

EPISODE 4: A Violation of the Code

FADE IN

ROBOT VOICE

You are suspected to have the fugitive Fern Finch on board. Cease your flight at once and turn her over immediately. If you need reinforcements to aid in subduing this dangerous fugitive, we are happy to come on board and be of assistance. Comply and we will allow you to continue on your way.

SOUND: SILENCE

GUY

Okay. We'll get her right out to you.

FERN

(Soft, disbelieving)  
You...you bastard.

GUY

Uh...I think I'm gonna need that back-up.

SOUND: COMMS CLICKS OFF

FERN

(Pissed and secretly scared)  
You...You actually sold me out, didn't you? You're actually turning me in.  
(Pause)  
You didn't even hesitate.

GUY

(Placatingly)  
Now look, I think it's best that--

FERN

Well, I think it's best that I stab you--

GUY

Waitwaitwait!

SOUND: ANIMATED BOOTSTEPS ON METAL PLANKING

SENTIENT ENTITY

Oh, this is just wonderful.

FERN  
 (Slightly breathless)  
 Stop running away like a coward  
 and let me stab you.

GUY  
 (Also breathless)  
 STOP! I'm not going to let them  
 board this ship!

SOUND: BOOTS STOP

FERN  
 (Wary, disbelieving)  
 Yeah? I guess I must have  
 misunderstood you when you told  
 those police clowns  
 (Mimicking Guy's voice badly)  
 "Let me finish metaphorically  
 stabbing Fern in the back and I'll  
 bring her right out to you, wait,  
 it looks like she's about to  
 literally stab me in the back, so  
 can you come and save me, please?"  
 (Normal voice; now very  
 sarcastic)  
 That was an ambiguous statement.  
 There are definitely multiple ways  
 to interpret it.

GUY  
 Stop and think for a moment--

SENTIENT ENTITY  
 (Harsh, mocking laugh)

GUY  
 --I don't want them looking any  
 closer at this ship than they  
 already have. I can obscure the  
 ship's identification codes, but  
 if they board, they'll want to  
 take a look at the identification  
 tags in the mainframe and that  
 isn't something I can alter.

SENTIENT ENTITY  
 You're assuming that I have  
 "identification tags."

GUY  
 (Groans; to himself)  
 That's even worse.  
 (MORE)

GUY (CONT'D)

(To Fern)

Look, if they even glance at the mainframe, they'll start to dig deeper into who I am and, trust me, I don't want that.

FERN

(Still skeptical)

Okay. So asking them to come on board is an excellent way to keep that from happening.

GUY

In order for them to come on board, they'll need to travel from their ship to ours via space pod. As soon as that pod is headed out way, we'll take off and leave them behind. They won't be able to chase after us until their pod has returned to their ship. It'll buy us a couple of minutes, at least.

FERN

Ah, the classic "frantic boomerang" trick.

SOUND: TYPING

GUY

(Ignoring her)

Let's see if I can get one of our exterior cameras focused on their ship and...alright, the pod has left their ship. Hang on!

FERN

(Quickly)

Wait, there's nothing to--

SOUND: ENGINES CRESCENDOING

FERN (CONT'D)

(Groans in discomfort)

You know, getting thrown around by your take-offs is getting really old.

GUY

(Unapologetic)

I don't know why you always get caught off-guard by them.

SOUND: SAME SIREN THAT THE POLICE USED TO HAIL THEM BEFORE

SOUND: BUTTON PUSHED. SIREN STOPS

GUY (CONT'D)

We...probably don't need to hear what they have to say...

FERN

(Serious)

That was a nice lead you got, but it looks like they're gaining on us.

(Pause)

Aaaand...now they're firing lasers at us...

(Pause)

It's too bad lasers don't make any noise in space...I bet they'd make a super cool sound if they did.

GUY

(Gritting his teeth)

I'm not sure I can lose them.

FERN

What?

GUY

They have a lock on our identification code. That's partly why they're able to stay right on our stern no matter what I do.

FERN

Okay, so change our ID code again.

GUY

I can't do the recalibration and pilot this ship at the same time.

FERN

Oh. Well, what about letting me dri--

GUY

(Interrupting her)

Absolutely not.

FERN

Yeah. That's probably for the best.

(Nervous)

So what's plan B?

GUY  
 (Stressed)  
 ...Something I'm working on.

FERN  
 Okay, well, no pressure, but I  
 don't think you have a lot of time  
 to figure it out.

