

## ASTRONAUT FOOD

### PART 1: MISSION ENGAGE

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*When I was a little girl, my dad used to hit me, when I misbehaved. “You won’t tell your mother,” he said to me, “because if you do, I’ll send you to el orfanato.” The orphanage. It was an awful thing to tell a kid, but I believed it. Part of the reason I got into science was that I stayed in too much—trying to stay out of trouble. Trying to stay on Dad’s good side.*

*Negative reinforcement is a dangerous tool. It can motivate, but it also creates an eternal bitterness. Mom never offered me much positive reinforcement, only grudging acceptance when I succeeded, so I never really knew the rush and the pleasure of reward, until NASA.*

*I chased that dopamine high all the way into space.*

--Journal of Eliza Gonzalez, PROJECT OUTBOUND logs

They found it orbiting Saturn. It didn’t show up on radar, not at first, and Hubble never even caught a glimpse of it. It was so huge that it caused a shadow on one of Saturn’s moons; that was how they found it. That was how they knew where to send the probes.

And presto, as soon as a probe bumped into the Craft, it lit up like a Christmas tree. Millennia of micro-meteorites had probably pummeled it, but it had stayed silent. Now, a manmade object prodded the thing and it came to life. Bio-luminescent membranes flickered in the dark. Fiber-optic cables pulsed under massive sheets of anti-radiation armor grown from modified bone. The thing was terrifying, vast, enormous. It was empty.

It was their ticket to the stars.

Eliza woke on the first day of her shift with a pounding headache. They still didn’t understand the stasis pods that filled the middle section of the Craft, the spinning section that simulated gravity. After years of tests, NASA and the other nations had decided they were “safe enough.” What they didn’t say was that submersion in the life-extending liquid would give you a hell of a hangover.

Climbing out of the vat of bubbling ooze, she groped for an oxygen mask. The inside of the ship stank of stale air... which made sense, since no one had breathed it for three years. Three years was the maximum amount of time they trusted the Craft to keep human bodies safe; any more than that, and the fluid began to effect small changes in cellular structure. Eliza’s job was to make sure the fluid got a dose of proteins and enzymes that would keep it stable.

She pulled the breathing tubes from her nose, rubbery lengths of flesh, and with distaste popped one out of her backside as well. *God, this ship is disgusting.* Standing firm, she looked at her reflection in

the chrome-like bulb of one of the Craft's control panels. A little muscle atrophy after three years, but still looking sturdy: broad hips, firm shoulders and her mother's long curly black hair, currently soaked in alien juices. There was a patch of fuzzy happy-trail over her privates, as she hadn't exactly been able to shave while in stasis. She shivered, and dug a bathrobe out of her trunk of belongings. There was much work to do.

"Log activate," she said to the dangling chain of microphones rigged throughout the spinning wheel. Red lights blinked. "Eliza Gonzalez, American branch of Operation Outbound, awake and out of stasis." Her stomach growled, and excess gas inside her churned—a result of pickling in that stuff, no doubt. "And hungry." She farted inadvertently as her insides adjusted to normal metabolic rates, and blushed. "Computer, delete that last soundbite. Okay, time to give these guys their three-year snack."

She followed her training, hooking tubes of bone into the stasis pods. Her teammates slumbered there, naked and dreaming. They still knew virtually nothing about how the Craft worked, so she followed the research to the letter, hooking the tubes up to NASA's home-brewed enzyme culture and letting it drip through the viscous membrane of the pods to nourish her slumbering friends. The doses would take days to complete, but she was in no hurry. Everything was automated, and she wanted a snack.

The artificial gravity generated by the spinning wheel of chitin, pressurized air and organic metal around her kept her stable, as she made her way to the "mess hall" section. Reheated astronaut food was no picnic, but it tasted delicious after spending years basking in a puddle of skin-absorbed nutrients. She chatted with the friendly but idiotic cook-ware AI, and scrounged up a jumpsuit. "Log, make note: Previous crew caretaker did not properly wash the uniforms before going under." She sniffed the pile of clumsily folded clothing. "Previous caretaker also had terrible B.O. and does not fold laundry well." Rude, but it would make for a laugh in three years when the next pilot woke up. She had no idea how a ship full of women made the uniforms smell this bad, but they did. Maybe NASA hadn't stocked them with any deodorant.

