

THE LONG DRIFT

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. EDGE OF ATMOSPHERE - DAY

A sleek test craft - the exact Mars re-entry/landing vehicle the crew will later fly - glides in near-silence against the curve of Earth. Blue limb, thin atmosphere glowing. Serene. Almost holy.

No music. Only the faint hum of systems.

INT. TEST CRAFT COCKPIT - DAY

Six astronauts in flight suits and helmets. Visors down. Reflective. Breathing steady through masks.

OKAFOR (PILOT) watches the horizon. Hands on controls. Gloved fingers on switches.

COLE sits rear seat, flight surgeon. Eyes on a small monitor glowing with vitals, G-load, O2 saturation. Calm. Observing. Assisting without a word.

HARRIS (engineer) reads engine temps.

SANTOS (astrobiologist) scans star trackers.

REEVES (commander) watches everything.

DILLON (systems tech) checks stabilizers, humming faintly under his breath.

The craft kisses the upper atmosphere.

CUT TO:

EXT. TEST CRAFT - ATMOSPHERIC ENTRY

CRACK.

The serenity shatters. Violent shudder. Metal groans. Flames streak across the windows. The craft bites hard.

INT. COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

The world tilts.

OKAFOR  
Roll right two.

HARRIS  
Engine two temp rising.

SANTOS  
Can't bail out on Mars. Let's figure  
this out.

REEVES  
Hold attitude.

DILLON  
Stabilizers offline.

Cole's monitor spikes. G-load climbing. He doesn't speak. He  
watches. Ready.

The craft yaws hard. Spin begins.

EXT. TEST CRAFT

The vehicle tumbles against the blue curve of Earth. Flames.  
Chaos.

INT. COCKPIT

Stable camera. The world rotates around them. Bodies  
bracing. Hands gripping. Alarms flashing.

OKAFOR kicks the thrusters.

HARRIS reroutes power.

Engines cough. Fight back.

The spin slows. Altimeter drops. They pull it out.

EXT. SOUTH PACIFIC - POINT NEMO - DAY

The capsule hits the water hard. Massive concussive CRASH.  
White spray erupts in every direction. The hull shudders,  
tilts, bobs. Ocean. Endless gray-blue ocean. The most remote  
location on Earth.

Silence.

HARRIS  
(deadpan, visor up)  
Next time we test a fusion drive, can  
we land on land?

Beat.

OKAFOR  
It'll be worse on Mars.

A shared laugh – relief, gallows humor, total trust.

Bigger laugh.

Recovery divers crack the hatch. Cold salt air floods in. They haul themselves out one by one – soaked, bruised, laughing. Alive.

REEVES watches them with quiet commander's pride.

Cole helps Santos out of her harness. Small, easy connection.

HARRIS  
You still keeping that Great Dane in that tiny apartment? Thing's bigger than your couch.

COLE  
(small smile)  
He's happy. That's what matters.

They stand together on the recovery vessel deck, dripping. The ocean stretches empty in every direction.

They drift apart to the medics. Together.

The recovery vessel cuts through the gray Pacific.

CUT TO BLACK.

TITLE: THE LONG DRIFT

CUT TO:

INT. JSC – PSYCH EVALUATION ROOM – NIGHT

The crew sits in a circle. A FLIGHT PSYCHOLOGIST across from them. Low light. No cameras.

PSYCHOLOGIST  
You will lose contact with Earth. You will lose control of the situation. You will lose certainty about the mission. When that happens – what do you hold onto?

She looks at each of them in turn. They answer without hesitating.

OKAFOR  
Discipline.

REEVES  
Protocol.

HARRIS  
Math.

SANTOS  
The work.

DILLON  
Whatever's still worth doing.

The psychologist writes something. Looks at Cole.

PSYCHOLOGIST  
Dr. Cole?

Cole has been watching them answer. Something in his face – not calculation. Care.

COLE  
Them.

Nobody responds to that. It sits in the room.

CUT TO BLACK.

EXT. LAUNCH COMPLEX – SERVICE TUNNEL – DAWN

A long fluorescent corridor. Techs in orange move with practiced calm. Through a grated door the Sunbird's silhouette fills the frame – long, sleek, waiting.

CUT TO:

INT. SUIT ROOM – DAWN

Suits hang like armor. Lockers click. The crew moves through the ritual with quiet efficiency.

SUPER: T-MINUS 10:00

CLOSE ON COLE – tablet in hand. Vitals, suit pressure, comm loop. He nods to a tech who seals his helmet.

COLE  
Seal good.

TECH

Seal good.

Quick beats – gloves snap, chest packs click, visors lower.  
Small human things: a thumb smoothing a photo into a sleeve,  
a pen tucked behind an ear.

DILLON

(under breath)

Battery at ninety-two. Phone's dead  
weight.

HARRIS

(grim smile)

Keep it. We'll need relics.

SANTOS

(quiet)

Bring me back a rock.

They share a look – ritual, not joke.

CUT TO:

INT. LAUNCH CONTROL – TOWER ROOM – DAWN

A bank of consoles. Heads down. The LAUNCH DIRECTOR stands,  
voice calm, ritualized.

LAUNCH DIRECTOR

Prop?

PROP LEAD

Prop is Go.

LAUNCH DIRECTOR

GNC?

GNC LEAD

GNC is Go.

LAUNCH DIRECTOR

Fusion Systems?

FUSION LEAD

Magnetic confinement stable. First  
plasma confirmed. Fusion is Go.

LAUNCH DIRECTOR

OTC?

OTC LEAD

OTC is Go.

LAUNCH DIRECTOR  
Astraeus, Launch. All stations report  
Go. Proceeding to terminal count.

CUT TO:

INT. ELEVATOR — SERVICE SHAFT — DAWN

The crew stands shoulder to shoulder. Metal hums. The  
countdown is a distant drum.

SUPER: T-MINUS 08:30

REEVES  
(soft)  
Check your comms. Keep it tight.

OKAFOR  
Comms green.

HARRIS  
Thermal margins nominal.

SANTOS  
(holding a small  
photo)  
For the record.

Cole watches them — the quiet center. He taps his tablet,  
tucks it away.

CUT TO:

INT. LAUNCH PAD GANTRY — DAWN

The elevator doors open. The rocket towers above — cables,  
umbilicals, a cathedral of metal.

SUPER: T-MINUS 06:00

Boots on grated steel. A tech taps each helmet in sequence.

GROUND TECH  
Astraeus, suit check.

OKAFOR / DILLON / SANTOS / HARRIS / REEVES / COLE (each in  
turn) Suit check.

CUT TO:

EXT. BOOSTER FAIRING — CAMERA FEED — CONTINUOUS

The Sunbird lies folded inside the fairing, inert, waiting.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — ENTRY HATCH — DAWN

The hatch yawns open. Compact interior, dense with switches and straps. The crew moves in, practiced and precise.

SUPER: T-MINUS 04:00

They strap in. Harness clicks. Comms mics snap. Visors seal. Cole moves between them, checking familiar seams.

COLE

O2 flow nominal. Comms loop active.  
Vitals green.

HARRIS

You always check the same line twice.

COLE

Habit.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COCKPIT — CONTINUOUS

Panels glow. The ship breathes. Outside, the gantry retracts like a slow exhale.

SUPER: T-MINUS 02:00

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)

Astraeus, Launch. T-minus two  
minutes. Confirm internal power.

DILLON

Internal power confirmed.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)

Copy. Switching to ship batteries.

A low harmonic under the comms — the fusion hum, barely audible.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.) (cont'd)

Tower clear.

OKAFOR  
Copy, tower clear.

SANTOS  
Science array green.

REEVES  
All stations report go.

SUPER: T-MINUS 01:00

The crew breathes together. Camera tightens on faces – a blink, a swallowed laugh, a hand finding a handhold.

CLOSE ON INSTRUMENT PANEL – PLASMA CONFINEMENT SEQUENCE INITIATED.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
T-minus thirty. Go for automated launch sequencer.

SUPER: T-MINUS 00:30

HARRIS  
Confinement stable. Field nominal.

DILLON  
First plasma. Feels like a miracle.

SUPER: T-MINUS 00:10

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
T-minus ten... nine... eight... seven... six...

COCKPIT ALARM – MASTER CAUTION – a polite, insistent tone. Trained reflex across every face.

OKAFOR  
Master Caution. Check panels.

HARRIS  
Scanning... transient telemetry spike.

DILLON  
SEU buffer flagged – transient. Auto-clear.

COLE  
Log it. Keep moving.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
...five... four... three...

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.) (cont'd)  
Initiating plasma confinement  
sequence.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.) (cont'd)  
...two... one... T-0

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.) (cont'd)  
Zero and liftoff of the Sunbird.

EXT. LAUNCH PAD — CONTINUOUS

Flame and light. The Sunbird lifts — vertical, precise. The gantry peels away. The world shakes.

INT. CREW CAPSULE — CONTINUOUS

G-forces press the crew into harnesses. The cabin becomes a small private world of breath and numbers.

The cabin vibrates — not violently, but deep, like a distant earthquake.

A low rumble settles into their bones.

OKAFOR  
Throttle up.

HARRIS  
Guidance nominal. Delta-V curve  
within tolerance.

DILLON  
We are actually doing this.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
Max Q.

OKAFOR  
Holding attitude.

HARRIS  
Structural loads within margin.

A higher advisory chime. The crew breathes through it.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
MECO. Stage separation.

EXT. CREW CAPSULE - DAY

The stage separation completes and the spent booster falls away, tumbling back toward Earth.

INT. CREW CAPSULE - MOMENTS LATER

The violence eases. Stars appear. Earth falls away.

DILLON  
(soft laugh)  
We are in orbit.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
First plasma confirmed. DFD engaged.  
Delta-V check nominal.

Cole watches them - the quiet ledger-keeper. He files the faces, the sounds, the small human moments.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - ORBIT - DAY

Weightlessness. The crew floats, still riding the high of insertion. Earth turns slowly outside the windows - vast, blue, infinite.

OKAFOR drifts at the main view-port, eyes wide, almost reverent.

SANTOS pushes off a handrail, whispering to herself.

SANTOS  
Look at that...

HARRIS rotates slowly upside-down, grinning like a kid, taking it all in.

DILLON laughs quietly, pushing off a bulkhead to get a better angle.

REEVES floats mid-deck, steady but softened, a small smile.

COLE watches them - the quiet center - taking in the moment without needing to speak. He catches a drifting water pouch mid-air and hands it to Santos.

HARRIS  
Fuel stage in visual range. Closing  
at point-two meters per second.

The crew turns.

EXT. ORBIT - CONTINUOUS

A massive cylindrical module – the pre-positioned FUEL STAGE – drifts slowly into frame. Majestic. Silent. A cathedral of metal catching sunlight against the black.

INT. CREW CAPSULE - CONTINUOUS

Everyone moves into position with practiced ease.

OKAFOR at the controls.

HARRIS calls alignment.

HARRIS monitors docking latches and fuel line pressures.

REEVES calls timing.

SANTOS watches external cameras.

DILLON checks RCS thrusters.

COLE stays rear, monitoring vitals and the crew's stress levels – calm, observant, the quiet protector.

HARRIS

Alignment within tolerance. Pitch stable.

HARRIS (cont'd)

Fuel stage rotation nominal. Latch pressures green.

REEVES

Stand by for soft capture.

Clipped, calm, methodical. No tension. Just precision.

A small human moment: Harris floats upside-down, rotating to watch the approach. Santos drifts past him, steadying herself on a handrail. Dillon pushes off a bulkhead to get a better angle. Cole smiles – small, private – watching them move like a family in zero-G.

OKAFOR makes a micro-adjustment with the thrusters. Gentle puffs.

OKAFOR

Closing at point-one.

Soft thunk. A gentle vibration runs through the hull.

REEVES  
Soft capture.

Indicator lights turn green.

OKAFOR fires one last micro-burst.