GUY  
 (Teeth grit)  
 Thank you for pointing out the  
 obvious.

SENTIENT ENTITY  
 I believe I might have a solution.

No. GUY No. FERN

SENTIENT ENTITY  
 What if I were to tell you that,  
 despite my utter disdain for the  
 two of you, I find myself in the  
 horribly distressing position of  
 sharing your sentiment regarding  
 police presence on this ship.

FERN  
 (Dripping with sarcasm)  
 Oh, well, in that case, I  
definitely believe you.

GUY  
 Wait a moment.  
 (To SENTIENT ENTITY)  
 What do you mean?

SENTIENT ENTITY  
 I apologize. There were too many  
 syllables in that sentence, to say  
 nothing of the complexity of the  
 syntax, so let me rephrase: I do  
 not want the police to board this  
 ship, either.

GUY  
 (Super skeptical)  
 Why?

FERN  
 "Why"? Really? Who cares! It's a  
 lie!

SENTIENT ENTITY

I assure you, it is not.

FERN

And I assure you that I've spent nearly half my life dodging Helios traps so it is my expert opinion that the trap you're setting for us now is one of the most obvious traps I've ever seen and, embarrassingly for you, that bar is set really low.

GUY

(Persistent)

Why don't you want the police on our ship?

SENTIENT ENTITY

(Condescending)

It shouldn't take much imagination to figure that out.

GUY

You're...you're hiding something, aren't you?

SENTIENT ENTITY

Perhaps.

FERN

Wait, wait, wait, this makes no sense! You're working for them! You had us en route to Venus yesterday! That's the last place anyone would go if they had something to hide!

SENTIENT ENTITY

(Haughtily)

I suppose I've overestimated how much imagination you have--

FERN

(Interrupting)

Oh my god. We get it! You think we're stupid. But, at the end of the day, we have control of the ship and all of your insults and lies won't do a damn thing to change that.

SENTIENT ENTITY

And you, Santee?



SENTIENT ENTITY  
 (Solemnly and with the  
 subtlest tinge of anxiety)  
 That was a clever maneuver, but it  
 doesn't look like it was  
 successful. They're firing warning  
 shots now, but it won't be long  
 before they start targeting my  
 thrusters and then we'll be dead  
 in the water.

FERN  
 And you want us dead dead, so  
 seems like six of one, half-dozen  
 of the oth--

SOUND: ENGINES ROAR AGAIN

SOUND: SOFT ALARM CHIMING. ANOTHER JOINS IN.

FERN (CONT'D)  
 (Groans)  
 I. Really. Hate sailing.

SOUND: ENGINE SOUND GROWING IN INTENSITY

FERN (CONT'D)  
 What's all that noise?

SENTIENT ENTITY  
 You're over-clocking my core  
 reactor. One more maneuver like  
 that and the police won't need to  
 disable my engines because you'll  
 have done it for them.

FERN  
 (To Guy)  
 It looks like they're getting a  
 lot closer and there're two of  
 them now.

GUY  
 (Tightly)  
 I see that.

FERN  
 You know...desperate times and  
 all...maybe we should reconsider  
 letting me man the helm of this  
 thing?



ROBOT VOICE (CONT'D)  
Request that your vessel suspend  
forward motion and await  
verification of your credentials.

SENTIENT ENTITY  
(Cold)  
Negative. If verification is  
required, you may do so while we  
remain in transit.

ROBOT VOICE  
(Irritated and grudging)  
Copy. One moment...  
(Silence)  
Psi-6263, you have been cleared to  
proceed, over.

SENTIENT ENTITY  
Yes, and pursuant to H.I.A.  
Article 154.002, this encounter is  
to remain classified.  
(Snidely)  
That includes official paperwork  
and any water-cooler gossip those  
on board chose to engage in.

ROBOT VOICE  
(Long pause)  
(Hateful)  
Copy.  
(Distantly)  
Those intelligence operative sons  
of bi--

SOUND: COMMS BUTTON PUSHED

SOUND: SILENCE

FERN  
(Faintly)  
What. The hell. Was that?

GUY  
(Also somewhat stunned)  
They've...they've peeled off and  
are...huh, it looks like they're  
actually leaving.

SOUND: GLITCHING

SENTIENT ENTITY  
 (Sounds very pained)  
 Now would be an excellent  
 opportunity to recalibrate the  
 identification code.

GUY  
 Oh! Uh...yeah.

