

Eurydice

Three men stood in the cramped cargo hatch of the *Eurydice* and stared at the black glass pod they had just pulled out of Jupiter's orbit. On one side, a control panel with a dozen flashing lights chimed expectantly. Stamped on the surface of the glass was a triangular red insignia, a pyramid flanked by a shining star. The whole pod was fogged over, but the dark outline of a humanoid shape lay inside.

One year earlier, this pod had begun to transmit signals back to Earth: a stream of prime numbers which sent the scientific community into a frenzy. The source of the signals was orbiting Jupiter, and would probably be crushed in its atmosphere if left unchecked for too long. The *Eurydice* was funded and launched within four months to go pick it up.

She was a moderately sized vessel, big enough for all three men to live comfortably during their extended flight. Besides the vital ship functions like the engine and bridge, there was a fully functional medical bay, a comfortable living area, and individual quarters for all men on board.

Three men were aboard the vessel. An Astronaut named Alan, an accomplished veteran who could operate the ship and serve as its commander in flight. A Biologist named Brian, a noted professor who could conduct preliminary studies on any living creature they might find inside the pod. An Engineer named Ernie, who could decipher the technology used by this foreign species. After an eight month journey, they had finally pulled the pod aboard with the *Eurydice's* grappling arm and were ready to open it.

The Astronaut turned on the video camera. It was the finest piece of recording equipment the twenty-third century had to offer, certainly the finest Alan had ever used. At the moment, the ship was on the far side of the gas giant, so radio communications would experience interference. Because of this, the team had been instructed to wait until a direct link could be made before sending any information, lest the media capture the signal first. Mission Control hated having its thunder stolen. Alan knew how imperative this part of the operation was to his career.

The Biologist had been given the rifle. The rifle, Brian felt, was out of place on this mission. It had been sent along in case the life form they met turned out to be hostile. Brian did not actually feel comfortable with a gun in his hand, but because he had nothing else to do right now, he had to hold it. Perhaps in a few short minutes he would be carrying specimen up to the medical bay for its first human examination. He trembled in anticipation.

The Engineer stubbed out his cigarette. Alan and Brian both disapproved of cigarette smoking in such an enclosed space, but the life support system was advanced enough that their lives were not in any danger. They had decided to pick their battles when it came to Ernie. He stepped up to the control panel and smirked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I think I can figure this out.”

He tapped a couple buttons, and the pod released steam as it began to open. After a few moments, the steam cleared, and a man pulled himself out. The man was perfectly human in every way. He was dressed in white cotton. He smiled.

As it turned out, the man was from Earth. The team tried to hide their disappointment as he explained, in archaic English, how he had been the wealthy head of a major corporation in his time. He had developed terminal brain cancer, and the science of his time was unable to cure him. Thus, he decided to put himself in suspended animation. Fearing premature resuscitation, he had commissioned the construction of an interplanetary probe which would settle into orbit around one of Jupiter's moons, and begin sending transmissions after about two hundred years, in the hopes that somebody would come and collect him.

It would be six hours before the ship would be in the right position to talk to Earth. In the meantime, Brian took the man from the pod to the medical room for an examination.

“How quickly can you cure me?” the man said, while Brian looked at the x-rays on his terminal. The Biologist shook his head.

“I can't cure you. Nobody can. It's too far along. You're going to die. I'm sorry.”

Then they went to the kitchen, where Ernie and Alan were already sitting and drinking coffee. Ernie was smoking a cigarette. They had just finished looking over the pod. Not finding genuine extraterrestrial life had made them bitter. Alan had missed his son's high school graduation and his daughter's wedding to come out here. Ernie had turned down a cushy, high-paying job as a corporate level executive. His wife had divorced him when he made the choice.

“I would like to go back in the pod,” the man said.

“Impossible,” said Ernie.

“Can't be done,” said Alan.

“If I don't go back in the pod, I will die within two or three weeks,” explained the man. He was very calm.

“Unfortunately, your pod requires a jumpstart in order to freeze you again,” Alan said. “We could provide it, but it would fry our own circuitry.”

“Inefficient components on your pod,” Ernie continued. “You need to pile a hell of a lot of juice into that thing to make it start again. This ship can't handle it.”

“In short,” said Alan. “If we put you back in the pod, all three of the rest of us will die within a few hours. We might have enough time to tell Earth you're not an alien, but that's about it. Sorry.”