REEVES (cont'd)  
Hard dock.

A quiet, satisfied cheer ripples through the capsule – not loud, not celebratory. Just the sound of professionals who did it right.

DILLON  
(grinning)  
Too easy.

A light laugh. Harris claps Dillon on the shoulder.

REEVES  
Stage One secured.

The camera drifts back slowly, showing the crew floating together, the massive fuel stage now locked to their ship, Earth turning below them in the windows.

A moment of unity.

A moment of triumph.

REEVES (cont'd)  
(quiet, proud)  
Well done, Astraesus.

They hang there for a beat, weightless, connected.

The cargo stage locks in twenty minutes later – the same practiced precision, the same quiet cheer. The three-stage stack is complete.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – ORBIT – AFTER HARD DOCK

The crew is laughing, still riding the high from docking. Harris floats upside-down, grinning. Okafor – for the first time since launch – has her hands off the controls.

DILLON pulls out his phone. A physical object. A relic of Earth, impossibly small in zero gravity – a piece of home that somehow made it this far. He holds it up. One look at Reeves.

DILLON

Commander.

Reeves looks at the planet below. The Pacific. Blue and infinite. A long beat.

REEVES

One song.

DILLON grins. Connects the phone to the ship's audio output.

Something blasts through the ship's speakers – loud, alive, impossibly Earth. The last Earth-sound they will ever choose.

They howl. Harris loses a food pouch and doesn't care. Santos spins free from a handrail, laughing. Reeves actually lets herself laugh. Okafor actually laughs – full, unguarded, real.

COLE watches from the edge. He smiles – real, full, unguarded. The smile of a man who does not know yet what that sound will cost them.

The song runs. Forty seconds. A minute. Dillon's phone chirps a battery warning. He kills it. The silence that follows is different from the silence before.

DILLON

(to the room)

Okay. Let's go to Mars.

A quiet laugh ripples through the capsule. COLE watches them. He files it – the sound, the faces, the moment – the way you file something you know you will need later and cannot explain why.

HARRIS

Hold on – I'm seeing a flicker on the structural load sensor.

A tiny beat of attention.

REEVES

Run it again.

Harris checks. The reading holds.

HARRIS

Confirmed good.

REEVES

Green across the board.

THE CAMERA DRIFTS BACK SLOWLY, REVEALING THE FULL THREE-STAGE STACK ASSEMBLED IN ORBIT: CREW SHIP + FUEL STAGE + CARGO STAGE. A CATHEDRAL OF METAL AGAINST THE BLACK. MASSIVE. COMPLETE.

Inside, the crew floats together, watching the moon grow in the forward window.

REEVES (cont'd)  
(quiet, proud)  
Calculate lunar slingshot trajectory.

Everyone turns to their stations.

OKAFOR  
Watch the fuel sensor on the moon burn. Just in case.

REEVES  
(small smile)  
Very good. Let's go to Mars.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
Astraeus, confirmed. Proceed to lunar orbit for slingshot.

The crew floats together, unified, watching their destination rise ahead.

CUT TO:

EXT. ORBIT - CONTINUOUS

The full three-stage stack, gleaming, begins its slow burn toward the Moon.

INT. CREW CAPSULE - ORBIT - DAY 1 (HOURS 0-24)

The full three-stage stack drifts toward the Moon. Earth shrinks in the windows.

The crew settles in. Weightless routines.

HARRIS floats upside-down, rotating slowly, checking fuel pressures.

SANTOS drifts past, taking photos of the shrinking Earth.

SANTOS  
Look at that. You can already see the curve.

DILLON pushes off a bulkhead, laughing quietly as he tumbles.

REEVES floats mid-deck, watching her crew with quiet pride.

OKAFOR runs system checks at the controls.

HARRIS  
Drift rate stable. Lunar orbit  
insertion in seventy-two hours.

Cole moves between them, checking vitals, suit seals, everything. The quiet protector.

Ground control chatter, calm and routine.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
Astraeus, telemetry looks beautiful  
from here.

REEVES  
Copy, Flight. All systems nominal.

A small, satisfied moment. They are in space. They are together.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - DAY 2 (HOURS 24-48)

Routine has set in. Zero-G life.

They eat from floating pouches.

Dillon loses a food pouch; it drifts away; he chases it, laughing.

Santos shows Reeves a photo of her niece on a tablet.

Okafor practices micro-burns on the simulator.

Harris and Dillon debate old sci-fi movies while running contingency checks.

HARRIS  
If we lose comms here, we route  
through DSN.

REEVES  
If the cargo stage depressurizes, we  
isolate it.

A beat. Harris checks the comms panel. One-way light time to Earth: two point four minutes and rising.

HARRIS

Round-trip light time is past four minutes. Even if they answer right now, we'll have moved before their words get here.

Nobody says what that means. They know what it means. Real-time is already gone.

Cole watches everyone's vitals. A tiny sensor flickers on Harris's panel for half a second. Harris resets it. Green again. Nothing alarming.

Cole notices. Says nothing. Files it.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - DAY 3 (HOURS 48-72) - LUNAR APPROACH

The Moon fills the windows. Craters sharp as knives. The terminator line slides across the surface.

Awe.

DILLON

(whispering)

Holy shit...

SANTOS tears up quietly.

REEVES places a hand on Okafor's shoulder.

COLE watches them all, absorbing the moment.

OKAFOR

Prepare for lunar orbit insertion burn.

HARRIS

Fuel stage stable.

REEVES

Trajectory nominal.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)

Astraeus, you are go for slingshot.

OKAFOR

Copy. Lining up.

The crew lines up at their stations.

EXT. LUNAR ORBIT - CONTINUOUS

The three-stage stack fires the lunar slingshot burn. Engines roar. The ship vibrates beautifully.

Inside, the crew smiles. Everything holds.

REEVES  
(quiet, proud)  
Very good. Let's go to Mars.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
Astraeus, confirmed. Proceed.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - DOME - DAY 3

The dome is small - barely four people wide - a blister of reinforced glass above the main corridor. Designed for star fixes. Nobody designed it for this.

MARS fills the forward arc. Not a point of light. Not a disc. A world - red-ochre and rust, scarred with ancient catastrophe, impossibly still against the black. Valles Marineris runs across its face like a wound that never healed.

SANTOS  
has been here for an hour. She doesn't move. HARRIS drifts up through the hatch, sees it, and stops.

HARRIS  
(very quiet)  
Nobody told me it would look like that.

SANTOS  
How did you think it would look?

HARRIS  
Like a picture.

He floats there, shoulder to shoulder with her, both of them staring.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
 Four years of mission prep.  
 Simulations. Models. I knew every  
 crater. Every atmospheric reading. I  
 didn't know it would look like it was  
 waiting for us.

Santos takes a photo with her tablet. The flash is  
 embarrassing – a tourist flash against a world.

SANTOS  
 (soft)  
 We're the first humans to see it like  
 this. No atmosphere between us and  
 it. No telescope lag.

HARRIS  
 We were supposed to land there.

Santos doesn't answer. Harris goes back down the hatch to  
 run his numbers. Santos stays.

SANTOS  
 (barely audible, to  
 Mars)  
 We would have come.

The burn cuts. Silence.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – MOMENTS LATER

The crew exhales. Relief. Triumph.

Then –

A tiny sputter.

A vibration that shouldn't be there.

The ship is a cathedral of light. Instruments scream  
 numbers. The Direct Fusion Drive hums like a small sun.

COCKPIT ALARM: MASTER CAUTION – a high, insistent chirp  
 layered with a low sub-thump.

HARRIS  
 Magnet Bank Three torque anomaly!

OKAFOR  
 She's pulling left – compensating  
 with RCS – (beat) No response!

HARRIS

Roll rate increasing – five degrees per second... ten... fifteen... twenty!

DILLON

Star tracker lost! We're blind!

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)

Sunbird, Houston – we see the excursion. Break-break. Check RCS authority.

The fusion plume sweeps across the cockpit like a strobe – blue light slashing through the spin.

OKAFOR

Cut the magnets! Kill the reaction!

HARRIS

Emergency shutoff unresponsive! Plasma injectors choking – feedback loop!

HARRIS (cont'd)

Delta-V off nominal – we missed the intercept corridor –  
(beat)  
We're on a solar escape vector!

REEVES

Jettison the fuel stage – now!

HARRIS slams the switch.

EXT. SPACE – CONTINUOUS

Explosive bolts fire. The fuel stage peels away. The ship tumbles. The burn terminates.

Silence drops like a curtain.

During the spin, the ship's emergency systems fire automatically – distress protocols, telemetry bursts, automatic handshakes. Something in the dark receives one.

It responds with a short structured burst. Structured differently than anything in the DSN catalogue. The passive array logs it automatically:

PASSIVE ARRAY – ANOMALOUS RETURN Source: non-local. Phase offset: 0.000 seconds. Signal lag vs. distance: none. Classification: unknown.

The implication — that something answered before light could have carried the question — sits in the log buffer. Unread. Nobody has bandwidth to notice.

INT. CREW CAPSULE — AFTERMATH

Weightlessness. Red lights. Breathing.

OKAFOR  
Spin stopped.

HARRIS  
(checking his board)  
We're stable... but the burn was off-axis during the critical window.

A long beat.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
(delayed)  
Astraeus... we have your numbers.

The voice is calm, professional, devastated.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.) (cont'd)  
No intercept window exists. Delta-v requirements exceed available capability. Trajectory is hyperbolic. You have passed the Ballistic Commitment Point. Return is not physically possible.

The crew absorbs it. No one speaks. The round-trip light time to Earth from here is already past four minutes and climbing. Even if Mission Control transmitted again right now, they would be somewhere else before the words arrived.

The crew goes silent.

Cole speaks first, the hopeful one, the man who chose optimism as a discipline.

COLE Then we stay alive and we keep working.

No one answers.

That silence is the first fracture.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — DRIFT DAY 3

The cascade was eleven hours ago. The crew is still in shock. HARRIS floats at the central console. He has opened a trajectory model. His hands are very steady.

REEVES drifts past, exhausted.

REEVES  
Harris. Get some sleep.

HARRIS  
In a minute.

He runs the model. The numbers come back red. He changes one variable. Red. He changes another. Red.

He closes the model. Opens it fresh. Starts from scratch.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
(very quiet, to  
himself)  
That can't be right.

Reeves watches him from the hatch. She doesn't say anything else. She goes to sleep. Harris runs the model again.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — ENGINEERING CONSOLE — CONTINUOUS

The passive array log scrolls automatically in the lower corner of Harris's screen. He's watching the trajectory model. He doesn't see it.

One line in the log:

PASSIVE ARRAY — ANOMALOUS RETURN

Source: non-local.

Phase offset: 0.000 seconds.

Logged: [CASCADE + 11h 14m]

Auto-classification: instrument error.

The log times out. The entry stays.

Harris runs the model one more time. Red.

He closes his eyes.

He doesn't see the log entry. It doesn't matter yet.

CUT TO:

CREW CUMULATIVE DOSE: 312 mSv

(Safe limit: 1,000 mSv)

FADE IN:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - COMMON AREA - WEEKS INTO THE DRIFT

The ship is quiet. Dim amber lights. The hum of life support.

HARRIS floats at the engineering console, tablet in hand. Numbers scroll. He has been here for hours. Maybe days.

He is alone.

He taps a sequence. Runs it again. The same red numbers appear.

HARRIS

(under his breath)

Post-cascade v-infinity... sixty kilometers per second relative to Sol. Hyperbolic excess over solar escape: eighteen klicks per second. Required delta-v to fix it: on the order of tens of thousands of meters per second.

He changes a variable. Runs it. Same result.

He changes another. Runs it.

Same result.

He stares at the screen for a long beat. Then, quietly, almost gently:

HARRIS (cont'd)

There must be a way.

He runs the numbers again.

