

THE TWELFTH ODYSSEY



Book 2 - Rebirth

Derrick Herbert

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CHAPTER 1

TIME : February 21st, 2196 AD., 16:33.12 Standard

PLACE : *Somewhere in 'Alliance Space'*

The escape pod drifted slowly through the black, starfilled void, only having to engage its impulse engines once to escape the rush of an oncoming meteor shower.

Its onboard computer was a marvel of modern technology, and once the hibernation unit had been activated and Mitch was locked in cryogenic suspension, he was guaranteed a 76% chance of survival.

Once the pod was well and truly away from its host, its first order of priority would have been to find out exactly where it was. This it would have done by spinning slowly through eight consecutive three hundred and sixty degree arcs, comprehensively mapping the space around itself. It would then have consulted its extensive library of every known system — uninhabited as well as inhabited — before finally fixing on the nearest

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navigable tract of space most likely to be populated. Then, with the aid of its manoeuvring and impulse thrusters, it would have realigned the pod, reengaged the main engine and shunted itself toward that inhabited tract of space.

The pod was also fitted with a beacon that would emit an emergency distress signal to any craft that came within its transmitting radius. Individuals had been known to survive between twelve and fifteen years in escape pods constructed to the highest specifications, perishing only when power to run the life-support systems had drained away.

Lambert, of course, by inputting the co-ordinates that he wanted to pod to move toward. Had bypassed all of that. He had virtually guaranteed that Mitch would be found — and found quickly.

The first craft to wander into the escape pod's path was the *Engraver IV*, an Alliance commercial super-freighter that was flagged by the Hy-Tek Corporation. Hy-Tek was the most successful technology multi-conglomerate in the Alliance and as the company name suggested, made its bread and butter from remaining at the cutting edge of technological innovation. The company maxim of '*...better than better...*' attested to that. It was one of those godawful slogans that only an ad agency could create, but against the wishes and beliefs of the company executive body— it had stuck.

Hy-Tek was one of several companies to be borne out of the wreckage of Lambert Enterprises' disassemblage, but even after twenty-five years the company continued to break new ground in research and development, rather than resting on its laurels as some of its larger and equally successful competitors had done.

It was one of a group of twenty 'super blue-chip' companies whose annual profits had been at or around the thousand trillion bracket

for ten years plus. As such, it did tend to overstate its case with every corporate decision that was made. The *Engraver IV* being a case in point. It was the second largest Superfreighter in the Alliance history and the *Engraver V* under construction in the space dock that orbited **Port Tek** would undoubtedly supersede the *Twenty-First Century* to become the largest.

The *Engraver IV* despite its size, was manned by a crew of only twenty who ran the massive computer operated ship on the twelve runs that it made each year across Alliance space. Fabriago Aleotti was the freighter's current Captain and as company regulations stated, he was responsible for the final decision to bring any '*dangerous and or unsound*' objects aboard the freighter for investigation.

Escape pods '*usually*' qualified as both dangerous and unsound. By their very nature they engendered a great deal of fear and trepidation in ships' Captain's and anybody that had ever held that position could recount a wealth of stories of entire crews being killed off by the occupants of escape pods.

It had been known for pods to be set up as Trojans that once taken aboard, quickly set about disabling its host which would then allow the host ship to be taken; sometimes the occupants of escape pods were contagiously diseased; sometimes — it seemed — said occupants were just plain ungrateful at having been rescued.

Aleotti had been all for passing this one up, but had been 'persuaded', although bullied would perhaps describe it more accurately, into bringing the pod aboard after a heated discussion with his Science Officer, during the course of which, Article Four of the Alliance's Merchant Shipping Laws was thrown at him more than once.

To wit: He '*...would be derelict in his duty if he did not go to the aid of a disabled vessel that posed no tangible threat to his own vessel or any carriage being conveyed.*' Unfortunately, under those broad terms, escape vessels '*usually*'

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also qualified. The *'threat'* if there were any, generally ensued once an escape pod had been taken aboard and by then it was always too late.

Aleotti had always considered himself to be a good Captain and decent man and had finally agreed, despite his misgivings — which he found he could not justify. But for the gnawing sensation that had taken up residence in the pit of his stomach, he would have agreed fully with his Science Officer that they were duty-bound to bring the pod aboard for investigation.

Aleotti knew through the company grapevine, that he had a very good shot at becoming the Captain of the *Engraver V*, once it was fully commissioned and didn't want to jeopardize that opportunity to his Science Officer's insatiable curiosity.

The elevator door hissed open and he stepped out into the darkened corridor, slowing to a stop and watching as the pod trundled slowly down the conveyor belt in one of the freighter's ore-specimen viewing chambers. Too late. A loud buzzing sounded and the conveyor jolted to a stop. Aleotti stared down the length of the viewing hall and fixed his gaze on the trio that were standing around the computer terminal at its end. He sighed, shaking his head then started toward them staring through the twelve inch thick sheet of toughened glass as a series of spotlights flickered to life within the viewing chamber, illuminating the small spherical pod.

"What d'you think?" he asked as he approached them.

