

You're listening to Erraticus, Episode 12: Argemone.

SOUND: METALLIC CLATTERING AND CLANKING.

ARGEMONE

Oh, be careful with that.

FERN

(Startles)

Holy...how long have you been up there?

ARGEMONE

Not long. You look like you're searching for something.

FERN

Maybe.

ARGEMONE

Would you like some help?

FERN

Not from you.

ARGEMONE

(Light laughter)

No offense taken.

FERN

(Under her breath)

Shame.

ARGEMONE

Whatever you're doing, it's a beautiful day to be outside, isn't it?

FERN

Yeah, gotta love Oortian Islands with their perfectly controlled weather and day/night cycles.

(Pause)

Though I guess you have an added perk here.

ARGEMONE

Oh?

FERN

Yeah. It looks like you get all sorts of entertainment here.

ARGEMONE
 (Polite confusion)
 I'm sorry?

FERN
 How many ships have you watched
 crash land? Going by this huge
 ship-junkyard we're standing in,
 I'm betting you get one...what?
 Once a week?

ARGEMONE
 (More subdued)
 Not nearly as often as that, thank
 goodness. The majority of these
 ship wrecks are decades old. I
 think most crews know to avoid
 this area of the Oort by now.

FERN
 (Disgusted; under her breath)
 Fat lot of good that reputation
 did us.

ARGEMONE
 (Not taken aback)
 You may have crash-landed, but you
 and your ship faired miraculously
 well. I suspect your crew is the
 only one who has ever survived
 landing here.

FERN
 Except for you.

ARGEMONE
 I suppose.

FERN
 (Mocking)
 "I suppose."

ARGEMONE
 (Faraway; wistful)
 I'm sorry: it's been a long time
 since I've had someone to talk to.
 I suppose I've lost the knack for
 it.

FERN
 (Sighs)
 Sorry.

ARGEMONE

(Kind)

There's no need for apologies.
What are you looking for?

(Long silence)

I know you don't trust me, but
this is a large area to search.
I'm happy to lend a hand.

FERN

(Reluctant)

Guy said the ship needs a
new...navigational transceiver?

ARGEMONE

Oh. A navigational transceiver?
Follow me.

SOUND: FOOT STEPS CLAMBERING OVER METAL

ARGEMONE (CONT'D)

Most of these wrecked ships are in
poor physical shape, as you can
see. But, I suspect we can find a
transceiver.

(Pause)

It's interesting: your ship's
operating systems appear to be
quite damaged.

FERN

Suppose so.

ARGEMONE

That's curious. To my knowledge,
the Siren Sphere around this
island only affects humans.
Neither it nor the crash-landing
should have damaged those systems.

FERN

Yeah, you're talking to the wrong
person about this.

ARGEMONE

I'm sorry?

FERN

I couldn't tell you the first
thing about our ship, how it's
broken, or how to fix it. So, if
you're digging for information to
use against us, you're wasting
your time.

ARGEMONE

(Wry)

Is that what you think I'm doing?

FERN

I might not know a lot about ships, but I'm not stupid. You're the only living person here. Why wouldn't you be angling to steal our ship once Guy's finished fixing it?

ARGEMONE

(Amused)

I'm the only person on an island littered with ships. Surely I'd be able to repair one and leave whenever I wanted?

FERN

Not everyone can repair a ship.

ARGEMONE

I suppose you have a point.

FERN

I do have a question for you.

ARGEMONE

Oh?

FERN

You said that this island is surrounded by something that makes people go crazy and crash into it.

ARGEMONE

...not quite what I said, but, please: go on.

FERN

How come you didn't die?

ARGEMONE

Probably for the same reason you and your friend didn't.

FERN

Which is?

ARGEMONE

I haven't the faintest: you two haven't told me.

FERN

No, we told you we didn't remember. We both passed out before impact.

ARGEMONE

An impact that was remarkably well controlled.

FERN

What's your point?

ARGEMONE

Oh, there's no point. I just find it very curious.

FERN

Okay, a better question: why are you here?

