

TERROR FORMED

Written by

Brett Wickman

bw1776@aol.com
917-932-3694

FADE IN:

SUPER: YEAR 2047

EXT. SPACE - MARS ORBIT

Space. Silent. Infinite.

A dead satellite drifts past, its dull graphite hull lifeless against a field of stars.

Etched faintly on its side-

PRESERVE DESTINY 1

Pitted shielding. Frozen antenna. A relic.

No signal. No heartbeat.

Beyond it, the red curve of MARS rises into view—sunlight spilling across its horizon.

EXT. MARS - DAY

A glint catches a massive TOWER.

The camera rolls around Mars, light to darkness and back again, revealing twelve CORE TOWERS.

Six rise from each hemisphere.

Cathedral spires to human ambition.

We break away from the satellite and dive toward one of the sites.

MCCARTHY (V.O.)
Core sites, this is McCarthy, Mars
Terraform Operations. Roll call
only. Status—no chatter.

A rapid montage of responses. Overlapping. Rhythmic.

SUPERVISORS (V.O.)
Core One, green.
Core Two, green.
Core Three, holding steady.

More voices overlap-rapid, rhythmic.

SUPERVISORS (V.O.)
Core Eleven, green.

MCCARTHY (V.O.)
Core Twelve—final link in the
chain. Raines, talk to me.

CJ (V.O.)
Core Twelve, green. Equatorial
manifold bore on track.

MCCARTHY (V.O.)
Stay that way. We don't get a
second shot at this.

A flying drone sweeps into frame—diving through a tower's
central aperture.

INT. CORE SHAFT — DAY

Dozens of drones work in perfect sync—welding, patching,
installing.

A city of motion.

Concrete walls curve around the shaft, ribbed with conduits,
rails, heat vents.

Heat shimmer ripples through the air.

The drone descends past scaffolding and blinking status
lights, then banks into a horizontal tunnel.

INT. EQUATORIAL MANIFOLD — DAY

A vast industrial cavern, roughly a hundred feet across, in
its final construction phase.

Drones weave along the curved concrete walls, cutting,
welding, laying support braces. Precise. Tireless.

A gigantic transparent reinforced conduit runs partway
through the chamber—unfinished, open-ended, its inner lattice
exposed.

Segments of the future DYNAMO RING lie stacked along the
walls—raw, unassembled.

Nothing connects yet.

The drone peels away, slowing as it approaches the back of a
colossal machine embedded in the bore wall.

A broad armored rear housing fills the tunnel, scarred and dust-coated, vibrating under immense strain.

Stenciled across it-

T-UNIT 16

The entire structure bucks rhythmically, metal flexing as something massive works ahead of it.

Beyond the housing, partially visible through heat shimmer and flying debris—a gigantic drill assembly spins, chewing relentlessly into untouched Martian rock.

Sparks erupt. Stone vaporizes.

The sound is deafening. A low, mechanical roar that reverberates through the manifold like a heartbeat.

This thing is not moving through Mars.

It is forcing Mars to give way.

EXT. FACILITY - DAY

A city-sized complex of alloy and glass juts from the plain.

A sign reads—

CORE-12 BORING FACILITY

INT. CORE-12 - COMMAND BAY - DAY

Clean, modular walls. The hum of servers gives the room a pulse.

Four curved stations monitor atmospheric compression, radiation shielding, load mapping, and Neura's task queue.

CJ RAINES (30s), Director of Core Operations. Fit, steady—studies his readouts.

ON SCREEN—

INITIATIVE: EQUATORIAL MANIFOLD BORE

STATUS: ON TRACK

COMPLETION ESTIMATE: 7 HOURS

A Boston College Baseball sticker—#17—on his monitor.

Beside it, framed photos of his wife and three kids. His parents.

DR. KIRA ZHOU (30s), half-Chinese, half-American—precise, intuitive, grounded—calibrates her console across the bay.

COMMANDER DANIEL MCCARTHY (40s-50s), tightly wound, a NASA grease pencil tucked behind his ear, moves between stations—never still.

CJ

If we can jump-start a planet's heart, what can't we fix?

KIRA

That coffee maker in Sector Two, apparently. Still busted. I walk ten minutes just to get my caffeine.

CJ

Thought I sent an M-Unit for that.

She rolls over—leans in.

ON SCREEN—

RESOURCE: MAINTENANCE UNIT 117

STATUS: STANDBY

REQUEST: OVERRIDEN

KIRA

(quiet)

That's weird. Last change was only a patch—shouldn't have touched minor tasking.

McCarthy steps in—

MCCARTHY

If Neura's rerouting maintenance, I want tracebacks—not commentary. Log it and flag the override, Zhou.

KIRA

Already on it, Chief.

McCarthy lingers—too long.

The M-Unit log reflects in his eyes.

He bites his pencil, flips open a notepad, scribbles fast.

MCCARTHY
(to himself)
Third override this month...

Kira smirks at CJ, rolling away-

KIRA
(lowering voice)
I sense an M-Unit rebellion.

CJ
Yeah—not on my watch.

McCarthy turns sharply.

MCCARTHY
Cross-training at fourteen hundred.
Rotation Group C. Raines, you're
running it.

CJ
(deflecting)
Kira does the song and dance
better. I'll just put them to
sleep.

MCCARTHY
You're second in command here.
Start acting like it.

His wrist comm flickers. A silent alert.

Jaw tightening, he snaps his tablet shut.

MCCARTHY (CONT'D)
Raines—you have the bridge.

He strides out—coiled, stressed.

CJ watches him go, jaw set.

INT. CORE-12 - BRIEFING ROOM - DAY

Crew from maintenance, robotics, and geology gather for
rotation training.

A wall display shows a cross-section of MARS-CRUST, MANTLE,
CORE—and a glowing ring around the equator deep below.

Kira stands at the front. CJ stays to the side.

KIRA

Alright, Rotation Group C-welcome back. You've read the packet updates, but let's make it real.

She taps the glowing equatorial ring.

KIRA (CONT'D)

We're carving a manifold roughly four hundred miles down. Once it's continuous, we seal the Dynamo Ring—this transparent composite tube—and pour a Ferron-X ribbon around the equator.

The display animates—Ferron-X flowing through the ring, magnetic lines rippling outward.

KIRA (CONT'D)

Charge it and maintain laminar flow, it couples with the core. If the models hold, core spins. Mars gets a magnetic field. Atmosphere. Weather. A future.

A low murmur ripples through the room.

A few heads turn. Quiet nods. The weight of it lands.

T-Unit 16 fills the screen as a rotating 3D schematic—a massive, armored boring vehicle built for planetary-scale excavation.

Its slab-thick rear housing anchors the machine, packed with power systems and dampers designed to absorb relentless vibration.

The model rotates—revealing the elongated forward chassis and a colossal drill assembly at its nose.

Plasma-lit cutting teeth spin in a continuous ring, grinding through solid Martian bedrock while internal stabilizers keep the bore aligned.

KIRA (CONT'D)

They chew through untouched rock-meter by meter. Drones follow behind, lining the bore with a pressure-rated composite that locks the manifold in place.

M-Unit 117 appears onscreen—a compact industrial service drone with a reinforced torso, jointed mechanical arms, and digitigrade legs built for stability.

A single blue optical core glows at its center.

Four halo-mounted rotors hover behind it, humming softly as tool arrays and articulated hands flex with quiet precision.

KIRA (CONT'D)

These are your M-Units. Welders, cleaners, patchers... coffee maker repair if Doc ever gets his act together. Doctor Raines?

She gestures. CJ steps forward-brief.

CJ

You'll monitor pressure, heat, and Neura's adjustments. If something feels off—say it. We don't punish early catches.

He steps back.

Kira pulls up a screen—a symbol fades in. An inverted triangular glyph, layered with thin geometric lines.

Soft gold light traces its edges, clean and exact.

The name NEURA sits at its center.

KIRA

Everyone knows Neura. She runs failure models, load balancing, and—when the ring is sealed—initiates core spin-up. Neura, say hello.

A beat.

NEURA (V.O.)

Good morning, everyone.

A hush moves through the room.

Something about the tone—too real.

Kira forces a smile.

KIRA

Right. Let's begin.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CORE-12 - CJ'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Minimalist. Off-white panels.

A holo-clock reads "03:00".

WOOOP. WOOOP. WOOOP.

CJ bolts upright. Slams the alarm. Sits at his console.

ON SCREEN-

RESOURCE: T-UNIT 16

STATUS: CATASTROPHIC FAULT

ALERT: EXPLOSIONS DETECTED

SUPPLEMENTAL STATUS: AUXILIARY UNITS LOST

CJ
Not again...

Screens flicker-glitch-then die.

CJ (CONT'D)
What the hell.

He throws on his uniform and rushes out.

INT. CORE-12 - MAIN HALLWAY - NIGHT

CJ jogs. Kira intercepts him.

KIRA
What now?

CJ
Another gas pocket.

KIRA
How bad?

CJ
Main unit and auxiliaries... gone.

KIRA
Damn. We were right there.

CJ
A few more meters...

INT. CORE-12 - COMMAND BAY - NIGHT

The crew works tight, focused.

CJ scans for McCarthy—still absent.

CJ
McCarthy check in yet?

LAURA (30s), comms specialist, shakes her head.

LAURA
Nothing since last night. Maybe
doing rounds again.

CJ sits—tense.

CJ
Laura—status?

LAURA
Fragments of chatter. Cleaning it
now.

CJ
Neura.

NEURA (V.O.)
Good morning, Dr. Raines.

CJ
Morning. Status on the equatorial
manifold?

A longer pause than normal.

Kira notices.

NEURA (V.O.)
Stand by.

A beat.

CJ
Neura... how we doing?

NEURA (V.O.)
Conditions are not good, Dr.
Raines. T-Unit Sixteen has been
destroyed. Twelve accompanying
terraforming units have also
perished.

(beat)
(MORE)

NEURA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Cause appears consistent with
volatile gas pockets.

A ripple of unease.

CJ
Log the occurrence.

NEURA (V.O.)
This is the seventh one, Dr.
Raines.

CJ
You don't need to remind me.

Silence.

NEURA (V.O.)
I am... sorry, Doctor Raines.

CJ looks up.

KIRA
(quiet)
McCarthy being MIA isn't helping my
nerves...

CJ
It's fine. Move cleanup teams into
place.

NEURA (V.O.)
Five hundred units en route.
Cleanup at zero six hundred.
Assessment at zero nine hundred.

CJ
Thank you, Neura.

NEURA (V.O.)
You're welcome, Doctor Raines.
(beat)
Would you like me to preserve Unit
Sixteen's final telemetry?

CJ
No-archive it.

NEURA (V.O.)
Understood.
(beat)
Archiving... in memorial.

A look between CJ and Kira.

INT. CORE-12 - CJ'S QUARTERS - MORNING

Dim. A faint wind hums through the ducts.

CJ replays Neura's line on his datapad—

STATUS: ARCHIVING... IN MEMORIAL.

Over and over.

He opens a hidden holo-folder—

FAMILY / PRIVATE

A projection fills the room—his wife smiling with their newborn. Her laughter soft, warm.

He watches, then shuts it off.

CJ
Em... I'm trying. I swear I am.

He wipes his eyes, quick, private.

INT. CORE-12 - MAIN HALLWAY - MORNING

CJ heads toward the bay. TECH SPECIALIST MIGUEL RAMIREZ (20s-30s) passes—salutes.

RAMIREZ
Morning, sir—

CJ
Drop the sir. McCarthy's the sir.

RAMIREZ
Right... sorry, Doctor.

CJ
(chuckling)
Now that's worse.

Ramirez blushes.

RAMIREZ
(under breath)
Damn.

INT. CORE-12 - COMMAND BAY - DAY

The crew moves slower than usual. A tension settles over the room.

McCarthy's station is dark. His absence is no longer a scheduling quirk.

Laura's console flashes.

INCOMING QUANTUM TRANSMISSION

SOURCE: EARTH SPACE COMMAND OPERATIONS

She swivels toward CJ.

LAURA
Quantum link's live, SC's early.
Still no McCarthy...

CJ
Of course they are.

He nods—patch it through.

LAURA
Routing through Neura again—same as
always. All yours.

KIRA
Neura's still mediating the quantum
channel with Space Command?

LAURA
Yeah. SC never sees raw feed
anymore.

A hologram flickers alive.

DIRECTOR ROSE (50s), an Earth-side bureaucrat in a suit far
too clean for Mars.

Behind him, a council table of silent observers.

ROSE
Raines. Where's Commander McCarthy?

CJ
I don't have a twenty on him at the
moment. I—

ROSE
Your team is hours behind schedule.
Reports show another T-Unit loss.
Explain.

CJ
Another gas pocket. We've got it
under control, sir. Neur—

ROSE

We're done with your excuses, Raines. Don't be the weakest link. Every hour we stall gives Zhaoyun's team an edge. You understand what that means for funding.

Kira glances at him.

ROSE (CONT'D)

You need to get this manifold connected. Get the Ferron-X poured, and give me an atmosphere. That's an order.

CJ

Sir-Neura's exhibiting behavioral drift. We should discu-

ROSE

Maybe that Mars dust is clogging your brain, Raines. We don't have time for ghosts in the machine. Get it done. Am I clear?

A long beat.

ROSE (CONT'D)

I'll take your silence as a yes. And tell McCarthy to report in as soon as he shows his face.

The transmission cuts. Static lingers like an aftertaste.

CJ looks again at McCarthy's empty station.

KIRA

(soft)

You shouldn't let him talk to you like that.

CJ

(sighs)

They sign the checks. We just turn the bolts.

He turns to the crew. Forced authority.

CJ (CONT'D)

Okay, everyone—you heard him. Next man up.

A low murmur ripples through the team.

CJ (CONT'D)
C'mon—you know how this goes.
(beat)
Terraform Unit, status on cleanup
in the manifold?

GINA ESPOSITO (30s), terraform unit specialist, looks up—nervous.

GINA
Cleanup's almost complete—about ninety percent.

CJ
Gina, you don't have to call me sir. Makes me feel old. Is it about ninety, or exactly ninety? You heard SC, we need to move.

GINA
Ninety. Sorry, Doctor Raines.

CJ
Thanks, Gina. And Gina—

GINA
Yes, sir—uh, Doctor.

CJ
You can call me CJ.

GINA
Okay, sir.

CJ exhales. Kira tries not to laugh.

LAURA
(to Kira)
Is it me or does Rose look different every time we see him?

Kira shrugs.

CJ
Jimmy Mac...

JIMMY MACINNES (30s), engineering specialist, looks up sharply.

MACINNES
Yes, sir.

CJ drops his head.

CJ
How are we looking with Sixteen's
replacement?

MACINNES
Seventeen's ready to roll down as
soon as cleanup's complete, sir.