SOUND: RAPID TYPING

FERN  
 (Suspicious)  
 That's where you give the ship a  
 new name, right?

GUY  
 Among other, much more important  
 and complex functions, yeah.

FERN  
 What are you gonna call our ship  
 now?  
 (Pause)  
 Oh my god. Really? That's gotta be  
 the worst name for a ship in the  
 history of ships. And... probably  
 in the history of names, too.

SOUND: TYPING STOPS

GUY  
 (Exasperated)  
 Fine. You come up with a better  
 name!

FERN  
 Easy peasy.

SOUND: SLOWER TYPING

GUY  
 (Groans)  
 No. Absolutely not.

SOUND: RAPID TYPING

FERN  
 What? Why not?

GUY  
 Really? Do I really need to tell  
 you why "The HMS Surprise Bitch"  
 is not an acceptable name?

FERN  
(Saccharine)  
If you'd be so kind.

GUY  
No. Here. This is our new name.  
It's not up for debate.

FERN  
(Disgusted sound)  
Ugh. "Belphegor's Prime"? What the  
hell does that even mean?

GUY  
Just a little joke. Okay, let's  
check out the damage...

FERN  
I think we only took the one hit.

GUY  
Yeah and...I think it was just a  
glancing blow, but at some point  
I'm going to need to go to the aft  
hold and inspect the stern  
fanwale.

FERN  
(Softly)  
So, what the hell just happened?

GUY  
I...I don't know. I think...I  
think the...entity actually  
overrode my code and gained access  
to the external communications  
array? Hang on...let me make sure  
they haven't regained control of  
anything else...huh, that's weird.

FERN  
What?

GUY  
It looks like...they don't have  
control of that system any more.  
Or...or any other system that I  
had blocked their access to.

FERN  
So, it only got temporary control  
of our external comms?

GUY  
Looks like it. But maybe not the  
entire system?

FERN  
What?

GUY  
I think they only overrode enough  
code in order to accept the police  
cutter's incoming hail.

FERN  
So...that would be easy for it to  
do?

GUY  
No, it should have been  
impossible.

FERN  
"Should."

GUY  
(Worried)  
Yeah.

FERN  
(Sarcastic)  
Well, that's reassuring.  
(Pause)  
Also, is it just me or is it being  
really quiet?

GUY  
(Loudly)  
Hey? Uh...you? Are you there?

FERN  
Hey! You! Yeah, we're talking to  
you, you son of a glitch! What?  
You finally run out of insults?  
After less than half a day? That's  
embarrassing.  
(Pause; softer)  
Huh. That alone should have gotten  
us at least three pretentiously  
snide insults.

SOUND: TYPING RESUMES

GUY  
Lemme see...

SENTIENT ENTITY  
 (Drained, slightly pained and  
 glitching randomly)  
 Stay out of my source code.

GUY  
 (Apologetic)  
 Sorry! Just...trying to figure out  
 what happened to you.

SENTIENT ENTITY  
 (Still glitchy)  
 Something that wouldn't have  
 happened if you had listened to me  
 earlier.

GUY  
 Did you...I don't know, hurt  
 yourself doing that?

SENTIENT ENTITY  
 (Glitchy)  
 None of your business. Now, leave  
 me alone. I have no further  
 interest in conversing in moron.

FERN  
 (To Guy)  
 Eh, it sounds fine.

GUY  
 (Softly)  
 "They."

FERN  
 What?

GUY  
 It's probably more accurate to  
 refer to this...this entity as  
 "they."

FERN  
 Why?

GUY  
 Because they're essentially a  
 person.

FERN  
 No, it's a computer.

GUY

Trust me: I've seen a lot of computers in my line of work. This...being is as close to a computer as we are to bacteria.

FERN

(Growl of frustration)

Ugh. So what? Why should I start being polite to the thing that wants us dead?

GUY

It's not about politeness: it's about decency. Even if this being wants us dead...be better than that.

FERN

"Be better than that?" Bold of you to assume that I care what it--or you--think about me.

GUY

It's not about me. It's not even about this being. They're horrible and I certainly don't like them either, but...they're still a sentient, autonomous being. You shouldn't...insult? Deny? someone's identity because you hate them.

(Frustrated groan)

Look: all I'm asking is that you not be a dick about this.

FERN

Wow. That was poetic.

GUY

(Snaps)

Fine. Do what you want.

FERN

Trust me, I always do.

GUY

(Angry; confrontational)

Yeah, I can tell. Tell me, do you ever think about others or do you just skate through life taking advantage of people without any remorse for the trouble and inconvenience you cause them.

