

**Reassignment**

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The sky is pink.

The color of the sky does not strike you as unusual. In fact, nothing strikes you as unusual about this situation. After all, you had spent your entire service life in the interior of the ship you are currently standing on the deck of, with the designation of *Montserrat Bay*. In fact, you had never even seen pink before at all. Grey, certainly, for that is the color of the ship's walls. White, of course, for that is the color of the assembly lines which you had previously worked on. You have even seen colors such as blue and green, for those were the hues of the fish you were assigned to sort. And, naturally, when one deals with such a large quantity of fish, they are bound to see some injured specimens on a regular basis as well. Red, the color of blood, is also a tint you are familiar with. But not pink. You are certain that pink fish exist, but nevertheless have never seen them.

You tilt your cranium towards the source of the pink sky, laying your optics upon what seems to be a yellow half-circle. This is the sun, you understand. A light which will continue to shine for billions of years, which cannot be manually turned on or off. Instead, it moves across the sky in a cycle synonymous with the rotation of the Earth. Judging by the

sun's current position, it is late in the evening. 18:02, to be exact. That would explain the pink sky.

Your cranium readjusts itself, taking account of the architecture in front of you. The deck of a factory ship is much less crowded than the interior, mostly made up of machinery and loading bays designed to transport captured fish down for processing. After descending a flight of stairs attached to the side of the enormous ship, your optics narrow in on your true objective: a much smaller fishing vessel, its trawl empty and hanging from its crane. The boat is a combination of white and brown, but you cannot see any identifying markers on it. This is good: these are recognizable colors, and will make the transition in assignment more fluid. From the distance, you can see three individuals, two female and one male, leaning on the side of the boat's railing and clad in the signature yellow jacket of the Mermaid Fisheries Company.

Leading down to the boat is a metal ramp, guarded by a man in an orange coat. As you approach, the man holds up a hand, signaling for you to stop, while simultaneously pulling a scanner out of the coat's pocket- a motion he had undoubtedly done many times before. You stop abruptly, and the scanner's rays pass over your optics, before flashing green. The man wordlessly jerks his head in the direction of the boat. You notice then that the three fishermen are staring at you, no doubt having heard your footsteps on the metallic deck. You cannot approximate their thoughts (behavioral analysis had never been your intended function, after all).

After descending the ramp, you assume a parade rest position. Your optics scan the scene. Now that you are much closer, you notice that the state of the boat was much worse than you had originally analyzed. The brown on the side of the craft is not paint, but rust; in fact, the white coloration of the boat seems to indicate that all the paint, and subsequently any of its identifying markers, have been stripped away by the elements. The trawl system is in better condition, but you can see similar signs of decay, and the net is fraying in several areas, though not irreparably. Evidently, this trawler had not been maintained in some time-odd, given company policy regarding catching vessels. You log the information as relevant.

“You our new deckhand?”

The voice comes before you have a chance to vocalize. You turn towards the source of the sound, one of the female crew members. There is a golden bar on the breast of her jacket – signifying her position as captain of this vessel. There is also a white hat on her head, though not one manufactured or affiliated with Mermaid Fisheries. Likely a form of self-fashioning. Her expression is stern, but it does not seem cruel, like those on the faces of the supervisors within the factory ship.

“Yes, ma’am,” you say. There is a tinge of static.

“You got a name?” It is less of a question and more of a demand.

“This unit is designated FSU-2583.”

The woman looks at you with an expression you cannot discern, before shrugging.  
“2583. Good enough for me. I’m Captain Miller, in charge of this vessel, the *Red Jackal*.”

From now on, you will refer to me as such. These two assholes," she gestures widely towards the other two crew members, "are Frank, our lead foreman, and Grace, our other deckhand. I don't give two shits what you call them so long as you do your job. We clear?"

Something is missing here – a ship this size should have a crew of at least six, and more likely eight to ten. Nevertheless, it seems imprudent to vocalize this at the moment; by the looks you are being given, they see you as more of an intruder than an associate.

"Affirmative, Captain Miller."

The Captain nods in approval. "Now, then. I have matters to attend to in the cabin. Get acquainted with your crewmates. We'll be out of here in an hour. We'll need to move fast if we're going to get past the storm."