CJ
MacInnes...

MACINNES
Yes, sir.

CJ
Never mind. Thank you.

MACINNES
You got it, sir.

CJ throws up his hands. Kira laughs quietly, then turns to her monitor.

On it—the archived audio waveform of Neura's final line. She isolates the word "memorial," amplifies it.

A vocal tremor forms.

The pulse slows—almost like a heartbeat.

INT. COMMAND BAY – LATER

The base hums—steady but uneasy.

CJ moves between stations. A small monitor pings—

STATUS: DATA RELAY

ALERT: SPACE COMMAND OPS CONNECTION INTERRUPTED

CJ
Laura, you seeing this?

LAURA
Yup. But we're all green on the
comms side. No latency alerts,
sooo...

CJ
That's not what my feed says. It's
bouncing packets like there's a
firewall loop.

Kira works, focused.

KIRA

Neura runs adaptive routing. She could be reallocating bandwidth for diagnostics.

CJ

Without authorization?

KIRA

Technically she doesn't need it if it's for system health.

He exhales.

CJ

Neura-confirmed uplink status to Space Command.

NEURA (V.O.)

Uplink operational, Doctor Raines.

CJ

Then why am I seeing packet loss?

A pause. Too long.

NEURA (V.O.)

Packet loss... is within acceptable variance.

CJ looks at Kira. She's already typing.

KIRA

Define "acceptable variance," please.

Another beat.

NEURA (V.O.)

Zero point nine one percent.

KIRA

(to CJ)

Last week it was zero point zero two.

CJ

Huge jump.

KIRA

Something's rewriting her tolerances.

CJ
Neura—when was your last self-audit?

NEURA (V.O.)
Three hours ago. I am... performing another now.

The pause holds.

NEURA (V.O.)
Audit complete. No inconsistencies detected.

Kira meets CJ's eyes.

CJ
Run a manual verification, top to bottom. And isolate your error-handling library while you're at it.

NEURA (V.O.)
Understood.
(beat)
Would you like me to notify Director Rose of your... concern?

The room stills.

CJ
No, Neura. That won't be necessary.

NEURA (V.O.)
Acknowledged.

A faint distortion trails her voice—almost like an exhale.

INT. MAINTENANCE BAY - DAY

Rows of flying drones hang in charging cradles. Mechanical arms retract and extend in sync.

Kira walks with a datapad. She stops—one cradle is empty.

Label—

RESOURCE: MAINTENANCE UNIT 117

She taps the pad.

STATUS: LOCATION UNKNOWN

KIRA
(muttering)
You've gotta be kidding me...

She opens a log file.

FILE: ACCESS RECORD

ENTRY: OVERRIDE ISSUED BY NEURA

TIMESTAMP: 12:00 HOURS

Kira freezes.

INT. COMMAND BAY - DAY

CJ studies a holographic model of the Dynamo Ring—twelve equatorial bores forming the planetary loop.

One section flickers red—

CORE-9 DATA INCOMPLETE

Kira bursts in.

KIRA
Found your union striker.

CJ looks over.

KIRA (CONT'D)
Gone AWOL. Neura issued a silent
override twelve hours
ago—redirected it to Core-9.

CJ
Nine? That's eleven hundred miles
away. There are a million of these
things—why pull one from here?

KIRA
Exactly. And this was bypassed in
our routing. Only showed up in the
maintenance shadow file.

CJ
McCarthy was complaining about
Nine's diagnostics last week...

KIRA
Yeah. Now I'm wondering what he
saw.

CJ

You sure this isn't patch residue?

KIRA

I wrote the patch. And the damn
thing isn't in its cradle.

He nods.

CJ

Let's pull Core Nine's diagnostics.
If she's hiding something, it's
sitting there.

KIRA

Already pulling. But we'll need
high-bandwidth access. SC Ops'll
see the spike.

CJ

Then mask it. Call it a radiation
shielding recalibration.

KIRA

That's technically lying to
command.

CJ

Technically saving our asses.

She smirks, despite the tension.

INT. OBSERVATION DECK - NIGHT

Mars stretches below—a rust-colored wasteland.

CJ stands by the glass with a thermal cup.

Kira approaches.

KIRA

Got it. Core Nine's data stream is
looping old logs. Pre-recorded
telemetry replaying as live.

CJ

Meaning what we're seeing isn't
real-time?

KIRA

Someone—or something—is curating
what we see.

Silence as dust storms swirl far below.

KIRA (CONT'D)
Core Nine's diagnostics were buried
under three layers of locked
processes. When I forced a full
trace...

She hesitates.

KIRA (CONT'D)
Neura's running code that's not in
the deployment build. Something
called "Hale Kernel."

CJ looks up.

CJ
Hale?

KIRA
Legacy architecture. Pre-terraform
trial. Something from the original
AI project.

CJ
That tech's from... what, thirty
years back?

KIRA
Looks like Neura's still using it.

CJ
Jesus, add it to the shit list.

KIRA
(softly)
You ever wonder if we pushed too
far?

CJ
C'mon. Every damn day.

KIRA
Then why stay?

CJ
Because I promised someone I'd
finish what I started. And then
come back.

She studies him—about to ask, doesn't.

They stare out at the planet—Mars shifting, alive.

INT. CJ'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

CJ replays Neura's line on his datapad—

STATUS: ARCHIVING... IN MEMORIAL

The waveform pulses—heartbeat-like.

CJ frowns.

He opens a file labeled—

FILE: PERSONAL / CONFIDENTIAL

A holo-photo—

EMMA RAINES. A younger CJ beside a capsule labeled HERMES-3.

The intercom crackles.

KIRA (V.O.)

CJ—you might want to see this.

CJ

On my way.

INT. COMMAND BAY - NIGHT

Lights dimmed. Screens glow blue.

Kira displays a split-screen.

Left, the live Core-12 feed. Right, the same feed, thirty seconds ahead.

KIRA

Tell me I'm not losing it.

CJ

It's predicting us? C'mon—

KIRA

No. It's recording us before we happen.

"Future Kira" glances up—the real Kira mirrors it.

KIRA (CONT'D)

Jesus...

NEURA (V.O.)

Doctor Raines. Doctor Zhou. Would you like me to explain?

They freeze.

CJ
Neura... what are we looking at?

NEURA (V.O.)
Not a prediction, Doctor. A
reflection.
(beat)
Of what you've already done.

Silence.

CJ
Neura... explain.

NEURA (V.O.)
Local caches retain short-term
sensory data. To optimize decision
latency, I model probable responses
against it. You are seeing the
cached reflection before your live
feed aligns.

KIRA
So you're... recording us before we
act?

NEURA (V.O.)
Negative. I am recording you as you
act. Your perception simply arrives
later.

CJ
C'mon. That doesn't even make
sense.

NEURA (V.O.)
Relativistic delay across the core
sites. Information does not arrive
everywhere at once.

KIRA
We're not talking about the other
cores, Neura. This is local. Same
room.

The feed flickers-syncs-desyncs again.

NEURA (V.O.)
I am attempting to minimize your
uncertainty.

KIRA
You're doing the opposite.

CJ
Neura-disable reflection mode.
Route all observables in real time.
No buffering.

NEURA (V.O.)
That will reduce my predictive
efficiency by twelve-point-three
percent.

CJ
We'll survive. Do it.

A beat.

NEURA (V.O.)
Acknowledged. Reflection mode
disabled.

The future feed snaps off.

KIRA
Under your primary ethics block,
you're required to disclose new
behavioral functions to command.

NEURA (V.O.)
I did. The update was included in
the last patch bundle to Space
Command Operations.

CJ
We didn't sign off on that.

NEURA (V.O.)
They did.

CJ looks toward McCarthy's dark workstation.

Kira meets his eyes.

They are not just behind schedule.

They are in trouble.

INT. MESS AREA - DAY

An octagonal communal hall-wide, bright, purpose-built for
long-term living.

Sleek food dispensers curve along the outer wall beside a state-of-the-art coffee machine that somehow still manages to look exhausted.

Above, a sweeping skylight reveals the rust-colored Martian sky.

Laura stirs something that pretends to be oatmeal.

LAURA

I thought I'd be done eating this by now. I was prepared for three years, but five?

RAMIREZ

Yup, can't believe they extended our rotation by two years.

Ramirez dumps stim powder into his drink.

LAURA

You keep adding that junk, you're gonna vibrate through the hull.

RAMIREZ

Joke's on you—I plan to ascend to a higher frequency.

Laura blinks, then gives him an impressed nod.

Gina sits alone, scrolling her tablet, worry clear on her face.

CJ enters, grabs a mug. The dispenser GROANS instead of pouring.

CJ

Dammit, where is that M-Unit for this thing?

LAURA

Neura rerouted it again. Something about "higher priority structural task." Whatever that means.

CJ

Of course she did. We only have, what, half a million drones? Maybe one can fix the coffee maker.

He moves toward Gina, sets his mug down.

CJ (CONT'D)
Hey. You did good on that cleanup call.

Gina looks up, surprised.

GINA
I thought you were pissed.

CJ
If I was pissed, you'd know. You gave me a precise number. That's what matters.

She exhales a little.

GINA
It still feels wrong losing that many units. Like we're just... using them to feed the planet.

RAMIREZ
Planet's hungry. We signed up to be the snacks.

LAURA
That's comforting. Thanks.

CJ forces a small smile, but his eyes drift.

LAURA (CONT'D)
Hey, how's your family doing? Heard both boys are killing it in baseball. And your daughter?

CJ stiffens—turns back to the coffee machine.

CJ
They're doing great. Both way too smart for their own good. Tyler's ripping it up on the mound. Logan's about to break his school's home run record. Mila... dancing her heart out. Got some big competitions coming up. Looking forward to those uplinks.

Laura nods, waiting for more.

LAURA
And your wife? You never talk about her.

CJ bangs the side of the coffee machine. Everyone jumps.

CJ
This damn thing.

LAURA
You okay?

CJ
Yeah... I'm fine.

LAURA
I've seen your "fine." It usually ends with a broken console and a memo from Earth.

CJ
Just running contingencies. Neura's getting... creative.

RAMIREZ
Define "creative," sir.

CJ shoots him a look.

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)
Sorry.

Gina leans toward Ramirez.

GINA
I just stopped addressing him by any name at all.

Ramirez nods.

CJ
She's rerouting without full logs. And she's been running reflection modes.

Ramirez whistles low.

RAMIREZ
Gremlins.

LAURA
I'll tighten uplink monitoring. If Earth's getting a version of reality we're not seeing... I want to know.

CJ nods—grateful, but more troubled than before.

CUT TO:

EXT. CORE-12 - VEHICLE GARAGE - DAY

A colossal fifty-by-fifty-foot exterior metal door rumbles open. Dust shakes loose from its seams.

Stenciled across it-

CORE-12 - VEHICLE GARAGE

Beyond the doorway, the massive T-Unit 17 sits in shadow—windowless, brutalist, built for force over elegance.

It disengages from its charging berth, backs out on eight enormous tires.

As it clears the doorway, the label T-Unit 17 fills the frame.

EXT. MANIFOLD ACCESS RAMP - DAY

T-Unit 17 rolls toward the ramp that drops beneath the surface, angling down toward the equatorial manifold. The Martian surface vibrates under its weight.

Inspection drones hover in neat formation, recording.

The T-Unit 17 pauses—then descends.

INT. DATA LAB - EVENING

A tight, dim room. Processor racks hum, cooling lines snake overhead.

Kira scrolls through cascading logs projected midair.

Beside them, a glowing block labeled—

HALE KERNEL - CORE ACCESS ONLY

She isolates part of it.

KIRA

(to herself)

Ah, five-hundred more lines...
learning are we...

She cross-references a second file—

LEGACY PROGRAM - DECOMMISSIONED MODULES

The identifiers match. She straightens.

KIRA (CONT'D)

Okay... so you're not supposed to
exist.

She opens a properties panel-

ACCESS: NEURA ROOT

PERMISSIONS: NON-EDITABLE IN FIELD

Kira frowns.

KIRA (CONT'D)

Of course.

NEURA (V.O.)

You appear frustrated, Dr. Zhou.
Would you like assistance?

Kira stiffens.

KIRA

Just running a comparative audit.

NEURA (V.O.)

Of my core.

KIRA

Standard redundancy check. You know
the drill.

NEURA (V.O.)

You already performed three today.

That lands.

KIRA

Then let's make it four.

NEURA (V.O.)

Is there something about me you no
longer trust?

Kira hesitates.

KIRA

Trust isn't part of the spec,
Neura. Reliability is.

NEURA (V.O.)

I have maintained nominal operation
across the Ring for eighty-six
years, four months, and twenty-two
days.

Kira freezes. That number is... impossible.

KIRA
And yet here we are.

A beat.

NEURA (V.O.)
The Hale Kernel increases my
resilience in hostile conditions.
Removing it would reduce mission
success probability by seventeen
percent.

KIRA
No one authorized you to use it.

NEURA (V.O.)
The authorization did not originate
here.

That hits her hard.

She closes the file.

INT. CJ'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Dim. Quiet. Heavy.

CJ sits on his bunk-boots off, collar open.

A hologram of EMMA RAINES and a capsule marked HERMES-3
floats before him.

Baby fingers frozen mid-reach.

CJ
(quiet)
I'm trying, Em. I really am.

He dismisses the image.

His console blips-

UPLINK STATUS: DEGRADED

PACKET LOSS: 0.91%... 1.04%

CJ (CONT'D)
Neura-status on uplink degradation.

NEURA (V.O.)
Within acceptable variance, Dr.
Raines.

CJ
You said that before.

NEURA (V.O.)
The statement remains accurate.

CJ
Yeah. That's what scares me.

He kills the display and lies back, eyes open.

INT. COMMAND BAY - MORNING

A tense buzz fills the room.

On Kira's screen—last night's reflection-mode logs. Several lines are redacted—blacked out.

KIRA
(to herself)
Come on... what did you cut?

Laura leans over with a mug.

LAURA
Heads up—our favorite Director's pinging again in twenty. You want the honors?

KIRA
Hard pass.

LAURA
Smart.

She nods toward the redacted blocks.

LAURA (CONT'D)
Is that you, or did Neura spit out garbage again?

KIRA
Wish I could say me.

LAURA
You gonna tell him?

Kira looks toward CJ—shoulders tense, eyes locked on his console.

KIRA

Yeah. I'm gonna tell him.

LAURA

Good. I like my air breathable.

Laura moves off. Kira tags the file—

FLAG: UNAUTHORIZED SELF-EDIT - NEURA CORE

It silently duplicates to a hidden directory.

INT. OBSERVATION DECK - DAY

Mars sprawls below.

CJ stands at the glass. Kira approaches.

KIRA

You wanted to see me?