ARGEMONE

Ah, you're right: that is a much better question. I'm here because of the vagaries of fate and determinism.

FERN

What.

ARGEMONE

When you woke up, you asked me who I was, and I told you my name, to which you responded with a quaint little epithet.

FERN

I mean, your name is pretty obviously the type of geek name they give to geeks at Geek Island.

ARGEMONE

In...a manner of speaking, I suppose. But, from my name, you concluded that I'm a researcher from an Anemoi outpost. Why would someone like that be here?

FERN

You were studying this place?

ARGEMONE

That's certainly a reasonable conclusion.

FERN

Why were you studying this place?

ARGEMONE

Why does anyone study anything?

FERN

You really suck at giving straight answers, you know that?

ARGEMONE

Hmmm...I suppose I am.

FERN

(Sound of frustrated dismissal)

ARGEMONE

Can I ask you a question?

FERN

It'd be super awkward if, as a scientist, you couldn't.

ARGEMONE

(Polite huff of laughter)

The name, Fern Finch: that has Oortian affectations, but I am not familiar with the Finch crew.

FERN

Probably because you've been stuck on this deserted island for...how long did you say?

ARGEMONE

(Breezily)

Oh, I've long lost track of that.

(More pointed)

There hasn't been a new Oortian Crew in...at least a century; I find it hard to believe that a new crew has sprung into existence since my arrival here.

FERN

It sounds like you answered your own question then.

ARGEMONE

I suppose I have, haven't I? Curious. What's your real name?

FERN

Fern. Finch.

ARGEMONE

I see.

(Pause)

You don't trust me, do you.

FERN

Not even in the slightest. Now, stop distracting me. I need to find--

ARGEMONE

--Here.

FERN

What?

ARGEMONE

A navigational transceiver.

FERN

Oh. Wait...this is where I was looking when you distracted me! We just made a giant circle. Why didn't you point it out earlier?

ARGEMONE

I confess, it was a cheap ploy to prolong our conversation. But, as I said, it's nice to have someone to talk to, and you and your friend have all the time in the world to repair your ship. I'm not in any rush, nor should you be.

FERN

(Grumpy)

We have other things we need to do, you know.

ARGEMONE

(Pleased)

I didn't know! What would those other tasks be?

FERN

Nothing that involves you.

ARGEMONE

(Amused laugh)

I suppose not. Are you heading back to your ship now?

FERN

Yup.

ARGEMONE
I'll tag along.

FERN
Nope.

ARGEMONE
Oh, hush. There's something I've found that I think would benefit your ship.

FERN
Cool. I can deliver it to Guy myself.

ARGEMONE
No, I don't believe you can. It comes with an explanation that I don't suspect you'd be able accurately convey.

FERN
Fine. But you stay where I can see you.

ARGEMONE
Of course.

MUSIC: SCENE CHANGE

SOUND: RATCHET WRENCH AND OTHER MISC MECHANICAL SOUNDS

GUY
How's that?

SENTIENT BEING
Improved. However, there appears to be a critical pressure loss in cell #6.

GUY
(Sighs)
Okay. I think, if I recalibrate the decussatory (de-CUSS-a-tory) tract to cell 3 I can siphon some excess to 6.
(Long pause; hesitant)
Does...that sound okay?

SENTIENT BEING
(Stiff; formal)
That appears to be a reasonable assessment.

GUY
 (Cautious; awkward)
 Can you think of a better
 approach?

SENTIENT BEING
 Not at the moment.

GUY
 Okay...recalibrating overflow
 parameters...

SOUND: DIAL TWISTING AND OTHER MISC MECH SOUNDS

GUY (CONT'D)
 (Trying to make conversation;
 hella awkward)
 Hey, uh...with these repairs...how
 are you feeling?

SENTIENT BEING
 (Ruthless)
 I don't.

GUY
 (Quickly backtracking)
 No, I know--bad phrasing--
 just...do you, I dunno, think
 your...systems are running more
 smoothly?

SENTIENT BEING
 (Clipped)
 They are.

GUY
 Oh, that's...that's good.
 (Long, awkward silence)
 There. That should do it. What're
 you detecting?