Charles Martins shrugged and looked across at his assistant. "I've tried ultra-scans, spectro-analysis, x-rays, and just about everything else," he paused. "I don't know what's shielding it but it's resisting every attempt to scan it indirectly."

There was a deathly silence in the viewing corridor.

"It does have a cable access terminal on the outside," Martins added

pointing down at the display screen which had closed in on a section of the pod's metal hull. "But I'd have to go in to hook us up."

Aleotti remained silent for some time, staring down at the display screen. "*The Alcatraz*," he murmured finally, reading the name off of the side of the pod. "I've never heard of it," he looked to the three others for their input on the subject.

Arman Fir'kan'T, the Engraver's Technical Officer sighed. "I checked the name through the Registry," she shrugged and shook her head negatively, "nothing."

"It must be a mother of a ship, though," Jennifer Miles added, drawing a perplexed glance from Aleotti. "It's numbered seven hundred and seven," she explained.

"Jesus," Aleotti mumbled, he turned to reface his Science Officer. "Do you think its safe?" he asked again.

"You asked me that before, and I still don't know," Martins replied. "Nobody's going to know anything unless I go in there," he turned more fully to face the Captain. "What is it, Fabi?" he asked, "what's got you so spooked all of a sudden..."

Aleotti turned away from the prying gazes and stepped up to the glass window, staring through at the pod. "O.K." he said finally, "go, but be careful."

Martins looked around at his two shipmates, then crossed to stand alongside the Captain as he continued to stare into the darkened chamber. "If you know something we don't-"

"I don't!" Aleotti snapped. He turned to face them all again. "Sorry," he apologised. "I've just got a funny feeling about this..."

"I take it we aren't talking funny ha-ha," Fir'kan'T said quietly.

Aleotti fixed her with a exasperated glare, then looked back to Martins. "Go!"

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Martins nodded. All of a sudden he was none too sure that he wanted to go into the specimen chamber, but knew the pod was on the Engraver at his own insistence. He turned and left the viewport, walking back down the long corridor toward the set of doors at its end to get himself suited up. The two women continued to stare concernedly at the Captain; in the years that they had known him, they had never seen him act with any degree of uncertainty and it was a disconcerting sight to say the least of it. Aleotti crossed the corridor to stand before the communications console set into the wall behind them. He tapped a series of numbers into a keypad, then depressed a button.

“Gray,” he began, “that pod’s aboard — it’s in ore specimen chamber nine. Make sure the camera’s are on it, then get in touch with the rest of the crew make sure that they’re on the network...”

There was a long pause before the man on the opposite side of the link replied. “Yes, Sir,” they could almost feel the confusion in his voice, “is there something the matter, Captain?”

“Just do it, son,” Aleotti retorted.

“Yes, Sir.”

Aleotti lifted his finger off of the transmit button and turned, crossing the corridor again to once more stand before the glass window.

The air-lock inside of the darkened chamber slid open allowing part of the floor to be bathed suddenly in bright white light. Martins stepped slowly out of the lock and into the airless chamber, starting as quickly as he could across the floor. The door behind him slid shut again dropping the chamber back into murky gloom. The clumsily designed zero-gravity suit, hindered the already clumsily built Science Officer from moving about as freely as he would have liked, but for the intended purpose it was more than adequate.

After viewing the exterior of the pod with an expert eye, Martins

unhooked a small brush from his belt and reached up toward the plug on the side of the pod, gently brushing away the dust and ice that had accumulated around the input port, whistling 'Moon River' as he did.

"Never could remember the words to that damned song,"he muttered.

Jennifer Miles, smiled, she knew he was trying desperately to lighten the mood and take a little of the sobriety out of the situation. "Thank the Gods,"she murmured, "I'd much sooner hear you whistle it than sing it."

"Funny lady,"said Martins, "can I have some light on in here?"he asked.

"Your wish is my command,"Jennifer replied.

"Now why couldn't you have taken that attitude last night,"Martins retorted.

Fir'kanT choked back a burst of laughter, cutting it down to a mere snigger as Jennifer Miles' head snapped around at her. Even Aleotti couldn't hide his amusement and grinned broadly at Jennifer's obvious discomfort. Jennifer stabbed a finger down at one of the dozens of buttons that adorned the console they were gathered around and the chamber slowly filled with light from the large lighting units set into the ceiling.

"I hope you have a good memory, Chaz,"she said, "after that crack you're going to need it — it's a long way between here and journey's end."

"You cut me to the quick, M'dear—"

"I just bet she does,"Fir'kanT muttered beneath her breath.

Aleotti couldn't help but laugh out loud as, Jennifer harrumphed grumpily and Martins began to whistle again. Martin's reattached the brush to the belt and reached next for the the data tablet that was also hanging from it, plugging the data cable into the port that he had just cleaned.

Entire, until then, inactive panels of instrumentation on the terminal in the viewing hall suddenly leapt to life and Jennifer Miles set hurriedly to work to the almost tuneful whistling that was reverberating through the set of speakers above their heads. Martins broke off the whistling to turn and

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look back toward the viewport.

“There’s a window here, Jen, see if you can get it open.”