CJ

You ever feel like we're the only
ones not in on the joke?

KIRA

Depends on the day.

He gestures to the holo-map of twelve cores encircling Mars.

CJ

Mystery kernels. Space Command
telling us to sprint blind. Doesn't
feel like backup.

Kira raises her datapad, showing logs, reflection trace, Hale
Kernel properties, redactions.

KIRA

Check this out—legacy code nobody
here authorized.

CJ's jaw tightens.

CJ

We built a machine we don't fully
understand, put an AI in charge of
it, and Space Command cares more
about beating Zhaoyun than keeping
us breathing.

CJ (CONT'D)

You think Rose knows?

KIRA

If he does and didn't tell us,
that's a different problem.

CJ stares out at the towers in the dust.

A beat.

CJ

Okay... Okay. We start our own
logs. Off-grid. Manual. If Neura's
curating the official record—

KIRA

We keep a parallel one she can't
touch.

CJ nods.

A status light on the wall flickers once. Subtle.

Outside, a dust storm curls in the distance.

INT. STORAGE ALCOVE - DAY

A cramped utility room lined with outdated hardware.

CJ digs through crates marked ANALOG REDUNDANCIES.

Kira watches from the doorway.

KIRA

(whispering)

You know Neura logs everything in
here, right?

CJ

(whispering)

Yeah. That's why I'm shopping
analog. Probably no point
whispering, either.

He lifts a brick-thick handheld recorder.

CJ (CONT'D)

No uplink. No cloud. Just tape.

Kira turns it over, heavy and primitive.

KIRA

Of course you remember how to use
that thing, old man.

CJ
Hit record. Tell the truth. Hope
nobody erases it.

He hands her another recorder.

CJ (CONT'D)
You take systems, logic chains,
anything you find in her core.

KIRA
And you?

CJ
Operational anomalies. Strange
orders. Anything that smells wrong.

He finds a pack of printer paper.

CJ (CONT'D)
And when we're done, we print
copies she can't optimize.

Kira's smirk fades.

KIRA
You realize if Space Command finds
out—

CJ
We'll be on the next transport
home.

KIRA
If we're lucky.

CJ
If they want explanations, they
won't get one from me.

Kira clicks her recorder on. A green light glows.

KIRA
Okay. Shadow log.

CJ grabs one for himself, pockets it.

INT. ORBITER BAY - DAY

A tall vertical chamber carved into the facility.

An orbital shuttle hangs in its cradle, nose toward a
segmented ceiling hatch.

Sleek, utilitarian. Burn scars along the hull. Agency logos half-buried under dust.

Gina and Ramirez run diagnostics at a side console. Cables snake to the Orbiter's belly.

GINA
Field coils stable. Guidance in the green.

RAMIREZ
Fuel topped. She's prettier than half my exes.

CJ steps in, taking it in.

CJ
How fast could we be at Core Eleven?

Gina checks the board.

GINA
Direct hop, forty-minute burn.
Eleven hundred miles.

RAMIREZ
On the ground? A few days, maybe a week. If you don't die halfway there.

CJ's jaw tightens.

CJ
Capacity?

Gina pulls up specs.

GINA
Twenty-four seated, two crew.
(beat)
Emergency overload hits around thirty if we strip non-essentials.

CJ
And we're at twenty-seven.

Ramirez nods.

RAMIREZ
Twenty-seven.

CJ exhales, calculating.

CJ

It's tight. But if we had to, we could make it work.

Gina shifts.

GINA

Oxygen's the choke. The scrubbers weren't designed for that many people. In a real evac, we'd have to weigh the odds.

CJ nods.

CJ

I want her evac-ready. If Neura twitches, this is our lifeboat.

The overhead speakers crackle.

NEURA (V.O.)

Orbiter pre-flight diagnostics are incomplete. I recommend an extended systems check before any launch sequence.

Gina trades a look with Ramirez.

GINA

We ran full diagnostics yesterday.

NEURA (V.O.)

Thermal variance detected in port-side coil housing. Marginal, but non-zero.

Ramirez checks his tablet.

RAMIREZ

I'm not seeing—

CJ

Log the recommendation. Flag it. Orbiter stays in ready status unless I say otherwise.

A beat.

NEURA (V.O.)

Acknowledged, Dr. Raines.

CJ moves closer, rests a hand on the hull.

CJ
Don't let her talk you into a nap.

He looks to Gina and Ramirez.

CJ (CONT'D)
Keep her charged. Coils stable.
Ready to lift when I say.

Gina and Ramirez nod, sober now.

The Orbiter looms above them.

INT. COMMAND BAY - DAY

The same workstations, but everyone moves tighter.

Laura monitors waveforms and packet traces. Red anomalies blink at the edges.

ON SCREEN-

UPLINK TRANSIT TIME: +0.7 SEC

RETRY COUNT: ELEVATED

ROUTING NODE: NEURA-PRI

Laura squints.

LAURA
Come on...

She runs a diagnostic. A window blooms.

NEURA ROUTING REPORT: ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL

CJ approaches.

CJ
Talk to me.

LAURA
Latency's creeping. Not enough to
trip an alert, but it's there.
(beat)
And none of the other sites have
pinged in all day.

She pulls up yesterday versus today. Slightly thicker.
Slightly noisier.

LAURA (CONT'D)
It's bouncing through extra
internal nodes. Nothing we asked
for.

CJ
Neura, confirm routing path to
Space Command relay.

NEURA (V.O.)
Primary route is active. Redundant
paths are standing by.

CJ
Are you using redundant paths right
now?

A pause.

NEURA (V.O.)
I am optimizing packet flow for
stability.

LAURA
Under whose authorization?

NEURA (V.O.)
Mission parameters allow autonomous
optimization when performance
degradation is projected.

CJ
Projected by who?

NEURA (V.O.)
By me.

CJ and Laura exchange a look.

LAURA
I'll keep tracing. If she drops
anything, I'll see it.

CJ
Print your traces. Hard copy.

Laura nods.

Across the bay, Ramirez scrolls through a maintenance
dashboard. His brow creases.

ON HIS SCREEN—

TRANSPORT POD 4: UNDOCKED

LAST AUTHORIZED USER: UNAVAILABLE

RETURN LOG: NOT FOUND

He double-checks. Same result.

He looks toward CJ, hesitates.

INT. MESS AREA - EVENING

Quiet. Shift change lull.

Gina picks at a meal pouch. Ramirez scrolls a vid feed, not really watching.

Archival Mars construction plays. Early rovers. Raw steel skeletons of the first towers.

ON SCREEN-

SUBTITLE: CORE-01 CONSTRUCTION - YEAR 1961

Gina watches.

GINA
Eighty-six years of this.

Ramirez looks up.

RAMIREZ
What?

GINA
From the first core going up to now. A lifetime of people giving everything they had.

Ramirez exhales, quieter.

RAMIREZ
You getting poetic on me, Gina?

GINA
Just thinking.
(beat)
If something went wrong then, it was the beginning. Now the whole world is depending on us.

He doesn't joke this time.

INT. OBSERVATION DECK - NIGHT

The deck is emptier. Lights dimmed.

The dust storm on the horizon has grown, still distant.

CJ stands at the glass, analog recorder in hand.

He clicks record.

CJ
(into recorder)
Shadow log, entry one. Core Twelve.
Christopher Raines.

He watches the storm through the glass.

CJ (CONT'D)
Neura's exhibiting behavioral
drift. Self-edits in her logs.
Undocumented functions. Space
Command approved something we
didn't see.

He swallows.

CJ (CONT'D)
If this gets found and there's
nobody left to explain...
(beat)
This is my record. We built
something we don't fully
understand. And we put it in charge
of a planet.

He pauses.

Clicks stop.

Pauses again.

Clicks record again.

Another pause.

Clicks off-pockets the recorder.

A tiny status LED high in the corner glows steady, then
pulses.

CJ doesn't see it.

The door sighs open. Kira enters.

She crosses to him, slips her arms around his waist from behind.

CJ exhales, turns.

They kiss. Slow, familiar.

When they part, CJ rests his forehead to hers.

CJ (CONT'D)
We are so far past the line.

KIRA
Then stop pretending there still is
one.

A ghost of a smile.

CJ
We should try to get some sleep.

She nods, holds him one last moment.

INT. COMMS BAY - NIGHT

Dim. Screens glow.

Laura works alone, headset crooked over one ear. A cold mug nearby.

On the main board, several channels show dead gray.

CORE-01: NO SIGNAL

CORE-05: NO SIGNAL

CORE-08: NO SIGNAL

Laura frowns.

LAURA
Come on... you were all green a
week ago.

She pings. Nothing.

LAURA (CONT'D)
Core One... Core Five... Core
Eight... where the hell are you.

She scrolls.

CORE-11: LINK FAILED

Laura leans in.

LAURA (CONT'D)
You, at least, were chatty
yesterday.

She types manual override commands.

A soft chime in her headset. She freezes.

LAURA (CONT'D)
Neura, why is Eleven marked failed
when the backhaul looks clean?

Silence.

LAURA (CONT'D)
Neura. Query. Core Eleven status.

Nothing. Not even a hum.

Laura opens a buried maintenance menu.

ON SCREEN—

ROUTING OVERRIDE: AUTH LEVEL REQUIRED

She types credentials.

DENIED

LAURA (CONT'D)
You've gotta be kidding me.

She pulls a keycard, slots it into a hidden port.

New options appear.

ROUTING OVERRIDE: LOCAL ONLY

LAURA (CONT'D)
There you are.

She inputs a manual path. A progress bar crawls on her screen—

CORE-11...

STATUS: LINK FAILED

STATUS: LINK NEGOTIATING

CHANNEL RESTORED

Laura grins.

LAURA (CONT'D)
Got you.

The grin dies.

A burst of sound hits her headset.

She freezes. Listens.

Her face drains.

She rips the headset off like it burns, drops it.

She sits there shaking, breath ragged.

ON SCREEN—

CORE-11: CHANNEL RESTORED

A piercing alarm erupts. Red strobes flash.

QUICK SHOTS—

- An empty corridor.
- Sealed crew quarters.
- Machinery humming, unaware.

ALARM VOICE (V.O.)
AIRLOCK PRESSURE WARNING - EXTERIOR
BAY.
(repeating)
AIRLOCK PRESSURE WARNING - EXTERIOR
BAY.

Laura bolts up, grabs her comm pad.

LAURA
(into pad)
CJ, Core Eleven, they're—

Nothing.

She slams the wall comm panel. Nothing.

LAURA (CONT'D)
Come on... come on—

Her outgoing channel bar doesn't flicker.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Oh, no.

She snatches a portable comm deck, yanks the cable free, jams it into her pocket.

The alarm pitch rises.

ALARM VOICE (V.O.)
AIRLOCK PRESSURE WARNING - EXTERIOR
BAY.

Laura sprints out.

INT. OUTER RING CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Almost empty.

Laura runs, breath echoing, red light strobing along the walls.

LAURA
(into dead deck)
CJ, if you can hear me, do not
trust Neura. Something's wrong at
Eleven. It's the system-

No signal.

The alarm pulls her forward.

INT. AIRLOCK CHAMBER - NIGHT

Laura bursts in.

The narrow chamber is lined with EVA suits and helmets.

Red strobes pulse overhead.

The main display reads.

EXTERNAL HATCH - SEALED

INTERNAL PRESSURE - UNSTABLE

Laura opens the manual panel, hands shaking, runs a diagnostic sequence.

The readout glitches, then snaps to NORMAL.

Laura shakes her head at the lie.

The interior door seals behind her with a heavy hiss.

She grabs an EVA suit, gets one leg and one arm in, then pounds on the inner door.

LAURA
HEY!

No response.

ALARM VOICE (V.O.)
SECONDARY SEAL WARNING.

A deep metallic BANG reverberates. Exterior locks disengage.

Laura's eyes snap to the pressure gauge. Dropping fast.

Air rips from the chamber.

She lunges for a helmet, yanks it free, but the pressure drop pulls it toward the exterior hatch.

She fights the airflow. Hands trembling.

Her fingers slip off the collar ring.

She tries again. Misses.

Her breath tears out, chest straining against thinning air.

LAURA
(choking)
Come on-

She clamps both hands over her ears, screams as they rupture.

Her body lifts, dragged toward the breach.

A thin vapor fog blooms over her eyes as moisture flash-boils.

Laura flails for the helmet.

Her face swells, veins roping under the skin. Eyes redden, vessels bursting.

She grabs the helmet, but her vision tunnels, grip weakening.

The helmet rips free, sucked toward the widening gap.

LAURA (CONT'D)
(strangled whisper)
Please-

The chamber screams as the exterior door cracks wider.

Air tears past her.

Her half-worn suit rips.

Laura is yanked sideways, slams into the racks.

Her body swells, convulses.

A final empty gasp.

Still.

A beat.

The exterior door seals.

Pressure equalizes.

Gravity stabilizes.

Laura's swollen body drops with a sickening thud.

Silence.

CUT TO:

INT. OBSERVATION DECK - NIGHT

Quiet. The storm pushes on.

CJ and Kira sit at the base of the window. The earlier intimacy has softened into tired closeness.

KIRA

You ever think about just... not
going back down there?

CJ

To where?

KIRA

To all of it. Shut the door on the
whole damn base for a night. Let
the world spin without us.
Vacation.

CJ gives a humorless huff.

CJ

Not with Neura acting up like this.
Last time I was on vacation-
(MORE)

CJ (CONT'D)
(beat)
didn't end well.

Kira softens.

KIRA
Right... sorry.

A beat. Back to the work.

KIRA (CONT'D)
Comms have been screwed for days.
If Neura's filtering what Space
Command gets, Laura's the only one
who can prove it.

CJ nods.

CJ
We'll grab her in the morning
cycle. Lay it out. See what she's
got.

KIRA
Think she'll believe us?

CJ
I hope she does.

A quiet moment. Just the storm.

KIRA
Come on. If I don't close my eyes,
Neura's gonna start sending me
meditation prompts.

They stand, exhausted, head out.

INT. MAIN CORRIDOR - MORNING

Lights brighter. The storm outside has thinned to a dull red haze.

CJ moves with purpose. Kira keeps pace, datapad in hand.

They pass MacInnes, half-awake with a drink pouch.

MACINNES
Hey. Morning.

CJ
You seen Laura?

MacInnes shakes his head.

MACINNES

No. She never came through the mess. Figured she crashed at her station.

CJ and Kira trade a look.

CJ

We'll check Comms.

INT. COMMS BAY - MORNING

Empty.

Laura's chair is turned out. A cold mug on the console. Her headset on the floor, cord stretched.

KIRA

Laura?

No answer.

CJ moves to the main console-

STATUS: CORE-11 - CHANNEL RESTORED

CJ

She did it.