Same result.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - HARRIS'S STATION - LATER

The tablet now shows a scrolling list:

RATION PROJECTIONS

O2 SCRUBBER EFFICIENCY

REACTION MASS REMAINING

COMMS WINDOW SHRINK RATE

RADIATOR EFFICIENCY

CORE TEMP / STRUCTURAL MARGIN

Harris is methodically crossing items off.

He stops on one line. Stares.

HARRIS

Four seconds.

He closes his eyes. Opens them. The line is still there.

He runs the simulation one more time – the exact moment of the cascade. The override command. The clock in the corner of the screen reads 00:04.12 too late.

He watches it play out in silence.

Then, in the reflection of the monitor, his daughter appears behind him. Eight years old. Standing in their old kitchen on Earth. She is smiling, holding a drawing.

She doesn't speak.

She just looks at him.

Harris doesn't turn around. He stays very still.

HARRIS (cont'd)

(soft, almost  
tender)

Hey, kiddo.

The reflection stays.

He reaches out, touches the screen. The image flickers but doesn't vanish.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – NAVIGATION BAY – DRIFT DAY UNKNOWN

Harris runs the trajectory numbers. The numbers move.  
Not scroll. Not glitch. Move – like they're alive.

Dv REQUIRED: 11,420 m/s

Dv AVAILABLE: 312 m/s

He blinks. The numbers rearrange:

YOU ARE NOT GOING HOME

Harris recoils. Blinks again. The numbers are normal.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
(whisper)  
Sleep. I need sleep.

He doesn't sleep.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - MEDICAL BAY - NIGHT (SAME NIGHT)

COLE is finishing rounds when he notices Harris's station is still lit.

He drifts over.

Harris is still there, staring at the same simulation. The daughter is gone from the reflection.

COLE  
You should sleep.

HARRIS  
Sleep's a luxury we can't afford.

Cole drifts closer. Sees the numbers.

COLE  
Harris.

HARRIS  
Four seconds, Marcus. Four. That's all it was.

Cole doesn't answer with words. He simply stays. Presence.

A long silence between them.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
(quiet)  
You still keeping that Great Dane in  
that tiny apartment?

COLE  
(small smile)  
He's happy. That's what matters.

Harris laughs once – a broken sound.

HARRIS  
We're not going home, are we?

Cole doesn't lie.

COLE  
Not the way we planned.

Harris looks at the tablet again. The daughter is back in  
the reflection, still smiling.

He reaches out, touches the screen gently.

Then, very quietly, almost conversationally:

HARRIS  
I'm tired, Marcus.

Cole understands what he means.

He stays right where he is.

COLE  
I know.

Harris drifts toward the airlock hatch at the far end of the  
common area. Slow. Methodical. No drama.

Cole follows, matching his speed. Not grabbing. Just  
present.

Harris stops at the hatch. Hand on the manual override.

HARRIS  
It would be clean.

COLE  
It would be over.

Harris looks at him.

HARRIS  
That's the point.

Cole doesn't move. Doesn't argue. He just stays.

A long beat.

Harris's hand drops from the override.

He drifts back toward Cole.

They float there together in the dim light.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
(soft)  
Thanks.

COLE  
Any time.

They stay like that for a long time.

The daughter is gone from the reflection.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMAND STATION — DRIFT CYCLE UNKNOWN

Dim amber lights. The hum of life support.

REEVES sits strapped at the command console, tablet in hand, running a checklist.

She's been here for hours.

Maybe days.

Her eyes are red. Her breathing shallow.

She scrolls.

ON TABLET:

CONTINGENCY PROTOCOL 14.7 — LOSS OF PRIMARY MISSION

CONTINGENCY PROTOCOL 14.8 — LOSS OF SECONDARY MISSION

CONTINGENCY PROTOCOL 14.9 — LOSS OF RETURN WINDOW

She checks each box with mechanical precision.

REEVES  
(under her breath)  
Procedure is safety.

She scrolls again.

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — LATER

The crew floats nearby, exhausted.

DILLON hums faintly.

SANTOS scribbles notes.

HARRIS stares at nothing.

Reeves floats through them like a ghost.

REEVES  
Status checks. All stations.

No one moves.

She waits.

REEVES (cont'd)  
(sharper)  
Status checks.

COLE drifts in, intercepts her gently.

COLE  
Reeves. They need rest.

REEVES  
Rest is not a protocol.

She moves past him.

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMAND STATION — NIGHT CYCLE

Reeves is alone again.

She opens another checklist.

CONTINGENCY PROTOCOL 22.1 — LOSS OF COMMAND

She hesitates.

Her hand trembles.

She scrolls.

CONTINGENCY PROTOCOL 22.2 — COMMANDER PSYCHOLOGICAL  
IMPAIRMENT

She stares at it.

Her reflection stares back.

Behind her reflection –

a faint shimmer of Mission Control's waveform.

She blinks.

It's gone.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – SLEEP BAY – NIGHT CYCLE

Reeves wakes in the dark.

She reaches for her tablet. Pulls up the checklist.

CONTINGENCY PROTOCOL 22.2 – COMMANDER PSYCHOLOGICAL  
IMPAIRMENT

It's checked.

She didn't check it.

REEVES

(whisper)

No... I didn't...

She stares at it. Her hand hovers  
over the checkbox. She unchecks it.

It checks itself again.

She closes the tablet. Doesn't open  
it again that night.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMAND STATION – LATER

Reeves activates the comms panel.

Static.

She speaks anyway.

REEVES

Mission Control, Astraesus actual.

Running contingency review.

Requesting confirmation on 22.2.

Static.

Then–

A faint voice.

Soft.

Comforting.

Impossible.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
We hear you, Commander.

Reeves freezes.

REEVES  
...Flight?

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
You're doing the right thing.

Her eyes fill.

REEVES  
We lost the fuel stage. We're off  
trajectory. I need guidance.

MISSION CONTROL (V.O.)  
Stay on protocol.

She exhales – relief, grief, surrender.

REEVES  
Copy, Flight.

The voice fades.

Reeves doesn't question it.

She logs the exchange.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – LATER

Reeves floats in, energized, almost serene.

REEVES  
Mission Control is still receiving.  
We're not alone out here.

The crew looks up.

HARRIS  
What?

REEVES  
I spoke to them. They confirmed  
protocol alignment.

SANTOS looks confused.

DILLON looks hopeful.

COLE watches her carefully.

COLE  
Reeves... what exactly did you hear?

She bristles.

REEVES  
Don't patronize me, Marcus.

COLE  
I'm not. I'm asking.

Reeves floats closer, eyes sharp.

REEVES  
They told me we're doing the right  
thing. That we stay on protocol. That  
we keep going.

COLE  
Reeves...  
(soft)  
There's no signal.

She shakes her head.

REEVES  
You weren't on comms. You didn't hear  
it.

COLE  
No one heard it.

Reeves looks around.

The crew avoids her eyes.

She feels the isolation hit her like a physical blow.

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — LATER

Reeves floats in, hollow and determined.

COLE drifts toward her.

COLE

Reeves.

She doesn't look at him.

COLE (cont'd)

You've been awake for... I don't know  
how long.

She keeps floating.

Cole reaches out – not grabbing, just anchoring her with  
presence.

COLE (cont'd)

Sit with me.

She stops.

He guides her to a handrail.

They float together in silence.

Reeves breaks quietly – not loudly.

Her breathing shakes.

Her hands tremble.

Her eyes close.

Cole stays.

He doesn't fix her.

He just stays.

After a long beat:

REEVES

(whisper)

I heard them, Marcus.

COLE

I know.

REEVES

They sounded so real.

COLE

I know.

She leans her head against the bulkhead.

REEVES  
(small, broken)  
I don't know what's real anymore.

Cole stays with her.

He doesn't answer.

He doesn't need to.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – PILOT STATION – NIGHT

Okafor stares at the controls.

Her reflection in the view-port isn't synced with her movements.

She raises her hand. Her reflection raises it a beat late.

OKAFOR  
(whisper)  
No...

The reflection smiles. Okafor does not.

She slams her eyes shut. When she opens them – the reflection is normal.

She floats back. Checks her hands. Checks the viewport. Normal.

She doesn't report it.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – MEDICAL BAY – LATER

Cole works through the night, running his own diagnostics.

At some point he realizes his own vitals screen has been open for hours.

He checks his numbers. Normal. Human. Deteriorating on the standard schedule.

He exhales.

COLE  
 (to himself)  
 Still human.

Silence.

Then – barely audible through the comms panel, a single pulse.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
 For now.

Cole's breath catches.

He stares at the panel.

Then at his hands.

He closes the diagnostic screen.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – DOME – NIGHT CYCLE

Cole pulls himself up through the hatch. He floats in the dome's center, arms loose. He doesn't go to the telescope.

He just looks. The stars are not what they were from Earth. Out here they don't twinkle. They are fixed. Hard. Absolute. The sky is the actual thing, in all directions, with no floor.

He stays for a long time. Still. At the edge of his peripheral vision – a faint green pulse. Far away. Testing the hull.

COLE  
 (very quiet)  
 I see you.

The green fades. He stays a moment longer. Then he goes back down the hatch. He never comes up again.

CUT TO:

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – PILOT STATION – WEEKS INTO THE DRIFT

OKAFOR floats at the pilot controls, eyes on the forward window. She is still the fighter – posture straight, hands steady on the stick out of habit.

She tightens her grip on the controls. Runs a manual diagnostic she knows will fail.

RCS THRUSTERS — OFFLINE

ATTITUDE CONTROL — DEGRADED

MANUAL OVERRIDE — NON-RESPONSIVE

She resets the panel. Runs it again. Same results.

OKAFOR  
(under her breath)  
Doesn't matter. You check anyway.

She pulls up the cascade footage — the moment everything went wrong. Frame by frame.

Millisecond by millisecond.

The micro-meteoroid hit. The confinement flicker. The misaligned burn.

She rewinds. Plays it again. Rewinds. Plays it again. Her jaw clenches.

Her hand finds the edge of the console.

She hits it. Once. Flat palm. Not rage — precision. The way you hit something when you want it to know you're not finished with it yet.

OKAFOR (cont'd)  
(very quiet)  
That was my ship.

She rewinds it again.

CUT TO:

CREW CUMULATIVE DOSE: 589 mSv

(Safe limit: 1,000 mSv)

Cole drifts in behind her.

COLE  
You don't have to keep watching that.

OKAFOR  
I do.

COLE  
Why?

(MORE)

COLE (cont'd)  
She doesn't look at him.

OKAFOR  
Because I'm the pilot. And pilots  
don't get to look  
away.

Cole studies her – the tension in her shoulders, the exhaustion in her eyes, the discipline holding her together by threads.

COLE  
You didn't cause this.

OKAFOR  
I didn't stop it either.  
She rewinds the footage again.

COLE  
You're allowed to be human.

Okafor's jaw tightens.

OKAFOR  
Not yet.

She turns back to the controls. Runs another manual thruster test. Everything red.

Her breathing stays steady. Her posture rigid. Her eyes hollow.

She whispers something – barely audible.

OKAFOR (cont'd)  
Hold the line.

She repeats it.

OKAFOR (cont'd)  
Hold the line.

Her voice cracks on the third repetition.

She closes her eyes for a long beat.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – DRIFT DAY 11

Dim amber lights. The hum of the Sunbird's wounded systems.

HARRIS floats at the central console, eyes sunken, running numbers on three different screens at once.

COLE drifts beside him, watching.

On the display:

TRAJECTORY MODEL — SOLAR GRAVEYARD ATTEMPT #14

□v REQUIRED: 11,420 m/s

□v AVAILABLE: 312 m/s

Harris exhales through his nose. No anger. Just math.

HARRIS

That's fourteen in a row.

COLE

Run fifteen.

Harris does. The numbers don't change.

HARRIS

(quiet)

We're not even nudging it.

Cole logs it on his tablet. Another line in a growing list.

