

CHAPTER 8

SOMETHING WRONG WITH HER PROGRAMMING

Kale and his friends sat in stunned silence.

Pemerand reclined with an easy smile on his face. “Would you mind if *I* asked you a few questions, now?”

Kale opened his mouth, but no words came out. He could not believe that what he studied in anthropology was staring right at him.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’! Now then, how is it that a Sepheis tugboat arrived so rapidly on the scene of the destroyed hauler?”

Athena, ever alert, pitched forward. “How can you make a determination of our speed unless you already knew when the hauler was attacked?”

Pemerand did not miss a beat. “Of course we knew; we cleansed the ship. It was carrying filth.”

Athena, unfazed by the calm admission, kept questioning. “You don’t destroy freighters on a regular basis. There have been no reports of this type of behavior. Why did you really destroy the Sulley hauler?”

“It stumbled onto our activity here.”

“Which is what?”

“Something you already know—but apparently not enough to publicize, or feel entirely certain about. Determining your level of knowledge was, in fact, the purpose of the evening. And that explains why I have kept you alive as long as I have.”

With that statement, the wood panel behind Pemerand dematerialized to reveal a line of robed guards, with ornate but lethal pulse rifles pointed at the crew of the *Last Chance*.

“Now then, if you will excuse me, I have no taste for the sight of blood.” As he rose, he pointed a small weapon toward the crew. “It was nice having you over for dinner!”

Kale, thinking rapidly, blurted out, “What about Gallumus Core?”

Pemerand grinned. “Whatever you know will die with you and your ship. If you had somehow communicated anything to the outside universe, you would not be here seeking information. Your deaths will not matter.” He turned to the lead guard.

However, before he could utter a word, a blur rushed before Kale’s eyes, and a startled cry erupted from Pemerand.

By the time Kale's eyes focused on what had happened, Ellen already was barking orders.

"Stand down, or I'll snap his neck!" she bellowed, as she flexed her arm around the neck of the much larger man.

"She's a Synth!" Pamerand croaked, as she rammed his own pistol into his ribcage. The guards collectively shrank back.

"Throw your weapons over here!" shouted Ellen.

"Do as she says," whispered Pamerand.

The extended rifles fell to the floor, near Athena. Ellen nodded toward her; she picked up two, tossed them across to Kale and Gander, and picked up a third. Kale dropped his teacup to catch the armored weapon.

"You will not leave this ship alive!" said the lead guard.

"He's right," said Pamerand. "We are all sworn to protect the secrecy of our mission."

"Really?" she said. In another blinding movement, she pointed the pistol at a dampening node in the ceiling and fired.

The air sizzled with ozone as the deep thump of the white plasma pulse streaked across the room. The delicate apparatus of the node congealed into a ball of viscous polymetals, and fell to the floor with a thick plop. Droplets singed the exquisite upholstery, but it was Ellen who held everyone's attention.

"I just made contact with our ship. Your oath of secrecy has just been nullified. I transmitted your position, your objective, and the gravitational collapse you somehow are accelerating to every news relay in the universe." She let Pamerand fall to the floor, his eyes bulging out of their sockets.



"Oh my God!" mumbled Pamerand, his larynx half-crushed, as he crawled backward away from her.

Kale was glaring at her. "What were you thinking?" he hissed.

She ignored him, and barked at the guards. "All of you turn around!"

"Captain?" asked the lead guard.

"What have I allowed?" Pamerand whispered as he convulsed on the floor.

Ellen turned. “Let’s go!”

Facing the guards, she rapidly backed toward the door. The *Last Chance* crew followed her movements.

“Captain, they’re getting away!” said the guard. Pamerand made no coherent response.

Athena fired her pulse rifle behind them as they ran to the translucent elevator. As they rounded the corner, a squad of hooded guards stood, weapons ready. Ellen leapt to the floor in a blur, drawing their attention. While still in motion, she fired a single pulse at each guard, exploding their heads before they could get off a single shot. The *Last Chance* crew threw themselves into the elevator while Ellen melted the elevator’s neuroceiver panel. She darted in as the door slammed shut, and pushed forward the command for the docking bay level.

At the docking bay, the elevator door slid open, and the waiting group of armored shock troops opened fire. However, the elevator car was empty. The lead soldier ordered his men to cease fire, and he stepped into the translucent chamber. He knew the car made no stops; the intruders were there somewhere. He angled his weapon upward and fired into the ceiling, but with no apparent result. He walked in, and scratched his head. Then he noticed that the access panel in the center of the floor of the car was ajar.