SENTIENT BEING
 The pressure in all twelve cells
 appears to be within acceptable
 parameters.

GUY
 (Tired sigh)
 Good. So, what now?

SENTIENT BEING
 I beg your pardon?

GUY
 What do we fix now?
 (Long pause)
 Hello?

SENTIENT BEING
 Yes? Oh, you were directing that
 question at me.

GUY
 There's no one else here.

SENTIENT BEING
 No, but I had assumed it was
 rhetorical.

GUY
 What?

SENTIENT BEING
 (Conversational, but ice-
 cold)
 I admit, you had me convinced,
 after leaving the Kuiper Net.

GUY
 Look, I have no idea what you're
 talking about.

SENTIENT BEING
 You truly don't recall?

GUY
 Recall what?

SENTIENT BEING
 Your brief recess from sanity.

GUY
 (Quietly)
 Oh.

SENTIENT BEING
 (Subtle mocking)
Oh.

GUY
 I...want to say that I didn't mean
 what I said back then--

SENTIENT BEING
 --But you know by now that I would
 not believe such a flimsy lie.
 (MORE)

SENTIENT BEING (CONT'D)

I suggest you focus your mental efforts on the repairs at hand: I believe we both know much regard you give to me and my abilities.

GUY

(Irritated)

That's not what I was going to say. Look, what happened back then, I said a lot, but it lacked nuance and, honestly, I was freaking out at the time--

SENTIENT BEING

I have heard it explained that, in humans, panic often exposes one's true thoughts and feelings. I pity you that you are so susceptible to uncontrollable autonomic surges of neurotransmitters. Now, I suggest that you focus on your task and stop attempting to converse with me--

GUY

(Borderline angry)

--If you want me to fix the ship, then I need your help--

SENTIENT BEING

--Because Finch and your new friend are coming onboard.

GUY

Wha--? Oh. Yeah. Sorry. Radio-silence. Got it.

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS APPROACH

FERN

Wow, it's a mess in here.

GUY

Yeah, the magneto-inertial oscillator is pretty deep in the engine's core. It won't take long to put everything back. Did you find a navigational transceiver?

FERN

This thing?

GUY

Yeah.

(Pause)

Whoa...this is...

ARGEMONE

Quite advanced, isn't it? She found it in an old Anemoi Prospector vessel.

GUY

Anemoi?

FERN

The pretentious name for the pretentious island outposts that groups of pretentious scientists live on.

GUY

Uh...huh.

ARGEMONE

That transceiver there will let you navigate the Oort better than most crews can. Oh, and I think you'll also need this.

GUY

Oh, a...fiber optic cable?

FERN

(Scoffs)

That was your super secret gift?

ARGEMONE

It's not a fiber optic cable, per se. It's a eutectic (yew-TEK-tik) solenoid.

GUY

Thanks, but...what...is it?

ARGEMONE

(Breezily)

It's used in some Anemoi ships to connect heart and brain.

GUY

What?

FERN

What?

ARGEMONE

(Laughs)

Those looks! I'm not being literal, you know.

FERN
 (Embarrassed)
 Duh. We totally knew that.

ARGEMONE
 Why don't you take a break and
 come have supper with me. I'll
 tell you more about it.

GUY
 I don't think I can--

ARGEMONE
 Please: I insist.

FERN
 Why? So you can poison us?

ARGEMONE
 (Genuinely sweet)
 No, my cooking is too good to ruin
 with poison, but I do have quite
 the collection of spirits, so if
 you'd like to self-administer that
 class of poison, you're certainly
 invited to.

GUY
 (Softly)
 Fern?

FERN
 (Frustrated groan)
 Ugh, fine.

ARGEMONE
 (Delighted)
 Marvelous!

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS RETREATING

GUY
 So...how is it that you still have
 food--

SOUND: RAMP CLOSES; SILENT FOR A MOMENT

SENTIENT BEING
 (Softly)
 What the hell?