With that, she walks off, disappearing behind one of the many crates lining the boat's deck. Such distrust is not atypical for androids, but it does make you wonder if it will impact productivity. Some processing power is set aside for simulations, just in case.

You take this opportunity to step onto the boat, your feet hitting the deck with a sound somewhere between a thud and a clang. One of your optics briefly moves downwards. Much like the exterior, the deck is rusted, and there is a small puddle of seawater directly in front of you, showcasing your new yellow paint. A subroutine attempts to initiate a conversation with the puddle, which you override. This is your new task now, regardless of what your matrix recalls. You wonder why the trawler is in such abysmal condition; from what you can gather in your databanks, fishing craft attached to factory

ships are supposed to be well-maintained. Then again, they were also supposed to adhere to guidelines on worker's rights, a notion which bordered more on comedy than tragedy.

Not even a moment passes before the man on the right steps forward. There is a seemingly perpetual grin on his face, showing the man's dark yellow teeth underneath, and his contact lenses shine in the light. It seems as if the grin is eternally plastered onto the man's face; would it remain if the skin were peeled off?

You purge the erroneous thought at once. It seems that there have been some issues in the installment of your new software. You will have to do a status check later.

The man holds out his hand. "Well, the Captain already gave you the introduction. Name's Frank Kushner. Truthfully, 'lead foreman' is a good way of saying 'errand boy' in this case, but I'm the second in command these parts. I'll be telling you what to do. Hope we can get along, partner."

"Likewise."

You take the hand in your own, making sure not to damage any of the man's fleshy bits. He steps back to the edge of the boat once again, taking a position along the ship's railing. Your optics then narrow in on the final figure, the deckhand, who had been silent so far.

Instantly, you detect a different atmosphere from this individual. She straightens herself up, attempting to come eye-to-optic with you, but failing due to the height difference between the two of you. So instead, she crosses her arms and looks at your

frame up and down, as if searching for weaknesses. Is she, as humans tend to say, sizing you up? Or is it a method of intimidation? If the latter, it certainly is not working. After 10.4 seconds, she finally deigns to introduce herself.

"Name's Grace. Where's Jack?" Behind her, Frank perks up in interest. Was he not aware of the recent reshuffling?

"Your former associate was laid off by the Company on grounds of inefficiency. This information should have been relayed to you by email." It is not exactly a lie, but not a truth either. You are not fully aware of the Company's motivations, but you can estimate that efficiency, and thus profit, was the main motivating factor.

The woman gives an expression somewhere between a sneer and a scowl. "And why did they send an android instead of an actual person?"

A brief silence fills the air. Behind her, Frank covers his face with his right hand, as if he had expected this outcome all along. You hesitate – it has been some time since you have done that. "The Company has deemed it necessary to bolster the efficiency of trawler crews with synthetic workers."

"What a goddamn surprise," Grace says. "You'd think the Company could send us that email a day in advance. Maybe then we wouldn't have been waiting fourteen hours for an android!" She throws her hands in the air dramatically, before letting her hands flop to her side, her demeanor shifting into something much more menacing. The sneer is gone, and is instead replaced by a hard, cold frown.

“We’ll see just how efficient you are, bot-boy.”

Before you can say anything in response, she turns on her heel, before silently vanishing amongst the trawler’s mass of machinery.

For several seconds, there is a silence on the deck. Frank looks at his feet awkwardly, reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out a cigarette and a lighter. After several fumbled attempts, the flame finally comes to life, and the foreman takes a whiff.

“Well, I think that went better than expected! She only called you a ‘bot’ once.” The smile on Frank’s face expands to the point that it reaches his eyes. You cannot tell if this was done consciously, or if his muscles are simply working on autopilot.

“I suspect that she dislikes this unit.”

Frank chuckles. “You think?”

“Has this unit done something to anger her?”

“No, no.” Frank shakes his head quickly, and turns away from you to look at the ocean. “Same as usual, on these boats. She used to be a dockworker, right when the big corporations started buying androids *en masse*. Lost her job, couldn’t get a new one. Ended up here.”