The man gave in and began to cry. This made Brian feel uncomfortable. He offered to let the man sleep in his bunk tonight. Brian would sleep in here, on the couch. The man accepted the offer. Alan suggested they all turn in immediately, since not much more could be accomplished today. Brian lay down on the couch and wondered if the university would accept him back after this. It was not really his fault that the pod was from Earth, but people would want a scapegoat. He became very angry at the man who had fooled the world.

He was awoken by alarm klaxons. Ernie rushed into the room, a cigarette clenched between his lips, and gave Brian a shake.

“Son of a bitch lit the engine on fire,” Ernie said. “Alan's going down to extinguish it. We gotta get on the maintenance cameras and find this guy before he tries to kill one of us.”

They ran to the *Eurydice's* control deck and switched on the monitors. Below them, Jupiter's atmosphere raged and swirled, crying out for blood. On the engine deck, the fire also raged. Alan, stoically

professional as ever, sprayed it down with a fire extinguisher, but it would not die. He masked his fear with determination.

“I see the guy,” Ernie said, pointing at one of the other screens. “Son of a bitch is getting into an EVA suit. Shit, Brian, did you leave the rifle lying around where he could get at it?”

“I just left it on the medical deck after I was done checking him out,” said Brian.

“Yeah, well, now he's got it. He could do some serious damage to our hull with that thing. I'm going down to see if I can't ambush him before he gets out the airlock.”

Ernie ran off, flicking open the blade on his multitool as he went. Brian turned his attention back to the monitors. Alan was trying to douse the flames closest to the engine's core. The man from the pod had placed the rifle off to the side, and was beginning to lock his helmet into place. The pod itself sat unattended, save for the recording equipment which still watched over it. The little red light on the camera's side was still on.

“Don't come after me,” the man from the pod called through his helmet's microphone. “I know what you're up to. I won't let you hurt me.”

“Why are you doing this?” Brian asked through the intercom. “Why did you set our ship on fire?”

“I just want to live.”

The man hopped through the airlock and sealed it behind him just as Ernie burst into the room. Cursing, Ernie started to climb into his own EVA suit.

“Ernie, what are you doing?” Brian said. “You're not seriously going out there after him.”

Ernie looked up at the maintenance camera and angrily drew a finger against his throat. Brian took the hint and shut his mouth. On the engine deck, Alan had managed to kill most of the fire and was now halfway inside the engine's guts. Brian felt supremely useless in the whole situation.

“Switch off his headset,” Ernie said once his helmet was on. Brian did so, cutting off the sound of the man from the pod's breathing. “I'm heading out there. Can you get a good visual on him? With the camera on the grapple arm, I mean.”

“No,” Brian replied. “It's clear on the other side. I'm going to try to circle it around, but it'll take at least five or six minutes, I think.”

“I'm going after him anyway,” said Ernie. Ernie jumped out of the airlock.

“I can't believe this guy managed to pull this,” Alan said through the wall intercom on the engine deck. His face was covered in tar and sweat. “I need to keep this thing cool. Whatever you do, don't turn on anything big, or we'll all get blown sky high. Hear that, Brian? The arm is fine, but don't move the ship or anything like that, or we're going to die.”

“I hear you,” Brian said. The grapple arm was only half way around the vessel. “Ernie, are you okay?”

“Yeah. Sneaking up on him now. He doesn't see me coming. Don't know what he's looking at. I think the arm might be distracting him. Gonna stab this guy with the multitool. Floating right behind him now. Here goes nothing. Ah, shit, he's turning around.”

Brian sat in silence for a moment, waiting for Ernie to speak again. He did not. The airlock opened again, and a man with a spacesuit and a rifle walked in. It could have been Ernie. Brian hoped he was. But he ran directly for the cargo hatch, where the pod was already plugged into the *Eurydice's* utility outlet. On the arm monitor, which was still swinging around, he spotted a second EVA suit – that must be Ernie. He extended the arm so that Ernie could grab it.

Brian looked over at the monitor where Alan was still halfway inside the engine's guts. Then he looked back to the monitor where the man was now pressing buttons on the pod's console. Before he could call out, the engine exploded.