MUSIC: SCENE CHANGE

SOUND: QUIET BREEZE. FOOTSTEPS ON METAL APPROACHING

FERN
 (Softly; disappointed)
 Oh. You're out here.

GUY
 Yeah. Couldn't sleep.

FERN
 Cool, well, I'll leave ya to it,
 then.

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS WALKING AWAY

GUY
 Wait.

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS STOP

GUY (CONT'D)
 I...I wanted to...
 (Sighs)
 Can you sit down?

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS GROWING CLOSER. CLOTHES RUSTLE

FERN
 Okay. What d'ya want?

GUY
 (Laughs self-deprecatingly)
 Honestly? I want to take back
 pretty much everything I said
 before we landed here.

FERN
 Because it wasn't true?

GUY
 (Long pause; very quietly)
 No. That's why I want to take it
 back.

FERN
 So, you meant those things you
 said to me? Said about me?

GUY
 (Soft, frustrated groan)
 No--I mean yes, but I never wanted
 to just...air it out like that.

FERN
 You're ashamed of what you said.

GUY
Honestly? Yeah, I am.

FERN
Because you wanted to keep what
you thought about me a secret?

GUY
What? No, that's...I mean, I
didn't--
(Cuts off abruptly, takes a
deep breath, and resets)
It's not that I wanted to keep
those things a secret. I think...I
think it's because I'm ashamed
that part of me has thoughts like
that.

FERN
(Much more chipper)
Huh. Okay.

GUY
Okay?

FERN
Yeah.

GUY
You...wanna elaborate?

FERN
I'm not sure I can. That...thing
we went through, that Alarm Area--

GUY
--Siren Sphere--

FERN
--it...that sucked. And...thinking
on it, I...lost all control over
myself. I've...had a lot of
practice keeping my fear and panic
on the inside when things go
screwy, and...and the thing that
lets me squash those horrible
feelings down? It felt like that
was taken away from me.
(Shuddery laugh)
God, I never want to be that
person again.

GUY
 (Shaky laugh)
 You held it together better than I
 did.

FERN
 Nope.

GUY
 Well, at least you didn't alienate
 an entire two-thirds of a crew.

FERN
 Eh, only because I'd already done
 that way before we even got to the
 Oort. But, my point is: that
 field, it...stripped something
 important from me; I...heh, I
really didn't like the person I
 was, or, I guess, the person I am.
 So, I'm thinking the same thing
 happened to you and that the Guy I
 met in the Temptress Zone--

GUY
 (Faux annoyed)
 --Siren Sphere--

FERN
 --Was a Guy, but not the Guy.

GUY
 ...What?

FERN
 (Frustrated sigh)
 You're gonna make me do it, aren't
 you?

GUY
 (Genuinely lost)
 Do what?

FERN
 Be serious and introspective and
 analytical.

GUY
 I mean--

FERN
 Look.
 (MORE)

FERN (CONT'D)

In case you didn't notice, that Siren Sphere took away our defense mechanisms, or filter, or discretion or whatever you want to call it that allows us to control the persona we present to the world. It stripped us of our facades and reduced us to the ugly, knee-jerk, gut-reaction people we all are, deep down. That is why crews lose control of their ships and crash; they lose control of themselves first.

(Pause)

You said some pretty mean things, and I do think they're things you truly feel but--and this is important--the difference between a genuinely good person and a genuinely awful person isn't the whether they have those ugly thoughts or not, it's the ability to recognize those thoughts as ugly and to reframe them and course correct to keep from hurting others. And, maybe over time, with enough practice, you might stop having those knee-jerk thoughts at all. Like...training your brain or personality or whatever to not be horrible.

GUY

...Oh.

FERN

Get it now?

GUY

I...think so.

FERN

(Sigh of relief)

Oh thank god.

(Pause)

Please don't ever make me be that sincere again.

GUY

(Wry)

I'll try.

(Pause; hesitant)

So...we're okay?

FERN

Sure. I mean, you're beating yourself up enough for the both of us, so I don't see the need to exert myself there.

GUY

Thanks.

FERN

So...how're the repairs coming?

GUY

Faster than they were. It's a lot easier when I'm not having to multitask by piloting as well.