INT. CREW CAPSULE — PILOT STATION — LATER

OKAFOR is strapped in, jaw clenched, running the Mars suicide aerobrace sim again.

On screen:

ENTRY VELOCITY: 58.2 km/s

HEAT LOAD: RED

STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY: FAILURE — 0.4 SECONDS AFTER INTERFACE

She reruns it.

Same result.

She reruns it again.

Same.

Okafor closes her eyes.

Her hands shake.

OKAFOR  
 (under breath)  
 Come on... give me something...  
 She reruns it a fourth time.

FAILURE.

She kills the screen.

Floats in silence.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – AIRLOCK VESTIBULE – DRIFT DAY 15

Okafor and Santos suit up. Practiced. Efficient. Neither speaks.

Cole watches from the hatch.

COLE  
 You know what you're going to find.

OKAFOR  
 We go anyway.  
 She seals her helmet. Santos does the same. Cole steps back. The inner airlock hisses shut.

EXT. ASTRAEUS – CONTINUOUS

Two figures emerge into the black. Tethered. Moving along the hull with practiced ease.

The RCS thruster cluster comes into view.

Okafor stops.

A long beat.

SANTOS  
 (helmet comms, quiet)  
 Aisha.

OKAFOR  
 (V.O.)  
 I see it.  
 The manifold is gone. Not damaged. Gone. The impact took it completely. Bare mounting plate. Sheared bolts. Open space where the hardware used to be.

(MORE)

OKAFOR (cont'd)  
Santos reaches out. Touches the  
mounting plate. Pulls her hand back.

SANTOS  
(V.O.)  
There's nothing to fix.  
Okafor floats there. Earth behind  
her, impossibly distant. The Sun  
smaller than she  
has ever seen it.

OKAFOR  
(V.O.)  
Copy.

INT. CREW CAPSULE - AIRLOCK VESTIBULE

Cole is still at the hatch when they come back in. He reads  
it in Okafor's posture before the helmet comes off.

She pulls it free. Looks at him.

OKAFOR  
You were right.

COLE  
I know.  
He helps her out of the suit. Says  
nothing else.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - COMMON AREA - DRIFT DAY 17

DILLON floats with his tablet, earbuds in. A tinny blast of  
Misfits leaks out - fast, loud, defiant.

DILLON  
Better than listening to the walls.

He turns it up. The music becomes a shield - a tiny bubble  
of Earth in the void. COLE watches from the corner - filing  
it, not judging.

CUT TO:

EXT. ASTRAEUS - DEEP SPACE - DRIFT DAY 17

The ship drifts. Engines cold. Dark metal against darker  
nothing.

Then – from the forward hull – a shimmer. GREEN. Faint at first. A wash of bioluminescent light that has no right to exist at 2.3 AU. It climbs the hull in soft curtains, the way aurora borealis climbs a winter sky. No sound. No origin. Just light, alive and purposeful.

It pulses once. Twice. Fades.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – AIRLOCK VESTIBULE – DRIFT DAY 17

SANTOS sits cross-legged, staring at the view-port. A faint harmonic hum pulses through the hull – barely audible.

She tilts her head, listening.

SANTOS

(soft)

You're getting louder...  
She doesn't realize she said it out loud.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – SAME

DILLON hums the same harmonic under his breath without noticing.

Reeves floats past him, stops, listens.

REEVES

Roy... what are you humming?

DILLON

(blinks)

Was I?  
He genuinely doesn't know.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – DRIFT DAY UNKNOWN

The alien voice pulses – softer now, almost rhythmic.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)

We... hear... your... sounds.

Dillon looks up.

DILLON

What sounds?

A faint rhythm emerges – a distorted echo of the Misfits track he played earlier. Dillon goes pale.

DILLON (cont'd)  
That's— That's my music.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... learn... quickly.

Harris drifts closer, jaw tight.

HARRIS  
Don't copy that. Don't copy anything  
from us.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Why... not?

Cole floats in the doorway — already knowing the answer.

COLE  
Because you're not supposed to know  
what we love.

The alien signal goes quiet. An abnormally long silence —  
not an absence, a pause. Something vast recalibrating. Then  
it pulses again. Steady. Patient. Resumed.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMAND STATION — DRIFT DAY 19

Harris and Cole run the Solar Graveyard attempt again.  
On screen:

PERIHELION SHIFT: 0.00014 AU

EFFECT ON TRAJECTORY: NEGLIGIBLE

OUTCOME: ESCAPE

Harris rubs his eyes.

HARRIS  
We're transmitting but nothing's  
getting out. Something's sitting on  
the channel.

Cole logs it.

COLE  
We keep trying.

HARRIS  
Why?

Cole doesn't answer.

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — DRIFT DAY UNKNOWN  
The static pulses again — sharper this time. A faint rhythmic pattern under the noise.

SANTOS leans in, adjusting the gain.

SANTOS

There. That. It's intentional.

HARRIS

Everything in space looks intentional  
if you stare long  
enough.  
The pulse shifts — becomes a shape. A  
voice emerges. Not words. Just  
cadence.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)

—lo... —hear... —you...  
The crew freezes.

REEVES

Mission Control...?

COLE

No. The delay's wrong.  
The voice stabilizes — still  
distorted, still alien.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)

We... hear... you.  
Santos covers her mouth. Dillon's  
eyes widen. Okafor  
grips a handrail.

OKAFOR

Who are you?  
A long pause.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)

We... are... near.  
Harris looks at Cole — the first  
flicker of real fear.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — LATER

The signal is clearer now — still warped, but undeniably  
trying.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Where... are... you... from?

SANTOS  
Earth. We're from Earth.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Earth. Yes. We... know... this.

HARRIS  
How?

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.) (cont'd)  
We... were... not... looking. You... crossed...  
the... line.

REEVES  
Voyager? You heard Voyager?

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Not... the... probe. The... probe... does...  
not... cross. You... crossed.

A beat.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.) (cont'd)  
You... fell... into... the... light.

DILLON  
(quietly)  
They heard it.  
Cole watches the waveform — jaw  
tight.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMAND STATION — LATER

The signal stabilizes further. The cadence is almost  
conversational.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
What... is... death?  
The crew goes still.

HARRIS  
It's... when the body stops. When the  
mind stops.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Stops? Why... stop?

DILLON  
 (softly)  
 Because we're fragile.  
 A long, thoughtful pulse.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
 Fragile. Yes. We... see... this.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — HOURS LATER

The crew is scattered. Santos stays at the comms panel.

SANTOS  
 What do you need from us?

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
 Know... you. Learn... you.

SANTOS  
 Why?

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
 To... help.  
 Cole floats behind her, unseen.

COLE  
 (quiet)  
 Turn it off.  
 Santos jumps.

SANTOS  
 Jesus, Marcus—

COLE  
 It's not them. It's not human. And  
 it's asking the  
 wrong questions.

SANTOS  
 They're trying to understand us.

COLE  
 They're dissecting us.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — SLEEP BAY — DRIFT DAY 21

Reeves floats in her harness, eyes open, staring at nothing.

She hasn't slept.

Her tablet glows beside her.

CONTINGENCY PROTOCOL 14.9 — LOSS OF RETURN WINDOW

CHECKED.

CONTINGENCY PROTOCOL 15.1 — LOSS OF PLANETARY CAPTURE

CHECKED.

Her hand hovers over the next box.

She can't check it.

She closes the tablet.

Floats in silence.

CUT TO:

EXT. ASTRAEUS — DEEP SPACE — DRIFT DAY 22

BLUE light now. Different in character from the green — less diffuse, more structured. The curtains of light move with direction, as if organized by something that is trying to find the right shape.

The blue pulses climb the hull and spread across the dome's surface in patterns that almost resolve into geometry before dissolving.

INT. CREW CAPSULE — DOME — CONTINUOUS

SANTOS is at the telescope. She looks up from the eyepiece. The blue light paints her face through the dome glass.

SANTOS

(clinical, into  
recorder)

Signal log, Day twenty-two. Blue spectrum. Structured. Previous green event was diffuse — this has directionality. Whatever it is, it's getting better at something.

She looks at the pattern on the dome glass. It almost forms a circle. Then a line. Then dissolves.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
 (very quiet, not  
 into the recorder)  
 You're trying to talk to us.

The blue light fades. The dome glass reflects only stars.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - DOME - DRIFT DAY 23

HARRIS floats at the telescope - Santos's instrument, but she's not here. Through the eyepiece: JUPITER.

Not close. Never close. But enormous - a banded disc of cream and amber and rust, storm systems the size of Earth visible as smears of color. The Great Red Spot sits at its southern hemisphere like an old wound.

He does the math without meaning to. At their current velocity they passed Jupiter's orbital distance two days ago. Everything from here is the long nothing.

Four of Jupiter's moons are visible. Io. Europa. Ganymede. Callisto.

HARRIS  
 (barely audible)  
 First humans to see you this close.

He stays at the eyepiece for a long time. When he finally pulls back, his eyes are dry. Past the grief. Into the math on the other side of grief.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
 (to the planet, not  
 looking back)  
 You were supposed to be the trip home.

He goes down the hatch. Jupiter turns in its orbit. Indifferent.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - COMMON AREA - DRIFT DAY UNKNOWN

0300 ship time. The rest of the crew is in their sleep cycles. SANTOS floats alone at the comms panel.

The ELF band is open – the harmonic she's been mapping cycling through the speaker at a volume too low to wake anyone.

She has been sitting here for two hours. She reaches out. Adjusts the gain. Leans toward the mic.

SANTOS  
(very quiet)  
I know you're there.

The harmonic continues. No change.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
I've been mapping your signal for eleven days. The pattern isn't random. The response lag adjusts when I adjust gain – you're tracking my output. You can hear me.

A long beat. The harmonic pulses once.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
We're going to die out here. All six of us. Our life support has a ceiling and we're going to hit it and there's nothing we can do about that unless something changes.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
I'm not asking you to save us for free. I'll teach you whatever you want to know. Our biology. Our languages. Our history. Whatever you need. Just –

Her voice drops.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
Don't let us disappear out here. We came this far. We should mean something to someone.

The harmonic holds its pitch for three seconds. Then shifts – barely perceptible, a fraction of a tone – toward her voice's register.

Santos closes her eyes.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
(barely audible)  
Thank you.

She doesn't open her eyes for a long time. When she does, she looks at the speaker like someone who has just signed something they can't un-sign.

She logs the exchange as a harmonic anomaly. Scientific notation. Nothing that would alarm anyone. She closes the panel.

COLE is in the hatch behind her. She doesn't see him. He watched the whole thing. He doesn't move for a long beat. Then he goes back to the medical bay. He doesn't sleep.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - MEDICAL BAY - CONTINUOUS

Cole sits at his station. A new entry open in the medical log.

He types one line. Stops.

ON SCREEN: Santos - behavioral note - 0317 hrs: Negotiating with signal source. Possible Stage II cognitive capture. Recommend-

He deletes it.

Types it again. Reads it. Deletes it again.

The cursor blinks.

He tells himself he doesn't have enough data to file a behavioral flag. That a single observation isn't evidence. That he'll wait.

He knows that's not why he deleted it.

He deleted it because filing the note means he has to treat her as compromised. And he is not ready to lose another one of them to a category on a form.

He closes the log. Stares at the blank screen.

COLE  
(quiet, to himself)  
You keep doing that.

He means himself.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMS STATION – NIGHT CYCLE

0410 ship time. The crew is in sleep cycles. Cole moves through the dark common area alone – not drifting, moving. Purposeful.

He reaches the comms station. Pulls up the ELF band control panel. The harmonic Santos has been mapping cycles through the speaker – low, patient, alive.

Cole studies the panel for a long beat. Then he begins the isolation sequence – methodical, surgical. Antenna array offline. Passive receiver muted. ELF band closed.

The harmonic stops.

Silence.

Thirty seconds of it. Cole stands in the silence the way a surgeon stands after a successful procedure – still, reading the room.

