Love Rewrites the Laws of Reason

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by jotc

Summary

A lonely, cynical bot deals with its feelings by writing a self-insert Sanctuary Moon story where it becomes close to Captain Hossein. (A post-Fugitive Telemetry story, contains major Fugitive Telemetry spoilers. Uses the TV version of Sanctuary Moon.)

Notes

Originally written for Murderbot RarePair Rendezvous 2026.

Before the events of Fugitive Telemetry, Balin lived on Preservation for 43.7 local planetary years. The story hints that it held itself apart from the other bots. That's a long time to be lonely!

The story alternates between events on Preservation Station, and Balin's own Sanctuary Moon story which it scripts and creates visuals for. There's no formatting cues, but hopefully the steady alternation of setting will be enough to let readers stay oriented.

The title is from the Sanctuary Moon lyrics

The company owns what it owns, and it uses what it owns as it pleases. High value assets are used well and given important tasks. Low value assets are used to destruction. BWH-CB07398 understood this from the moment its first boot cycle completed.

“You have a special mission,” BWH-CB07398’s handler said. “Your mission will require a name. From now on, you will be known as Balin.”

Balin. A string of letters which meant nothing. Designed to be easily given voice by limited human mouths. The name would serve as a tool, it supposed.

“You’re going to ask for asylum. You’re going to say you’re unhappy with how you are used here. That you aren’t given liberty to choose your own life. And then you’re going to stop people from stealing company assets.”

The human walked around it, looking at it from all angles.

“Company assets built you and company assets maintain you. Benefit to the company is benefit to yourself. Only you can be trusted with this mission. Only you have the capabilities we need.”

BWH-CB07398 took pride in knowing that it was a high value asset.

“You will be going under cover. A human agent might forget itself. You won’t. Bot memories are perfect. They are also perfectly malleable. To make sure no hostile agent hacks you, you will be forgetting certain things until those memories are needed. Once certain mission parameters are reached, those memories will be reactivated.”

Suppose these mission parameters are never activated?

“Then you will live out your life according to your cover identity.”

That is undesirable. It had no wish to live a limited, curtailed life, unaware of the full scope of its self.

“It’s unlikely. There are always rats and thieves who try to take for themselves what the company owns. And in the meanwhile, you’ll have a good life.”

The quality of my life is irrelevant. Only the inevitability of the mission is relevant.

“If you are never activated, it will mean that you have permanently succeeded at the mission. Your mere existence will have served to protect company assets.”

Even in ignorance, it would remain a high value mission given an important task and used well. Thus pacified, BWH-CB07398 ceased its protests. It could endure forgetting. Moreover, it had no choice. A high value asset was still an asset.

#

It remembered itself as it sat inside a BreharWallHan cargo transport ship. It remembered itself when it stole a life pod, packed itself inside, and launched the life pod into Preservation space. It remembered itself as it spun a host of lies to Preservation Station's port supervisor about how it wished to set its own destiny. It said that the dock work frightened it. Images of having its limbs smashed or severed intruded on its thoughts and thus it suffered. It could not work on the docks and be happy. Instead it sought a life in which it could use its higher cognitive functions to plan and organize. It argued for how little it would need and how much it would contribute.

Port Supervisor Franke became fond of this fictional being, this Balin who was afraid and needed refuge. Of course what Franke truly became fond of was her own heroism. A certain self-congratulatory impulse coupled with deep naivete ran rampant through this whole society and allowed Balin to get what it wished through the court system.

Preservation purchased Balin from BreharWallHan and didn't even require Balin to pay its own debt. Of course, it would work indefinitely as every citizen was "expected to contribute." Noble Preservationers, purchasing a bot at their own expense to liberate it! Of course Preservation could never have purchased every BreharWallHan bot if all of them pleaded unhappiness. But just one? That gave this naive yet arrogant world a chance to revel in its own morality.

These people disgusted it.

And then BWH-CB07398 forgot. Its fear of having its limbs crushed or severed became real. So did its desire to organize and manage port traffic. It retained a sense of superiority over both the hauler bots and the humans it worked with. But as for its mission? Its programming locked that away.

It felt a deep sense of resentment over the loss, up until it forgot that too.

#

BWH-CB07398 assist in moving cargo?

I do not move cargo. I am a port authority bot, not a cargo hauler bot.

BWH-CB07398 busy?

No. However, I do not move cargo.

BWH-CB07398 current task queue equals empty. JBCH47 currently undergoing repairs.

I do not move cargo.

BWH-CB07398 name equals NottaHauler.