Women. It had to be women. The pods, it seemed, would not activate with men, or even a fifty-fifty ratio of men to women. No, the ratio had to be over a hundred to one, females to males. The NASA technicians could only puzzle at this, before shrugging and surrendering to the asinine will of the Craft. Thus, a new generation of female astronauts had been raised and trained relentlessly inside a decade—hailing from Russia like her training partner Karenina, or her sparring rival at the Cape Canaveral gym, Chunhua Xiang. And then there was her, the half-Latina badass offspring of an army woman and a crazy house-husband. Well, the Craft needed knowledge, not ancestral pedigree—and she had knowledge. Plenty of it.

She also had severe gas. "Ugh! Take note, log: Pre-stocked rations have a high carb content yielding the same results as baked beans." She did some calisthenics, making the smelly uniform even more so, and then finally washed it. No need to waste water on a ship where every drop was precious. Supposedly, the nose of the Craft collected ice particles and melted them for supply use, but she didn't trust this alien hunk of junk. It had just been *left* in their solar system, complete with instructions. Who knew if it was benign? All they knew was that when you filled the pods and pushed certain controls, the autopilot kicked in and started furrowing space-time in the direction of a distant solar system. Currently, they were racing across the interstellar gulfs at just under the speed of light, a bubble of warped space-time projected ahead of them and pulling them in its wake. No, she didn't trust the Craft at all. Because no matter how hard they tried, the scientists couldn't tell what laid on the other end of this journey.

Of course, mankind *had* to go. Terrible gastronomic noises or not. Just think of the possibilities, the understanding to be gained... *The stench*. A raunchy *brrrrappptf* rumbled out of her as she checked their course, and she grunted in annoyance. This was going to be a long trip.

The weeks slipped by easily. She played every simulation game they'd been able to pack; she maintained the weird pseudo-organic system of the ship as best she could. She slept fitfully on a military cot and awoke at every clank and hiss of steam. Most of all, she tried not to think about the fact that she was alone. Utterly alone, between the light of distant stars.

Something caught her attention after a few months of sitting around and eating MREs and protein bricks. The sphincter of tissue between the wheel sector and the *rest* of the ship—the unknown part—kept opening.

It would flash open in the middle of the night, or afternoon (time meant nothing out here, but she did her best to estimate based on the ebb and flow of the organic light-nodules) like a pink flower opening in the roof, then snap shut. She saw the flash of tunnels above and the hiss of atmosphere escaping, then it would close again.

It was bizarre. Nothing like this had been noted in the tests. Perhaps the ship was broken? If so, it was a smelly problem; a weird musk came from inside the doorway when it flapped open, and she wrinkled her nose at it. But they'd been told not to mess with the rest of the ship.

After a while, of course, curiosity enticed her.

She was bored, absurdly bored after six months, and getting out of shape. No amount of jogging and push-ups could stave off the hefty muffin top that accumulated around her waist, flopping inside her uniform like a donut of stored calories jiggling and rubbing against her jumpsuit. Eventually she decided, fuck it. If the Craft was built stupidly enough to kill all of them with a sphincter-vent malfunction, the aliens who built it probably wouldn't notice if she accidentally broke a few things.

So she stuck a cleaning broom in the sphincter.

The whole wheel section jerked to a halt. She was thrown off her feet and became immediately weightless, nearly smashing herself on a bulkhead. Finally, terrified, she swam-crawled through the air to the gap and looked through.

A long, fleshy green tunnel covered in weird cables led up into the main body of the ship.

Ambition had always been her downfall, at school. Her lofty ideals were not shared by other students, and so she'd had few friends even at Yale. She crawled up the pipe not out of some death wish, but out of sheer raging curiosity and desire.

She *had* to know.