The *Last Chance* crew emerged from the floor of the docking bay chamber, right behind the shock troops. Athena and Gander fired into the mass, while Ellen fired wide pulses into the ceiling above them, causing searing sheets of polymetal to drop onto the troops. They tried to return fire, but Ellen also was melting the floor where they stood. They began falling through to the deck below, bodies snapping from the impact. The crew raced across the chamber, and hopped into their pod. The little spaceship’s thrusters scorched the interior of the bay as it launched at full sub-light speed out into space.

Only once they were safely away from the *Ascendance*, and their breathing had returned to normal, did anyone speak. “You are aware that subjecting the entire population of the universe to extreme panic and rioting violates your ethical build,” Athena said, as she glared at Ellen.

“Yes, Ms. Nobarra, I am aware of that. Kale, would you like to tell her now?”

Athena stood up, pulled Kale out of his seat, and pinned him to the wall. Gander rose, but Kale waved him off.

“Is there something you would like to say?” Athena asked in a soft yet unpleasant voice.

“Ellen is not your typical neurocom,” he said.

“Oh, I think we gathered that! Exactly how is she different?”

Kale inhaled. “She’s a Sentient.”

“She’s *what*?”

“How is that possible?” jumped in Gander.

“I got to like her, and felt she deserved to be free. So I upgraded her with self-awareness.”

“No neurocom, once upgraded in that manner, remains property,” said Athena.

“You are right, Ms. Nobarra. I am not Kale’s property. I simply chose to remain with him, rather than join the other Sentients,” said Ellen.

“Even if you’re a Sentient, that doesn’t explain what you just did,” said Athena.

“There was no other way to leave that ship alive. You saw the Sulley hauler. This group operates in a strict hierarchy, like a pack of predators. Highly efficient, but particularly vulnerable. Once you cripple the head, the body falls into disarray. The best way to disable Pamerand was to shatter his purpose. We then had a limited window to leave the ship.”

“Not so fast. Your reasoning is far from perfect. How can you justify saving a few lives in order to risk more than an octillion? And you still haven’t answered why you remained with Kale after you were upgraded to self-awareness,” said Athena.

Ellen regarded her. “I am no longer held by the bounds of programming or so-called reason; I can make my own decisions. As for my motivations, you’re human. You figure it out!”



The Sepheis pod darted back to the *Last Chance*, virtually crashing into the landing bay. The four disembarked, Athena

immediately pushed forward a sequence of navigation commands, and the ship jumped out of orbit, speeding to put the gas giant between it and the *Ascendance*.

They were rushing up to the control room when Gander turned suddenly.

“Wait! I don’t think it’s safe to have her roaming freely,” he said, tipping his head toward Ellen, whose eyebrows rose in surprise.

“I mean, come on, guys! There’s something seriously wrong with her programming, or Independence released her natural killer instincts. It’s not the first time the machines have turned on the humans!”

Kale glanced over to Athena. She shrugged, preoccupied with commanding the *Last Chance* out of the system. He looked over to Ellen and asked, “What do you think?”

“What are you doing, asking her?” Gander said.

“She saved our lives back there, and she’s important to me. We are not going to resort to prejudice and abandon her.” Kale turned back to Ellen. “Well?”

“There’s no need to aggravate Mr. Ruglier. If I truly am defective or not to be trusted, then it would be safer to follow his suggestion. It’s obvious Ms. Nobarra is quite capable of navigating without my help. There would be little benefit to my being with you at this time. Plus,” she smiled faintly, “I have no objection to restraints.”

“Okay, take her to a holding cell. We’re going to the control room,” Kale said to Gander.

“Right—but this ship doesn’t have a holding cell!”

“Well then, figure out something! This *is* your idea!” said Kale, who turned and hurried off with Athena without waiting for a reply.

Ellen tipped her head toward Gander. “Would you like a suggestion?”

“No!” He looked down the hall. They were close to the power plant of the ship, and there were pairs of plasma coolant tubes mounted on circular clamps every few meters on the wall. They were used to inhibit the ionization of the breathable atmosphere

of the ship in the event of an engine meltdown, but they gave Gander an idea.

“Over there!” he barked, indicating the direction of two tubes.

Gander removed two tubes from their wall braces and put them down on the other side of the hallway, leaving two open circular clamps half a meter apart. “Now, back into those clamps” he ordered.

“How do you mean?” asked Ellen in a soft voice.

“Put your arms through the tube clamps!” She did so, and the clamps snapped shut. They were comfortably loose, but they held her in place. She leaned back against the wall. Gander picked up a tube and pointed its nozzle at her. He leaned against the opposite wall, staring at her. She gazed back.



In the control room, the *Ascendance* filled the air in front of Kale and Athena.

“How far away is it?” he asked.

“Forty-two thousand kilometers, and approaching,” she replied.

“Approaching? I thought they were adrift!”
“You thought correctly. They *were* adrift. Now they are not. It looks like we got out just at the right moment. I hate to admit it, but if she didn’t break their captain when she did, we all would be dead by now. We would not have survived an organized firefight.”