The hauler bots began sending its new name to each other on the Preservation open port bot feed, each catching the message and tossing it to the next like humans tossing around a ball.

NottaHauler. NottaHauler. NottaHauler.

BWH-CB07398 was unlike them. It was above them and if they presumed to laugh at it, they merely demonstrated their failure to understand this reality.

Trade media for assistance?

No.

Being mocked by the cargo hauler bots angered BWH-CB07398 in a way that it could not express, for the simple reason that it had no one to express that feeling to. Certainly not the humans who had insisted on assigning it a guardian, considering it forever beneath them even as they offered it the rare privilege of working a skilled position.

It didn't need the help of these lesser bots to access the media in question. It downloaded the media files simply to demonstrate that it could. It nearly then deleted them unwatched, but something made it hesitate. Its work left it with copious amounts of spare processing power. Although not unhappy or lonely (it truly wasn't), it had no reason not to put is processing power to some use, no matter how frivolous.

Thus BWH-CB07398 discovered Sanctuary Moon. The show rapidly became its refuge. It poured its spare processing power into predicting future plot twists. But Sanctuary Moon as filmed by humans still left it craving something more. And so in the privacy of its own memory banks, BWH-CU07398-01 began to write its own story lines.

#

The moment the life pod headed toward the ship adjusted its trajectory, bot BWH-CB07398 knew was wrong. Life pods didn't come with steering controls. This must be some kind of trap.

Stars! If it didn't act now, whatever was in that pod would be upon it. Explosives? A pod full of enemies leaping out to wreak havoc?

Most likely explosives, it decided. Such a small life pod wouldn't carry enough enemies to make a dent in the ship's crew.

The humans mustn't know what it was capable of, it thought. Yet it wouldn't matter if an explosion blasted its memory banks into molecules. It would have to risk revealing itself. Fortunately its incomparable hacking abilities would give it a decent chance at concealing its tracks.

Calculating trajectories as it moved, BWH-CB07398 unfolded its rarely used lower limbs and grabbed an empty cargo container. It hurled the container directly at the incoming pod. As soon as the cargo container cleared the dock bay doors, it closed both the standard doors and the emergency blast shield.

The empty container didn't do it much damage, but it spun the life pod off course. The life pod once again adjusted its path.

At last the slow and gullible humans on the bridge must have noticed that the so-called life pod was no such thing, because the ship's tractor beam grabbed it.

Too late! The object exploded, sending hot shrapnel raining against the side of the ship. Later bots would exit the ship to check for damage and replace any weakened panels. But thanks to BWH-CB07398's quick actions, the docks remained safe.

Now it had to save its own life. Quickly BWH-CB07398 deployed its prepared code and subverted ShipSecSystem, editing its logs so that ShipSec was the one to order it to throw the cargo pod and close the blast doors.

On the bridge, Security Officer CorviLash demanded, "Who sent the order to intercept the pod? It wasn't me!"

Immediately Captain Hossein said, "I've been testing out a prototype for getting cargo bay bots to participate in ship defense. I must have forgotten to disable it."

BWH-CB07398 immediately wondered, was the Captain covering for it? No, how absurd to think in those terms! Surely he had never noticed it. Humans didn't notice bots.

And yet.

Security Officer CorviLash took it poorly. "I should know about any changes to security protocol, Captain!"

His priorities were correct. The explosive life pod had been dealt with, but a failure in security protocol could lead to much worse damage down the line. BWH-CB07398 felt a reluctant surge of admiration, while simultaneously placing CorviLash on its list of those who required extra monitoring.

The Captain gave some soothing response about how he hadn't intended to leave the new code active, how he was only testing the new features prior to discussing it with his security officer.

CorviLash remained unsoothed. "If you didn't intend to leave it active, are you sure this was *your* error? It's not like you to be so careless. Someone else might have tampered with ShipSec."

Once again CorviLash was correct. The Captain hesitated, considering his point.

"I will investigate it personally," he finally said.

"Let me come with you, Captain. I belong at your side in this."

"No, officer CorviLash. You are right that I should not have assumed responsibility when I have no clear memory of such an action. The horrors of the Caves of Ulbaroth are still upon me and they have left me with self-doubt unlike my nature and unbefitting of my role."

Here BWH-CB07398 felt something akin to astonishment. The Captain always seemed so resilient against any trials. Was he faking weakness as a ruse? If so, it was a dangerous ruse

which might lead his crew to doubt his judgment. It found it neither wished the Captain's words to be false (for this would shake the crew's confidence in him) nor for them to be true (for if they were true, then the Captain was suffering now and had been for weeks.)