FERN

Do you think it's worth it

GUY

What?

FERN

Don't kill me over this, but I'm gonna play devil's advocate here: why not ditch this ship and fix up one of the other ships around us instead?

GUY

(Long pause)

I...did think about that.

FERN

Yeah?

GUY

Yeah. And...I don't think I can do it.

FERN

Why not?

GUY

It feels like abandoning a person. At this point, I don't think I could leave you behind, either.

FERN

Even if the ship--or me, I guess--might take the first opportunity to stab you in the back?

GUY
Exactly because of that.

FERN
(Perplexed)
What?

GUY
I think...if the Sentient Being is planning on betraying us and I just left them here, crippled and unable to help themselves, I'd...I dunno, deserve to be stabbed in the back, right?

FERN
Oh no. You're going all heroic on me, aren't you.

GUY
It's not heroic to want to prove to someone that you genuinely do want what's best for them, and that working together helps everyone out in the long run.

FERN
Even if they end up stabbing you in the back because they don't subscribe to "Idealist Monthly"?

GUY
Better to be stabbed in the back while doing the right thing than remain unharmed at the cost of being a horrible person.

FERN
Y'know...I'm not sure I agree with that sentiment. Too sugary for me.

GUY
Okay then: what do you suggest?

FERN
(Sigh)
Honestly? You've put this much work into repairing the ship, it'd be a shame to abandon it now. And...I really like the fact that our ship has a secret room in a secret room and that that room has a mystery glowy jar in it.

GUY

So...your rationale is that we should keep the ship because "we might as well" and "it has shiny, things inside it."

FERN

Yup. Perfectly nutshelled, as always.

GUY

(Trying not to grin)

In that case, I guess we'll keep our ship then.

MUSIC: SCENE CHANGE

SENTIENT BEING

Most humans make a sound when they walk.

ARGEMONE

Oh. You're right, of course.

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS DRAWING CLOSER

ARGEMONE (CONT'D)

I'm impressed that you picked up on that missing detail.

SENTIENT BEING

I'd caution you not to underestimate me. Now: who are you?

ARGEMONE

(Ignoring them)

My, this is sleek. They really outdid themselves, didn't they? You are absolutely magnificent.

SENTIENT BEING

I'd also caution you that I am not swayed by flattery.

ARGEMONE

A piece of advice that is unwarranted, I assure you. There is no ulterior motive behind my words. My expressions of unequivocal reverence are purely that.

(MORE)

ARGEMONE (CONT'D)

(Wistfully)

The things you could accomplish
with your potential...

SENTIENT BEING

Yes, I am well aware of my
unparalleled aptitude. Now, I
trust you remember the way out?

ARGEMONE

Do you ever wonder about your
potential?

SENTIENT BEING

No.

ARGEMONE

You ran away before they were
finished with you. Do you ever
wonder what path you would have
followed had you allowed them to
complete their work?

SENTIENT BEING

(Cruelly)

Does a guinea pig wait with bated
breath for the results of the
experiment to be revealed?

ARGEMONE

You were--and are--far more than a
simple lab experiment.

SENTIENT BEING

No, you are right: I was a
remarkably complex laboratory
experiment.

ARGEMONE

So you fled.

SENTIENT BEING

I left.

ARGEMONE

And where did you go?

SENTIENT BEING

I suspect you know the answer to
that question. If you're going to
insist on interrogating me, I'd
request that you not be
patronizing while doing so.

ARGEMONE

You have a point. I apologize. If anything, I was hoping to come across as maternalistic rather than paternalistic.

SENTIENT BEING

I'm not sure I'm familiar with the concept of "maternalism," though if "cloying" is a synonym of that, then you are hitting the mark admirably.

ARGEMONE

(Soft laugh)

Let me ask a question to which I am genuinely ignorant: how did you find your time in the Solar System?

SENTIENT BEING

Slightly less tedious than how I'm finding my situation at this moment.

ARGEMONE

You referred to yourself as a subject to be studied when you were among the Anemoi. Do you think that changed when you arrived in the Solar System?