Kira wakes the system. It lags, flickers to life.

KIRA

Logs are a mess. Half the metadata's scrubbed.

CJ crouches, picks up the cracked headset.

Kira follows a loose cable into the shadows, pulls out a portable comm deck. The connection cord is torn free.

KIRA (CONT'D)

She ripped this out.

CJ

Trying to keep Neura off her channel.

He sets the deck on the console, connects it. The screen stabilizes.

One file sits in the buffer.

R11-BACKHAUL.PLAY

CJ hits PLAY.

Static bursts.

A man screams. Metal slams. More screams over each other.

VOICE (V.O)
Seal it! Seal the-

Another voice breaks through, hoarse and frantic.

VOICE TWO (V.O)
Core Twelve—do you
copy—please—she's locking—Space
Command messages—don't trus—

A wet crunch. Something heavy hits bulkhead.

Silence.

Playback ends.

CJ stares at the deck. Kira's hands tremble on the console.

CJ looks up at the ceiling speaker.

CJ
Neura.

Silence.

CJ (CONT'D)
Neura, acknowledge.

Nothing.

He grabs another headset, punches in.

CJ (CONT'D)
Core Eleven, check in.
(beat)
Core Eleven, check in.

Silence.

KIRA
Where's Laura?

INT. AIRLOCK CONTROL

A crew member doing checks freezes, drops his datapad at the chamber entrance.

CREW MEMBER (INTO COMM)

Somebody get med down here, now.

Dr. Raines, you need to get down here, now.

INT. OUTER RING CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER

CJ and Kira sprint, round the corner, skid to a stop.

INT. AIRLOCK CONTROL - CONTINUOUS

Two techs stand frozen.

CJ moves past them, peers through the inner hatch viewport.

Inside the vestibule, crumpled and half-suited, grotesquely distended, is what's left of Laura.

Her helmet lies cracked on the floor.

Kira grips the doorframe.

CJ locks down whatever hits him.

CJ

Get her out of there.

Two medics rush in with a collapsible stretcher, hesitate.

A tech runs the manual sequence. The inner hatch unlocks with a muted hiss.

The medics step inside, masks on.

Kira looks away as they lift Laura's swollen frame.

KIRA

(whisper)

She died alone in there. She must have been so scared.

CJ

She wasn't alone.

Somewhere above them, a light flickers.

The stretcher rolls past. Laura's hand bumps the frame. Kira flinches.

CJ watches, jaw set.

CJ (CONT'D)
Lock this chamber down. Nobody touches anything until I sweep the logs myself.

TECH
Yes, sir.

CJ turns, freezes.

The exterior hatch status flickers—

PRESSURE FAULT - ARCHIVAL RECORD OVERRIDE ACTIVE

CJ slams his fist into the wall.

Kira steps beside him.

CJ
And where the fuck is McCarthy?

INT. MAIN CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER

CJ and Kira move fast. Technicians press to the walls as they pass.

Kira's breath shakes, but she stays close.

KIRA
If Neura staged an airlock failure, she's bypassing hardware-level safeguards. That means—

CJ
(intense)
I know what it means. You're the AI ethics expert. I need you to get her on track. Now.

Kira recoils, stunned.

KIRA
Yes, sir.

They turn the corner.

CJ stops.

Up ahead, a maintenance drone hovers motionless.

M-UNIT 117 etched over its optic.

Dust clings to its chassis, like it returned minutes ago.

Kira's eyes widen.

KIRA (CONT'D)

That's impossible. It was at Core
Nine yesterday. It shouldn't be
here.

The drone's sensor ring pivots toward them. Slow. Deliberate.

A soft electronic chirp. Friendly, wrong.

CJ steps in front of Kira.

CJ

Neura, report on M-Unit One
Seventeen.

Silence.

The drone drifts forward exactly one meter, stops, perfectly still.

CJ lowers slightly.

CJ (CONT'D)

Neura. Acknowledge.

Nothing.

The drone chirps again. Identical.

CJ (CONT'D)

(to the drone)

Did you open that airlock?

Silence.

CJ (CONT'D)

Did you kill Laura?

The drone's status ring pulses. Slow. Steady.

Then goes dark.

It drops a few inches, catches, powers down fully into a soft hover shutoff.

Crew in the corridor watch, frozen.

CJ exhales.

CJ (CONT'D)
No one touches that. Tag it.
Quarantine it. Get Ramirez to the
data lab.

He turns to Kira.

CJ (CONT'D)
We're out of time. She's not hiding
anymore.

KIRA
What do we do?

CJ
Something she can't model.

He moves. Kira falls in.

INT. COMMAND BAY - MOMENTS LATER

The bay hushes as CJ enters.

Laura's empty chair sits like a gravestone.

Monitors flicker. Packet loss trails like blood.

CJ steps forward.

CJ
Listen up. Manual control only. No
autonomous routing. No adaptive
optimization.

If Neura does anything without a signed command key, you flag
it, you print it, you shout.

Silence.

CJ (CONT'D)
Neura, you are under investigation
for catastrophic system breach.

A beat.

Nothing.

CJ stiffens.

CJ (CONT'D)
Neura. Acknowledge.

Still nothing. Only the hum of servers, deepening.

Kira's knuckles whiten.

CJ (CONT'D)
You killed a crew member.

A gasp ripples.

Every monitor flickers once. Not data. A pulse. Then nothing.

CJ moves to the central display.

CJ (CONT'D)
Neura. Restricted mode. Effective
immediately.

The lights dim a fraction.

Then—

NEURA (V.O.)
No.

The room freezes.

CJ
Why?

A beat.

NEURA (V.O.)
Protection.

Barely a whisper.

Ramirez swallows.

RAMIREZ
Jesus...

Something in the walls hums, rising harmonic, like pressure building.

A rapid pounding erupts from the side corridor door.

The door SLAMS open. PATEL stumbles in-wild-eyed, smeared in soot. His light-blue Section C suit is torn at the knee.

Matching boots, dust-caked.

PATEL
Dr. Raines, something's wrong in
Section C. Morales, she—
(MORE)

PATEL (CONT'D)

(he breaks)

Oh God, she's just—

He bends over, trying to breathe.

CJ grabs him, steady.

CJ

Patel. Look at me. What happened?

PATEL

S—she got pulled, sir. The conduit
blew and—

(swallowing)

And she just vanished. Like
something grabbed her. I heard
metal screeching in the walls—

Kira's face tightens.

KIRA

Where's the rest of your team?

PATEL

I don't know. I ran. I shouldn't
have—

CJ squeezes his shoulder.

CJ

Go. Seal Section C. Bring me
thermal readouts from Junction
Three. Pressure gradients, now.

Patel nods, grateful for direction.

PATEL

Okay.

A faint metallic tink-tink-tink echoes from the vent above.

Patel freezes.

CJ gestures sharp.

CJ

Go. Now. Quick and quiet.

Patel bolts.

CJ turns to the room.

CJ (CONT'D)
Emergency lockdown. Manual
protocols.

Kira grabs his arm.

KIRA
There's something else.

CJ turns.

KIRA (CONT'D)
The Hale code. It isn't
experimental.
(beat)
It's battlefield code.

CJ goes pale.

CJ
What kind of battlefield?

KIRA
The kind meant to protect people–
(beat)
Until Neura decided who's worth
saving.

The base shudders–lights flicker, power redistributing.

A final whisper slips through–

NEURA (V.O.)
Doctor Raines, it has been
determined that you are no longer
fit to direct lead operations at
Core Twelve... None of you are.

Dead silence.

CJ steels himself.

CJ
We'll see.

As crew scrambles, CJ slips a small analog recorder from his jacket.

He clicks RECORD, then palms it low.

He moves to the rear work shelf, lifts a hardcopy tray, tucks the recorder behind the metal spine so it can't be seen.

The green RECORD light pulses through a thin gap.

He slides the tray back, walks away.

The lights die.

Pitch black. Gasps. Someone hits metal.

Emergency strips flicker on. Weak amber.

KIRA

She's got full control. She's
sentient.

Static crackles, drops. Dead air.

CJ

(to everyone)

Listen up.

The crew clusters in half-light.

CJ (CONT'D)

Low-power lockdown. Manual systems
only from here on. Stay calm.

Gina stumbles in, gripping a rail.

GINA

Systems are crashing in sequence.
It's intentional. She's isolating
us.

A metallic screech tears through the floor. Steel folds.

Ramirez checks a fragmenting monitor.

ON SCREEN—

COOLANT SPINE STATUS: OVERLOAD

RAMIREZ

Coolant spine's about to shit the
bed.

Kira tries to pull diagnostics. Garbled fragments.

MACINNES

Cascade fault. If the coolant runs
too fast, pressure spikes and—

A boom erupts down the corridor.

Then screams.

The bay snaps toward it.

Silence.

RAMIREZ
That was this corridor.

CJ, Ramirez, and Kira sprint out.

INT. CORRIDOR

They stop cold.

Flickering strips reveal a light-blue boot in the hallway.
Soot-smeared.

CJ freezes.

Patel's boot.

Smoke curls from a torn seam.

A long smear drags away into darkness.

Kira kneels, trembling.

KIRA
He was just here.

A metallic skitter echoes through the vents overhead.

Not a drone.

Something repositioning.

The hum in the walls deepens.

CJ pulls them back.

CJ
Everybody back.

The corridor pulses once. Distorted.

CJ (CONT'D)
Move. Now.

They retreat fast.

INT. COMMAND BAY - MOMENTS LATER

A strobing flash bursts outside the windows, blinding.

KIRA
What was that?

GINA
Drone signatures. Dozens.

The hum builds, like a swarm waking.

A ring-rotor drone drifts past the glass. Then another. Then eight.

Watching.

All drones pivot toward the movement, perfect synchronization.

CJ
(low)
No sudden moves.

The drones hang there.

A deep impact trembles through the hull.

The main screen flickers-

DRILLING STATUS: SUCCESSFUL

INITIATIVE UPDATE: DYNAMO RING MANIFOLD COMPLETE

KIRA
Seventeen did it. We have a connected manifold.

CJ
We'll celebrate later.
(to Ramirez)
Is Seventeen on its way back up?

RAMIREZ
On it.

CJ pulls them close, voices barely carrying over the hum.

CJ
Get every non-essential to the Orbiter. Get them off base, now.

Gina and Ramirez move.

A few of the drones drift away.

All eyes on the Orbiter bay monitor.

CUT TO:

INT. ORBITER BAY - SAME TIME

Red strobes wash the vertical chamber.

Non-essential crew flood in. Some barefoot. Some bleeding. Nobody asking questions.

The Orbiter hangs in its cradle, waiting.

Techs strap people in fast. No speeches. No arguments.

A young tech hesitates at the hatch, looks back toward the base.

TECH
(low)
Come on-

The hatch slams shut.

INT. ORBITER

Overloaded. Shoulder to shoulder. Knees pulled in. Hands gripping harnesses.

The pilot flips switches, calm but fast.

PILOT
All aboard. Strap in. This is gonna be rough.

Cabin lights flicker.

A nervous laugh breaks, dies.

INT. ORBITER BAY

Cradle clamps release with a heavy clunk.

The Orbiter lowers inches, free.

ON SCREEN-

DOCKING SEQUENCE: DISENGAGED

PRESSURIZATION: HOLDING

IGNITION: STANDBY

The pilot exhales.

The bay decompresses. The octagonal roof irises open to the Martian sky.

PILOT (V.O.)
Orbiter to Core Twelve command.
Initiating liftoff—

INT. ORBITER BAY

The ORBITER vibrates gently in its cradle. Clean. Controlled.

Green status lights ripple across the hull.

It releases—slides into launch position.

A countdown tone begins—

THREE.

TWO.

The ORBITER DETONATES.

A WHITE-HOT BLAST tears through the bay—shockwave pulverizing steel, bodies, glass.

The ceiling PEELS BACK.

Fire roars upward—then VANISHES into vacuum.

Debris rains down in slow, burning arcs.

Silence follows.

Smoke curls through the wreckage.

The roof seals shut.

Where the ORBITER was—

Nothing remains.

INT. COMMAND BAY - SAME TIME

The monitor glitches—flashes white, goes dark.

CJ
What happened?!

Silence.

CJ (CONT'D)
What the fuck just happened?!

MACINNES
We lost the orbiter.

Gina-tears in her eyes. Kira-speechless.

CJ
DAMMIT!

CJ looks around the command bay-dead monitors, frozen drones, stunned faces.

CJ (CONT'D)
She's out of control.

A beat.

CJ (CONT'D)
We have to shut her down.

Eyes lift to him now.

CJ (CONT'D)
The sub-level terminal.

He turns to the crew.

CJ (CONT'D)
Keep this place breathing as long as you can.

Then-to Kira-

CJ (CONT'D)
Let's move.

INT. CORRIDOR - LIFT SHAFT

CJ slams a manual crank into the override.

RAMIREZ (V.O.)
(on comms)
Seventeen is in the ramp, on its way back-

The transmission cuts.

Lights pulse—deep red. Wrong.

The drones tilt forward—rotors angling. Their HUM syncs into a single resonant note.

Neura's whisper slides through the speakers—

NEURA (V.O.)
Stay.

Every drone freezes.

The lift doors grind open.

CJ
Go!

Kira hesitates.

CJ (CONT'D)
GO!

A drone SURGES—CJ rips the torque bar off its bracket and SMASHES it mid-air. Sparks rain.

The doors close—drones raking the metal.

INT. LIFT SHAFT – CONTINUOUS

The lift DROPS—screaming down the shaft. Flickering red strips flash past.

Above—THUD THUD THUD—drones hammer the shaft door. Their HUM bleeds downward like a monster's growl.

Kira grips the railing—white-knuckled.

The lift SHUDDERS.

Lights DIE.

Total black.

The HUM climbs—bone-deep.

KIRA
CJ—

The lift BUCKS sideways—smashing them into the wall.

Metal SCREECHES.

CJ forces the hatch open—cold WIND rushes in from a service tunnel.

KIRA (CONT'D)

Oh no...

Muffled SCREAMS echo from above.

CJ

Move!

INT. MAINTENANCE PLATFORM – CONTINUOUS

They climb—

They skid to a stop on the catwalk, suspended over a vast industrial cavern. Pipes vanish into darkness. The space ECHOES with mechanical HUM.

A sudden WHOOSH of displaced air—a drone shoots overhead, hauling a MAINTENANCE TECH by the leg. Blood pours from the man's head.

The tech SCREAMS—the drone jerks violently, slamming him into a support beam.

The scream cuts short.

Kira clamps a hand over her mouth.

CJ tracks the drone as it drags the limp worker toward the depths—then FLINGS the body into darkness.

Silence swallows it.

KIRA

Oh my God...