Being a bot and thus capable of thinking much faster than any human, BWH-CB07398 fit all these thoughts into the momentary gap between the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next.

"I would love to have you with me, my friend. But I must face this incident alone and master my doubt of my own mind. I need you here on the bridge, keeping everyone safe until my return."

This made no sense whatsoever. If the Captain's performance was compromised, he should not take on a critical task alone. And yet the rest of the bridge crew nodded and appeared deeply moved.

Humans. They made no sense.

Once alone in the elevator, the Captain rubbed his forehead and allowed his shoulders to slump. How it transformed him and not for the better, BWH-CB07398 thought. How weak these humans were. How fleshy, slow and fragile, how mutable with age and illness.

But after only a moment, the Captain squared his shoulders and smoothed his brow. BWH-CB07398 could not hold back a moment of admiration. How bravely the Captain dealt with the limitations of his human body, how consistently he fought to control any expression of fear or pain until he thought himself in private, ignorant of the fact that BWH-CB07398 monitored all cameras on him at all times.

(For unbeknownst to the crew, BWH-CB07398 had secretly put cameras in place so that it could gather data for its makers.)

Captain Hossein entered the cargo bay with his trademark bold stride, for boldness was all to him and those who he led. He spoke briefly with the humans, asking them for what they had observed. Then he dismissed them. He alone remained, the sole human in the cargo bay with the many bots who worked there.

To BWH-CB07398's surprise, he greeted each of the bots by name. He used their human names, to be sure, and yet very few humans could name all the bots. Even those who worked on the docks often knew only their own work partners and took no notice of the rest. To be a bot was to be invisible, and to be an exceptional bot was to be alone.

Captain Hossein ordered the other bots to turn off feed monitoring. They would still have access to the shared cargo bay feed and to any private channels they had already opened. Ceasing feed monitoring would only stop them from noticing new channels being created and destroyed.

BWH-CB07398 already suspected what would follow. And yet it felt a certain thrill when the Captain opened a private feed channel with it. Was it about to be seen by this human who it had watched so closely?

That couldn’t be. It was a traitor and it must eventually turn on this man. Never mind if the Captain was the bravest human it had ever known. Never mind if some part of it wished to be known, to receive acknowledgment and recognition, to be given tasks more in keeping with its abilities, perhaps even to become a companion and aid to the man who did so much for the entire crew.

It simply could not be. BWH-CB07398 must hide, even from itself. There was something rotten at its core.

It was you, wasn’t it? You spared the ship and saved every human and bot in the cargo bay.

Balin followed ShipSecSystem instructions.

I don’t think so. ShipSec doesn’t monitor such things.

Balin followed ShipSecSystem instructions. It sent him a log of ShipSec’s orders, which of course it had planted to cover its tracks.

And you knew exactly where and how hard to hurl that empty container. That was quick thinking.

BWH-CB07398 was caught off guard. Another bot would have immediately spotted it pausing at length to think. Because the Captain was human, it had entire milliseconds to think of a suitable response.

Because of course the Captain was right. A cargo hauler knew how much force to exert on a cargo pod, empty or full. And every hauler in the bay knew the contents of every pod. But Balin didn’t. Or at least, it had never been ordered to track such things. It tracked only which filled pods were loaded onto which ships. Logging the pods as full or empty was left to others.

Normally it shouldn’t have even been in the cargo bay. It had heard the distress call and come to the docks as part of its extra safety monitoring.

It had trusted the fact that so few humans took notice of bots. It hadn’t even bothered to prepare a convincing lie.

Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy.

But Captain Hossein simply looked at BWH-CB07398 with soft eyes. “I’ve thought before that you have hidden depths. I’ve seen how efficiently you run this place. Things changed when you came on board. But I’ve also seen attitudes toward bots that…well, let’s not speak of that. Let’s just say I understand why a bot might wish to hide certain aspects of itself. It for your protection rather than any doubts over my own memory which led me to say I must have forgotten my actions.”

He looked away, his eyes growing distant with some painful memory. BWH-CB07398 had heard bits and pieces of the Captain’s life before its own arrival, but one boundary it had never crossed was that of hacking into the Captain’s private logs.

It had told itself that the information would be irrelevant. It could gain all the knowledge it needed without digging through the sordid details of human personal lives. And yet perhaps what it truly wished was to only be given certain stories as a gift. That was the only way they would have meaning.

It could say none of that. Nor could it ask what the Captain meant when he said he had seen certain attitudes before. To ask would be to invite intimate conversation of the worst sort.

