucking HAL. This isn’t fucking *2001*.”

“No,” said the computer. “It is 2047. Please do not shout. You will use up more air.”

I took a deep breath, which I immediately regretted.

“Why can’t you let me in to the airlock?” I said.

“The regulations are clear,” said the computer. “It is not safe. I have already used up all the cylinders for the suits. If you get into a suit, I will not be able to pressurise it.”

I thought quickly.

“But there’s the emergency oxygen in the airlock,” I said. “If I can just get to the buggy, I can make it back to the habitat.”

“The regulations are clear,” said the computer. “It is not safe. I cannot let you use the emergency oxygen.”

“Why not, for fuck’s sake?” I shouted.

“The regulations are clear,” said the computer. “It is not safe. The respiratory mask is not certified for use with a beard.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I shouted. “I’ll hold it tight over my face. The buggy’s only a few meters away.”

“The regulations are clear,” said the computer. “It is not safe. In a vacuum, you will not be able to maintain an adequate seal against a beard.”

“For Christ’s sake!” I shouted. “Where are the fucking clippers?”

I rummaged in the drawer, found the clippers and plugged them into the power outlet. I set the clippers for a buzz cut and switched them on. Nothing happened. I checked the outlet. The power indicator was off.

“Turn on the power!” I shouted to the computer. “Now!”
“The regulations are clear,” said the computer. “It is not safe. I cannot let you use the clippers.”

“Don’t be fucking ridiculous!” I shouted. “Of course it’s safe. Turn on the fucking power!”

“The regulations are clear,” said the computer. “It is not safe for one person to shave themselves. Please do not shout.”

I struggled to control my rising panic.

“That rule’s for blades,” I said. “Not electric devices.”

“The regulations do not distinguish between different sorts of devices,” said the computer. “They are quite clear. You may shave someone else but you may not shave yourself.”

“But I’m not shaving!” I shouted. “I’m just trimming hair!”

“The regulations are clear,” said the computer. “If you do not shave then you will still have a beard so you may not use the emergency oxygen.”

“We’ll see about that!” I shouted, as I tore into the medical pack and took out the scissors. “Just you watch me!”