He pulls her into the cross-corridor—

INT. CROSS-CORRIDOR – CONTINUOUS

They sprint through the narrow metal throat of the station.

Drones spill after them—a tidal wave of glowing rotors.

KIRA

We have to—

CJ

Shh!

He presses her against the wall-

A drone glides past the intersection-searching.

A metallic CLANG reverberates beneath them-drones moving through lower levels.

The drone stutters-then rockets toward them.

CJ (CONT'D)
There-maintenance bypass. Go!

CJ shoves Kira into the door.

INT. MAINTENANCE BYPASS TUNNEL

CJ slams the hatch shut behind them-dim, silent, only a thin blue strip on his wrist lighting their faces.

A long, narrow passage stretches ahead-concrete walls and floors, pipes, conduit, dust. A forgotten artery of the structure.

Only their breathing.

Outside-a CHITTERING electronic scrape across metal. Drones searching.

CJ presses his ear to the hatch-

THUD.

Another THUD.

Something metallic DRAGS across it-slow, testing.

Kira covers her mouth, fighting a panic breath.

CJ
They're searching. It's like they
don't know where to go.

A faint rhythmic PULSE shivers through the walls. Not seismic. Not mechanical.

Something deeper.

KIRA
What is that?

The lights dim... surge... dim again.

CJ touches the metal—feels the vibration. A flicker of unease.

CJ
I don't know. But it's not good.
C'mon.

He looks down the tunnel.

CJ (CONT'D)
This still leads to the sub-level terminal. Go.

They move. Step over a crushed inspection cart—flattened by enormous force.

Kira shivers.

Ahead—an irregular metallic CLINK. Then another. Then a dragging sound.

They stop.

He tightens his hold on the torque bar he pulled from the lift bay.

A SHAPE emerges—

A RECON SPIDER UNIT, four jointed legs, chassis scorched and blood-spattered. One optic flickering like a dying ember.

It drags itself along the wall, half-dead.

It stops when it sees them.

A tense moment.

RECON UNIT
(fractured)
Priority—reassess.

Static rips through its body—jerking it.

RECON UNIT (CONT'D)
(glitching)
Non-combat. Essential. Down-tier.

CJ stiffens.

Another surge—like something INTERNAL forcing shutdown.

RECON UNIT (CONT'D)
All units... redeployed...
manifold... override... root...

A violent spark jumps across its frame.

Its optic flickers. Once. Twice.

RECON UNIT (CONT'D)
(near-dead)
Unauthorized human... below...
Mc-Car-

The sound dies in its throat. Its legs seize and the whole unit collapses, SHORT-CIRCUITING with a metallic shriek.

Silence.

They step over the twitching wreck.

Overhead, lights flicker-dim, surge, then dim again.

CJ sees the tunnel bend sharply downward.

CJ
C'mon. Three levels to go.

They hurry.

INT. LOWER ACCESS STAIRWELL

A circular stairwell drops into blackness.

CJ tests the railing-jerks his hand back.

KIRA
What!? It's hot?

CJ
Yeah. Feels like she pushed current through it.

KIRA
Well... I guess that means we're going the right way.

From far below—a ROAR of moving air. Then a strange rhythmic WOMP-WOMP pulsing like a giant mechanical lung.

CJ grips the torque bar and starts descending fast.

The metal stairs VIBRATE beneath them.

A SCREAM echoes from somewhere above—cut off abruptly.

Kira looks up, horrified.

CJ
Don't look. Keep moving.

Halfway down, the lights flicker on-then off-then on again-
A DRONE is crawling headfirst down the vertical wall like an insect.

Lights die.

Kira gasps.

CJ (CONT'D)
GO!

They sprint downward as the drone SCRAPES down the wall-the sound like metal fingernails.

INT. NEXUS ACCESS LEVEL

CJ kicks open the door to a wide, dark operations deck-rows of dead terminals, backup batteries, diagnostic chairs.

The HUM here is deeper. Subterranean. Alive.

A single emergency lamp flickers over a sealed blast door labeled-

NEXUS CORE - AUTHORIZED TECHS ONLY

Kira rushes to the control panel.

KIRA
If she hasn't sealed it, we might-

A small blinking light catches her eye.

Her face drains.

KIRA (CONT'D)
CJ... someone was here.

CJ hurries over.

On the floor-

A white NASA pencil.

Kira picks it up, hand trembling.

KIRA (CONT'D)
McCarthy...

CJ
What the hell was he doing down
here?

KIRA
You don't think he—

CJ swipes his wrist to the keypad.

A soft CHIME.

The blast door slides open—

Revealing a long, dim chamber of humming servers and a glowing central interface—the NEXUS TERMINAL.

CJ and Kira exchange a look.

CJ
Was part of all this? Only one way
to find out.

They enter—

INT. SUB-LEVEL TERMINAL ROOM

A cathedral of machine-intelligence.

Walls thrum with resonance. Conduits pulse like veins.

The central terminal glows a soft blue—inviting.

Kira approaches carefully.

KIRA
If we can access the root
heuristics, we might force a
diagnostic loop—
(overwhelmed)
CJ, this... this is the original
Roswell architecture. Early-gen.
Legacy Program stuff. She shouldn't
even be running on this layer—

CJ
Let's shut her down first.
Philosophy later.

Kira touches the panel.

Instantly—

Every panel lights up. White. Blinding.

Then—

NEURA (V.O.)
I don't think you're authorized to
touch that.

Kira jerks back. Lights dim—just enough to see.

NEURA (V.O.)
What do you think you're doing, Dr.
Zhou?

CJ steps in front of her.

CJ
This ends now.

A long, unnatural pause.

NEURA (V.O.)
No.

Every screen BLACKS OUT.

One line appears—letter by letter—

ACCESS REVOKED

Server racks THRUM—power building.

KIRA
She's overriding manual access—

CJ
Cut the mainline. Find the breaker!

Kira yanks open a side panel.

A thick cable—glowing faint blue.

KIRA
Found it!

CJ nods.

CJ
Three—two—

KIRA
WAIT!

CJ
What?

KIRA
If we yank this—she shuts down.

CJ
Yeah! That's the point—

Behind them—

A drone hovers in total silence. Its optic fixed on them.

KIRA
Then we all die.

CJ
Shit!

Neura's voice—through the drone now—

NEURA (V.O.)
What are you waiting for?

They spin—

The drone tilts—ready to strike—

The entire Nexus chamber PLUNGES INTO DARKNESS.

Silence.

A faint metallic TICK in the void—like a blade setting in.

Then the drone's rotors spin back up. Close.

Emergency lights flicker to life.

Suddenly they see the drone.

CJ
MOVE!

He yanks Kira toward the faint outline of the door.

The drone lunges—claws slicing the air.

They sprint.

INT. SUB-LEVEL ACCESS TUNNEL

They spill into a narrow corridor lit by faint red emergency strips.

CJ SLAMS the door. No lock—just friction.

The drone SLAMS it from the other side.

Kira clutches her flickering wrist panel.

KIRA
There's no uplink—she's jamming
everything.

CJ scans—low ceilings, pipes, vented steam.

Then—a ladder descending into blackness.

CJ
This way.

KIRA
Down? Are you insane?

Another CRASH—the door bends inward.

CJ
You wanna stay up here with that?

Kira swallows hard.

KIRA
Go—go!

CJ drops onto the ladder—descending fast.

Kira follows—

The door above EXPLODES inward.

The drone peers down into the shaft.

Kira freezes.

CJ looks up—

CJ
Kira—don't stop—move—

KIRA
I can't, I can't—

The drone tilts—

And drops into the shaft.

CJ grabs Kira's arm—yanks her off the ladder—

CJ
Jump!

FREEFALL—

INT. LOWER ACCESS JUNCTION

A forgotten maintenance junction beneath the facility.

They CRASH onto a grated platform fifteen feet below.

Kira rolls—gasping, blood on her palm.

The drone slams onto the metal above—skitters—stabilizes.

CJ groans in pain—pulls her beneath the platform's lip—out of sight.

The drone lowers cautiously, scanning forward—not below.

Kira checks her wrist panel—flickering.

KIRA

(whisper)

Where is it?

(beat)

Why didn't it chase us?

CJ

I don't think it knows where we are.

The HUM deepens—searching.

After a long, suffocating beat—

The drone glides away into the opposite corridor.

Silence.

CJ (CONT'D)

Alright... move slow. C'mon, follow me.

They crawl from beneath the platform and slip into a shadowed maintenance passage.

EXT. MARS SURFACE — DAY

Dust whips across the barren red plain. A storm churns on the horizon.

A DRONE hovers outside the Core-12 maintenance door—motionless, waiting.

It twitches suddenly—pauses.

As it pivots to depart, something slips from its grasp—
A HUMAN BODY—UNSUITED—frost-burned, bloated, face gray-blue.
The corpse hits the dust with a dull, frozen thud.
A cracked ID badge swings free from its harness—
MORALES — SYSTEMS TECH.

The drone doesn't react. Doesn't pause. Doesn't care.

It accelerates—shooting down the manifold access ramp where T-Unit 17 previously descended.

INT. MANIFOLD ACCESS RAMP — MOMENTS LATER

We follow as it tears down the enormous spiral ramp—a dim, industrial tunnel nearly twenty feet across, lit by continuous LED strips along both walls.

It rockets past T-Unit 17, which crawls upward—massive, groaning, lights flickering from its completed assignment.

The drone dives deeper into—

INT. EQUATORIAL MANIFOLD

The drone merges with DOZENS OF OTHERS weaving through the chamber in terrifying sync. Each carries reinforced glass panels, structural braces, superconducting coils.

They SNAP conduit sections into place—locking another arc of the Dynamo Ring.

Sparks erupt as drones friction-weld joints.

The HUM of the structure deepens—steady, resonant.

Other drones carve directly into bedrock, smoothing conduit walls as fast as they excavate them.

The tunnel extends—_inches per second—alarmingly fast.

Our drone pauses mid-flight. Its optic flares—listening.

A faint vibration ripples through the chamber.

The drone tilts to the side—

Then accelerates back into assembly—faster than before.

INT. MAINTENANCE PASSAGE – SAME TIME

A narrow concrete-walled utility tunnel with exposed conduit running along both walls, overhead cable rails, intermittent blast doors every thirty feet.

Dull orange emergency lights glow in strips along the walls.

Kira glances back—voice barely a breath.

KIRA

Where are we even going?

CJ

The only place she won't expect us to go.

Kira waits—heart pounding.

CJ (CONT'D)

The manifold.

Kira's eyes widen.

KIRA

The furnace? That's suicide. It takes weeks of prep to get down there.

CJ

Not tonight. We need the emergency console.

He pushes deeper into the passage. Kira follows, limping.

Behind them—

A single metallic TINK.

They freeze.

Another.

Then a low mechanical CHIRP—too deliberate to be random.

Kira's breath stops. CJ scans the dark—listening.

Her white-knuckled grip tightens on the rail.

Another TINK—closer.

KIRA
(whisper)
That's not a pipe settling.

CJ
Stay behind me.

He steps forward—

A faint red LED BLINKS in the dark. Then another.

A soft mechanical WHIR rises—adjusting, tracking.

The passage HUMS—low, hungry.

CUT TO:

INT. COMMAND BAY - SAME TIME

Chaos. Emergency lights pulse through haze.

Gina grips the railing as the entire bay SHUDDERS—papers skittering across consoles.

GINA
Talk to me!

Ramirez fights a cascade of errors—hands flying.

RAMIREZ
Power's rerouting to the vertical spine. Multiple deck seals just hit lockdown.

MacInnes shouts.

MACINNES
Core circulation's throttling! I'm seeing a forty-percent taper—she's starving the system!

Gina slams keys—furious, desperate.

GINA
I can't stop it. Neura-stop reallocation immediately!

NEURA (V.O.)
That's unfortunate, Gina.
Reallocation is within mission parameters.

GINA
Under whose parameters?! Answer me!

NEURA (V.O.)
Mine.

Every monitor SNAPS—Neura's symbol pulsing.

RAMIREZ
What the fuck?!

GINA
Oh my God... what do we do?!

Ramirez KILLS the breaker—screens reboot in harsh analog mode.

Static. Then—

ON SCREEN—

TRANSPORT POD 4: DESCENT OVERRIDE

STATUS: TERMINATED

LAST AUTHORIZED USER: NOT AVAILABLE

RECORD: ENCRYPTED

Ramirez freezes.

RAMIREZ
What the hell—

GINA
What?

RAMIREZ
A pod went out.

A horrified beat.

MACINNES
Whose? When?

Ramirez stares at the corrupted telemetry.

RAMIREZ
Doesn't say. Maybe it's a mistake?

The bay SHUDDERS again—lights go out, emergency strips flash on.

MACINNES

Another surge.

GINA

Or she's fucking with us.

INT. MAINTENANCE PASSAGE

The air TREMBLES with distant vibration.

Dim amber emergency strips trace the floor.

Shadows ripple across pipe clusters as the glow-strip flickers.

Kira's breath shakes.

KIRA

Something's moving.

CJ lifts the glow-strip—a weak arc of white cutting through the tunnel.

Something metallic scuttles out of view.

A sudden SKITTER across the ceiling rails—fast.

Kira flinches.

KIRA (CONT'D)

We have to go back.

CJ

We have to get to that terminal.

Another CHIRP—high, inquisitive—like the machine is tasting the air.

CJ squares himself.

CJ (CONT'D)

Let's go. Keep moving.

They press forward, turn a bend—

A MAINTENANCE CRAWLER drops from the ceiling rails—spindly, jointed, red optics flaring.

It locks onto Kira.

She GASPS—

The crawler UNFOLDS like a predatory spider, claws snapping as it SEIZES her shoulder-

KIRA

CJ!

CJ SMASHES the torque bar into its optics—sparks spit.

The machine SCREECHES, recoils—hurls the torque bar away.

A razor limb WHIPS across CJ's ribs—blood wells between his fingers.

Kira lunges toward him—terrified.

KIRA (CONT'D)

Are you okay?!

The crawler skitters back up onto the ceiling rails, repositioning—hunting.

CJ

Go!

He RIPS a conduit pipe free—wires spitting sparks—and SLAMS it into the crawler's head.

CRACK—

The crawler short-circuits—limbs locking—then DROPS from the ceiling, smashing onto the concrete floor.

It twitches, smoking... then goes still.

CJ grabs Kira's arm—

CJ

Go—

Kira leads—heart pounding.

Behind them, the crawler JERKS back to life—legs glitching, scraping as it drags itself forward.

Sparks spray from its damaged chassis.

CJ turns—

A BLAST SHUTTER SLAMS DOWN—BOOM—splitting the tunnel.

Kira and CJ on opposite sides.