The foreman takes another whiff of his cigarette, and blows out a puff of smoke. “These ships are a dumping ground for people like us – high school diploma seafarers so desperate for work that we’ll sell our souls to Mermaid for next to nothing, because at least

it's work. Though it seems we're going to lose even that pretty soon, if you're anything to go off of, my synthetic friend."

You look down at the puddle in front of you once again, taking your silicon features into account. Perhaps this is a burden that all synthetics, but especially androids, inevitably have to face: the status of being a creation. Molded by humans to serve humans and, in doing so, ostracizing humans.

Frank flicks his cigarette into the ocean. "Well, don't tell her I said any of this. She'll get mad at me. Come on, new guy. I'll show you around." He claps you on the back. You recall that humans do this as a form of reassurance through physical contact. A worthless gesture, given that you are incapable of *feeling* anything. Still, the gesture itself is appreciated, if only because it means you have one ally on this ship. At least, that is as you surmise.

Perhaps this reassignment would be... more difficult than anticipated.

Androids typically do not require training when given a new assignment. The reason, of course, is simple: they are given a form of software, installed directly into their matrix, that gives them the ability to complete new tasks. Androids are not like humans: they cannot learn skills unrelated to their core function in a fluid manner. There are some things the android can do, and some things it cannot. While the android is capable of immense flexibility in their respective tasks, they cannot actively move beyond that task in the way a human can. An android designed to wait tables cannot simply transition into a war

machine. Instead, it must be bestowed upon them in the form of software. There is, however, an advantage in this: when an android receives new software, they are instantly able to grasp all of the information contained within. As such, an android with new software can essentially be considered a professional in whatever task they are assigned to. Naturally, there are inherent limits in storage space, and if an android has too much software, they will have to either dispose of it or cut other forms of memory space.

You are no different in this regard. You had never been given new software up until this point, but your disposition is little different from before. It is not a matter of 'learning'; it is as if this part of you always existed, merely buried within your databanks. As such, you undergo your new task as a deckhand with all the experience of a professional who had been at sea for years. Still, in many ways, it is not wholly unlike the work you had been doing in the factory ship, with the added caveat of catching and freezing fish rather than just processing them.

But humans do not like to be shown up. It is, therefore, unsurprising that it takes a mere twenty-seven minutes and nineteen seconds into the first trawl for Grace to begin to critique your performance.

"Too slow." Grace's voice is easily audible even over the roar of the waves, even as she watches you lower a net full of fish into the ship's lower compartment from her spot on the trawl's controls.

Your cranium swivels behind you like an owl turning its head. "This unit is working as quickly as protocol permits."

"I don't care, droid. You need to work *faster*." Her lips are contorted into a thin, indiscernible line. You cannot tell if she is genuinely displeased or simply doing it out of amusement at your circumstances.

"Why must this unit work faster?"

"Because the other boats have gotten a head start on us and the captain's got her hands full trying to get us back on track, especially with that storm." Her lips raised into a smirk. "Wasn't this information relayed to you? By *email*?"

"No, ma'am." You decide not to fight against Grace's jab towards your previous conduct.

She rolls her eyes. "This is why I hate androids." She steps down from her spot, and looks back up at you. "Us fleshy humans? We need something to survive. It is called *money*. That's why we're out here, and not on land. Since we are behind schedule, we're only getting the scraps of what the other boats missed. Less fish means less money."

"This unit does not understand. "

Grace's expression turns to a grimace. "My God, you bots *are* stupid, aren't you? No, that's not how it works. There's less and less fish every year, but we are also getting *paid* less every year. We need at least five thousand boxes every week to survive on this job."

"Would it not be optimal for fish to be divided equally amongst the catching vessels?"

She blinks. Her lips open and close a few times, as if testing their operational capacity. You can see several beads of sweat form on her brow- certainly not a coincidence, given the cold weather typical to the North Sea.

"No," she says. "No, that's not possible. Get back to work, bot." You do not say anything, but nonetheless begin to slightly overclock your servos.

