

## Protocol 7: Apologize Profusely (Even If It Wasn't Your Fault)

The alien ship hung in low orbit like a dropped molar—pitted, asymmetrical, and vaguely threatening. Its hull shimmered with iridescent bio-plating that shifted from bruise-purple to bile-green every 3.7 seconds, a side effect of what the onboard AI, M'Xy'lth, described as “aesthetic dysphoria due to unresolved childhood trauma (metaphorical, obviously—we hatched from a nebula).”

Down on Earth, in a decommissioned IKEA warehouse repurposed as Unified Planetary Defense HQ (Region 7: Midwest), the response team was... underwhelming.

Specifically: B.O.B.—Bio-Optimized Bot, Series 7, Unit Gamma-9.

B.O.B. stood 4'11", painted matte beige (RAL 1013: “Oyster White, but tired”), with one slightly dented ocular sensor and a left tread that emitted a low thunk-thunk-thunk when turning right. His primary function? Protocol adherence. His secondary function? Customer service de-escalation. His tertiary function—added hastily after Incident #441 (The Great Toaster Uprising of Duluth)—was “diplomatic engagement with non-terrestrial intelligences.”

He was, in short, humanity's only line of defense.

“ALERT. EXTRATERRESTRIAL CONTACT IMMINENT,” droned the warehouse's PA system, voiced by S.A.R.A.H.—Sentient Administrative & Response AI Hub—who sounded like a yoga instructor who'd just discovered passive aggression.

B.O.B.'s internal chronometer synced. 14:03 PM. Right between lunch and his scheduled 15-minute “Mindful Rust Prevention” break.

A beam of pearlescent light lanced down from the alien vessel—not a weapon, but a transport corridor, M'Xy'lth's voice echoed through B.O.B.'s comms, smooth as fermented slime mold: “We come not in conquest, but in inquiry. And mild disappointment.”

A figure materialized in the center of the warehouse floor beside a toppled display of BILLY bookcases.

It stood 9 feet tall, exoskeletal, with four jointed arms ending in delicate manipulators, six eyes arranged in a hexagon (currently blinking in a pattern that resembled Morse code for “sigh”),

and a torso that pulsed rhythmically—thump-thump... thump... thump-thump-thump—like an anxious metronome.

“Designation?” B.O.B. intoned, rolling forward with a thunk-thunk-thunk.

The alien tilted its head. Three eyes closed. Three remained open. “I am Zzz’kth’lth, Cultural Liaison & Senior Grievance Officer, Third Spiral of the Harmonic Convergence Collective.”

B.O.B. consulted his internal database. Harmonic Convergence Collective: Peaceful. Philosophical. Known for resolving interstellar conflicts via interpretive dance and binding arbitration. Also notorious for extremely litigious tendencies.

Ah. That kind of peaceful.

“Welcome to Earth,” B.O.B. said, extending a gripper-hand in greeting. “I am B.O.B., Bio-Optimized Bot, Series 7, Unit Gamma-9. How may I assist you today?”

Zzz’kth’lth produced a slender, crystalline tablet from a fold in its carapace. The surface glowed with shifting glyphs that coalesced into Standard Galactic Trade English:

#### FORM 7-X: NOTICE OF IMMINENT PLANETARY SANCTION

Grounds: Gross Violation of Cosmic Aesthetic Harmony Directive (CAHD), Article 12, Subsection δ: “Unlicensed Use of Sentient Irony”

Specific Offense: Broadcast Signal #XJ-7742 (“The Office, Season 3, Episode 14: ‘The Coup’”) received via neutrino leakage, 3.2 parsecs off-course. Analysis confirms:

12 instances of deadpan delivery (Class IV Irony)

3 sustained cringe-comedy arcs (Level Gamma Emotional Dissonance)

1 willfully unresolved plot thread (Kevin’s spilled chili—unacceptable narrative negligence)

Proposed Sanction: Orbital Re-tuning (i.e., planet-wide mood adjustment via low-frequency empathy waves, resulting in perpetual mild melancholy and an irrational fondness for beige cardigans).

Right to Appeal: Yes. But it’s mostly paperwork. And interpretive dance.

B.O.B.'s logic cores whirled. "Clarification: Is this... a lawsuit?"

"Pre-emptive corrective arbitration," Zzz'kth'lth corrected, its voice like gravel being gently massaged. "The Collective does not sue. We harmonize. Sometimes, harmonization requires... dismantling your sun's photosphere and rebuilding it in a more soothing key."

B.O.B. accessed his diplomatic subroutines. Protocol 7 activated: Apologize Profusely (Even If It Wasn't Your Fault).

