

VILLAINY PREVIEW STORY # 3

The Betrayal

By Shelly Li

Sam saw no reason to resist at this point, and so he leaned back in his chair and let his surroundings wash over him. The spotless, cornerless white room, without windows and devoid of feeling. He knew that there were nano-cameras hidden all over the walls nonetheless.

The man sitting across the glass desk had introduced himself as Dr. Peter Kohl. A smile sat squarely on his face, a mixture of pity and repulsion.

But Sam didn't let this doctor, robotics psychologist, whoever he was, bother him in the slightest. He knew he couldn't escape his fate now, the conclusion drawn from the moment he killed Matthews, then the homeless man at the park, the grocery store boy, the fragile old woman at the spotlight, her younger friend sitting in the seat next to her...

He had lost count of how many lives he had taken.

But as he reflected back on the last few months of his life, his attempt to escape capture, the image of Matthews approached the forefront of his mind.

Matthews: his caretaker, his conversational partner, and his accident.

How was Sam to know that Matthews hadn't been like him, that Matthews would shut off when physical force was applied?

He sighed, wishing that RoboCorp could have coded the knowledge of human death into his system, and returned his attention to Dr. Kohl.

Robotics psychologist Dr. Peter Kohl stared into the robot's deep, humanly eyes, perfectly simulating focused emotions of pain and shame. Kohl had read up extensively on this case, this robot named Sam.

After strangling his owner to death, Sam had gone off on a rampage, killing twenty-two people before the police caught him at the cemetery, cleaning Tyler Matthews' gravestone.

Kohl looked down at the folder of papers in front of him, finding the best method to getting the answers he needed, so that he could deliver the root of the robot's malfunction to RoboCorp.

Since the killings didn't seem to have a pattern, or even a reason, Kohl couldn't attribute the malfunction to faulty programming at the factory. No. Something had happened after Tyler Matthews bought Sam, took the robot home, lived with him for over a year.

But RoboCorp's archives didn't show a single complaint filed by Matthews, or any complaint of robots of Sam's model.

So what had gone wrong?

"Sam, just to be clear here," Kohl began, "you do know that the consequence of your actions is deactivation, right? After a horrific debacle like this, there is no way we can reprogram—you know, fix—whatever is wrong with you."

"Yes, I know," Sam replied, a smile crossing his face. His humanly features were designed to make customers feel more comfortable, after all, more welcoming to the idea of a powerful, freethinking machine living in their homes. "So I assume you're going to ask me a few questions, put together an analyzation of my answers, and then cast me away. That's usually the procedure, right?"

Kohl nodded, taking down a few notes. One could tell a lot about a person by examining his robot—in Sam's case, Kohl expected his owner to have been a candid, yet bitterly sarcastic individual.

"So, I guess the obvious first question is: why did you kills Matthews?" Kohl asked. He looked up, watching something resembling sweet sorrow flicker into Sam's eyes.

"I didn't know that I could kill him," Sam said. Kohl noticed the robot's fingers curl into fists. "He was going to return me for the new model coming out, and, well, I thought I was more to him than a machine." Sam swallowed, his eyes, wet. "I became angry, and I wrapped my hands around his neck. I squeezed, I felt his pulse fluttering against my fingertips, and then I squeezed tighter."

The robot shook his head. “Why couldn’t he value me as much as I valued him?”

Kohl fought to keep his answer to himself, but Sam voiced his words for him anyway. “You want to tell me that I’m just a robot,” he said, his tone softening. “I’m a commodity of convenience.”

Kohl didn’t know how to respond.

“It’s normal for humans to think like that, at least it is among all the people I’ve come across,” Sam continued. “But you programmed me with emotions, and so I can’t help but feel the way I feel. You gave me free thought so that I could grow and adapt to any surrounding. You even designed me to look like you, with this skin and these eyes... why bother making me look so human if you were just going to treat me as lesser than?”

Kohl paused a moment, digesting the robot’s words. Then he said, “Sam, our race does a lot of illogical things, things that we can’t ever explain.”

“I’ve noticed. It kind of clashes with our programming. I’ve always wanted to ask why, but as I mature and learn more about human action, do things I can’t explain either, I feel like I’m getting closer to the answer by myself.”

Kohl took the opportunity to make a transition in the conversation. “So you killing Tyler Matthews... would you consider that an illogical action?”

“Do *you* consider murder to be illogical, Dr. Kohl?”

Kohl jotted down Sam’s answers. “So how did you feel after you killed him?” he then asked.

Sam frowned and said, “Have you ever betrayed someone? Are you familiar with the crushing guilt that consumes you afterward?”

The words felt like a hot knife slipped into Kohl’s chest. His thoughts began to separate from the present, parting like a curtain and bringing him back to the first time he had cheated on Sara. That feeling of threatening combustion returned, bruising, cutting.

