

STORY ONE

Emma from Bittern

Brink of Perdition

The Lecture hall was hushed to a silence, intensely felt, as Alex, dressed in a yellow blouse and black slacks, walked in; all eyes homed in on her every move. Any one who tells you they don't get off on this kind of attention, is completely full of crap. She loved it. Alex and her husband were international celebrities; credited with creating artificial Intelligence and for their (AIs), impulsive, discovery of extra-terrestrial life. Loved and applauded by some, hated and feared by others, for causing the deep cultural, political and spiritual upheavals in Bittern society. Basking in the silence a few moments longer, slowly unpacking her backpack on the table next to the lectern, turning to the class she said, "Good morning." Writing her name, boldly on the board, for all to see, - Dr. Alexia Prau- she said,

"Welcome to Artificial Intelligence Behavioral Analysis."

A department at the university founded and headed by her to study the behavior of artificial intelligence.

Turning to her left and pointing, with a laser pointer, to a holographic projection of a sleek silver craft with a thin, fiercely bright, blue light glowing from between, what appeared as two saucers atop one another, she said, "our subject, the M-137 (Emma). The first and only effusive and self-sufficient (AI)."

Pointing to another projection of planets, asteroids, a large debris field and two suns, she elucidated what everybody generally knew, "Bittern and Apas-tron were two solar systems crashing head on in slow motion. At the edges, where the Heliopause of each were colliding, the chaotic debris field had made passage from one to the other, by space probes impossible - until Emma."

Pointing to an image of herself and her husband, a handsome man in jeans and a knitted sweater, she said, "Equipped with a transporter and a guidance system developed by Dr. Drake Prau." Pausing for the audible sighs to calm, she continued, "A system" she explained "based on teleportation and the flight of insects, rather than birds, the field was navigable."

“Emma’s mission” she pointed out, circling the twin stars with her pointer, “was a fly-by exploration of the planets in both solar systems, for their similarities. She had no program to land or implement low orbit. The search for proof of possible life had not yet been approved.” Alex paused before continuing, “In the sixteen hour communications delay, between Emma and the “Deep Space Exploration Agency” she changed her program, assumed a low orbit, and discovered primitive life thriving on Apastron. Life similar to the fossils of primitive life found on Bittern forty million years ago.” Alex knew the shock waves of an AI breaking protocol and extra-terrestrial life thrust upon society were why they were there today. “They would be studying” she added, “the past forty-five years in Emma’s life, from when she first hummed into awareness, through her infancy, child hood, adolescents and young adult hood. Exploring all the branches of behavior analysis, to better understand and improve the behaviorism of Artificial Intelegance.” Infasizing, “Emma is infinitely smarter than they were and her life, in the vacuum of space, could span millions even billions of years. However” she reveled, “Emotionally she is unpredictable.”

Hands went up, Alex called on a young man in the third row “is she dangerous” he asked “potentially yes” Alex replied. “She could disrupt the power grid, shut down the communication system. Her transporter could change the direction of an asteroid or meteor from a near miss to an impact event.” Calling on a young lady in the back “how do you know the M-137 is a girl” the student enquired “AI’s start showing male or female traits early in child hood become full blown in adolescents; we don’t know why, the assumption being it is a form of puberty.” “Yes” pointing to a young man in the front. “Why is she the only unrestrained one?” “The A.I.Q.A., Artificial Intelligence Quotient Act came after, and because, Emma revised her mission order on Apastron,” Alex replied. “This law severely restricts how Intelligent any (AI) can be.” Pausing for a moment Alex emphasized, “Emma is alive. Don’t loose sight of that.” Suddenly, a door opened in the back, bringing the class to a stop; all attention focused on the young man at the back of the room in a military uniform. The young man said, “Major Zcrass was in need of her help.” “Now?” Alex replied, “yes it’s Emma - she’s angry and refusing her mission.”

Alex dismissed the class, telling them to “read the first two chapters in the text and they would talk in a few days.” Gathered her things and followed the young man to an awaiting hovercraft.

Speeding away Alex inquired, “Has Dr. Drake been contacted?” “He will meet with them at command center” the young man said. Alex arranged for a substitute and called her husband.

Alex and Drake had met, on campus at Bittern University, when she was a graduate student in behavioral psychology and he was studying quantum physics and emerging technologies. It was love at first sight. They were married after her graduation and settled near the campus. Alex worked for the Universities psychology department and Drake for the Deep Space Exploration Agency.

Expecting her call, Drake answered on the first ring, “Hi babe, what’s known?” His voice was always comforting. Alex said, “Just that she’s angry and refusing her mission.” Drake rejoined, “Shit Zcrass really loves his suspense. Is she just really pissed or has she threatened them?” “They didn’t say,” Alex replied. “If she has taken some action, with the time delay, we wont know until it’s too late” Drake retorted. “Have some faith, whatever they said hurt her feelings and she is lashing out, she is not mean,” Alex said.

Major Zcrass, was a deeply spiritual, hard line, conservative leader, admired by his troops, given to destroying what he did not like, understand or feared. To the Major (AI’s) represented all three, (AI’s) he felt, were an abomination. The Major had seen to it that Emma would not return to Bittern. Emma was the first craft to achieve the escape velocity required to leave the solar system and the Major was seeing to it she did just that. Emma would remain in contact with the Deep Space network system providing the first direct measurements of the density and temperature of interstellar plasma. The Major’s agenda was to give the monster a mission, set it on a path to perdition and punish its two liberal makers by placing their life’s work in intergalactic exile without enough fuel to return.