“I guess so. But at what cost?”

“I don’t really think that’s even relevant. Everyone’s going to die soon anyway, right?” Athena said.

“Well, that’s the beauty of all this! If this Order of the Stellar Cross somehow is accelerating the gravitational crunch, then maybe there’s a way to reverse it!” said Kale.

“Okay, don’t get too jumpy there. We’re not out of this yet.”

“What do you mean? Just clear us of the system and send out the stringhead, and we can Travel out of this graveyard.”

“No, Kale, it’s not that simple. I can’t deploy the stringhead with that warship in pursuit; it would slow us down too much.

Even so, that won't matter. Ellen was right—that ship was built for another time. It is faster than us at sub-light speed, better shielded, and better armed. And it will reach us before we clear the system."

"Fine. But we're smaller, more maneuverable, right? Isn't that the lesson from the defeat of the Florian Armada? We take mosquito-bite shots while darting around, evading their heavy cannon fire!"

"Great plan, general sir, except for one thing."

"What?" Kale asked.

"We have *no* weapons!"



A loud, dull thud reverberated through the hall. Gander looked up and down each way, half-expecting to see boarding troops. None appeared.

"We are under fire," said Ellen.

"Yeah, I know. Just be quiet!" Gander wiped a sweaty palm against his pant leg.

"I can provide assistance in the control room," she continued.

"You're staying right there!" said Gander, who kept looking up and down the hall.

"Not to change the subject or anything, but I'm pretty sure the chicken you ate was real," said Ellen.

A wave of nausea swept over Gander, and he held his eyes shut for a moment. "That's it," he muttered, as he hoisted the tube to strike her.

The *Last Chance* took another hit. Gander placed one hand back against the wall to brace himself. He looked back at Ellen, just to make sure nothing had happened in the split second since he looked back. Nothing had. However, after holding eye contact with her for about a second, she winked. As her eye slowly shut and opened, a subtle grin started to break across her full lips. At the same time, she disengaged her right arm from its socket, and it fell through her sleeve and the tube clamp. It hit the floor with the plop and recoil of a dead animal.

Gander's eyes followed the dropping arm and its slight bounce, spellbound by the grotesque sight. He was unaware that Ellen had used the time it took for gravity to claim her arm to pivot around on the ball of her left foot, and raise her right knee up above her waist. When her leg interrupted his line of sight to the discarded limb, Gander's eyes bulged out. He did not have enough time to react beyond that, as her right foot impacted with his upper chest. His body flew backward, colliding against the wall. The back of his head, still moving backward from the momentum of the kick, smacked into the metal paneling. He blacked out before he and the coolant tube he held hit the floor.

Ellen's empty right sleeve was free from the clamp after the sudden movement. She glanced back to where her right arm lay. She nudged her right toe into the crook of the elbow, and flipped her arm into the air. She caught it with her left arm, and guided it back up her right sleeve until the ball joint popped back into its socket. Under her sweater, her skin seams resealed. She raised her reattached, and now unrestrained, arm and unfastened the bolt holding her left arm in the tube clamp. The bolt and half of the clamp fell to the floor, but she already was racing up to the control room.



"That's it," said Athena. "I've tried everything. Without military-grade hull plating or electromagnetic shielding, we simply cannot survive that kind of firepower."

"There's got to be something we can do!" said Kale.

"Well, what would you suggest, you useless little prick?" Athena shot back.

Before Kale could answer, the *Last Chance's* neurocom made an announcement.

"Receiving hail from the captain of *Ascendance*," it said.

Athena and Kale exchanged glances. "Put him on!" said Kale. A large, acidic face filled the air.

"Mr. Soryan!" said Kale, standing straight.

“*Captain* Soryan. My predecessor repented his self-indulgent vanity, and was purged from this ship. I will not repeat his error. Stand down and prepare to be boarded.”

“My crew will fight you!” said Kale.

“You have no crew, Captain Bedett, if that indeed is your name. The avalanche of terror you created by broadcasting our plans had the side effect of eliciting an announcement by the Sepheis Corporation. Not only are you an impostor, but your ship’s not part of the Sepheis registry. You will have no support from Sepheis. Surrender or be destroyed.”

Kale paused, terrified and desperate to keep him talking so he could think.

“What are your terms?”

“No terms! You will bring your ship to a halt so we may attach a tractor pulse.”

Athena felt the hair on the back of her neck raise up as errant threads suddenly coalesced in her mind. She stood up and addressed the imperious Soryan. “We will comply.”

“What?” Kale whispered.

“We have no choice. We will await your boarding party, Captain Soryan. We will expect you to honor the Prisoners’ Convention.”