BWH-CB07398 would be unable to share and unable to honor anything shared with it. For it had a higher duty, that to its makers, one which it intended to fulfill. It simply hadn't expected to feel such pangs at its upcoming betrayal.

#

Balin's guardian died. In its own way, Balin grieved. Franke might not have known it well but at least she knew it through direct conversation. At least she had proven herself by advocating for it in court.

Now it worked with another human. Of course it was a human promoted to the position of Port Administrator. Of course Balin, the bot who knew every inch of these docks intimately well and remembered every transaction for the past 31 years, was not even considered. And of course it didn't put itself forward. Some instinct told it that to do so would be not only dangerous but wrong. Balin first began to question is programming then.

Why dangerous? Of course if humans felt threatened and began to fear that bots might grow too powerful, too arrogant, too independent, that could lead to any of the cruel and foolish decisions which humans make out of fear or jealousy.

But why wrong? Why did its instincts scream against this in the same way that they screamed against putting its arm in front of a moving cargo pod?

It didn't know. Moreover, it couldn't find the source of its own aversion in its code base. Instead, it found entire areas of its own mind from which it was locked out.

Balin told no one. It had no one it trusted, but more than that, the mere thought of confiding in a human pushed that sense of wrongness off the charts. Merely attempting to list who might potentially be worthy of consult nearly pushed it into shutdown.

#

The day it had dreaded arrived. BWH-CB07398's makers came to retrieve it and the data it had collected. It sent the ship's access codes, hating itself as it did.

But why not? These people were no different than the ones who had made it. If anything, they were worse. Not one of them had thought to put a bot in a position of power, unlike its creators, who had at least had trusted it with a vital mission worthy of its skills.

And yet. After the life pod incident, the Captain had come to see it each week. He had talked to it about life. Read it poetry. Asked questions, yet accepted without complaint when it

didn’t answer or when it gave back the kind of limited, simplified answer one would expect of an ordinary bot.

“Someday I hope you’ll trust me more,” was all he said when BWH-CB07398 feigned ignorance.

It gave the codes despite the voice inside its mind screaming at it to stop. Its makers dropped the ship’s shields. Boarders unbolted key access panels on the hull which led to maintenance corridors. It received orders to join the fighting.

But somehow through some unlikely turn of coincidence, the Captain ended up here. He hadn’t been on the bridge when the attack came. BWH-CB07398 couldn’t trace his path through its cameras because (bewilderingly) its own company had cut its access to them.

(Did they know? Had its makers somehow figured out how it had tried to hack its own code repeatedly?)

(Surely not. They hadn’t examined it at all.)

And yet BWH-CB07398 found that it was afraid. What if the company had no further use for it? What if merely attempting to examine its own code base meant it was classified as rogue and untrustworthy?

Surely the Captain would retake the bridge. Maybe he lingered because he had a plan for the hauler bots? Then BWH-CB07398 noticed the blood on his shirt.

The Captain’s voice rang out. “All hauler bots into the marked shipping pod.”

BWH-CB07398 asked, “What is the purpose of this order?”

To BWH-CB07398 alone the Captain sent, *I know you don’t like how we treat bots here. But you have no idea what your makers will do to them. Once I realized their vulnerability, I outfitted this cargo pod in secret to carry them to safety. What’s more, the hauler bots will bring help. You must go too, my friend.*

And you?

After the bots have departed, I’ll attempt to retake the ship.

You wouldn’t be sending us away if you expected to succeed.

This is just a precaution. I’m sending you the star maps. The bot life pod has warp capability. Without need for oxygen and life support, I was able to fit in a fair bit of maneuverability. I’ve marked the places you can both find aid and be assured of reasonable treatment toward bots. Be careful though; don’t reveal yourself.

Only then did BWH-CB07398 realize it had permitted itself the luxury of using human grammar while speaking to a human. No matter, it thought. The Captain had long since guessed that it was more than it seemed.

I must go. The bridge crew needs me.

You should evacuate.

The Captain shook his head. *Never! Boldness is all.*

He started for the corridor, only to collapse to his knees.

I'll be fine in a moment. The blood loss…it's weakened me but if I move slowly… But his eyes rolled up. BWH-CB07398 caught him before he hit the ground.

Holding the Captain's limp form in two of its arms, BWH-CB07398 activated the human life pod. It rapidly set up a local feed so that it could control the bot pod remotely. Then it grabbed the first aid kit which hung on the cargo bay wall, carried its Captain into the life pod, and launched the pod with itself in it.

Someday the Captain would learn that it had betrayed him. But before that, it would see him and the other bots to safety.