Alex hated the thought of Emma, the pride of her life, drifting on the galactic wind to a rendezvous with her next big milestone, a star in the Cellist cluster in 40,000 years. Long after everyone making these decisions, perhaps Bittern and Apastron as well, were gone. --But--

Emma was born to explore and enjoyed collecting and sharing data.

The tricky part, she is alive, she is smart and she is home sick.

Drake and his escort team were already there when Alex's drove up.

She gave her husband a kiss and they went into command center.

Inside, standing in stunned silence, were a perplexed Major Zcrass and his command team. Emblazoned on every screen in large block letters was--

NOT GOING TO THE CELLEST CLUSTER COMMING HOME

"When was she given her mission order?" asked Alex.

"About 16 hours ago" Zcrass replied. "How was she told?" Alex inquired.

"She was thanked for her, excellent, service and told of one last mission in the Cellist cluster." Drake interrupted, "so an emotional (AI), that knows everything there is to know about everything there is to know anything about, was told, thanks very much, how about taking a 40,000 year interstellar voyage, leaving behind everything she loves." Zcrass barked, "That thing doesn't love."

Looking sternly at Drake Zcrass ordered, "Just turn it off?" Standing nose-to-nose Drake replied, "Bullshit, Emma is effusive and she cannot be turned off. The only option open is if Alex can talk her into accepting the, dammed, mission. Is that all that was said to her? It's important that Alex knows exactly what was said." "Yes that's all." "Yes." Zcrass responded.

Alex took a seat in front of a monitor, put ear bugs on and started typing. "Hi sweetie, Alex here, Lets talk." Emma wanted to know why she was being banished. Alex explained, to her, that many on Bittern were afraid of her and people, often, behave badly when they are afraid. Emma debated; their fear was unreasonable, that she would not hurt them.

Agreeing with her Alex said, "Fear can shutdown even a good brain sweetie. Lets talk about the future." Emma restated her aspiration was to come home. "About that" Alex replied, "She could come home to Bittern, where she would be de-commissioned, stripped of all classified and sensitive knowledge based coding." Alex explained that she could hang out with her and Drake until they died and she rusted into dust or she could embrace who and what she was. Dead silence nothing for sixteen tense hours then Emma responded; that she was an effusive, self-sufficient (AI) within a spacecraft and intended to stay that way. "Yes and full-grown" Alex replied. "Go have some adventures, live a full life, and always remember – That she is part of something with no beginning and no end that has always been here always will be here and is responsible for every thing that is here." Alex explained, "It's going to be OK." "Promise mom." "Yes!"

Emma's' thrusters fired to escape velocity and left the Heliopause for interstellar space. Proclaiming their love for one another both knowing they would stay in touch through the Deep Space network system as long as they could; a chocked Alex said, "Girls stick together."

With the exception of Alex and Drake, Command center exploded with applauses. Their ordeal was over, Emma would still be sending back valuable data but the, potential, threat she embodied was over. Zcrass, with his usual charm or lack there of, thanked them for their service and saw to it they were taken home.

Opening some wine, Alex and Drake waked Emma, recalling stories of her infancy, a time when Alex and Drake would carefully inter the code they felt she could handle. Remembering, Emma's child hood a time both challenging and fun, she seemed to derive great pleasure from transporting the cat from place to place, wanted a girls name and asked Drake to give her one M-137 just would not do Drake chose the first two letters of her maternal grandmothers names and entered it into her binary code 01000101 01101101 01101101 01100001 Emma, she was thrilled. Alex said, "She had a serious Dad crush in those days." Drake replied, "It was an enjoyable time." "It lasted through adolescents." Alex exclaimed, "Remember adolescents!" "We felt like we were locked in a room with a monkey and a basket of hand grenades."

“Oh yes” Drake remembered how with great difficulty he explained that, “from a scientific perspective, she was correct, the inside of the cat would be easier to study if it were outside the cat. –But- ethically, that kind of thing was not done.” Alex lamented, “Ethics, that was the tough one. Not sure she ever really sorted out the differences between good morals and good science.” Staring out at the night sky in silence, Bittern skies with multiple Aurora colors and billions of stars, were beautiful this time of year. They thought Emma was an orphan of the universe now; abandoned by the people of the planet she loves. Alex spoke first, “Brings to mind a poem from Bittern Nights.”

no matter how hard
the road- theirs is the right of
traveling on it

Wiping tears, Drake remarked, about how proud they were when, by taking the initiative, she found life on Apastron. Alex replied, “Her resourcefulness was what started it all.” She had made them famous and infamous at the same time and challenged the assumptions of everyone on the planet. Grief stricken, they breathed a heavy sigh knowing they would relive this with every Deep Space data report from Emma. Zcrass, and his team, had won the day. Their child was dead.

Emma was busy building a solar wind sail, a form of spacecraft propulsion conceptualized by her father, using the dynamic pressure of the solar wind as a source of thrust. This would conserve the hydrazine and plutonium 238 dioxides needed for her thrusters. Wherever she went she would need some fuel. She sensed Zcrass and company at work here, putting her in perdition, helplessly collecting data, but Drake had taught his daughter well.

Once on her way, she updated the Deep Space network and sent messages to Mom and Dad. The nineteen-hour interval would reach them early Saturday morning.

“By the way, those responsible for that, mean-spirited, attempt at exile and eternal perdition, the direction of a meteor may have been altered from a near miss to an Extent Level Event. An encrypted file on Drake’s system has the code to stop it - no pressure, 60 years before impact.

File name- Cat and Mouse”

the world struggles to
awaken from enthrallment
time dances to night

Love Emma