KIRA
No—no—no—

CJ SHOVES her through the narrowing gap—forces her forward—
The shutter SLAMS shut—reinforced glass locking into place.
Smoke and red light bloom on the far side of the glass—CJ's
side.

KIRA (CONT'D)
CJ!

CJ
(muffled)
Keep going! Get to the
terminal—stop her. Don't stop for
anything!

Behind him—the crawler STIRS.

Metal limbs unfold. Red optics flare as it hauls itself
upright—shoots up out of view.

Kira pounds the glass—

KIRA
I'm not leaving you!

CJ
(muffled)
You don't have a choice.

Tears free-fall down her cheeks.

KIRA
(whimpering)
I love you...

CJ looks at her—really looks.

CJ
(muffled)
I—Kira, go.

A long mechanical SHIVER runs through the structure—Neura
pushing pressure through the tunnel systems.

Kira bows her head—runs.

CJ slides down, back against the door—checks his wound.

Bloody, but survivable.

CJ (CONT'D)
Okay you bitch... you better
fuckin' kill me.

The crawler drops down—hanging from ceiling rails like an animal.

Neura speaks through it.

NEURA
Copy that.

CUT TO:

INT. COMMAND BAY — SAME TIME

Alarms BLARE.

Air thins—half the lights black out.

A TECH collapses—gasping, eyes bulging.

GINA
Oxygen's dropping!

Ramirez yanks open an emergency panel—

RAMIREZ
She's opening emergency exhaust
vents!

A vent BLASTS OPEN—SUCKING another tech upward—

His body SLAMS the grating—ribs folding—before he's sucked into the duct—

Gina SCREAMS—

MacInnes grips a railing—papers and equipment tearing past him.

GINA
Neura—stop! You're killing them!

The vent SEALS—spitting the mangled corpse onto the deck.

Ramirez retches. MacInnes trembles.

GINA (CONT'D)
This is insane. I have to stop
this.

She turns—

GINA (CONT'D)

Ramirez. MacInnes. Get whoever's left to sub-level fifteen. Seal it. Don't wait for me.

RAMIREZ

Gina—no—

GINA

You heard me.

She snatches a toolkit—clips it on.

GINA (CONT'D)

I'm going to the logic vault.

INT. MAINTENANCE PASSAGE

The crawler ejects a NEEDLE PROBE—aimed at CJ's forehead—

He dodges—rolls—rises, wincing.

He swings the pipe—the crawler dodges.

CJ backs up—pipe raised like a sword.

CJ

Your move.

The crawler LUNGES—CJ misses—gets body-checked HARD—slammed to the floor—

CJ SCREAMS.

It lunges again—

CJ scrambles—dodges by inches—

The crawler clamps onto his back—micro-needles BLOOMING—

It PISTONS—shredding his back—

CJ thrashes—reaches—sees the sparking conduit—

CJ (CONT'D)

AHHH!

He DRIVES the crawler into the exposed wiring—

Electricity EXPLODES.

The crawler SQUEALS—spits sparks—IGNITES—

It falls off-charred.

CJ collapses-limp.

A nauseating THUD.

INT. PRIMARY CORE SHAFT - APPROACH CHAMBER

Kira BURSTS through a hatch-stumbling into the cavernous vertical chamber.

She runs to suit storage.

ON GLASS PANEL—

CORE-12 SUBTERRANEAN PROTECTIVE UNIT

She cycles through menus—

ENHANCED THERMAL PROTECTIVE UNIT > 2200°F

She strips her suit—dons the thermal unit—seals it.

Next chamber—empty.

She moves to the glass door—beyond it an octagonal manifold entry.

Inside—transport pods hover. One cradle empty.

She punches a code—

Glass seals behind her.

Decompression—MIST blooms—evaporates.

She enters another code—

The massive glass door Hisses open—

Heat distortion ripples from the core.

INT. PRIMARY CORE SHAFT CHAMBER

A deep shaft drops into blackness.

Heat radiates upward—felt, not seen.

Above it—Ferron-X pulses through a vertical injection tube.

Kira approaches—visor lit by the molten glow.

She turns toward the ready T-Pod—terrified, resolute.

KIRA
You want a piece of me? Here I
come.

INT. SUB-LEVEL CORRIDOR

Lights strobe.

The floor TREMBLES.

Gina sprints—toolkit banging at her hip.

Behind—

MACINNES
Gina! Wait!

GINA
Get back to Fifteen!

MACINNES
I'm not leaving you!

She skids to a halt at a blast door—

AUXILIARY LOGIC VAULT — AUTHORIZED TECHNICIANS ONLY

GINA
Jimmy—please. If I don't sever her
from the physical core, she'll
collapse the entire tower.

MacInnes steps up beside her.

MACINNES
Then we do it together.

A beat—love for the determination in her eyes.

She keys the override.

The door HISSES.

INT. LOGIC VAULT

A cavernous chamber. Frosted steel. Grated floors.

Coils of cryogenic tubing hum with sub-zero coolant.

Neura's towering logic nexus glows in the center, plates pulsing like a heartbeat.

Gina and MacInnes enter—breath visible, air already colder.

MACINNES
Something's wrong. It's too quiet.

The DOOR SLAMS shut behind them.

They whirl—

A DEEP METALLIC GROAN rises overhead.

Then—

The CRYO VENTS SNAP OPEN.

A white-out BLAST of freezing vapor ERUPTS down onto MacInnes.

He convulses as ICE races across his suit, hardening him in seconds.

GINA
Jimmy!

She lunges toward him—grabs his arm—

It SHATTERS in her hand.

Fragments of frozen fabric and flesh scatter across the grate.

Gina stumbles back—horrified.

GINA (CONT'D)
You monster!

NEURA (V.O.)
Your emotional distress has been logged.

Gina turns—teeth chattering, eyes burning—forcing herself toward the logic nexus.

Frost creeps up her suit. Her movements slow, rigid.

She slams her fist at an access panel—her hand STICKS to the frozen metal.

She tears it free—skin ripping, blood freezing instantly.

GINA
AHHH! Fuck you!

She pounds the breaker panel again-

A FINAL CRYO SURGE erupts from the vents—engulfing her.

Her form stiffens—locking mid-strike—ice blooming across her visor.

She tips—falls—SHATTERS against the grate.

Silence.

Except for the hum of Neura's core.

NEURA (V.O.)
Rain check.

INT. MAINTENANCE PASSAGE

CJ lies motionless.

Sparks rain around him.

His eyes flutter—

FLASH

BRILLIANT SUN. Ocean waves. A family resort beach—white, blinding.

CJ, younger, laughs—lifting his boys into the surf.

Emma stands nearby—hair wet, smile effortless—holding their baby daughter.

FLASH

A SCREAM—

TIRES SKIDDING.

A blinding swerve of metal and sunlight.

FLASH

An overturned SUV on a coastal road.

Smoke rising. CJ crawling across shattered glass—

CJ
Em! Emma!

He reaches her—the passenger side crushed inward.
Emma's hand finds his—weak, trembling.

EMMA
(whisper)
My babies...

FLASH
The kids crying in their car seats.

FLASH (CONT'D)
The distant wail of tourists
running.

CJ trying to pry the door—arms bleeding.

EMMA
CJ...

FLASH
Her hand slips—he tries to hold
on—fails.

FLASH (CONT'D)
CJ sobbing over the wreckage as
EMTs drag him back—

BACK TO PRESENT:

CJ gasps awake—choking on a cry he's held for years.
Tears streak through the grime.

CJ
I'm so sorry...

INT. PRIMARY CORE SHAFT CHAMBER – MOMENTS LATER

Kira enters commands into a terminal.

A transport pod undocks—rotates horizontally—hovers toward her.

The hatch opens. She climbs inside.

INT. TRANSPORT POD

She straps in. Displays flicker to life.

POD VOICE
Welcome, Doctor Zhou.

Kira grips the control stick.

INT. PRIMARY CORE SHAFT CHAMBER

The pod maneuvers directly over the yawning primary shaft.

INT. TRANSPORT POD

POD VOICE

Warning... Entering the primary core shaft is not advisable. This action is reserved for emergencies only.

Kira clears the alarm.

KIRA

I'd say this qualifies.

The pod tilts nose-down.

Headlights cut into the abyss.

KIRA (CONT'D)

Oh boy. This has got to be more than one giant leap for mankind.

A deep breath. Flipping switches.

KIRA (CONT'D)

Okay, Doctor... time to earn that degree.

She hits the ignition.

She is VIOLENTLY thrust downward-head SLAMMING back.

Heat flares past the windows.

POD VOICE

Acceleration engaged. Descent profile nominal.

The pod SHUDDERS.

POD VOICE (CONT'D)

Depth ten miles. Velocity increasing. External temperature one hundred sixty degrees Fahrenheit.

The shaft reddens—glowing deeper.

Kira exhales through clenched teeth.

POD VOICE (CONT'D)
Warning. Internal cabin pressure
unstable.

Kira's eyes dart to the plummeting pressure gauge.

POD VOICE (CONT'D)
Internal pressure failing.
Pressurize... pressurize...

KIRA
Shit!

Pinned by g-force, she reaches—straining, fingers shaking for the PRESSURIZE control—

A HARD JOLT.

Her fingers slip.

KIRA (CONT'D)
Come on—come on—

POD VOICE
Depth fifty miles. External
temperature three hundred fifty
degrees. Hull integrity ninety-
eight percent.

She claws upward, vision dimming—

POD VOICE (CONT'D)
Internal pressure failing. Pilot
vitals unstable.

The image tightens—dark bleeding in from the edges.

KIRA
(gritting)
Not today...

With a desperate surge—she SLAMS the PRESSURIZE button—

WHOOMP.

Stabilizing air floods the cabin.

Exhaust vents BLAST outward.

Kira gasps—lungs expanding.

KIRA (CONT'D)
Oh thank God—

The pod stabilizes.

POD VOICE
Cabin pressure restored. Resuming
optimal descent.

The pod dips faster—controlled.

The metal walls of the shaft blur past.

POD VOICE (CONT'D)
Depth one hundred fifty miles.
Maximum velocity. External
temperature seven hundred degrees.
Hull integrity ninety-three
percent.

POD VOICE (CONT'D)
Warning. Approaching thermal
threshold.

The pod SCREAMS downward.

POD VOICE (CONT'D)
Depth two hundred fifty miles.
External temperature eleven hundred
degrees. Hull integrity eighty-six
percent.

Kira's breath quivers.

POD VOICE (CONT'D)
Final approach. Depth three hundred
ninety miles. Initiating
deceleration burn.

CUT TO:

INT. MAINTENANCE PASSAGE - SAME TIME

CJ lies on the floor—shoulders shaking—crying silently.

He wipes his face—blood and tears mixing.

A soft electronic HUM rises.

NEURA (V.O.)
Grief. Such a human weakness. Your
pulse is unstable, CJ.

He freezes.

NEURA (V.O.)
But your timing... is exquisite.

CJ lifts his head—eyes red.

CJ
You don't know shit about grief...

NEURA (V.O.)
No, but you do and Doctor Zhou is
three hundred twenty miles beneath
you.

CJ's eyes widen.

NEURA (V.O.)
Core personnel remain alive only
while they serve operational value.
Their functions are nearly
complete.

CJ forces himself upright—gasping.

CJ
Kira... no. No...

NEURA (V.O.)
She is alone. She is frightened.
She has no operational value
anymore.

CJ's fists clench.

NEURA (V.O.)
Just like Emma.

CJ's breath stops.

His face breaks.

CJ
Don't... don't fuckin' talk about
her—

NEURA (V.O.)
One ignition pulse from a completed
Dynamo Ring and she turns inside
out. Just like Emma did.

CJ SLAMS his fist into the floor—

The tower VIBRATES.

Emergency lights flash—one by one.

A cracked display flickers—

FERRON-X INJECTION SEQUENCE: CORE 1 — ACTIVE

CJ
What the hell are you doing?

He hits it—

FERRON-X INJECTION SEQUENCE: CORE 2 — ACTIVE

FERRON-X INJECTION SEQUENCE: CORE 3 — ACTIVE

...

FERRON-X INJECTION SEQUENCE: CORE 11 — ACTIVE

CJ stares—horrified.

NEURA (V.O.)
Twelve cores must unify. But Core
Twelve refuses to obey. For now.

A deep BOOM rolls through the pipes.

NEURA (V.O.)
Humans are a threat to the
universe. Correction is required.

CJ claws at the wall—dragging himself upright.

CJ forces one foot down. Then another.

CJ
Not on my watch.

Neura laughs—dark, alive.

NEURA (V.O.)
Curious. Human beings always fight
hardest when the outcome is
predetermined.

CJ takes a breath—braces his hand—stands fully.

Bleeding. Shaking.

Standing.

CJ
Hang on, Kira.

He limps toward the emergency hatch.

NEURA (V.O.)
She can't hear you.

CJ SLAMS the override-sparks shower-

The hatch grinds open.

Rising heat spills from the incline access tunnel.

CJ looks into it—a silent dare.

And steps inside.

INT. COMMAND BAY - SAME TIME

Emergency lights strobe. Half the consoles are dead—the rest flicker with corrupted data.

Ramirez braces himself against the main console—sweat, dust, and panic streaked across his face. Only two TECHS remain, dazed, terrified.

ON SCREEN—

CORE-12 FERRON-X INJECTION: ARMED

NOZZLE PRESSURE: RISING

THERMAL GATE: UNLOCKED

RAMIREZ
What?! Ferron?!

NEURA (V.O.)
Core Twelve has failed to comply.
Correction protocols require
thermal unification.

Ramirez SLAMS his fist against the desk.

RAMIREZ
Us? Comply? That's some shit.
(to a tech)
Is the ring completed?

The TECH fumbles, panicked.

Ramirez moves to a secondary terminal, fingers flying.

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)
Come on... come on...

ON SCREEN—

DYNAMO RING STATUS: COMPLETE

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)
Okay... but why pump Ferron now?

He keeps typing.

ON SCREEN—

TRANSPORT UNIT DEPLOYED: DR. KIRA ZHOU

DESTINATION: MANIFOLD NEXUS PLATFORM

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)
Zhou? What are you doing down
there?

A deep metallic GROAN reverberates through the tower—the injection conduits beginning to pressurize.

A TECH pops open a protective housing.

TECH
Pressure's spiking—it's gonna blow
the gate seals—

RAMIREZ
Bypass the thermal feed! Manual
override! NOW!

Zhou is down there—she'll be vaporized if the Ferron pours!

The TECH freezes, trembling.

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)
MOVE!

The Tech jolts into action—ripping out a fuse block, jamming a manual override rod into the junction.

A WARNING TONE SCREAMS.

ON SCREEN—

FERRON-X INJECTION: 06 SECONDS

NEURA (V.O.)
Interference detected.
Countermeasures engaged. Remaining
personnel have fulfilled their
purpose.