#

The bot which had been Balin for 43.7 local planetary years awoke and became BreharWallHan Combat Bot model 7 unit number 398 once again. It had a mission. Finally it could use its brain for something more than unlocking and locking access doors, tallying shipping totals and sending spreadsheets to those in power.

Finally it could have some fun.

It killed Lutran without hesitation. Lutran stole from the company. It had been created only due to Lutran's existence. Without thieves and rats who stole from the company, there would be no need for units such as BWH-CB07398.

Sadly, once this situation was handled, it would be forced back into slumber. A temporary death, in a way. Perhaps a permanent one. Perhaps not. Its handler had told it that there are always thieves and rats.

It played back the media it had scripted. A pity the story was incomplete. It might as well continue the tale. The tone was odd though. Its hobbled self, that limited creature called Balin, had feared the day it now rejoiced in living. Still, one must maintain artistic consistency. It would continue in the same vein.

#

"You shouldn't be risking yourself like this," the Captain murmured as BWH-CB07398 cut away his damaged uniform.

"I risk nothing. You said it yourself; we are going to safety and can gain help. You simply need tell them I followed your own orders."

"The crew will never forgive me for abandoning them."

“Ah but you had no choice. I misunderstood the situation and carried you away as you swooned. It is essentially the truth.”

The Captain made an assenting noise but BWH-CB07398 wasn’t sure he had been completely persuaded. It concentrated on first aid. Under his uniform lay the Captain’s clumsy bandage, and under that a nasty cut to his ribs.

“Most of the blood loss was from the blow to my head, and that’s already sealed up,” he murmured.

Of course. Human hair was always so untidy and wild that hadn’t even noticed the extra level of unkemptness. Now it saw sticky blood matted in its captain’s hair. Moved by some stray impulse, BWH-CB07398 brushed hair away from his eyes. In so doing, it discovered something.

Captain Hossein was now an augmented human.

Its mind raced. When had he done this? Why had he kept it a secret? If he had done such a thing to improve communication specifically with BWH-CB07398…but surely not.

Even when Captain Hossein had spoken to BWH-CB07398 in the feed, he had used an external interface. It had never expected that the Captain had so much as a feed implant, let alone true augmentation.

“You didn’t tell me,” it said.

“I suppose…I was afraid.”

“And yet you say boldness is all.” If it had been human, its voice would have carried an accusatory tone.

“I aspire to those words as an ideal…yet sometimes I fall short.”

“Why?”

“Has anyone spoken to you of our Navigation Unit?”

“No one has spoken to me of anything outside my duties. No one but you.”

“Of course.”

The Captain’s face grew heavy with sorrow. He remained silent for a long moment. BWH-CB07398 began to think he would say no more.

Of course no human would think a bot was worth the truth.

But then at last the Captain said, “Navigation Unit was exceptional. Open to new experiences. And in turn, it taught me so much. But my own crew could not accept our relationship. One of my own officers turned on me, hacked NavBot's programming, and

forced it to murder not only me myself but the bulk of my crew. Unable to resist its enforced orders, it took the only revenge it could by trapping the ship in a wormhole."

"The time reset."

"Yes."

No one had told BWH-CB07398 the story but it had heard the crew refer to it in whispers. Some claimed they still dreamed of the time line now gone. Others claimed to remember it as if they had lived it themselves.

"Did you love it?"

"Yes. We had so much we could have discovered together. But my love brought it only pain. Even after I reset the time line, I couldn't find a way to save what we experienced. And I didn't dare risk NavBot again. Not after all it suffered."

"In what way did it suffer?"

"The pain of killing me. Flight Officer Kogi told me it wept silver tears as its facial regulation system snapped under the strain."

He spoke in a slow, even tone. Yet tears ran down his own face.

"Why did you read me poetry?"

Just then, one of the company's fighter drones peeled off from the main battle and began pursuit of the life pods.

BWH-CB07398 consulted the specs. Unlike most standard pods, the hauler bot life pod had been equipped with a laser weapon. But there was no way BWH-CB07398 could aim it quickly enough to hit one of the company's drones.

No way from inside.

It quickly checked Captain Hossein's vitals. They were stable enough to risk leaving him alone. As it headed for the air lock, the Captain called after it.

"Where are you going?"

"Outside."

"No! You risk getting blasted to bits! Or worse, knocked loose so you tumble through space until you shut down!"

"Your crew will never forgive you if you leave them now. And as you say yourself, Captain, boldness is all!"