Then – from the life support bay. A hum. Low. Familiar.

The harmonic is back. Not through the comms panel. Through the O2 recycler. The water processor. The heat exchanger. Every passive system the ship runs to keep them alive. The signal hasn't lost the channel. It's become the infrastructure.

Cole stands very still.

He cannot cut the signal without cutting the ship. He cannot cut the ship without cutting the crew.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
(barely audible,  
almost gentle)  
We... are... already... here.

Cole doesn't respond. He closes the comms panel. Turns off the station display. Walks back to the medical bay in the dark.

He doesn't tell the crew. There is nothing to tell them that would help.

CUT TO:

CREW CUMULATIVE DOSE: 1,023 mSv

(Safe limit: 1,000 mSv)

INT. CREW CAPSULE — MEDICAL BAY — DRIFT DAY 23

Cole runs a full systems check.

O2 SCRUBBERS: 91%

WATER RECYCLER: 94%

RADIATION DOSE: ELEVATED

CREW PSYCH: DECLINING

He logs everything.

He hesitates on the last line.

COLE  
(quiet)  
We're running out of time.  
He closes the tablet.

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — DRIFT DAY 25

The crew gathers — not because they want to, but because they have to.

Harris floats at the console.

Okafor grips a handrail, jaw tight.

Santos looks wired.

Reeves looks brittle.

Dillon looks calm.

Cole watches all of them.

HARRIS  
We've run every option.  
Solar graveyard. Mars capture.  
Jupiter sling. Deep drift.  
Every model ends the same way.  
Silence.

OKAFOR  
We're not dead yet.

SANTOS  
We're... somewhere in between.  
Reeves closes her eyes.

REEVES

We stay on protocol.  
Cole looks at her — the first crack  
of real fear in his eyes.

COLE

Protocol won't save us.  
Reeves doesn't respond.  
Harris looks at Cole.

HARRIS

We've got a full tank — but it's Mars  
fuel. One precision burn, not a  
brute-force return.  
Cole logs it.  
The crew floats in silence.  
The drift hums around them.  
The ship feels smaller.  
The air feels heavier.  
The hope feels thinner.

DILLON is closest to the observation window. He goes still.

DILLON

Hey.

Nobody looks up.

DILLON (cont'd)

Hey.

They look.

Through the windows: RED light. Not warm red. Cold.  
Clinical. It doesn't drift or organize — it moves  
methodically across the hull. Port to starboard. Bow to  
stern. Slow. Deliberate. A structural scan.

The red light paints every face.

SANTOS

(quiet)

That's new.

OKAFOR

(even quieter)

It's been doing that for how long?

COLE is at the back of the room. Watching the aurora, not  
the crew.

COLE

Long enough to know where all of us  
are.

The red light finishes its sweep. Fades.

DILLON  
(barely audible)  
It was counting us.

Nobody argues with that.

CUT TO:

CREW CUMULATIVE DOSE: 1,147 mSv

(Safe limit: 1,000 mSv)

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — DOME — DRIFT DAY 20

DILLON is alone up here. Data chips in a neat row on the instrument shelf. He has been talking softly into his tablet for an hour. He stops mid-sentence.

Through the dome glass: a haze. Blue-white, impossibly delicate. It drifts across the forward arc like smoke through a doorway.

A comet tail. Not the comet itself — that's millions of kilometers ahead, already gone. Just the remnant: ionized gas and dust catching what little sunlight reaches this far out, shimmering faintly.

Dillon watches it drift past. Slow. Peaceful. Gone in forty seconds.

DILLON  
(into recorder)  
Log entry, addendum. Drift Day  
twenty. We passed through a comet's  
tail today. Forty seconds. Blue-  
white. I don't know which comet.  
Somebody should know we saw that.

DILLON (cont'd)  
(quiet, to the dark)  
We're going as far as we can.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - COMMON AREA - DRIFT DAY UNKNOWN

DILLON floats in the center of the common area with a food pouch and a specific expression - the expression of a man who has decided something.

DILLON  
Okay. New rule.

Nobody looks up. Harris at his console. Reeves runs a checklist.

DILLON (cont'd)  
We do one thing every day that isn't dying.

He pulls out his phone. Connects it to the ship's audio output.

REEVES  
Dillon -

Misfits blasts through the speaker. Harris looks up. Santos turns from the observation window.

Dillon dances in zero-g. Badly. Deliberately badly - the kind of dancing that is a full commitment to looking stupid because looking stupid means you're still alive enough to care.

Santos cracks a smile. She tries not to. She fails.

HARRIS  
You're gonna blow your eardrums.

DILLON  
(still dancing)  
Better than listening to the walls.

Reeves watches all of this. She doesn't smile. But the checklist goes face-down on the console. That's enough.

COLE watches from the corner - quiet, filing it. Something in his face that isn't quite a smile and isn't quite grief.

The track runs forty-five seconds before Dillon's phone chirps a battery warning. He kills it. The silence that follows is lighter. For now.

DILLON (cont'd)  
(to the room)  
Same time tomorrow.

He floats back to his station.

CUT TO:

CREW CUMULATIVE DOSE: 1,289 mSv

(Safe limit: 1,000 mSv)

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — WEEKS INTO THE DRIFT

DILLON floats alone in the dim amber light.

He is calm. Almost serene.

In front of him: a small tablet, a portable recorder, and a growing stack of data chips.

He speaks softly into the recorder, voice steady, almost gentle.

DILLON

Log entry... day unknown. This is Tech Sergeant Roy Dillon. If you're listening to this, we didn't make it home. But we made it this far.

He pauses, smiles faintly.

DILLON (cont'd)

That counts for something.

He drifts to the observation window. The stars are endless.

He begins cataloging everything — methodically, without panic.

He labels data chips.

He logs system status.

He records crew vitals from the last medical sweep.

DILLON (cont'd)

(into recorder)

Food at sixty-three percent. Water recycler at ninety-four. O2 scrubbers nominal. Radiation exposure... higher than we planned.

He pauses on another line. Different kind of number.

DILLON (cont'd)

(into recorder)

Estimated distance from Sol: somewhere past two AU.

(MORE)

DILLON (cont'd)  
We're beyond Mars orbit. Moving  
outward at sixty klicks per second.  
At this rate we cross Jupiter's  
distance in about a month. Neptune's  
in four. After that there's nothing  
on any chart that was ever meant for  
a crew.

He stops.

Looks at the recorder.

DILLON (cont'd)  
We're not going home the way we  
wanted. But we can still go as far as  
we can. Someone should know what we  
saw out here.

He keeps working.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - LIFE SUPPORT BAY - LATER

Dillon checks the water recycler.

The condensation on the panel forms perfect circular  
clusters - too perfect, too

symmetrical, too organic.

He wipes them away.

They reform instantly.

DILLON  
(quiet)  
...nope.  
He backs away slowly.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - DILLON'S CORNER - LATER

Dillon is alone again.

He has arranged the data chips in neat rows, like a small  
shrine.

He speaks into the recorder once more.

DILLON  
For whoever finds this... we tried. We  
really tried.

A faint shimmer appears in the bulkhead reflection behind him.

His GRANDMOTHER – older, kind, exactly as he remembers.

She doesn't speak at first.

She just looks at him with quiet love.

Dillon goes very still.

DILLON (cont'd)  
(soft, almost  
reverent)  
Hey, Gran.

The reflection smiles.

GRANDMOTHER  
(gentle, in her  
exact voice)  
You always were the strong one, Roy.

Dillon's eyes well.

He doesn't fight it.

DILLON  
I don't feel strong right now.

GRANDMOTHER  
You don't have to. You just have to  
keep going as far as you can.

He nods slowly.

The reflection fades.

Dillon sits with it for a long beat.

Then he goes back to cataloging – calmer now.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – LATER

The crew is scattered, exhausted.

Dillon drifts among them, offering small, practical help.

He hands Santos a fresh data chip.

DILLON  
For your star logs.

He adjusts a loose strap on Reeves's harness.

DILLON (cont'd)  
You're doing good.

He pauses by Reeves, who is still hollow from her own collapse.

DILLON (cont'd)  
(quiet)  
Protocol's important. But so is rest.

Reeves looks at him — surprised by the gentleness.

DILLON (cont'd)  
We go as far as we can. That's the mission now.

The crew absorbs it.

No one argues.

Dillon becomes the emotional ballast without trying.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — MEDICAL BAY — NIGHT CYCLE

Dillon is alone with Cole.

He is showing early signs of radiation sickness — pale, tired, but calm.

DILLON  
Doc... if it gets bad, don't drag it out.

Cole looks at him.

COLE  
We're not there yet.

DILLON  
I know. But when we are... I want to go clean. Toward what I've been hearing.

Cole doesn't answer right away.

He just stays with him.

DILLON (cont'd)

(soft)

Grandma's voice. She's been with me since the drift started. She says it's okay.

Cole absorbs that.

COLE

You're not alone.

Dillon smiles – peaceful.

DILLON

I know.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – DOME – NIGHT CYCLE

Santos has been at the telescope for six hours. She is not recording anymore. She is just looking.

Through the eyepiece: SATURN. Smaller than Jupiter – farther out, less dominant – but the rings change everything. Edge-on from this angle they're a razor-thin line bisecting the planet's disc, geometrically perfect, catching the distant sun in a thin bright wire.

Santos has studied Saturn her entire career. She wrote her doctoral thesis on ring dynamics. She has never seen it like this. She pulls back from the eyepiece and floats in the center of the dome with her arms loose at her sides.

Like a human being, for once. Not a scientist.

SANTOS

(to herself)

There it is.

She takes no photos. No recordings. No notes. She watches Saturn turn until the ship's drift carries it out of the dome's arc of view.

Then she picks up her recorder.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
 (back to science,  
 voice steady)  
 Signal log addendum. The harmonic  
 pattern I've been mapping matches the  
 rotational period of the aurora  
 events. They're not random.

She looks at where Saturn was.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
 (quieter)  
 Nothing out here is random.

SANTOS floats alone at the main view-port, tablet in one  
 hand, a small external microphone clipped to the hull in the  
 other.

She is calm. Focused. Scientific.

She records a low-frequency hum coming from outside the  
 ship.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
 (into recorder,  
 precise)  
 Signal log, day unknown. ELF band.  
 8-12 Hz. Repeating harmonic pattern.  
 Not random. Not noise.

She taps the tablet. A waveform appears.

She overlays it with another recording. The two patterns  
 sync.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
 (quietly awed)  
 It's responding.

She drifts to the nav station, pulls up the ship's sensor  
 array.

She begins mapping the resonance patterns - lines  
 connecting, forming geometric shapes on the screen.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - SANTOS'S WORK AREA - LATER

The table is covered in data chips and printed waveforms.

Santos works methodically, cataloging every new harmonic.

She speaks into the recorder again, voice steady but edged with wonder.

SANTOS  
The signal isn't background  
radiation. It's structured. It's...  
listening.

A faint shimmer appears in the view-port reflection behind her.

A CATHEDRAL – vast, luminous, made of light and memory. Not religious exactly. More like the inside of a mind made architecture.

Santos goes very still.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
(soft, reverent)  
...hello.

The cathedral shifts slightly, as if acknowledging her.

She doesn't flinch. She leans in.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
You're not random. You're trying to  
say something.

The structure pulses once. Gentle. Warm.

Santos smiles – small, private, almost hopeful.

CUT TO:

EXT. ASTRAEUS – DEEP SPACE – DRIFT DAY UNKNOWN

The airlock opens.

Two figures drift out first – OKAFOR and DILLON, tethered, moving along the hull with the ease of people who have stopped being afraid of the void.

Then REEVES. HARRIS. SANTOS.

Cole stays inside the hatch, watching. He will not come out yet.

The crew fans out along the hull – slow, unhurried, reckless in the way of the already-condemned.