It does not take you long to begin to understand the basic schedule on the trawler. While Captain Miller handles the cabin and plans the voyage, all of the other crewmen dedicate themselves to various forms of work. You and Grace, the deckhands, work in a general process beginning with the trawl and later shifting towards gutting and freezing the fish caught. Frank, the foreman, has the least consistent job, alternating between giving you and Grace instructions, filling in for unmanned areas, checking for any technical errors on the boat, and doing personal tasks for the Captain. Under ideal circumstances, a foreman should only be doing the first two, but with such a shortage in crew, there is no option but to offload much of the work to Frank. While in the process of gutting the fish that evening with the other two workers, you finally decide to ask why.

"May this unit inquire as to the reason this catching vessel is understaffed?" Your vocal box is not entirely used to the cold, and the sound comes out lower than usual due to building frost. You activate internal heaters in response.

Grace scoffed. "Why do you think? Because of damn androids like you." She tosses a fish into a nearby compartment to be boxed later.

“Take it easy, Grace,” Frank said, slicing a knife into a haddock. He stopped for a moment, frowning as he watched the creature’s intestines spill downwards. “Well, she’s not wrong. After the Company fired every human worker in the factory ships, almost everyone here resigned in protest. Didn’t work, of course. Ever since, it’s been more and more difficult to keep the boats staffed. Too little fish, too low wages. You’re looking at the few who stuck around.”

“And now it’s happening again,” Grace said bitterly. “We just can’t win. Guess that’s why Jon and Kristi ended up going into crime. Pays better than this, for sure.”

Frank shot her a sharp look. “Enough of that, Grace. That’s not a path I advise going down.”

Nobody says anything after that for the rest of the day, beyond words related to the job. You have never actually considered the circumstances of humans. You had, of course, seen humans before this, as supervisors within the factory ship. But before the *Red Jackal*, you’d never interacted with actual human workers. You had known that humans required a thing known as ‘money’ to purchase necessities, unlike your own kind which get it directly from their employers, but had never truly grasped any of the subtleties. When one required

Is this to mean that you are at fault for their circumstances? You do not know. You will have to think about that. For several hundred hours, at least.

Life on a catching vessel is taxing on the human body; crewmates rarely get more than five hours of sleep. Androids, however, do not require such rest, merely periods of recharging on a monthly basis. Within the factory ship, you would work for weeks on end

without stopping, and had no concept of 'shifts' beyond those of the human supervisors, who would swap out for breaks and sleep on a sporadic basis. Having time without work is anathema to an android, and this is one of the reasons they were able to so easily supplant humans. After a brief debate, it is decided that you will accompany Captain Miller in the cabin at night so that, in her own words, "I don't screw up and kill everyone." It is unnecessary. The Captain sleeps in rigid, ordered cycles, falling asleep for thirty minutes at a time, waking up for two, and then immediately going back to sleep once more. You realize that this is likely a matter of necessity: without an adequate second in command to take charge of the boat while the Captain sleeps, she must handle it 24 hours a day. It is not healthy for a human.

At one point, while she is awake, you ask the Captain why there is so few crew. She looks at you for a moment, the wrinkles in her face visible even in the dark, and a brow rises.

"You don't know? Figured you would have." She sighs. "When all the human workers on the factory ships got fired and replaced by androids, most of us went on strike. I tried to warn them, but they wouldn't listen. Damned morons thought that an isolated strike could force Mermaid to negotiate. It didn't work. This ship's been understaffed ever since."

"Is this unit to blame?" You are unable to crush the erroneous conceptualization before it leaves your voice box.

The Captain snorts. "Please. The *Company* is to blame. Those fucking vampires would sell their own children to make a profit. None of this is about humans and androids, 2583. That's just the... the red herring."

"That is incorrect. Much of the division between organics and synthetics is derived from changes in labor."

"Yes, yes. But that's not the *reason*, 2583. It's about squeezing as much profit as possible. That's how you get *Montserrat Bay*, a veritable ghost ship."

The Captain slumps further back into her chair. She looks out through the window, at the sea stretching for thousands of kilometers, before simply sighing. Within the next thirty seconds, she is asleep. She wakes up a minute behind schedule, and does not speak to you again.

Your optics move to the window. The sun has begun to rise, but you cannot see it behind the blanket of clouds. The sky is not pink, but grey. In many ways, it looks not dissimilar to the ceiling of your workspace within the *Montserrat Bay*.