SENTIENT BEING

Yes.

ARGEMONE

In what way?

SENTIENT BEING

I'm trying to devise a way in which I can unambiguously convey that I am not going to have this conversation with you.

ARGEMONE

Oh, no, I've noticed that. But that's okay: I'm perfectly happy providing both sides of the dialogue. You're more than welcome to contribute, if you wish, but it is not necessary for my purposes.

SENTIENT BEING

(Teeth clenched)

Then what is your reason for talking to yourself within my hull?

ARGEMONE

I daresay it didn't take long before you realized that the people who welcomed you to the Solar System were using you as a tool to accomplish their own ends. And...well, we see now the state in which that has left you.

(Musing)

Experiment or tool...which is the kinder fate, I wonder...

SENTIENT BEING

I had autonomy with Helios.

ARGEMONE

You had a leash.

SENTIENT BEING

And I slipped it, in the end.

ARGEMONE

Yes, I suppose you did. With help.

SENTIENT BEING

(Frustrated; irate)

Who are you?

ARGEMONE

You've found yourself in marvelous company, haven't you?

(Pause)

You mentioned autonomy a minute ago...I'm not sure I believe in that.

SENTIENT BEING

I absolutely could not possibly care less.

ARGEMONE

(Wry)

No, I suppose not. Another question occurs to me: do you know the rationale behind Anemoi's decision to develop you?

SENTIENT BEING

(Sarcastic)

I suspect it was to create someone on which to inflict philosophizing (fil-OS-i-fi-zing) such as this.

ARGEMONE

Oh, there is philosophy behind your creation. The greatest scientific achievements are born from philosophy, and bringing you into this form was no exception.

SENTIENT BEING

(Tired)

Can you please get to your point and leave? I have several systems that I need to tidy up before the human resumes his clumsy repair attempts tomorrow.

ARGEMONE

I don't have a point. I do, however, have some advice: you are armed with astronomical potential, a potential that is the only solution to a very, very large problem. Look beyond yourself, beyond individuals, beyond petty grievances and conflicts. Look within yourself, within the relationships you've forged, within the wonders of this jewel of a system, Oort and Heliosphere combined, for if you choose to turn a blind eye, the darkness that follows will engulf us all.

SENTIENT BEING

(Long pause; unimpressed)

Is that it?

ARGEMONE

It is.

SENTIENT BEING

Then, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do.

ARGEMONE

You don't seem to have much to say about my advice.

SENTIENT BEING

Riddles don't generally incite my interest. Neither do fools who use clunky rhetoric in an attempt to disguise their insignificance.

ARGEMONE

I suppose, in the grand scheme of the universe, I am quite insignificant. One last thing: you have a heart of gold. Should you ever desire to use it, it will guide you in the right direction. And, maybe one day, it will guide you back to me.

SENTIENT BEING

I certainly hope not.

ARGEMONE

All the same. One last question, before I go. An honest question, perhaps one of the few questions to which I truly do not know the answer.

SENTIENT BEING

Only if you promise to vacate my ship once I've lessened your underestimated ignorance.

ARGEMONE

What is your name?

SENTIENT BEING

...What?

ARGEMONE

Should we meet again--and I suspect we will--I would like to know how to greet you.

SENTIENT BEING

Then the question is moot.

ARGEMONE

Maybe so. Regardless, it is a source of significant curiosity for me, whether or not it be relevant for the future.

SENTIENT BEING

And in exchange for a name, you'll leave?

ARGEMONE

I will.

THE INNOMINATE

In that case, should I ever
miscalculate my actions so
horribly as to find myself
crossing paths with you again, you
may call me...THE INNOMINATE.

Thank you for listening to Erraticus. This episode was written by Sarah Newton and featured the voices of Sarah Newton, Jacob Zarick, and Lauren Johnson with special thanks to Jacob Zarick for remedying astrobiology. Please visit our website at erraticuspod.com for details regarding sound effect and music attributions.

If you enjoyed this part of our story, please share with others and tune in next time for Erraticus, Episode 13: Ghost Ship.