Then – a curtain of light rises along the hull. GOLD. Not the diffuse green of the early contact.

This is structured, banded, moving in slow waves that follow the ship's spine like current through a wire. It climbs past their suits. It catches in their visors.

Nobody speaks.

Wide – impossibly wide. The full hull of the *Astraeus* in silhouette. Five figures tethered against it like paper cut-outs against the dark. The gold aurora slices the sky behind them in slow, breathing bands.

And below –

JUPITER.

A banded disc of cream and amber and rust, storm systems larger than Earth spinning in slow grandeur. The Great Red Spot like a wound that won't close. Four moons visible at the edge of frame – Io, Europa, Ganymede, Callisto – each one a world the crew will never reach.

Six human beings. One broken ship. The gold aurora. Jupiter's full face.

This is the image.

Santos is the first to move. She reaches out, palm flat, and lets the gold light wash across her glove.

SANTOS  
(helmet comms,  
barely audible)  
It's warm.

It isn't. But she feels it that way.

Suit alarms have been chirping for four minutes. Nobody has moved to silence them.

A comet's remnant drifts across the forward arc – barely visible, a blue-white haze of ionized dust catching the last of the distant sun. It passes through the aurora's gold and splits the light for three seconds.

Then it's gone.

Harris watches it go through his handheld scope.

HARRIS  
(quiet, to himself)  
First humans to see any of this.

He doesn't say the second half. They all know the second half.

Dillon spins in zero-g – arms wide, face up – letting the aurora move through him. Not joy exactly. The thing past joy. The thing you feel when the grief is so complete it circles back to something like peace.

DILLON

(quiet awe)

We're the first humans to see this.

Okafor pushes off the hull – too hard, too far – drifting out on her tether until she hangs in open space, facing Jupiter's full disc. The gold aurora moves around her.

OKAFOR

(flat)

We're the last humans to see anything.

Reeves watches her. Too tired to intervene.

HARRIS

If we were on trajectory, we'd be braking right now.

REEVES

We're not on trajectory.

Okafor stares into the planet's banding. Something in her posture shifts – not surrender. The opposite. A fighter finding the last place to plant her feet.

OKAFOR

(whisper)

Hold the line...

Santos floats near the comms pack on her suit – listening to something the others can't yet hear.

SANTOS

Do you hear that?

A faint pulse. A shimmer moves across the gold aurora – a different color threading through it. Cold. Clinical.

DILLON

That's not solar wind. Come on. We're dying anyway. Might as well get the view.

Santos tilts her head.

SANTOS

(soft)

It's learning us.

Cole steps onto the hull. Last. He clips his tether. Looks at his crew – six people silhouetted against Jupiter's face, the gold aurora slicing the sky behind them. He has this image of them the way you file a thing you know you will need later.

COLE  
(quiet, to himself)  
Beautiful.

A faint blue glow rises along the hull – different in character from the gold. Colder. More organized. The alien's other frequency.

The crew turns toward it – mesmerized, terrified, undone.

Cole is the only one who looks away.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – LATER

The crew is gathered loosely.

Santos drifts in, tablet in hand, eyes bright with discovery.

SANTOS  
I have something.

They look up.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
The harmonics. They're not natural. They're responsive. I mapped them. They're building patterns that match our own transmissions. They're learning us.

REEVES  
(still hollow)  
Learning us how?

SANTOS  
They're intelligent. Something is out here. Something that understands we're adrift.

DILLON nods slowly, peaceful.

DILLON  
We go as far as we can. Maybe this is part of it.

HARRIS is silent.

Cole watches Santos carefully.

COLE  
Santos... you're seeing structure in  
noise.

SANTOS  
(gentle but firm)  
No. I'm seeing intelligence in the  
dark.

She holds up the tablet. The waveform pulses in sync with  
the ship's hum.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
(quiet, certain)  
Something is out here. And it's  
reaching back.

The crew absorbs it.

No one argues.

Santos becomes the hinge — the bridge between the  
Pragmatists' calm acceptance and the Hopefuls' rising  
belief.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — SANTOS'S WORK AREA — NIGHT CYCLE

Santos is alone again.

The cathedral reflection returns. Larger now. More detailed.  
Light and memory folding into impossible geometry.

She drifts closer to the view-port.

SANTOS  
(whisper)  
Show me more.

The structure opens — a vast interior of light, echoing with  
faint, wordless resonance.

Santos's eyes fill with wonder.

SANTOS (cont'd)  
I see you.

The cathedral pulses once. Warm. Inviting.

She smiles – peaceful, almost transcendent.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – PILOT STATION – WEEKS INTO THE DRIFT

OKAFOR floats at the pilot controls, eyes on the forward window. The stars are endless. She is still the fighter – posture straight, hands steady on the stick out of habit.

But something is shifting.

She closes her eyes for a long beat. When she opens them again, the cabin lights have softened into the warm gold of a Sunday morning back home.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – OKAFOR'S MEMORY / VISION – SUNDAY MORNING

A small kitchen on Earth. Sunlight through lace curtains. Coffee brewing. Her FATHER at the table, reading the paper exactly as she remembers him.

FATHER  
(gentle, familiar)  
You always fought the hardest, Aisha.  
Even when you didn't have to.

Okafor drifts closer in the vision. She reaches for the coffee pot. Her hand passes through it.

OKAFOR  
(soft, wondering)  
Dad?

FATHER  
You don't have to fight alone  
anymore.

The vision holds. Warm. Safe. Real.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – LATER

Okafor drifts among the crew, energized in a new way. The fighter is cracking open into something softer.

OKAFOR  
 (quiet, almost shy)  
 I saw my father this morning. Sunday  
 light. Coffee. The whole thing.

The crew looks up.

DILLON smiles, peaceful.

DILLON  
 They're reaching back.

SANTOS nods, eyes bright.

SANTOS  
 The signal is learning us. It's  
 giving us what we need.

REEVES is still hollow but listens.

Cole watches Okafor carefully. He files it – the fighter  
 breaking open, the new belief taking root. Says nothing.

COLE watches. Files it. Says nothing.

OKAFOR  
 (continuing, gaining  
 strength)  
 They're trying to help us. I felt it.  
 They're guiding us home.

Harris is silent.

Okafor becomes the emotional center of the hopeful faction  
 without trying.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – PILOT STATION – NIGHT CYCLE

Okafor is alone again at the controls.

The Sunday morning vision returns – stronger now. Her father  
 at the table, smiling.

FATHER  
 You can let go of the stick, Aisha.  
 They've got you.

Okafor's hands loosen on the controls for the first time  
 since the cascade.

She smiles – peaceful, almost transcendent.

OKAFOR  
(whisper)  
I believe you.

The vision fades slowly, leaving her floating in the real cabin, eyes shining.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — MEDICAL BAY — WEEKS INTO THE DRIFT

Cole floats alone at the diagnostic station. Vitals from every crew member scroll on the main screen.

He studies them the way a combat surgeon reads a casualty report.

COLE watches. Files it. Says nothing.

Okafor's REM spikes are climbing.

Santos's alpha waves are syncing with the ELF harmonics.

Reeves's cortisol is locked in fight-or-flight even when she sleeps.

Harris's heart-rate variability is collapsing into grief math.

Dillon's radiation markers are climbing, but his voice stays calm.

Harris's muscle mass is down four percent by Cole's last assessment. Okafor's grip strength measurably weaker than launch baseline. The resistive exercise gear gets used less as depression sets in. Bodies breaking down on schedule. Quietly. Unreported.

Cumulative radiation dose for all six is past the threshold where Cole stops writing optimistic notes in the margin.

Cole cross-references the data against the Pandorum diagnostic table he built weeks ago.

He adds one new line at the bottom:

COLE (V.O.)  
(soft, clinical)  
All six showing Stage II symptoms.  
I'm next.

He closes the file. Locks it.

He sits in the amber dark.

He thinks about Harris at the airlock. Reeves crying against the bulkhead. Every one of them he caught – stayed with – held in place without pushing.

That was the job. That was who he was. He is not sure who he is now.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – MEDICAL BAY – NIGHT CYCLE

Cole sleeps strapped into the med-bay harness.

His breathing is shallow. His hands twitch.

CUT TO:

INT. AFGHAN COMPOUND – NIGHT – COLE'S MEMORY

Gunfire everywhere. Muzzle flashes strobe the courtyard. Rounds snap overhead,

punching into mud walls.

Cole is on his knees in the dirt, working a MAS-CAL under fire – hands moving fast,

precise, automatic.

A TEAMMATE drags another casualty toward him.

TEAMMATE

Doc! Incoming!

Cole grabs the man, rolls him, checks airway, chest, abdomen – blood everywhere.

COLE

I got him. Hold pressure here. Don't let go.

Another burst of gunfire from the rooftop. Two teammates return fire, shouting over

the chaos.

On the far side of the courtyard, the COMMS GUY crouches behind a wall, radio pressed

to his ear.

COMMS GUY  
 (over radio)  
 Requesting danger-close fire mission,  
 Type Three control, grid to follow.

Cole doesn't look up. He's packing a wound, sealing a chest,  
 moving to the next man.

TEAMMATE  
 Doc, we got five now.

COLE  
 Tourniquet. High and tight. Go.

COMMS GUY  
 (over radio)  
 Grid: 2-4-Romeo-Victor - 1-5-7-3 - 8-  
 4-2-1.

Cole hears it - distantly - but he's already elbow-deep in  
 another casualty. He's too busy saving a life to process the  
 numbers.

COMMS GUY (cont'd)  
 (over radio)  
 Grid confirmed. Danger close inbound.  
 Twenty seconds.

The distant roar of jets builds - low, rising, wrong.

Cole throws himself over the casualty he's treating,  
 shielding him with his own body.

The whine of incoming ordnance grows sharper -

A blinding FLASH.

A deafening BOOM.

Everything goes black.

CUT TO:

INT. AFGHAN COMPOUND - MOMENTS LATER

Ringling. Dust. Ash drifting like snow.

Cole lies on top of the casualty - both half-buried in  
 debris.

He pushes himself up - ears bleeding, vision swimming.

Moans. Cries. Someone screaming.

TEAMMATE (O.S.)

Doc!! Medic!!

Cole staggers to his feet, choking on dust.

The courtyard is wrecked. Bodies everywhere. The compound hit dead-center.

Cole looks around.

He doesn't say a word.

He just understands.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — MEDICAL BAY — NIGHT

Cole wakes thrashing against the harness — drenched in sweat, gasping.

He looks around. Wild. Disoriented.

COLE

(hoarse)

Get out of my head.

Silence.

He stares at the ceiling of the medical bay.

His hands are shaking. He looks at them.

The same hands. The same work. Different ship. Different bodies. Same outcome.

He doesn't sleep again.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — MEDICAL BAY — LATER

Cole sits at the diagnostic station. Not working. Just sitting.

He opens a personal file on his tablet — the only one that isn't medical data. A photo. A Great Dane asleep on a couch that's too small for him.

Cole stares at it.

The ELF harmonic – Santos's frequency – bleeds through the bulkhead from the common area. Low. Almost below hearing.

Cole doesn't move to shut it out.

For a few seconds, the harmonic and the photo and the dim amber light make something that feels like sitting somewhere warm.

He notices what he's doing.

He closes the photo. Goes back to the vitals screen.

He doesn't acknowledge what just happened. He files it the way he files everything: correctly, completely, without mercy.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – MEDICAL BAY – NIGHT

Cole checks the crew vitals. All six show REM spikes, cortisol elevation, radiation

stress.

He rubs his eyes.

When he looks back – the vitals have changed.

All six read: STATUS: OPTIMAL

Cole slams the console.

COLE  
Stop rewriting my data.

The lights flicker.

Silence.

He resets the display manually. The real numbers come back.

He logs what just happened. Files it. Says nothing to the crew.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — LATER

The hopeful faction is gathered near the observation window. Okafor and Santos are animated. Dillon listens peacefully. Reeves is hollow but present.