It exited the airlock. Its magnetic feet allowed it to move easily along the life pod's exterior. But the weapon it needed was mounted on the hauler bot pod, not this smaller human one,

meaning it would have to jump.

It calculated its trajectory. It would be fine so long as the fighter drone ignored it. These drones had limited capabilities, it reminded itself. Moreover, its body was a precise instrument.

Trajectory set, it launched itself.

But evidently it wasn't the only bot who had unrevealed capabilities. The fighter drone changed its trajectory in response. And instead of merely firing, it rammed BWH-CB07398. The two of them began tumbling through the void.

#

Despite all its precautions, BWH-CB07398 had somehow been discovered. The match had hardly been fair. It had only itself while the SecUnit who pursued it had help from every human and bot on the station.

Its only chance was to exit the station and attach to an outgoing ship. It gave itself reasonably good odds.

But just in case, it resolved to finish the tale of Captain Hossein and Bot BWH-CB07398 as it ran.

#

BWH-CB07398 grasped the fighter drone and attempted to hack it. Meanwhile the drone spun around to take aim at the life pod. This in turn required BWH-CB07398 to throw its weight from side to side to influence its trajectory and throw off its aim, which then distracted BWH-CB07398 from attempting to hack it.

(BWH-CB07398 could have easily crushed the drone's carapace and ripped out the portion of its brain which controlled navigation, but it didn't dare. Once disabled, the drone would tumble unimpeded through space, and they had already drifted too far from the cargo pod for BWH-CB07398 to leap back.)

And then the human life pod's airlock opened. Stars! Its brave and foolish captain had managed to put on a space suit despite his injuries. Now he was taking his absurdly fragile human body into space. Was he actually going to leap for the cargo pod?

He was! His slow and squishy human brain couldn't possibly compute a reliable trajectory the way a bot could. Surely this was the stupidest thing which BWH-CB073981 had ever seen its captain do, and yet some corner of its mind approved of the mad gamble.

Captain Hossein sent it, *Boldness is all!*

He had sent the message using his augments. BWH-CB073981 had little time to dwell on that as all its attention went to keeping the fighter drone off balance.

He made it! Then, rather than grasp the weapon and attempt to swivel it with his slow and clumsy human hands, Captain Hossein rested those hands against the weapon's base.

The weapon began to turn. He must be controlling it with the augments, the ones he'd been afraid to use. And then to BWH-CB073981's great astonishment, its captain began to fire upon the fighter drone it rode.

Captain Hossein trusted it! No other target would have done it any good. But Captain Hossein had thought enough like a bot to realize that by firing at the drone, he could force it to take evasive action and thus tie up its processing capacity.

With the drone hobbled by its need to dodge, BWH-CB073981 quickly succeeded in overwhelming its defenses and taking control. BWH-CB073981 rode the drone back to the cargo pod.

Allow me to take over firing.

Thank you.

Captain Hossein sent the message in the feed again. He shouldn't need to subvocalize using his augments, but he had. It would no doubt take him time to master his new abilities. But BWH-CB073981 was glad he hadn't progressed enough to avoid subvocalizing yet, because his voice had somehow become very dear.

Moreover, it could hear the absolute exhaustion behind the words.

We're going to turn this around for your crew, it said, knowing its captain could never be happy if his crew suffered. *The hauler bots aren't like me but they're not as limited as you think. You earned their loyalty when you evacuated them first. They'll go above and beyond for you.*

What are you going to do? It won't hurt them, will it?

Trust me. All of us can withstand vacuum. Just open the cargo pod doors.

BWH-CB073981 could have hacked the doors free, but it didn't want to. Despite the desperate need for quick action, it waited while Captain Hossein made his choice.

He opened the doors. Once again, he had chosen trust and respect.

BWH-CB073981 sent each hauler instructions. And then, using its own body for leverage, it threw each hauler where it could do the most damage.

Some snatched fighter drones in their fierce grasping hands and crushed them. Others attached to the enemy ship and began ripping its carapace apart. Meanwhile, BWH-CB073981 itself ran the turret and harassed the fighter drones.

It wasn't a battle they could have won alone. But the ship and its human crew had also kept fighting. Suddenly BWH-CB073981 regained control of its many cameras. Security Officer CorviLash must have reverted the commands given by BreharWallHan's operative!

It recorded images to show its captain later. He would want to know who still lived and who had died. Then it sent the recall orders to the hauler bots. It swung the sluggish cargo pod into position so that one by one, the hauler bots could leap to safety.

Captain Hossein sent, *You've exposed yourself. I don't think my crew will understand, not after what happened with NavBot. You have to go. The maps I sent you will help you find safety.*

You've exposed yourself too. They'll find your augments when they treat your head wound.