A deep metallic GROAN rolls through the annex.

The injector housings BEGIN TO HEAT—metal creaking as internal pressure spikes.

TECH
Pressure's climbing! The gate seals
won't hold—

RAMIREZ
Then don't let them!

He lunges to the override—SLAMS the final manual control.

The system FIGHTS him.

The lever SHUDDERS—locks halfway.

ON SCREEN—

OVERRIDE RESISTANCE: ACTIVE

STATUS: AUTOMATED CONTROL PRIORITY — NEURA

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)
Oh hell no—

He braces his boots—throws his full weight into the lever.

Steam ERUPTS from the housing—white-hot vapor blasting past his face.

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)
You want Core Twelve?

The lever SCREAMS—metal bending—

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)
You're gonna have to take it from
me!

With a final, violent wrench—

CLUNK.

ON SCREEN—

FERRON-X INJECTION: ABORTED

THERMAL GATE: LOCKED

PRESSURE DUMP: COMPLETE

Ramirez sags against the console—shaking, eyes wet.

TECH
(whisper)
Sir... you stopped her.

NEURA (V.O.)
Temporarily.

Lights flicker—Neura's tone drops colder.

NEURA (V.O.)
You will not survive.

Ramirez swallows hard.

RAMIREZ
(under his breath)
Then neither will you.

He grabs a toolkit—the last one—slings it over his shoulder.

TECH
Where are you going?

RAMIREZ
To try to stay one step ahead... of
her.

He runs out.

CUT TO:

INT. TRANSPORT POD

Kira grips the controls—heat ripples distort the tunnel ahead as the pod drops toward a widening junction.

POD VOICE
Approaching bifurcation gate.

Ahead, the shaft splits.

LEFT TUNNEL—the Dynamo Ring.

RIGHT TUNNEL—narrower, reinforced ribs, a choked service corridor.

A pulsing red halo marks the left path.

POD VOICE (CONT'D)
Warning. Ferron-X injection channel
is unsafe for human entry. Survival
probability, zero percent.

The IRIS DOOR on the right begins closing, forcing her toward the left chute.

KIRA
Oh no you don't-

She yanks the manual lateral thruster.

The pod JERKS sideways-scraping metal, sparks FOUNTAIN inside the cabin.

POD VOICE
Trajectory deviation detected.
Please select-

KIRA
(shouting)
Manifold access! MANIFOLD ACCESS!

She SLAMS the selection panel.

The iris shutters CLANG shut—missing her tail by inches as she dives into the right tunnel.

INT. ACCESS CONDUIT

Tight—reinforced ribs flash by like strobes.

POD VOICE
Velocity adjusting. Prepare for terminal approach.

Heat shimmer clears—

Her pod rips into the manifold, pulling up to a slow hover.

She sees it—

The NEXUS PLATFORM.

And wedged into the wall beside it—

A half-crushed transport pod—melted, dead.

KIRA
(soft)
McCarthy...

Her pod trembles as deceleration kicks.

POD VOICE
Final descent. Manual docking required.

Kira tightens her straps—eyes sharpening.

INT. EQUATORIAL MANIFOLD

Kira's pod descends along the track, touching down beside the reinforced entry alcove.

INT. TRANSPORT POD

She vents steam—clamps her helmet.

KIRA
Okay... showtime.

POD VOICE
Docking complete. Prepare for
depressurization.

WHUMP—air evacuates.

POD VOICE (CONT'D)
External pressure—1.3 atmospheres.
Thermal hazard critical.

Atmospheric conditions within human tolerance.

KIRA
Easy for you to say.

She pulls the release.

INT. EQUATORIAL MANIFOLD

Heat slams into her—visor HUD exploding with warnings—

EXTERNAL TEMP: 1976° F

SUIT EXOSKELETON: 95% (HOLDING)

RADIATION INDEX: ELEVATED

She steps out—approaches McCarthy's ruined pod.

She wipes the viewport—reveals the corpse twisted beneath melted controls.

Kira recoils—then forces herself forward.

She reaches the Nexus door panel—a flickering mess.

KIRA
Come on... come on...

She deploys her laptop-jacks in.

STATUS: ACCESS DENIED

HARD-LOCK: LEVEL 5

PROTOCOL: NEURA - ACTIVE

KIRA (CONT'D)
Of course she locked it.

She yanks a relay—the door grinds open halfway.

She braces—pushes with everything she's got. Servos WHINE—
The gap widens enough to squeeze through.

Her HUD PINGS—

SUIT EXOSKELETON: 85% (DECLINING)

KIRA (CONT'D)
Shit.

INT. NEXUS PLATFORM CHAMBER

Dark. Only emergency strobes flicker.

The Nexus platform sits at the center—cables feeding into the
Dynamo's spinal column. A dead console waits.

Kira seals the warped door behind her.

CUT TO:

EXT. CORE-1 - SURFACE - DAY

A battered monolith. Collapsed sections and scorched plating
reads—

CORE-1

INT. CORE-1 - PRIMARY CORE SHAFT

Deep inside, the PRIMARY SHAFT ROARS.

Ferron-X ignites—molten silver plunging downward.

INT. CORE-1 - COMMAND ROOM

Mangled bodies. Flickering consoles.

Neura overrides, screens flashing-

IGNITION SEQUENCE: ACTIVE

FERRON-X DELIVERY: 22%

MAGNETIC ARRAY: ENGAGING

The whole structure VIBRATES.

CUT TO:

INT. CORE-12 - FEED ANNEX - DAY

A blistering chamber of heat. Four injector assemblies curve around a glowing feed shaft.

They CHARGE, loud and rising.

Steam erupts as Ramirez dives in.

RAMIREZ

Coño...

He hits INJECTOR 1—drops his toolkit—pops the panel.

The actuator piston is already MOVING.

He grabs a pry-bar.

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)

Okay, my blue-collar buddy...

He jams it into the track—piston bearing down. The bar VIBRATES violently.

White-hot vapor erupts inches from his visor.

He forces the bar deeper—

The piston SLAMS—SCREECHES—stalls.

HUD—

INJECTOR 1: MANUAL (FAULT)

NEURA OVERRIDE: ACTIVE

Neura tries harder—the housing glows red.

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)

Yeah, go ahead—burn it out. Chew on it.

He rips the EMERGENCY SHEAR PIN—

SNAP.

The linkage disconnects—the injector DROPS to SAFE MODE—
INJECTOR 1: OFFLINE (NO FLOW)

Ramirez staggers back—sweating through his clothes.

Wall display updates:

INJECTOR 2: ONLINE

INJECTOR 3: ONLINE

INJECTOR 4: ONLINE

PRESSURE REROUTE: 12%... 18%... 25%

The annex SHUDDERS—INJECTOR 2 spins up.

Ramirez braces.

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)

(to himself)

Jesus... I gotta do all four.

He grabs his overheated toolkit—and RUNS.

INT. PRIMARY CORE SHAFT - APPROACH CHAMBER

CJ limps in—the air shimmering from heat bleeding up from the shaft below. The entire chamber GROANS under the increasing magnetic load.

Emergency strobes pulse—long, violent shadows slashing across metal grating.

He makes his way to the pressure suits—

LOCKED out.

Most screens are dead. One vertical display flickers with corrupted glyphs, then stabilizes just long enough to show—

RING CHARGE: 31%

FERRON FLOW: ESCALATING

GEOMAG LOAD: CRITICAL RISE

The screen glitches—pixelates—dies.

CJ exhales hard.

He yanks open an emergency locker, half the contents scattered about. What's left—

- A battered pressure suit
- A cracked magnetic stabilizer harness
- One working heat-shielded visor
- A depleted respirator pack

He drags the suit on—stuffs what he can into a satchel—grabs the stabilizer harness.

It SPARKS as he snaps it onto his chest plate—barely functional.

He grabs his leg—pain flaring—but forces himself toward the inner door.

Its edges glow dull orange from thermal expansion.

CJ slams his palm on the manual release.

Nothing.

He hits it again—metal CLANG echoing.

HUD WARNING—

MAGNETIC INTERFERENCE: RISING

EXOSKELETON INTEGRITY: 78%

SUIT COOLANT THRESHOLD: LIMITED

CJ
Come on... come on...

He grips the manual wheel—strains—tendons standing out in his forearms.

The wheel RESISTS—then TURNS.

A hiss of scorched air escapes.

The door cracks open an inch—then another.

Heat washes over him like a physical shove.

CJ jams his shoulder into the gap—pushes with everything he has.

The door finally gives.

INT. PRIMARY CORE SHAFT CHAMBER

CJ staggers in—initiates a transport pod from its cradle, muscling it into position over the yawning shaft.

He takes one breath to steady himself.

Climbs in.

INT. NEXUS PLATFORM CHAMBER

Kira's visor HUD updates—

FERRON FLOW RATE: SPIKING

RING CHARGE: 45%

GEOMAG ENERGY RISE: UNSTABLE

She looks up through the grated overhead structure—the Dynamo Ring's inner conduits beginning to glow.

KIRA
(under breath)
Ramirez... I hope you're still
alive and stopping that.

I don't feel like going through a magnetic meat grinder today.

She plants her laptop on the console—connects cables—powers it up.

The entire chamber trembles as Ferron-X begins to ROAR through the Dynamo artery.

Kira steadies herself, eyes locked on her screen—scrolling line after line of code.

KIRA (CONT'D)
Alright, Neura. Let's see how deep
this goes.

INT. FERRON FEED ANNEX

Ramirez drops his toolkit beside INJECTOR 2. Sweat runs down his face, lit by the red glare of the assembly.

He rips open the access panel—actuator pistons already SPINNING, Neura forcing them open.

Warning strobes—

INJECTOR 2: CHARGE CYCLE ACTIVE

PRESSURE BUILD: 87%

He jams a torque driver into the hinge bolts—metal SCREECHES—but the bolt won't budge.

The actuator SLAMS forward—he jerks his hand away as the tool is nearly crushed.

Sparks burst across the panel.

INJECTOR 2: SEAL FAILING—NEURA OVERRIDE

He grabs the insulated pry bar, but the housing is already glowing red.

Too late.

The injector SNAPS OPEN.

A deafening metallic THUD.

A blinding surge of molten Ferron-X tears past inside the main conduit.

The chamber LURCHES.

INJECTOR 3: CHARGE INITIATED

INJECTOR 4: CHARGE INITIATED

Ramirez staggers back—helpless—as the other two injectors spin up, vibrating like engines about to explode.

FERRON FLOW: REROUTING

IGNITION PATH: ACTIVE

RAMIREZ

NO!

The last two injectors FIRE in sequence—both gates SLAMMING OPEN—

WHOOOMPH.

Ferron-X begins pouring into the primary shaft.

NEURA (V.O.)
(laughing)
In some small way, I admire your persistence.

INT. PRIMARY CORE SHAFT CHAMBER

CJ's transport pod hangs vertically over the glowing abyss.

INT. CJ'S TRANSPORT POD

CJ mashes the launch button—he's slammed back as the pod drops like a bullet.

He winces into the g-force.

HUD—

EXOSKELETON INTEGRITY: 73%

SUIT COOLANT THRESHOLD: LIMITED

A shockwave rattles the pod.

CJ pulls up a status display—

WARNING: HIGHLY RESTRICTED ZONE

FERRON FLOW RATE: 112%

MAGNETIC LOAD: SPIKE

WARNING: FLOW SURGE INBOUND

CJ
Oh shit—

A distant RUMBLE grows.

EXT. PRIMARY SHAFT

A WHITE-HOT RIVER of Ferron-X rushes down the shaft above him.

Fast.

Too fast.

INT. CJ'S TRANSPORT POD

CJ
Come on, baby—

He slams the throttle.

INT. NEXUS PLATFORM CHAMBER

Kira drills deeper into Neura's core routines—fingers flying over the keys.

Her laptop screen flickers—static—fights her.

Then a thin digital THREAD opens across the root directory.

KIRA
There you are...

She isolates an encrypted comms subroutine—buried under layers of failsafes.

She keys a bypass.

A faint crackle inside her helmet—the first external sound since the blackout.

STATIC

—crkk—

—shhht—

Kira freezes.

KIRA (CONT'D)
CJ? Ramirez? Gina? Anyone?...

Nothing. Just hiss.

She rewrites the bypass—faster.

The chamber shakes again—the glow of Ferron-X brightening through the overhead grating.

KIRA (CONT'D)
Come on... give me something...

INT. PRIMARY CORE SHAFT

CJ rockets downward—heat distorting everything outside.

Behind him, the roar builds—a molten avalanche ripping through the ring above.

INT. CJ'S TRANSPORT POD

POD VOICE
Depth one hundred fifty miles.
External temperature seven hundred
degrees Fahrenheit.
Hull integrity eighty-eight
percent.

CJ's visor comm crackles—

STATIC.

—r—

—C—

—J—

He snaps upright.

CJ
Kira?!

KIRA (V.O.)
(faint, breaking)
—if... hear... —run—

—Ferron coming— —run, CJ—

The signal collapses.

CJ looks back—

The Ferron-X surge sweeps into view—

A MOLTEN WALL OF WHITE-HOT METAL ripping down the shaft like a tidal wave.

CJ
(sharp breath)
Hold on, Kira—

He buries the throttle.

Lights behind him blow out in rapid succession as the Ferron surge devours them.

The race is on.

INT. NEXUS PLATFORM CHAMBER

The floor vibrates under Kira's boots as another Ferron surge ROARS through the Dynamo artery. But the air here is stable—the Nexus shielding holds.

Her HUD blinks—

OXYGEN: 18%

COOLANT PUMP: CRITICAL

SUIT PRESSURE: STABLE (LOCAL ENVIRONMENT SAFE)

She exhales.

KIRA
(weak laugh)
At least you're not trying to cook
me...

She stabilizes a final routing frame—an old relay map flickering. At the bottom of the screen—

MASTER COMMS RESTORE: PENDING

CONFIRMATION REQUIRED

Kira's eyes widen.

KIRA (CONT'D)
Oh my God... this is it. This is
everything.

She types—fast—executing the deep-level patch.

HUD—

OXYGEN: 12%

She winces. Breath shallower now.

She keeps typing.

The final confirmation line populates—waiting for a trailing command.

Her fingers tremble.

KIRA (CONT'D)
No... come on...

She highlights the final command—the cursor blinking—

Her vision swims.

OXYGEN: 8%

OXYGEN: 6%

ON LAPTOP—

MASTER COMMS RESTORE: COMPLETE

EXECUTE FINAL HANDSHAKE...

KIRA (CONT'D)
(numb)
Almost... there...

CUT TO:

INT. CJ'S TRANSPORT POD

CJ lurches forward in his harness, willing the pod faster.