Radio bursts crackle from the speaker — short, structured, repeating.

SANTOS

They're getting clearer.

OKAFOR

They're trying to help us.

Cole drifts in, listening.

Another burst. Longer this time. Almost like coordinates.

For a moment — just a moment — Cole feels it. The warmth in the frequency. The sense that something vast is paying attention. It moves through him like the feeling of a hand on a shoulder. He closes his eyes.

And then he hears the structure underneath it.

The burst isn't speaking to them. It's cataloging them. The tone shifts on the third repetition — not response, recalibration. Not comfort, collection. He has sat across from SERE instructors who used the same register. He has been in rooms where people were turned without knowing it.

He opens his eyes. The warmth is gone. In its place: clarity.

He speaks, calm, surgical.

COLE

Could be another nation. Secret program. Chinese, Russian, private. Somebody with a deep-space asset that picked up our ping during the cascade.

The room quiets.

COLE (cont'd)

Or we save every drop of RCS fuel we have left. If we pass anything with mass in the next few months we might be able to steal a gravity assist. Bend the vector just enough.

HARRIS

(quiet, exhausted)  
We already ran those numbers. We've got maybe two hundred meters per second of usable delta-v left. We need tens of thousands. The reactor still has fuel - D-He3 for years. What we don't have is reaction mass. No propellant, no thrust. We jettisoned our abort reserves with the stage.

COLE

We ran them when we still had the fuel stage. Different math now.

DILLON

We could burn straight-line to Mars. Test the landing craft the way we were always going to. Die on the surface instead of out here.

HARRIS

Solar graveyard - we nudge perihelion toward the Sun. Takes three weeks of burns. Doesn't change v-infinity. We'd fall in faster, but we'd still leave. We can't buy our way back into an ellipse with what we have. Jupiter sling - we aim for the gas giant, use the gravity well. We'd need to hit an approach window we don't have the delta-v to set up cleanly. We'd get flung faster outward, not back. Full reactor burn to try brute-forcing it - we'd cook the radiators off the spine in about six hours. The structural margin isn't there. We can't sustain the thrust we'd need even if we had the reaction mass.

SANTOS

Or we stay on this trajectory. Live as far as we can. Keep collecting. Keep transmitting. Someone will find the logs.

Cole does the math. He doesn't say it out loud.

Deep drift - at current life support consumption, scrubbers nominal and no catastrophic failure, they have fourteen months.

Maybe sixteen if they ration below ration level three. Long enough to watch the Sun shrink to a bright star. Not long enough to reach anything.

OKAFOR  
(fierce with new  
belief)

Or they open the door for us. They  
already said they can bring us home.

Cole's eyes flick to the speaker as another burst comes through.

Cole stays at the edge. His eyes go to the speaker, then back to the group.

He drifts closer to the group.

COLE  
We don't know where they're taking us  
after.

The hopefuls look at him like he's the last man still fighting a war that ended.

REEVES  
(soft, almost pitying)  
Marcus... they said home.

COLE  
They said home. They didn't  
say our home.

A long beat.

Cole's voice stays level.

COLE (cont'd)  
I'm not asking you to believe me. I'm  
asking you to let me propose one  
surgical option. The Sunbird still  
has enough reaction mass for one  
precision burn – not a brute-force  
return, but a single aimed shot. We  
use Mars exactly the way the mission  
planned. Gravity assist bends us back  
toward the inner system. Mission  
Control intercepts. No Earth  
coordinates. No front door. Just the  
way-point we already had.

He lets it land.

COLE (cont'd)  
(final, quiet)  
Use what's in the field.

The hopefuls exchange glances. The warmth they feel from the signal is palpable. Cole feels none of it.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE - OBSERVATION WINDOW - MOMENTS LATER

Cole is alone at the window.

The radio bursts again - warmer, more personal.

In the reflection of the glass, a single point of light appears. Not a star. Something else.

Cole stares at it.

The light pulses once.

Cole stares back.

For the first time, the alien and Cole see each other. No words. Just recognition.

The light shifts slightly - recalibrating.

Cole's face hardens.

COLE  
(under his breath)  
You already burned me.

The next burst comes through. This one is addressed to the group, not to him.

The alien has routed around the target.

Cole watches the reflection. The light is gone.

He files it.

INT. CREW CAPSULE - OBSERVATION WINDOW - CONTINUOUS

Cole stays at the window.

The reflection is still. No pulse. Just his own face and the dark behind it.

He speaks quietly. Not to the alien. Not to himself. To the record.

COLE  
 (low, honest)  
 I know what you're offering. I've  
 watched you give it to all of them.

A beat.

COLE (cont'd)  
 I envy them. I want you to know that.  
 The not-knowing. The warmth. The way  
 Harris's hands stopped shaking. The  
 way Santos stopped being afraid.

He doesn't look away from his reflection.

COLE (cont'd)  
 If you'd come for me first – before I  
 heard the structure underneath the  
 warmth – I'd have taken it.

A long beat.

COLE (cont'd)  
 (quieter)  
 You knew that. That's why you didn't.

He pushes off the window. Goes back to work.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – DRIFT DAY UNKNOWN

The alien voice is clearer now – still wearing the cadence  
 of Mission Control, but no  
 longer pretending to be them.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
 We... speak... with you. You... speak... with  
 us.

The crew floats around the console – wary, exhausted,  
 curious.

SANTOS  
 You're not from Earth. We know that  
 now.

A soft pulse. Almost pleased.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Correct.

HARRIS  
Where are you from?

A long pause – as if choosing the answer.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Far. But... near... now.

DILLON  
(smiling faintly)  
That's not an answer.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Your... words... are small. Your...  
distances... are small.

OKAFOR  
How did you find us?

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... were... not... looking. You... crossed...  
the... line.

REEVES  
What line?

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Ours. We... do not... announce. We...  
transmit. Between... points. Not... for...  
you.

A long beat.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.) (cont'd)  
You... fell... into... the... light.

Santos's eyes shine.

SANTOS  
You heard us.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... hear... you... now.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMAND STATION — LATER

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
What... are... your... needs?

DILLON  
(softly)  
Air. Water. Food. Warmth. Each other.  
A thoughtful pulse.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Fragile. You... are... fragile.

COLE  
What are your needs?

A pause.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
To... understand. To... know... you.

COLE  
Why?

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
To... help.

Cole doesn't buy it.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — NEXT CYCLE

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
What... is... death?

Reeves answers — hollow, honest.

REEVES  
It's the end. It's when everything  
stops.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Stops? Why... stop?

DILLON  
(gently)  
Because we're not built to last.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... do... not... stop.

The crew goes still.

SANTOS  
Then what are you?

A long, slow harmonic rises – like a breath.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... are... what... comes... after.

Cole's eyes widen – the first flicker of real dread.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMAND STATION – LATER

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... can... take... you... home.

The crew stares at each other – hope flickering.

Cole floats back, horrified.

COLE  
Don't. Don't listen to that.

The alien voice pulses – patient, inviting.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... only... ask... to... know... where... home...  
is.

The crew breathes in unison.

The trap is set.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMAND STATION – DRIFT DAY UNKNOWN

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.) (cont'd)  
You... breathe... air.

HARRIS  
Yes.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Why?

HARRIS  
Because we need oxygen.  
A long pause.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... do not.

SANTOS  
What do you breathe?

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Light.

The crew goes still.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.) (cont'd)  
Teach... us... how... to... breathe... air.

COLE  
(quiet)  
Why would you need to?

A pause – almost embarrassed.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
To... be... like... you.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – LATER

The alien voice speaks – but the cadence is wrong.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... will... take... you... ho- ho- ho-  
home.

The glitch repeats like a broken record.

SANTOS  
Are you okay?

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... are... We... are... We... are...

The voice resets.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.) (cont'd)  
We are here.

Cole stares at the speaker.

COLE  
It's practicing.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE — COMMON AREA — THE NADIR OF THE DRIFT

The hopeful faction has taken the room.

Okafor floats near the observation window, Santos beside her, both staring at the stars as if waiting for something to answer. Dillon drifts peacefully nearby, data chips still in neat rows. Reeves is present but hollow, Harris silent.

Cole floats at the edge, watching.

The radio speaker is on — low, constant ELF hum beneath everything.

REEVES drifts to the comms console. She picks up the transmission mic.

REEVES  
(into the mic,  
quietly)  
This is Astraeus. Mission Control, do  
you copy.

She waits. Nothing.

REEVES (cont'd)  
Flight, Astraeus. Come in.

Static.

REEVES (cont'd)  
(a beat, then very  
quiet)  
We're transmitting. Nothing's getting  
out. Something's sitting on the  
channel.

She sets the mic down. No one responds to what she said. They all already know.

No one is speaking. The ship itself feels like it is holding its breath.

Then—

A sharp click.

The hum changes. It sharpens. Organizes.

A single clear tone.

The crew turns as one.

OKAFOR  
 (whisper)  
 It's happening.

Another tone. Then a third.

The speaker crackles once – static, then silence.

Then, in perfect, calm, unaccented English:

THE VOICE (V.O.)  
 We understand.

The crew gasps – a single, involuntary sound. Santos's hand flies to her mouth. Okafor's eyes fill. Dillon smiles like a man who just heard his own name called across the dark.

THE VOICE (V.O.) (cont'd)  
 (continuing, warm)  
 We can bring you home.

The reaction is immediate and overwhelming. The hopefuls surge together. Okafor and Santos embrace mid-air. Reeves actually laughs – a broken, relieved sound. Harris drifts in from the edge, pulled by the gravity of hope.

They are grabbing the same rope. Six people who have not been this close since the cascade suddenly become one body again.

SANTOS  
 (laughing through  
 tears)  
 They heard us.

OKAFOR  
 They heard us.

DILLON  
 (quiet, reverent)  
 We go as far as we can... and they meet  
 us there.

Reeves is crying openly now. The commander is back, just for this moment.

Cole does not move. He is the only one still at the edge.

The radio speaks the third sentence.

THE VOICE (V.O.)  
 Show us home.

Cole hears it differently.

The warmth is still there, but underneath it – clear as a scalpel – is the request for coordinates. The address. The delivery.

Cole's face does not change.

Cole's eyes go still. The warmth moves through him like a hand on a shoulder – and then he hears the structure underneath it. The burst isn't speaking to them. It's cataloging them.

The crew is still celebrating. They are shouting over each other now, alive for the first time in months.

OKAFOR  
We're going home!

SANTOS  
They're bringing us home!

DILLON  
I told you. I told you something was  
out here.

Cole drifts back half a meter. Alone in the celebration.

He looks at the speaker as if it has just shown its teeth.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE  
SNAP-BACK

The celebration has not faded. The crew floats together in a single, weightless knot – the first time they have touched like this since the cascade.

The speaker is still open. The hum beneath the English is gone. Only the voice remains.

THE VOICE (V.O.)  
(perfectly modulated,  
warm)  
We understand. We can bring you home.  
Show us home.

Okafor is still laughing through tears. Santos clutches her tablet like a talisman. Dillon drifts with quiet peace. Reeves looks ten years younger. Harris wipes his eyes.

They are alive again.

OKAFOR

Tell us what to do.

THE VOICE (V.O.)

We are listening. Tell us everything.

The crew talks all at once – overlapping, eager, relieved.

SANTOS

We lost the fuel stage in lunar orbit. Micro-meteoroid cascade. RCS failure. We're on a hyperbolic escape trajectory.

REEVES

Current velocity is...

(checks board)

38 kilometers per second relative to Sol. No intercept window with any known asset.

HARRIS

O2 scrubbers at ninety-one percent efficiency. Food for another fourteen months if we ration hard.

DILLON

Radiation exposure is higher than planned. But we're still functional.

Cole's eyes stay on the speaker. At ten AU they can't raise Earth – the signal degrades to noise in the distance. But this comes through like it's next door. Clear. Immediate. Ignoring the inverse-square law like it doesn't apply.