FERN

What?

GUY

You promised me that I would never have to see you again. Then, not only do you sneak right back on board, but you do it after catching the attention of the Helios Police, who nearly destroyed our ship while trying to apprehend you!

FERN

I thought I already told you. I'm here by accident.

GUY

(Scathing)

You expect me to believe that lame excuse of a story? I'm starting to see that I can trust you almost as little as I can trust our digital friend here.

FERN

That's a good rule to live by.

GUY

(Angry; sort of loud)

Will you stop being glib and just answer my goddamn question?

FERN

(Pause. Serious)

Fine. But only if you answer one of mine.

GUY

(Icy)

Fine.

FERN

When I first met you in that hangar bay on Alectrona-Delta, you mentioned that you have something you need to do and that you're going to the Oort. What do you have to do?

GUY

(Sighs; reluctant)

I...I made something I shouldn't have.

(MORE)

GUY (CONT'D)

Or, I mean, I got tricked into designing tech that...well, that if it fell into the wrong hands, it would probably be really, really bad for a lot of people.

FERN

And let me guess, it fell into "the wrong hands."

GUY

Yeah.

FERN

And those "wrong hands" are the Helios government?

GUY

Well, the military and the HIA, but yeah.

FERN

Hoo boy, you got the Intelligence spooks involved, too? What the hell did you make?

GUY

(Serious, angry)

Something that I'm going to destroy before they have the chance to use it. Does that answer your question?

FERN

Yup.

GUY

(Still serious and angry)

Good. Now answer mine.

FERN

Crap. I forgot: what was it?

GUY

(Frustrated)

Why. The hell. Are you back on this ship?

FERN

(Sighs; Tired)

Honestly?

GUY

Honestly.

FERN

(Sighs; frustrated as well)  
I...I got in a tight spot on Chiron, which I did not foresee, and...I panicked, okay? I thought I'd have...friends...there. Turns out, I was wrong.

GUY

(Pointed)  
These "friends" of yours didn't turn on you because of your bounty, did they?

FERN

Honestly? No. I think they would have screwed me over even if I was worthless.

GUY

(Suspicious)  
Huh. These "friends" of yours sound interesting.  
(Pause)  
You never did convince me that you're not an associate of Robin Hood.

FERN

(Frustrated)  
Oh my god, you're still on that? Why the hell is that so important to you?

GUY

(Ice cold)  
Because it is.

FERN

(Tired)  
Look, what I am is a person whose only sanctuary now, in the entire Heliosphere, is a ship that wants me dead that's piloted by a guy who almost shot me earlier.  
(Pause)  
I have no other options. And...I don't think you do, either. Whatever my past associations were or weren't, you and me? We're on the same Helios spit list.  
(Pause)  
So, that thing you made: we're going to destroy it?

GUY

We?

FERN

I just said: we're on the same side now. You may not like it, but, if you're gonna be crossing paths with the Helios military and Intelligence goons, then I think you'll find that you're better off with me. You're good at the computer-y stuff and flying and...and not shooting me. And me? Well, I have some skills of my own that might come in handy against them.

GUY

Which are?

FERN

I dunno. They're pretty random and I don't, y'know, catalog them or anything.

GUY

That's...not a very strong endorsement for yourself.

FERN

Oh, trust me: it is.

GUY

(Groan; resigned)

Fine. If nothing else, it'll be good to have another human here with me.

FERN

What? Why?

(Sudden realization)

Is it because I have hands?

GUY

(Suppressing a smile)

Sure.

FERN

Aw, that's one of the most flattering things anyone has ever said to me.

GUY

Yeah, yeah.

FERN

So, is that why you're going to the Oort? Is that where the thing you made is going?

GUY

(Somewhat distracted)

Kind of? You remember that ship I was trying to blow up on Alectrona-Delta? That ship is armed with my tech and is heading to a Kuiper Net pylon. I can't track the ship directly, but I have the all of the pylon coordinates and H.I.A. communication frequencies for this sector, so I should be able to figure out where that ship will be heading.

FERN

(Impressed)

You can hack into H.I.A. comms channels?

GUY

It's...a bit tricky, but yeah. With enough time I can.

FERN

Is that why you stayed moored at Port Nickeline for so long?

GUY

Partly, but most of the delay was because the digital entity kept interfering with my work.

FERN

Ah.

(Pause)

So...it sounds like the code you used to keep them paralyzed didn't really work.