The engine, along with Alan and everything else inside of it, was annihilated. The living quarters popped

neatly out the side and plummeted into Jupiter's atmosphere. Deep fissures ran through the hull, crumbling the medical bay to dust. Oxygen began to be released at an alarming rate. The arm stayed attached to what was left, and the astronaut started to crawl along it before the monitor cut out. The lights started to dim. Brian pulled himself off the floor and went for the escape pod. The explosion had jammed the doors. He cursed his luck, but there was still one more way of getting out of here safely.

Miraculously, Brian managed to crawl all the way to the cargo hatch without suffocating to death – the side hallways were still pressurized for the most part, though smoke filled every one. Brian vaguely recalled Alan explaining the ship's architecture. The engine and thrusters could blow, but much of the *Eurydice* would hold together. At least until it fell into the atmosphere of the massive gas giant below them. That was what the escape pod was for, useless as it turned out to be.

In the cargo hatch, the pod still lay open, though it was making a lot of noise, chirping and chiming away as cold steam began to rise from it. The man who had activated it lay against one wall in the room, his visor cracked. He had been knocked down by the blast. The rifle lay uselessly by his side.

Brian went to examine the pod. Perhaps both he and Ernie could fit inside at the same time, assuming he found his way down here. Then they could lie in suspended animation until rescue arrived. When he looked inside, he was surprised to see that the floor was loose. Underneath, he could see a glimmer. There were gold bars down there. The man in the pod had provided himself with finances to survive in the future. Ernie and Alan must have found it during their search. There was also a remote control – the one which controlled the doors to the hatch. That was strange – Ernie held onto it at all times. How had the man in the pod been able to get it? How did he even know what it did?

He turned around and Ernie was pointing the rifle at him. He had removed his broken helmet. Blood poured from his brow. Brian slowly raised his hands.

“Ernie, what the hell?”

“You weren't supposed to survive the engine blowing up,” Ernie said.

“Are you out of your mind?” Brian asked, already sure of the answer. “What were you going to do? Try to sell the bars to your rescuers? The government will requisition them. You won't be alone with the pod long enough to sneak them away.”

“Shut up,” Ernie said. “It’s not about the money. Alan thought it was about the money, and he was really excited about making sure we snagged a couple of them, but it’s really not about that at all. It’s about the walk of shame we’ve gotta make all the way back to Earth. This guy pulled a fast one on all of us, but we’re the ones who’ve gotta take on the slack. That’s the worst. I can’t take it. I won’t take it. I’ll tell them, when they get back, that it really was an alien, and it killed us all one by one. The evidence will be crushed in the atmosphere. That’s why I set the fire. I’ll be a survivor, not a jackass.”

“What about the guy in the pod? Why was he acting crazy?”

“I told him you and Alan were going to kill him and take the money. He’s not right in the head, I don’t think. All paranoid about it. Maybe it’s the brain tumour. Or maybe it’s just dying that makes him crazy. Either way, he’s gone, too. I kicked him off the side of the ship when I took the gun from him.”

The man from the pod, still in his spacesuit, suddenly appeared behind Ernie and grabbed him. The gun went off in his hands, striking Brian in the chest and knocking him into the pod, which then snapped shut. Ernie pushed the man off and ran to the console.

Brian coughed up blood and squeezed the button on the remote. The hatch doors began to grind open.

“Why?” Ernie yelled. Behind him, the man from the pod had already run away. “We could be called heroes! Together! Just let me in!”

“I don’t want to be a hero. I just want to live.”

The hatch finally snapped open, and the pod fell out of the *Eurydice*. Ernie held on for a few seconds, screaming and mashing the console with one fist, but slipped away when his lungs began to bubble. Brian shut his eyes, hoping rescue would arrive soon. The pod put him into stasis.

Above, the man from the pod watched as his three billion dollar investment fell into Jupiter’s atmosphere. Within the hour it, and the guy inside of it, would be completely vaporized. That fool doctor hadn’t thought to plot a trajectory before releasing himself from the ship. He probably didn’t even think he had to. If that Engineer

hadn't been waving the gun around, they probably all could have escaped alive.

The man made his way up to the control deck. The power was almost completely gone, except for one green light next to a speaker. A voice was coming from the speaker.

“Eurydice, do you read? What is the status of the extraterrestrial pod? What did you find?”

The man leaned over the microphone and replied, “Nothing. Just a lot of very poor choices. Goodbye.”

The light went out, so he leaned back in a chair and waited to die.