Jennifer quickly scrolled through the options menu that was now available to her and selected the open mode on the windows. The metal shields that covered the four windows on the pod slid open.

Aleotti leaned toward the pick-up microphone. “Watch it in there, Chas.”

The two women glanced briefly toward the Captain as he lifted a flap and placed a finger over the ‘Emergency Hatch Release’ button. They all knew as did their dedicated but sometimes headstrong Science Officer, that if there was anything in the pod that could do any harm to them, the ship, or its cargo Aleotti would have no compunctions about jettison it back out into space, along with their much needed Science Officer.

“Watch that finger of yours, Cap?” Martins quipped, he knew exactly what Aleotti was doing. He lifted himself up onto tip toes and peered anxiously through the nearest of the small windows. The first thing he saw was Mitch’s body, the ashen greyness of his skin made him look none too healthy. “Whoops!”

“Chas!” Aleotti called, his finger trembled over the large red button.

The Captain’s voice echoed in the suit’s headset. “It’s O.K, Fabi,” Martins began, he climbed back up onto his toes and peered into the pod again. “One humanoid, male,” his voice faded away to a subtle mumble as he moved still closer to the port. “Take your time, Miles — I do have a lifetimes supply of air, y’know.”

Jennifer Miles smiled inwardly as she continued to tap away at the computer terminal, watching curiously as a familiar series of multi-coloured peaks and troughs appeared on one of the screens. “Drop the sarcasm, for once, Chas,” she tapped another few keys, “it seems to be clear of radiation on the outside,” she told him, “also on the inside, no contaminants, space

dust or anything else — but there are some bacteria floating around inside, they seem to be mycoplasmas of some sort,”she punched another button or two, “I can’t lock ‘em down exactly-”

“Vague’ll do,”Martins said.

“Well,”she began again, “I wouldn’t want to breathe them in, but offhand I’d say they were pretty harmless — I’m not getting any reading of life though,”she glanced across at the Captain.

“The cryo-plant may have malfunctioned,”Martins hypothesized, “there’s no telling how long this thing has been out there.” He peered into the pod once more then turned, looking toward the viewing window. “I’m coming back, I think you can decompress, Jen.”

The Science Officer of the *Engraver IV* turned and bounded back across the chamber. The door of the air lock slid open as he approached and then closed again once he was inside.

Aleotti finally lifted his finger away from the Emergency Hatch Release button and dropped the flap back over the top of the button. “Dead?”he enquired.

Jennifer shrugged. “Don’t know,”she replied. “A lot of the pod’s systems are offline still.”

“Great!”Aleotti exclaimed, “that’s all I need.”

A loud bleeping filled the corridor, stopping Aleotti before he could get into full flow. Arman crossed the corridor to stand in front of the communications console.

“Yes,”she began.

“It’s only me, Arman,”a voice replied.

“Hiya, Doc,”she shot back.

“Is Jennifer still there?”the man asked.

“What is it, Stuart?”Jennifer asked.

“You think he’s dead?”

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“The computer says he’s dead,” she replied, “me — I wouldn’t presume.”

There was a pause. “I’m on my way down — don’t touch the hibernation unit until I get there.”

“Got it!”

Fir’kan’I lifted her finger away from the Com console, turning as the lock at the end of the viewing hallway hissed open and Martins stepped into it.

“You know what this means, Charlie!” Aleotti shouted angrily.

“For pity’s sake, Fabi, system one is only two days away,” Fir’kan’I said.

Aleotti’s head snapped around. “Only two — Only!”

“We can make the time up if we make a run by the Firman Field-”

Aleotti laughed. “This gets worse,” he turned to look at her. “For one thing, they’re not just going to let us drop off an escape pod we found in the middle of nowhere and just go. Do you know how much paperwork I’m going to have to complete before they’ll let us go. As for making a run by the Firman Field, at this time of year with all of that magnetic energy flying around, we’ll be lucky to last a few hours — I’m going to have to get you reassigned, you’ve obviously been around Sen’kat too long.”

“Are we going to decompress?” Martins asked.

Aleotti sighed. “Are you sure it’s safe?”

Martins looked to his assistant, who could only shrug forlornly. “Look, Fabi, there’s a man in there — he may be dead, maybe the pod’s systems are playing up and he isn’t. He could be in urgent need of medical attention,” he paused. “Can I decompress?”

“O.K.” Aleotti sighed. He turned to the freighter’s Technical Officer. “Arman, I want you to check the Alliance Merchant Shipping Registry for some sort of documentation on the ship this thing came from-”

“I did that-”

“Do it again, Arman!” Aleotti snapped.

She nodded. “Sure, Boss, if it’ll make you feel better.”

“It will...”said Aleotti. “O.K — let’s leave Dr.Frankenstein and Egor here to get on with their work,”he turned to go, before adding. “On your head, Chas?”

“Isn’t it always?”Martins replied.

Aleotti nodded, then started back down the viewing corridor with Arman Fir’kanT in tow. She glanced back at Martins and Jennifer, shrugging at them before turning to match him stride for stride; leaving Martins and his assistant to decompress the chamber and begin to unravel the mystery as to what had happened to its single occupant.