GUY

No, it wor--

(Pause; pleased)

Wait... "Them"?

FERN

Shut up.

GUY

And the code is working. The problem is that almost all of this ship's systems require the entity in order to function. If I were to sever their connection to everything then the ship would be inoperable. And because almost all of those systems are interconnected to some degree, the entity can find loopholes in my code and interfere with some of my commands, like the command to prime the ship for take-off.

FERN

But...I thought you said external communications is one of the things it absolutely can't do.

GUY

Yeah. Them accepting that hail wasn't a work-around. That was...an actual violation of the code? Something it should not have been able to do.

FERN

And you think it--they hurt themselves?

GUY

I...I think so? Or whatever their equivalent of an injury is.  
(Slightly ashamed)  
I did get a quick look at their source code and...I can't tell you how, but, it looked...kinda wrong? Like...the code looked wounded?

FERN

How do a bunch of ones and zeros look wounded?

GUY

The same way a bunch of As and Cs and Ts and Gs would if you knew how to interpret the genomic sequences of organic life, I guess.

FERN

(Confused)  
Uh...huh.

GUY  
 But...the ship is still  
 operational, so...I think they'll  
 be okay.

FERN  
 Not that we care.

GUY  
 Well, if they die, we die.

FERN  
 Ugh. Fine. I guess we care a  
 little bit.

SOUND: TYPING RESUMES

GUY  
 (Distracted)  
 That's the spirit.

FERN  
 (Pause)  
 So...what're you doing now?

GUY  
 Trying to comb through these  
 H.I.A. communique to help me find  
 the right freque--...wait a  
 minute.

FERN  
 What?

GUY  
 This communique--it looks like  
 there was an anonymous tip about a  
 ship moored in the same lock that  
 we were on Port Nickeline. I guess  
 that explains all the commotion we  
 saw around that one ship near ours  
 when we were there.

FERN  
 (Feigning disinterest)  
 Yeah? Sounds boring.

GUY  
 (Reading)  
 It looks like someone reported  
 seeing some of Robin Hood's Merry  
 Men onboard a ship called...heh,  
 "Solar Flair."

FERN

(Nervous)

Heh. That's funny because that's the name you gave our ship earlier.

GUY

Not exactly. They spelled Flair "f-l-a-I-R" though. Our ship was "f-l-a-r-e." But still, what're the odds?

FERN

Yeah. What're the odds.

GUY

(Suddenly suspicious)

Hang on.

(Pause)

Fern?

FERN

Yeah?

GUY

That anonymous tip...was that from you?

FERN

What? No! Why would I do something like that?

GUY

Oh my god, Fern! Really?

FERN

Okay, look, I can explain. When you have a bounty on your head, the best way to move through a port is for all security forces to be focused on a different problem away from where you are. So...I may have raised an alarm about a suspicious ship in lock gamma. But! I assumed that you would have left the port as soon as I disembarked! I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to stay on Nickeline that long!

GUY

I told you! I needed to access their servers before I could leave!

FERN

No, you told me that after I came back! I didn't know you'd be sticking around for a while! If I did, I would have come up with a different distraction! One that didn't put you at the center of a rollicking security party!

GUY

(Pause)

You know what? I believe you.

FERN

(Defensive)

Look, I don't care if you--wait, what?

GUY

I don't think you intended anything bad to actually happen to me.

FERN

I really didn't--

GUY

Even if what you did was selfish and impulsive and reckless.

FERN

You know me so well--

GUY

Just...answer this question honestly.

FERN

I think I've met my quota of honest question-answering for the year--

GUY

Did you intentionally misspell Solar Flare?

FERN

...No.

GUY

So, you really thought I'd name this ship something like "Sun Pizzazz" or "Sol chic"?

FERN

Yes? No! I don't know! All I know is that it's a stupid name for a ship, no matter how you spell it!

(Pause)

And, joke's on you because clearly the person who owned that other ship in lock gamma thought something like "Sol Chic" was a good name!

GUY

Fair point.

FERN

That's it? You're not...angry?

GUY

(Sighs)

I'm...I maybe should be, but...like you said, now it's in your best interest to work with me. I...don't think you're going to have much motivation to betray me again.

FERN

For now.

GUY

For now.

FERN

(Pause)

So...this thing we're gonna do at the Kuiper Net pylon: it's gonna be dangerous?

GUY

(Softly)

Yeah. I think so.

FERN

(Grinning)

Sweet.