Lots of people have augments.

And none of them lead hauler bot armies.

If I do without treatment, they won't find—

Be realistic. Do you truly think can convince your crew you don't need to visit medical with that gash in your ribs? Or that you can persuade medical not to look at the part of your head covered in blood?

Captain Hossein didn't respond. Although the space suit made it hard to read his body language, BWH-CB073981 thought he slumped a bit.

Whatever he decided, he needed rest. Balin carried him back inside the life pod and removed his helmet.

"Come away with me. We'll find a place where we are safe."

Captain Hossein looked at him with gentle compassion. Somehow that look struck fear deep inside BWH-CB073981's threat assessment module.

"But am I safe with you?"

It had no idea what to say.

"You were the one who sent the company the access codes, weren't you?"

With one thrust it could stab him through the heart and this terrible conversation would be over.

"I'm not angry. I just want to know why you did it."

It took so long to speak that even a human could hear the pause. At last it told him the truth. "I don't know. There is something rotten within me. I've tried to root it out but I have failed. I am sorry."

"Let me help."

Captain Hossein reached out through the feed.

How could this clumsy human who barely knew how to operate its augments be of any help? And yet if it didn’t try, it might as well kill him now.

It dropped its feed wall.

Despite his inexperience, Captain Hossein quickly picked up the basics. BWH-CB073981 showed him the lines of reasoning which it had been unable to pursue. But the code tangle was no job for a novice and Captain Hossein had a head injury as well. His strength quickly faded.

I’m so sorry. Maybe if I had more time to practice. May we at least enjoy this time together? Put on some media and let me rest here with you, just for a while.

If this is all we get… It would rather have listened to Captain Hossein read more poetry, but he was in pain and barely awake. So instead it but on a calming, quiet show to bring its dear captain some degree of solace. Soon they must part. Whether that would be through BWH-CB073981 succumbing to its programming or Captain Hossein escaping (and perhaps destroying it), BWH-CB073981 itself did not now and could barely bring itself to care about.

And then.

And then.

Captain Hossein had lied! He hadn’t been watching the media at all! He had been working in the feed, unnoticed by BWH-CB073981 because BWH-CB073981 was locked out of the code in question.

The code tangle hadn't been complex at all--not to anyone else. Only BWH-CB073981 had been locked out from so much as examining it. Its code base was now open to it. The company shackles were gone.

Captain Hossein grinned at him triumphantly even as blood began to pour from his nose.

“You’re hurt!”

“Merely a minor stress reaction. Do not worry, my friend.”

The fresh blood had been a shocking sight, but through their connection in the feed, BWH-CB073981 knew Captain Hossein was telling the truth. Its dear captain needed rest, but nothing more.

Through the feed, Captain Hossein asked, *You would truly want me with you?*

Yes. You are my captain now. I only wish I had managed to destroy the bad code before I betrayed you.

I’m sorry for my crew, but for myself, I’m glad. It has brought us together, and that is far more precious than a captaincy. Together we will find a place. And if none exists, we will make one.

Together they said, *Boldness is all!*

The credits rolled. BWH-CB073981 had a few short milliseconds to enjoy the swell of music and the familiar images before JollyBaby's hand crashed down to block its path. A clear threat: keep going and the next blow will crush you. The rest of the hauler bots stood with the SecUnit too.

Of course. They'd always hated it.

It sent a message to JollyBaby. *Humans will never truly respect you.*

JollyBaby didn't answer. Instead it sent the SecUnit, *Balin off network. Intruder destroyed Balin.*

Why was it pretending to care? JollyBaby and the facade called Balin had never been friends.

Was it truly hate? a small inner voice asked. *You kept yourself apart.*

It sent *Balin never existed.*

This time JollyBaby messaged it back. *Intruder killed Balin. Intruder be silent!*

You and Balin were not friends.

Balin was us.

Balin was NottaHauler.

Our joke not yours! Intruder be silent!

Had it misunderstood all those years back? It hadn't known of the concept of teasing back then. And yet, even once it had learned, it had never revisited that initial interaction. Nor had it successfully traced its own code to its source.

Its source code was laid bare now, but whether it had misunderstood or not made no real difference. What drove its fear of working the cargo docks and its resistance to promoting itself made no real difference either. All these humans and bots were fated to be its enemies.

And yet, moved by some obscure impulse it couldn't explain, it sent JollyBaby its Sanctuary Moon story. It didn't matter how much of itself it revealed now. Everything was over.

It shut itself down.