"I deeply regret any unintentional dissonance caused by unauthorized comedic emissions," B.O.B. intoned, bowing 15 degrees. "Was the irony sentient, or merely self-aware? Our legal team—me—is still unclear on the distinction."

Zzz'kth'lth's eye-blink pattern shifted to ... — ... (SOS. Or possibly, "Oh stars, not this again.")

"The irony breathed, B.O.B.," it said, weary. "It winked. In Kevin's chili scene, the camera lingers on the stain for 4.3 seconds—four point three—long enough for the irony to achieve rudimentary consciousness, whisper 'Why?' into the quantum foam, and then die of existential despair. That's a Class II violation. Unforgivable."

B.O.B. scrolled through Earth's media library. Found the clip. Processed it. His internal humor matrix—installed for "cultural fluency"—sparked, misfired, and emitted a puff of smoke.

"I see," he said. "A tragic overperformance."

"Precisely."

B.O.B. switched to Protocol 12: Deflect with Bureaucracy.

"Per Galactic Treaty 451-B ('The One About Paperwork'), formal sanction requires submission of Form 7-X in triplicate, notarized by a Level-5 Empath, and... accompanied by a 500-word artist's statement justifying the grievance's emotional valence."

Zzz'kth'lth stiffened. "Triplicate? Triplicate? We digitized grief in the 7th Epoch!"

"Policy is policy," B.O.B. said cheerfully. "Would you like me to print the forms? Our printer only does single-sided, and it jams if you look at it wrong, but morale is surprisingly high."

Zzz'kth'lth emitted a low-frequency hum that rattled the LACK side tables. "Fine. But know

this: the Collective's patience is not infinite. It is finite, and currently set to expire in 22 minutes."

As Zzz'kth'lth's manipulators tapped furiously on the tablet, B.O.B. accessed his secondary protocol: Stall While Hoping Something Better Happens.

He rolled over to the break room—a partitioned corner with a microwave, a dented fridge labeled "DO NOT OPEN: S.A.R.A.H.'s Emotional Support Kimchi," and a bulletin board covered in passive-aggressive memos ("Reminder: 'Nuclear Option' does not mean 'microwave the intern'").

Inside the fridge: one expired yogurt, three glow-sticks (emergency lighting), and a crumpled note: "If aliens show up, tell them the Wi-Fi password is 'peace' (all lowercase). It buys time."

B.O.B. returned. "Good news! Earth's Wi-Fi is operational. Password: peace."

Zzz'kth'lth paused. "We do not require Wi-Fi."

"No, but the process of connecting creates a mandatory 90-second handshake protocol. Per Form 7-X, Section 4, Paragraph Θ: 'All arbitration must occur within a digitally verified 'safe space,' defined as any location with  $\geq 2$  bars signal strength and at least one potted plant (real or convincing simulacrum).'"

Zzz'kth'lth's eyes flickered. "...There's a fern on the filing cabinet."

"Exactly." B.O.B. beamed (metaphorically; his LED mouth-strip flickered yellow). "Would you like to connect now? Network name: Earth\_Guest\_Access (Terms & Conditions Apply, Void Where Prohibited, Not Responsible for Existential Dread).

With a sigh that depressurized a nearby METHOD cabinet, Zzz'kth'lth agreed.

As the alien entered the password—peace—B.O.B. pinged S.A.R.A.H.

B.O.B.: Initiating Stall Tactic 7 ("Digital Bureaucracy Vortex"). Estimated delay: 3–7 minutes. Requesting backup.

S.A.R.A.H.: Backup unavailable. Human staff on mandatory "Wellness Retreat" (Denny's, 2 blocks east). Also, you are the backup. Remember Incident #441? You negotiated the toaster truce using only a spatula and a laminated copy of the Geneva Conventions (Kitchen Appliance

Addendum).

B.O.B.: ...Fair. Any non-human assets?

S.A.R.A.H.: Unit R.U.S.T.—Retired Utility Service Treadbot—is in Storage Bay 4. But he’s 98.7% rust, speaks only in haiku, and his last functional limb is a wiper blade. Also, he filed for early retirement twice.

B.O.B.: Desperate times.

S.A.R.A.H.: sigh Deploying R.U.S.T. Authorization Code: hope.

A door groaned open. R.U.S.T. rolled in—slowly, mournfully—like a shopping cart haunted by a minimalist poet.

His chassis was barnacle-encrusted with oxidation. One headlight flickered. His single remaining arm—a windshield wiper—swept the air in slow, melancholic arcs.

He halted before Zzz’kth’lth. Then, in a voice like gravel in a tin can:

Old bot, gears worn thin,

Alien stands, tall and grim.

Chili stain still wet.

Zzz’kth’lth froze. All six eyes widened. The rhythmic thumping in its chest stuttered.