“I’m familiar with betrayal, yeah,” Kohl said. “But Matthews betrayed you first. He was going to return you for an upgrade.” The words slipped out before he could stop them.

The robot gave him a half-smile, almost as if he knew what was going on inside Kohl's mind. The simple gesture, that which humans identified as commiseration, both nestled and amused him.

"Does it matter who betrayed first?" Sam said. "If you betrayed someone in order to get revenge, are your actions justified? Help me out—I am, after all, just a machine."

Against his will, Kohl's stomach knotted up, knowing that Sam was right. He had forgiven Sara for cheating on him the moment she had admitted to having an affair. His cheating—his continued cheating—had nothing to do with her one night of betrayal. He had cheated so that he could find a way to forgive himself for letting Sara's loyalty slip from his grasp.

After a few seconds, Kohl managed to blink away the memories of dark rooms and fake love and refocused on Sam. He wasn't sure whether or not he was mentally fit to continue the analyzation. This case seemed more entangled now than when Kohl had started picking at Sam's brain—or at least, the Com-chip that acted as Sam's information processing center.

"So if you felt so guilty about killing Matthews, then why did you run?" Kohl pressed on. This, out of every missing thread to this case, was the question he had wanted to ask the most. "Why did you continue to kill, to betray?"

At this Sam let out a chuckle that made the hairs on Kohl's neck rise to attention. "You said that you were familiar with betrayal, Dr. Kohl."

Kohl frowned.

"Perhaps you need to do some more self-examining." Sam tapped his fingers against the glass table, fast then slow, like he was rehearsing a song in his head. "After you betrayed whomever, you felt this crawling itch all over, did you not? You felt like you were on fire and that no matter what you did, you couldn't peel the feeling off of you."

Kohl struggled not to smile as an odd thought struck him. Now who was the psychologist here? Nevertheless he let Sam continue.

"After you betrayed once, did you betray again? And again?"

Kohl said nothing. His eyes wandered down to the notebook in front of him, and he suddenly realized that he had not been taking notes for the last few questions.

“Why do you betray continuously?” Sam said. “To lessen the importance of that first betrayal, distance yourself from the pain and guilt by scattering the betrayals across a wide net.” The robot scoffed, looking away at the bare, white walls. “This is something I learned from human society, as I matured.”

Kohl nodded and added, “Something illogical.”

“Yes. But it is something that my emotions drove me to do, and the plan makes so much sense until you finish that second betrayal, and you realize that you’re still burning with shame. You mentioned that these acts aren’t considered betrayal if you were betrayed first.” Sam’s eyes returned to focus in on Kohl. “But when you love someone, truly love someone, being betrayed is an insignificant pain in comparison to the knowledge that your betrayal will crush that someone. And you would rather keep these secrets inside and let them tear you to pieces before giving voice to your actions and watching them hurt that someone. This is the price we pay for love, and it is a price we pay without regret.” A smile crossed Sam’s lips, so genuinely sad that it made Kohl forget who he was for a moment, forget their relationship as psychologist and machine.

The moment quickly passed, however, as Kohl began to snap out of this twisted robotics insight. Sam was just a malfunctioned machine that happened to say something that struck a chord in Kohl, nothing more.

Love. What does a robot know about love, about betrayal?

Letting out a deep breath, Kohl looked into the hidden camera behind Sam and motioned for the guards to enter the room.

Almost immediately, part of the seamless white wall caved away, and two men in uniform stepped in.

“Are you okay, Dr. Kohl?” asked one of the officers as they lifted the robot up from the chair. “You look a little shaken.”

Kohl shook his head and faked a smile. “I’m fine, just going to stay here for a few minutes and finish my write-up. Can you escort Sam here down to,”—He paused as his eyes and Sam’s locked—“deactivation?”

“Sure thing.” And with those words, Sam and the two officers flanking him exited the room.

After the door closed, Kohl sat back in his seat and sifted through everything Sam had said.

It didn't make sense. Something had to have altered Sam's programming for the robot to snap like that. There was no way that Sam could have "evolved" into this deep a mindset about love, betrayal, guilt, pain.

Kohl reached up and rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to clear this numbing cold from his mind. His thoughts returned to Sara again, then to all the secret rendezvous with various women, all that time spent with the warmth of another's body, pretending that he cared, pretending that he didn't...

He sighed and chucked his pen across the room. Now that he was all alone here, who was he trying to fool?

Sam was the embodiment of a human being, basking in—and at once suffering from—the same emotions. But yet the robot had been even more. Sam had understood the reasons behind his actions, and he did not regret, for his betrayals were performed out of love.

How does one analyze this, logically?

Kohl smiled and took out his cell phone.

Dialing the numbers, he then leaned back in his chair and counted the rings.

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Look for this and 22 other exciting stories in the upcoming Hall Brothers Entertainment anthology **VILLAINY**, available June 9th.