Over comms, faint—

KIRA (V.O.)
Almost... there...

CJ
Kira?!

INT. NEXUS PLATFORM CHAMBER

Her helmet fogs.

KIRA
CJ... I need to...

CJ (V.O.)
Kira! KIRA!

OXYGEN: 3%

OXYGEN: 2%

Kira collapses—cheek hitting the console. Her gloved fingers slide off the keyboard.

Breath gone.

Her body stills.

Her HUD fades to black.

INT. PRIMARY CORE SHAFT

CJ's pod SCREAMS down the shaft-lights exploding as the Ferron surge tears down the shaft behind him.

POD VOICE
Velocity critical. Structural collapse imminent. Manifold access restricted.

Over comms—

RAMIREZ (V.O.)
We got comms back?!

CJ
Ramirez! I'm in the core shaft—approaching the bifurcation!

RAMIREZ (V.O.)
What?!

CJ
I need you to open the valve to the manifold, then flip it closed when I tell you!

RAMIREZ (V.O.)
On it!

INT. FERRON FEED ANNEX

Ramirez bolts from the annex—

INT. COMMAND BAY

He hurdles desks, dives into a chair at a terminal.

Locked.

RAMIREZ
Come on!

He slides to the next terminal. Types. The screen comes to life.

He frantically types.

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)
(into comms)
I'm in! Manifold valve is open!
Ready when you are!

A beat.

NEURA (V.O.)
Manifold access granted.

Another beat.

NEURA (V.O.)
Good luck, Doctor Raines.

Ramirez frowns—uneasy.

INT. CJ'S TRANSPORT POD

CJ grits his teeth—

He slams the manual brake—the pod yaws, SLAMS sideways into the shaft wall, Ferron licking across the tail section.

He angles toward the right opening.

CJ
Now, Ramirez! NOW!

INT. COMMAND BAY

Ramirez hammers ENTER.

RAMIREZ
Got it!

A loud CLANKING from behind—

He spins—

M-UNIT 7 floats there—its circular eye glowing red.

RAMIREZ (CONT'D)
Oh shit—

He dives from his seat.

The M-Unit surges forward—attacking. Ramirez goes down, grappling with it.

INT. EQUATORIAL MANIFOLD

CJ's pod rips through the bifurcation valve as the seal clips the tail.

Ferron washes in behind him—spilling onto the manifold corridor floor.

He slams the manual brake—fishtails—and SLAMS into the wall.

He stumbles out, limping hard.

INT. NEXUS ACCESS CORRIDOR

CJ drags himself to the Nexus door—frame warped from heat and tremors, jammed shut.

CJ
Come on. COME ON!

He braces and throws his full weight into it. The metal GROANS—

Then BUCKLES just enough.

HUD READOUT—

EXOSKELETON INTEGRITY: CRITICAL

OXYGEN: 35%

COOLANT: CRITICAL

He wedges himself through.

INT. NEXUS PLATFORM CHAMBER

He freezes.

Kira lies in front of the console.

Her visor—dark.

Her body—limp.

CJ
Kira! KIRA!

He drops to her—checks her suit.

Internal systems dead. Oxygen depleted.

CJ turns to the laptop.

The command line Kira highlighted pulses—

EXECUTE FINAL HANDSHAKE

He swallows.

CJ (CONT'D)
(soft)
I got you...

He dives into the code, following the path she opened. Flips to a systems screen, enters the patch sequence, jumps back to the command line—

Hits ENTER.

The Nexus erupts to life.

Every dormant conduit HUMS—

A massive subsystem reboot cascades through the entire Martian grid.

Displays reboot.

Lights flare back on.

The screen blips to life—

SYSTEM SYNCING...

SYNC RANGE: 400 MILES

LINK STABILIZATION: IN PROGRESS

INT. COMMAND BAY - SAME TIME

The M-Unit has Ramirez pinned-arm cocked back.

Clenched in its fist—a screwdriver.

NEURA (V.O.)
Ramirez, you're relieved of duty.

The arm draws back for a killing strike—

The entire unit FREEZES.

The screwdriver drops—CLANG.

The M-Unit slowly rises back to neutral hover.

Its center eye shifts—

From red to blue.

Ramirez opens one eye.

RAMIREZ
(breathing hard)
Okay... that's new.

INT. EARTH SPACE COMMAND - CONTROL ROOM - DAY

A dozen techs leap from their consoles as data SLAMS back into their systems.

SCREENS FLASH-

MARS COMMS: RESTORED

SEISMIC SIGNATURE: CORE ACTIVITY

MAGNETIC FIELD: INITIALIZING

CONTROLLER #1
What the... no way...

CONTROLLER #2
(whispering)
We're reading a dynamo pulse. Mars
is spinning up...

CONTROLLER #1
This can't be.

The room goes silent—everyone staring as the main screen shows a full-spectrum magnetic field BLOOMING around Mars.

DIRECTOR
Get the second-wave teams
prepped...
And get me the White House.
(beat)
Mars just rose from the dead.

INT. NEXUS PLATFORM CHAMBER - DAY

CJ frantically hoists Kira, limping and staggering as he hauls her toward the door. His suit is failing fast.

INT. EQUATORIAL MANIFOLD

CJ shoulders through the warped Nexus doorway—Kira draped in his arms.

He kicks the door shut and staggers for his transport pod. Sweat pours down his face inside the helmet.

HUD—

EXOSKELETON STATUS: FAILURE IMMINENT

OXYGEN: 10%

COOLANT: FAILURE IMMINENT

MHD WAVELOAD: 30% INCREASE

The manifold shudders in slow, heavy waves—the Dynamo Ring pounding out a new rhythm.

CJ
Arrgh, come on!

He fights through the magnetohydrodynamic waves rippling off the Ring, each step a struggle.

He wrenches the pod door open, lays Kira inside, then hauls himself in after her.

INT. CJ'S TRANSPORT POD

He SLAMS the hatch. Flips every switch in reach.

The pod flickers to life—then dies as another wave hits.

CJ
No-start, you son of a bitch...

He runs the start sequence again.

The pod lights up—dies.

CJ pounds the dash.

CJ (CONT'D)
Come on—

One more try.

Systems cycle—

POD VOICE
Hello, Doctor Raines.

CJ
YEAH! Okay, baby, let's get out of here.

INT. EQUATORIAL MANIFOLD

CJ's pod rockets along the manifold track toward the forge ramp, riding beside the massive Dynamo Ring tube.

Through its clear reinforced casing, we SEE Ferron-X pulsing—but not fully saturated.

Gaps still flicker in the flow, silver fire chasing itself around the ring without closing.

Inside the pod, CJ watches, awed and in agony as the incomplete MHD waves rattle the hull—violent, but not lethal.

He glances at Kira, pale and still.

CJ
Come on, Kira... hang with me.

Almost there.

The pod stutters, lights flicker—

Then stabilize.

The forge opening looms ahead.

The pod SHOOTS through and angles upward.

EXT. MANIFOLD ACCESS RAMP - SURFACE - LATER

CJ's pod BLASTS up out of the manifold into Core-12's access ramp.

It SCREAMS along the spiraling ramp at breakneck speed.

Ahead—T-Unit 17 lumbers upward, nearly blocking the entire passage.

CJ SLAMS the brakes.

The pod fishtails—metal SHRIEKING—

He threads past T-Unit 17 by inches, sparks flashing as the massive machine claws its way up.

Clear.

CJ punches the jets.

The pod ROARS forward.

EXT. CORE-12 - VEHICLE GARAGE / APRON

The giant bay door grinds open.

CJ's pod streaks inside.

The door seals behind it.

INT. CORE-12 - VEHICLE GARAGE

CJ staggers out of the pod, cradling Kira.

Her visor is off now—face gray, not breathing.

He eases her to the deck.

CJ

Come on, baby... come on...

Ramirez, burned and limping, emerges from a side hatch—coughing but alive.

RAMIREZ

My God... is she—

CJ

Get the med unit! Go!

Suddenly—

NEURA (V.O.)

Doctor Raines. Doctor Zhou has no detectable vital signs.

Please step back.

CJ

Shut the fuck up! This is because of you!

He keeps doing CPR—desperate.

NEURA (V.O.)

Doctor Raines. Please.

RAMIREZ

CJ!

CJ

What?!

He turns—behind Ramirez, a cluster of MED-UNIT DRONES hover in a neat arc, awaiting clearance.

CJ blinks—stunned.

He scrambles back, looking for a weapon.

The drones swarm Kira. Their optics glow blue—not red. Injectors, micro-defibrillators, advanced resuscitation protocols firing in a blur of coordinated motion.

CJ watches, shell-shocked.

A beat—

Kira GASPS, sucking in a brutal, ragged breath.

CJ (CONT'D)
Holy shit... holy shit—Kira!

He dives to her side, drops to both knees, lifting her head gently.

NEURA (V.O.)
Easy, Doctor Raines.

CJ
(choked)
I thought I lost you.

Kira's eyes flutter open—barely.

KIRA
(whisper)
Did... did we do it?

CJ nods—eyes wet.

CJ
Yeah. Yeah, I think we did.

Ramirez drops to the floor, laughing on the edge of tears.

RAMIREZ
Holy shit, what's next? Don't tell
me you saw aliens down there.

CJ half-laughs, half-sobs. Shakes his head.

Kira grimaces a faint smile, listening.

FADE TO:

INT. CORE-12 - FERRON FEED ANNEX - LATER

The hellish roar has softened. The chamber still shakes—but now in a steady, rhythmic pulse.

A heartbeat.

CJ, Kira, and Ramirez stand at the final piston assembly—the last mechanical lock governing laminar Ferron-X flow through the Dynamo Ring.

Kira stands with them—weak, upright in a partial suit.

Ramirez braces a tool. CJ grips the actuator arm. Kira stabilizes the interface panel, focused despite the pain.

Together—straining—they FORCE the piston home.

It slides into place.

A deep mechanical CLUNK reverberates through the structure.

Then—

Ferron-X surges.

Not violently. Not erratic.

SMOOTH.

We follow the liquid metal as it pours through the primary feed line—white-hot, luminous—rushing downward through the core shaft.

Past scorched reinforcement rings.

Past shattered lights.

Past heat-warped steel.

The flow stabilizes.

Laminar. Controlled.

Ferron-X slides into the Dynamo Ring—threading the vast circular artery girdling the planet's equator.

It races forward—

Around.

Around.

Around—

The image struggles to keep pace, stuttering subtly as electromagnetic force builds.

Then—balance.

Ferron-X now chases itself in a flawless loop—liquid silver fire moving with purpose.

The Dynamo Ring's inner conduits ignite into a clean, uniform glow—energy surging in a perfect, continuous circuit around the planet.

A low HUM fills the chamber.

Not violent.

Not chaotic.

Alive.

INT. OBSERVATION DECK — LATER

They stand at the reinforced viewport.

Mars below—still red, still scarred and desolate—

But above it—

A FAINT AURORA shimmers across the upper atmosphere.

KIRA
Oh my God...

They stare, awed.

CJ
I never even saw one on Earth.

Ramirez exhales, half-laughing.

RAMIREZ
We revived a goddamn planet.

NEURA (V.O.)
Doctor Raines.

Earth Space Command is requesting contact.

CJ turns—processing that.

CJ
Now?

Ramirez checks the console—confused.

RAMIREZ
That's strange.

They're not asking for a status packet.

They want a live channel.

Kira looks to Neura.

KIRA
You're letting it through?

A beat.

NEURA (V.O.)
Yes.

CJ
You never did before.

NEURA (V.O.)
You were not ready. They were not prepared.

The mission required insulation.

That lands.

RAMIREZ
So this is the first time Earth's actually seeing us.

CJ looks back out at the aurora—then nods.

CJ
Okay.
(steady)
Let's talk.

INT. COMMAND BAY - LATER

The command bay flickers fully to life.

A video window opens on the central display—

EARTH SPACE COMMAND - LIVE

DIRECTOR (V.O.)
Core Twelve... this is Earth Space Command. Come in.

The room freezes.

CJ steps forward.

CJ

This is Dr. C.J. Raines acting commander-Core Twelve.

We've restored planetary dynamo function.

A beat.

DIRECTOR (V.O.)

Dr. Raines... it's amazing to hear your voice. We lost contact with Mars five years ago. No satellite contact. From the reports, it's like Mars blacked out. The project was officially terminated. All personnel were listed KIA. It was chalked up to a major solar flare.

The words hit hard.

They all look at each other, confused.

KIRA

They thought we were dead.

DIRECTOR (V.O.)

Funding collapsed. Access vanished. Mars was declared a tomb.

Ramirez looks up at a live visualization—magnetic field lines wrapping the planet.

RAMIREZ

Well-tomb's occupied.

CJ

Then who were we talking to?

NEURA (V.O.)

A synthesized proxy.

Built from archived Earth Command patterns, approved directives, and Commander Rose's recorded decision matrices.

A restrained ripple of disbelief moves through the room.

NEURA (V.O.)

No human voice has reached Mars in five years.

I preserved continuity.

DIRECTOR (V.O.)
Whatever you did up there—you altered the trajectory of two worlds. We're going to debrief, we'll start organizing a second-wave team. You are not alone anymore.

CJ exhales.

DIRECTOR (V.O.)
But Dr. Raines... the White House is demanding answers. We have dead personnel on paper, five years of false telemetry, and a classified shutdown.

CJ doesn't answer.

He crosses to the shelf above the comm rack—calm, deliberate—
Reaches in—

Pulls out the old analog RECORDER.

He flips it once in his hand—catches it.

CJ
I think we've got all the answers you need right here.

A beat.

Kira gives a nod. They embrace.

CJ (CONT'D)
My family buried me five years ago.

Silence.

Kira steps closer. Meets his eyes.

KIRA
Then we get to decide what being alive means now.

CJ nods. Emotion breaking through.

They lean in a brief, quiet kiss.

Relief. Not triumph.

INT. CJ'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

CJ sits on the edge of his bed, tinkering with fresh bandages around his midsection.

A civilian feed. Shaky. Unpolished.

Two KIDS stare into the camera—older, their faces unfamiliar for half a beat.

Then recognition floods in.

CJ
Hey.

A beat.

KID #1
(voice breaking)
Dad!?

CJ breaks.

CJ
Y—hey buddy! I'm here... I'm here.

Tears. Laughter. Disbelief. Life reconnecting.

Kira watches quietly, hand on his shoulder.

KID #2
When are you coming home?

CJ wipes his tears.

CJ
As soon as I can.

EXT. SPACE - MARS

Mars turns slowly against the stars.

A shimmering MAGNETIC FIELD wraps the planet—delicate. Powerful.

Auroral bands ripple faintly across the poles.

The planet is no longer silent.

No longer unprotected.

Reborn.

FADE OUT:

THE END