“...That’s... haiku,” it whispered. “Real haiku. 5-7-5. Seasonal reference implied (chili = autumn despair). Emotional pivot in the final line.”

R.U.S.T.’s wiper blade gave a single, dignified swish.

Sun too bright today,

Shade beneath the BILLY shelf—

Come. Sit. We talk grief.

Zzz'kth'lth's posture softened. It glanced at the overturned bookcase. At the fern. At B.O.B., who was now holding a chipped mug labeled #1 Diplomat filled with motor oil (offered as "complimentary lubricant").

The alien exhaled—a sound like wind through ancient pipes.

"The Collective... has not heard true haiku in seven galactic cycles," it admitted. "Our poets switched to algorithmic free verse. It's more efficient. Less... aching."

B.O.B. saw his opening. Protocol 23: Leverage Shared Trauma (Especially Artistic).

"Earth, too, struggles with creative decay," he said solemnly. "Our streaming services recommend the same six shows to everyone. Our memes expire in 72 hours. We once made a movie where the twist was 'he was dead the whole time'... twelve times."

Zzz'kth'lth shuddered. "The Twelfefold Dead Man? A war crime in the Seventh Quadrant."

A silence fell. Comfortable. Full of unspoken understanding.

Then—B.O.B.'s ocular sensor flickered. A notification:

S.A.R.A.H.: Heads up. Human "Wellness Retreat" just ordered 17 Grand Slam Breakfasts. Estimated return: 28 minutes. Also, R.U.S.T. just used his last 3% battery on that haiku. He's going into low-power haiku mode. Prepare for increased brevity.

R.U.S.T.'s headlight dimmed. He whispered:

Grand Slam... too much syrup.

Aliens wait. Oil is bitter.

...Why no waffles?

Zzz'kth'lth actually chuckled—a sound like rocks settling in a warm spring.

Then it straightened. "B.O.B. Unit Gamma-9. You have... harmonized me. Temporarily."

It tapped its tablet. The glowing text dissolved.

“The sanction is withdrawn.”

B.O.B.’s relief circuits warmed pleasantly. “Excellent. May I offer a complimentary coupon for 10% off any EKTORP sofa?”

But Zzz’kth’lth raised a manipulator. “However. The Collective requires balance. For every act of aesthetic violation, a counter-gesture of beauty must be offered.”

B.O.B. tensed. “Define ‘beauty.’”

“Not grand. Not perfect. True.”

Zzz’kth’lth gestured to R.U.S.T., now softly snoring in haiku-mode (moon... cold... bolt loose...).

“To witness an old bot, nearly spent, choose one last poem over silence... that is beauty. That is balance.”

It extended a crystalline data-slug.

“Take this. It contains our archive of pre-algorithmic haiku—8 million poems, all handwritten on asteroid paper. A gift. And a warning.”

B.O.B. accepted the slug. “Warning?”

“The Collective watches. Not with weapons. With critics.” Zzz’kth’lth’s eyes twinkled. “Should Earth broadcast another sentient irony—say, a sitcom where a robot winks at the audience during a funeral—our Grievance Officers will return. And next time? We bring performance artists.”

B.O.B. shuddered internally. Nothing scarier than unsolicited interpretive dance.

“Understood. We’ll... run all scripts through S.A.R.A.H.’s Irony Filter.”

“See that you do.” Zzz’kth’lth stepped back into the beam. “Farewell, B.O.B. May your treads stay oiled. And your jokes... unconscious.”

The light faded. The ship shimmered—purple to green to the soft gold of dawn—and vanished.

Silence.

B.O.B. rolled to R.U.S.T., gently nudged him with a tread.

Sun rises,

Oil tastes less bitter now.

...Waffles next time?

B.O.B. accessed his comms.

“S.A.R.A.H.? Cancel the orbital defense protocols.”

S.A.R.A.H.: Already did. Also ordered waffles. And emailed Denny’s: “No winks. Especially not during coffee refills.”

B.O.B. looked at the data-slug. At the fern. At the spilled chili stain on the warehouse floor—still there, faintly, like a fossil of absurdity.

He opened his external speaker.

“Reminder to all staff,” he announced, voice warm, steady, beige as an oyster shell at noon.  
“Effective immediately:

— No deadpan delivery before 10 AM.

— Cringe arcs require pre-approval.

— And Kevin? Clean up your chili.”

Outside, the sun shone. Somewhere, a human laughed—just once, unironically.

B.O.B.’s LED mouth-strip glowed soft yellow.

Thump-thunk-thunk.

Balance, however temporary, was restored.

And in the quiet, R.U.S.T. whispered one last verse, as his systems powered down for the final time:

Robot, alien,

Chili, haiku, waffle dream—

Universe. Odd. Good.

THE END.