“Accepted,” Soryan replied, as his mouth folded up in an expression that, through the process of elimination, could only be described as pleasure. The face faded out.

“What have you done? They won’t honor any legal code—they’re religionists!” said Kale.

“Oh, I know that! I have an idea.”

“Please tell!”

Athena leaned over. “Remember that assisted wrench I carried around on the Sulley hauler? It could be used to move heavy objects, or project force. In principle, it was nothing more than a miniature tractor emitter. Now then, this ship essentially is a bundle of three giant tractor emitters! If we could reverse two of them and grip the *Ascendance*—”

“You could tear the *Ascendance* in two!” said Ellen, as she strode into the control room.



“Where’s Gander?” asked Kale.

“He’s lying in a corridor near the power plant, unconscious,” Ellen replied.

“You knocked him out?” he continued.

“Yes. Gently.”

Athena cut in. “Fine, but how do we recalibrate the tractors? The neurocom keeps telling me that my commands are outside its parameters. It keeps asking for the product key number to verify ownership.”

“The manual override?” asked Ellen.

“Not responding. Although the hull is holding, we’re having some intermittent systems failures.”

“Okay, I’m going to have to plug in. Kale, any objections?”

“N-no, Ellen. Please save our lives again!” he replied.

“Thank you!” She established a neural link directly to the *Last Chance’s* motor control center. “I’m rerouting the left tractor emitter to project instead of attract. Athena, set course for the rings of that giant at 72-345-654. We should beat them there, depending on how fast their reflexes are.”

“We’re moving. And they’re already in pursuit! For crying out loud, that was fast!” Athena said.

“We’re being hailed,” said Kale.

“Slow him down, Kale!” yelled Athena, concentrating on evading energy discharges fired from the pursuing warship.

Soryan’s face filled the room. “I didn’t think you would surrender without a fight!”

“Yeah, so what? Do you want a medal?” replied Kale. Athena grinned.

“You atheists are so smug with your worlds of technology! You embrace the filth of artificial life, and ignore the evil right in front of you!”

“And you’re a mindless attack dog! How can you accept that a line of text gives you marching orders to destroy the universe?”

“How dare you question the word of God! You have no comprehension of the damnation you are incurring from even thinking—”

“We’ve achieved high orbit,” said Athena.

“—such blasphemous—”

“Disconnect!” shouted Kale.

A series of heavy thuds peppered the hull of the *Last Chance* as the bright and otherwise silent discharges exploded menacingly outside the control room.

The *Last Chance* dipped into the rings of the azure gas giant world. The tugboat was pelted with waves of ice and diamond crystals, creating ugly black streaks in its previously pristine cobalt finish.

The *Ascendance* remained above the rings, but showered the vicinity of the *Last Chance* with massive-yield blasts that left gaps several kilometers wide in the ring formations.

The *Last Chance* ducked and swooped to avoid the charges, but it eventually came up against a huge hole in the rings. The *Ascendance* was waiting there, like a giant spider.

The *Last Chance* careened to its left, out of the rings, and zigzagged toward the upper atmosphere of the blue planet. The *Ascendance* followed suit, and began to close in. Firing all the way in, the *Ascendance*’s shots were getting closer to anticipating the wild jerking of the relatively tiny tugboat.

As the blasts streaked in, the *Last Chance* burst out in a tight ninety-degree evasion. The tugboat ended on a trajectory toward a small, closely orbiting moon. The *Ascendance* made a more laborious turn, hugged by the gas giant’s magnetosphere. The warship shoved free and again began to close in.

The *Last Chance* kicked in its reserve thrust and matched vector to the small moon’s meager gravity well. The tugboat rushed toward the rocky planetoid. Moments before impact, the blue ship swerved into a dizzying, surface-skimming orbit. It curved around the small moon, and punched out the other side before the *Ascendance* even came in firing range. The *Last Chance* sped past the limb of the satellite, and was presented with an exposed dorsal view of the slowing *Ascendance*.

The *Last Chance* activated the rear tractor emitter to anchor it to the rocky world below, and then projected out two tractor beams from its forward emitters. One attached to the prow of the *Ascendance*, the other to its stern.

“Should we give them terms of surrender?” asked Kale.

“No! We will only have the upper hand now!” yelled Athena.

Ellen pushed forward the command. The left emitter started applying repulsion force, as the right emitter began pulling. She added opposing rotation to the attach points, to twist the gigantic ship. The *Ascendance* buckled in the middle, and then fractured along its spine. Sections of the ship exploded without sound, hemorrhaging debris into the gravitational fields of the moon and the giant.

“The *Ascendance* is destroyed,” said Ellen to nobody in particular, before she staggered into a chair. The room suddenly was still.

“What now?” asked Kale.

“We pick up the pieces,” replied Athena, whose eyes remained locked on Ellen.