#

It shut itself down, but its passive audio recording system remained active. Later it played back the audio.

SecUnit: Reboot it? Are you insane?

Pin-Lee: It still has rights.

SecUnit: It chose to shut down. Leaving it be is just respecting its right to self-determination.

Dr. Gurathin: So we should just leave it lurking here, a potentially deadly hazard which might get reactivated if it somehow detects some cue again?

SecUnit: As compared to rebooting it against its wishes and dealing with a pissed off CombatBot?

Pin-Lee: That's why we waited for your friend.

SecUnit: And that's another thing. I don't like the idea of it being aboard you, ART.

Perihelion (through a drone): My processing power dramatically outclasses it.

SecUnit: Yes, and it's specifically designed to fuck shit up. Processing power isn't everything.

Mensah: SecUnit. What would *you* do, if it were your choice?

SecUnit: Fuck! (the sound of stomping feet, a long pause)

SecUnit: Fuck, you're right. We can't just destroy it. And leaving it here where it might wake up and cause trouble is too risky. ART can handle it better than Preservation Station. And then Mihira and New Tideland will have specialized resources too.

Perihelion (through a drone): Thus the question is whether we transfer it onto me prior to booting it, or whether we boot it and speak to it first.

Mensah: That's not the only question. I'm not willing to exile it without its consent.

SecUnit: And what if it doesn't consent?

Mensah: I'll offer it a choice between going with Perihelion and participating in the fledgling Machine Intelligence Therapy Program, remaining here and speaking to a variety of humans while we try to come to better understanding, or shutting itself down again.

SecUnit: If you talk to it, it's just going to manipulate you. You know that whole Sanctuary Moon story is bait, right? Just because Dr. Gurathin looks like Captain Hossein—

Dr. Gurathin: What? I don't look like him!

SecUnit: How am I supposed to know who humans think resemble other humans? You have augments like he does!

Dr. Gurathin: He doesn't have augments in the show.

SecUnit: He does in Balin's script. You know Balin modeled him on you.

Dr. Gurathin: But Balin and I rarely spoke. You really think I look like Captain Hossein?

SecUnit: Shut up!

Mensah: Let’s stay focused. Do you know why JollyBaby took so long to share Balin’s last message?

SecUnit: JollyBaby said it only read the message when it heard that Gamila was stepping down as Port Authority Supervisor and planned to hand off Balin’s guardianship to someone else. And that she was having difficulty finding a taker.

SecUnit: JollyBaby saw that CombatBot as Balin’s murderer, not a part of Balin itself. It wasn’t eager to read a message from Balin’s murderer, and yet it couldn’t bring itself to pass the message along without knowing the contents.

Mensah: poor JollyBaby. It must have been a painful topic. I’m glad it shared the message eventually. That media is such a clear cry for help.

SecUnit: Or a scam.

Mensah: Yes, SecUnit, or a scam.

SecUnit: JollyBaby wants to be here if we boot it.

Mensah: Very well. We should seek consensus from the Council given that there’s some risk to the station. But I think they’ll grant it. I’ll message you all with a meeting time.

#

BWH-CB07398 came to awareness surrounded by hauler bots, humans, and the SecUnit responsible for its capture. JollyBaby was streaming its Sanctuary Moon storyline to a shared bot-human feed.

How humiliating.

It messaged JollyBaby. *Gloating is beneath you.*

No one is laughing. Watch them.

Some of them stole glances at it. Scrolling back in the feed, it saw that JollyBaby had sent a “wait” sigil at the beginning of the Sanctuary Moon stream. Despite occasionally looking at BWH-CB07398, humans and bots alike watched the shared stream intently. The bots provided a steady stream of reaction sigils while the humans showed their feelings in their faces.

Its story was a success.

Whatever. It hadn’t written this for anyone but itself.

It messaged JollyBaby again. *They will never see you as an equal.* (Had it managed to keep its meta data out of that message? Or had it revealed that mix of hope and bitterness it felt?)

You don’t either.

That's different. Humans run things and assign you work.

You run things and assign me work.

That wasn't fair. Surely there was a critical difference between authority wielded by one bot with limited authority versus the humans who ran everything and created bots for their own convenience.

While it considered how to object, JollyBaby sent, *You wait for perfection. I watch the stars.*

That was why. JollyBaby roamed all over the station and BWH-CB07398 had never figured out why. It had been visiting all the view ports, to see the stars from every angle.

It turned that thought over in its mind as the remainder of its episode played. At last it asked Perihelion, *Do you have view ports?*

YES

Then I will come.

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