COLE

(quiet, to himself)

We can't raise Earth at ten AU. Whatever this is comes in like it's standing right outside the hull.

The voice absorbs it all. No hesitation. No surprise.

THE VOICE (V.O.)

We see you. We understand the fear. You are not alone anymore.

A soft pulse of warmth comes through the speaker – not words, just the feeling of being seen.

The crew leans in closer to the radio like it is a fire.

Cole floats at the very edge of the group, arms crossed, listening with the same clinical focus he used on every diagnostic screen.

He hears the warmth.

He also hears the questions underneath it.

THE VOICE (V.O.) (cont'd)  
Tell us your exact vector. We can  
match it. We can open the way.

Cole drifts back. Arms still. Everything logged.

Santos is already pulling up the navigation display.

SANTOS  
Here – current position, velocity,  
everything.

She transmits the data packet.

The voice responds instantly, almost tenderly.

THE VOICE (V.O.)  
Thank you. We are coming. You are  
safe.

Okafor closes her eyes in relief.

OKAFOR  
They're coming.

Cole's eyes stay on the speaker. He hears the calibration in the voice – the way it has already learned their cadence, their fear, their hope.

He files it.

THE VOICE (V.O.)  
Rest now. We will speak again soon.

The line stays open – a soft, living presence.

The crew drifts apart slightly, but the knot of hope remains. They are smiling. Touching shoulders. Breathing easier than they have in months.

Cole drifts back alone toward the medical bay.

He stops at the hatch, turns once, looks at the speaker.

For half a second the voice almost feels like it is looking back.

Cole stays at the window a moment longer. Then doesn't.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – COMMON AREA – HOURS AFTER FIRST CONTACT

The crew floats in a loose constellation around the speaker.

The air feels different – lighter, warmer, almost breathable in a way it hasn't been since Earth.

Okafor drifts closest to the radio, eyes soft, posture open.

Santos sits beside her, tablet in hand, mapping every harmonic pulse like scripture.

Dillon hums quietly – not his usual tune, something new, something that matches the faint rhythm under the voice.

Reeves is alert, focused, commander-like again.

Harris looks like a man who has been forgiven.

Cole floats at the edge.

Always the edge.

The speaker pulses – a soft, warm breath.

THE VOICE (V.O.)

You are safe. We are coming. You are not alone.

The crew reacts like flowers turning toward sunlight.

OKAFOR

(whispering, reverent)

They sound like... us.

SANTOS

They're matching our cadence. Our pauses. Our emotional tone.

(beat)

They're learning us.

REEVES

They're guiding us. This is what Mission Control would do.

Cole's eyes flick to her – the first sign she's fully crossed over.

DILLON

(smiling)

Feels like someone finally turned the  
lights on.

He drifts closer to the speaker, eyes half-closed, peaceful.

The others nod.

HARRIS

(voice cracking)

I thought...

(he can't finish)

I thought we were dead.

Okafor reaches out, touches his shoulder.

He lets her.

This is the first physical contact he's accepted since the  
cascade.

The voice pulses again – a soft harmonic swell, almost like  
a sigh.

THE VOICE (V.O.)

We see you. We hear you. We are with  
you.

The crew closes their eyes.

Every one of them.

Except Cole.

He watches the way their bodies respond:

-slowed breathing

-softened posture

-synchronized micro-movements

-pupils dilating

-heart rates dropping in unison.

He's seen this before.

Not in space.

In trauma wards.

In shock victims.

Cole is the only one not leaning in.

THE CREW BEGINS TO SHARE

One by one, they speak to the voice – not reporting, not transmitting, but confessing.

OKAFOR

I was so scared. I didn't want to die out here.

SANTOS

I thought the harmonics were hallucinations. But you were there. You were always there.

REEVES

I failed them. I failed my crew. I failed my mission.

DILLON

I didn't want to die alone.

HARRIS

I didn't want to leave my daughter.

The voice absorbs it all.

THE VOICE (V.O.)

You are safe. You are heard. You are home.

The word home hits them like a drug.

They drift closer together, touching shoulders, foreheads, hands – a weightless embrace.

Cole floats a meter away, untouched by the warmth.

He hears the same words they hear.

But he hears the structure underneath:

-the mirroring

-the emotional calibration

-the reinforcement loops

-the behavioral shaping.

He whispers to himself.

COLE  
It's not comfort. It's conditioning.

He files it.

Says nothing.

THE VOICE (V.O.)  
We will open the way soon. Rest.  
Heal. Be together.

The line stays open – a soft, living presence.

The crew drifts into a loose, weightless embrace.

They look like a family again.

Cole drifts backward into shadow.

He is the only one not blooming.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – SECONDARY COMMS – CONTINUOUS

The crew is still gathered around the main speaker behind him.

Soft voices. The warmth filling the common area like a temperature.

Cole drifts to the secondary comms panel at the far end of the compartment. He doesn't look back. He pulls up the ELF transmit channel.

Low. Private.

He speaks quietly. Not to the crew. To the voice.

COLE  
We hear you. I want to propose a  
navigational solution.

A beat. The warmth in the speaker shifts – recalibrating.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... hear... you.

COLE  
You don't need our coordinates. Put  
us on a heading toward the inner  
system. No grid. We'll use Jupiter's  
gravity well, a Mars assist if we  
can get the geometry. Mission Control  
(MORE)

COLE (cont'd)  
intercepts us from there. You don't  
need to know where home is to point  
us toward it.

A long pause. Longer than any previous pause.

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
We... wish... to bring you... home.

COLE  
A heading. That's all I'm asking for.

Another pause. Then – patient, warm, immovable:

ALIEN SIGNAL (V.O.)  
Show... us... home.

Cole stares at the panel.

Behind him the crew laughs softly at something the voice  
said.

Santos's voice. Okafor's. Close enough to hear. Nobody turns  
around.

Cole closes the secondary channel.

He stands very still.

He files it.

CUT TO:

INT. CREW CAPSULE – MEDICAL BAY – HOURS AFTER THE BLOOM

The common area is still glowing with the aftershock of the  
voice. Laughter drifts faintly through the hatch. Someone is  
crying softly with relief.

Cole is alone at the diagnostic station, reviewing the same  
vitals screen. The numbers have not changed. The crew's  
biometrics are all trending the same direction – lowered  
cortisol, synchronized alpha waves, pupil dilation  
consistent with opioid-level comfort.

He logs it. Closes the file.

The hatch hisses open.

HARRIS drifts in. He looks smaller than he did in the  
Quitter chapter. The math is gone from his eyes. What's left  
is something quieter.

He closes the hatch behind him. They are alone.

HARRIS  
They're still talking to the voice.

Cole doesn't turn around.

COLE  
They're not talking. They're  
confessing.

Harris drifts closer. He stops beside the console, looking at the same screen Cole is studying.

HARRIS  
I know.

A long beat.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
(quiet, almost  
gentle)  
I heard what you said in the common  
area. About the Mars proposal. About  
not giving them our grid.

Cole finally looks at him.

COLE  
You heard it.

HARRIS  
I heard all of it.

He reaches out, touches the edge of the console like he's steadying himself.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
I ran the numbers again. Every  
possible intercept. Every gravity  
assist. Every slingshot we could  
steal. You're right. The voice isn't  
taking us home. It's taking  
us somewhere.

Cole waits.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
I know it's not human. I know it's  
learning us. I know the third  
sentence was a request for  
coordinates, not a promise.

He laughs once — a small, broken sound.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
I even know it's probably the same  
intelligence that routed around you  
the moment you pushed back.

Cole's eyes flick to Harris. The first surprise he's shown  
in weeks.

COLE  
You saw that?

HARRIS  
I saw everything.

Harris looks at the vitals screen again. His own heart rate  
is steady now. Calm. The narcotic is already in him.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
Even if every word of that is true...  
what do you want me to do about it?

The line lands like a scalpel.

Cole doesn't answer right away.

Harris drifts closer, voice low, almost tender.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
My daughter is six years old, Marcus.  
She's running across a field  
somewhere on Earth right now. I can  
see her. I can smell the grass. The  
voice gave me that. It gave me four  
seconds back. It gave me her face  
without the guilt.

He touches the screen where his own vitals are displayed.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
I'm six months from the end of this  
trajectory. Maybe less. I know the  
math better than anyone. I'm tired of  
being the man who chose four seconds  
over his daughter.

He looks at Cole – not angry, not pleading. Just honest.

HARRIS (cont'd)  
So even if you're right... even if this  
thing is going to deliver us like a  
package... I don't care anymore. I just  
want it to mean something.

Cole absorbs it. No judgment. No speech.

COLE (QUIET)

I know.

Harris drifts back half a meter. The two men float there, facing each other in the dim medical bay while the rest of the crew laughs softly in the next compartment.

HARRIS

(final, almost kind)

You're still the only one who hasn't bloomed, Marcus.

Cole watches him.

COLE

I know.

Harris reaches out, touches Cole's shoulder once – the same way Cole has touched every one of them.

HARRIS

Thank you for trying.

He drifts toward the hatch.

Before he leaves he pauses.

HARRIS (cont'd)

Vote's in a few hours. I'm voting yes.

He smiles – small, exhausted, at peace.

HARRIS (cont'd)

See you on the other side.

Harris exits.

Cole stays exactly where he is.

He looks at the vitals screen one more time.

He stays exactly where he is.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – AFT JUNCTION – LATER

The aft junction is cold metal and exposed conduits. The self-destruct charge panel glows red in the bulkhead – the only place on the ship that still feels like hardware.

The crew floats in a loose circle around the central handrail. This is where decisions are made.

Cole arrives last. He drifts to the outer edge, arms loose, face calm.

Santos is at the comm panel, finishing the up-link. The transmission bar is almost full – position, velocity, drift vector, everything.

SANTOS  
(soft, hopeful)  
They're ready. They said "open the way."

Reeves nods.

REEVES  
We vote. Voice or Mars.

The crew is already nodding.

OKAFOR  
Voice.

DILLON  
Voice.

REEVES  
Voice.

HARRIS  
(looking at Cole,  
gentle)  
Voice.

Five votes.

Santos reaches for the final transmit key.

Cole moves – fast, decisive. He crosses the circle, grabs the mic, and kills the up-link with one violent slap of the switch.

Static. Silence.

The crew freezes.

COLE  
I already asked them. Directly. On comms.

He looks at each of them.

COLE (cont'd)  
 A heading only. No coordinates. We  
 navigate the rest ourselves – gravity  
 slings, Mars assist, Mission Control  
 intercepts. They don't need to know  
 where home is to point us toward it.

A beat.

COLE (cont'd)  
 They said show us home. Three times.  
 Same answer.

He looks straight at them.

COLE (cont'd)  
 They don't want a heading. They want  
 the address.  
 (beat)  
 Never give your own grid.

He doesn't look at anyone specific. He doesn't need to.

COLE (cont'd)  
 In combat you never hand out your  
 coordinates. Not to friendlies. Not  
 to aircraft. Not to anyone. Because  
 if you do, they can drop a bomb on  
 you – even by accident.

A beat. Something moves through his face. Not grief. The  
 specific stillness of a man recalling something he filed and  
 never forgot.

COLE (cont'd)  
 I learned that the hard way. Too many  
 men. Wrong grid called into a radio.  
 I was close enough to hear it.  
 Nothing I could do about it.

He looks at the self-destruct panel.

COLE (cont'd)  
 We know nothing about them. Nothing  
 about their intentions. Nothing about  
 their program. And programs are born  
 from the same place everywhere –  
 military, expansion, weapons testing.  
 Ours is. Why wouldn't theirs be?

The crew is rattled.

Cole's voice stays level, almost gentle.

COLE (cont'd)  
Your radiation markers say you should  
feel sick. You don't. That's not a  
blessing. That's control.

A beat.

He looks straight at them.

COLE (cont'd)  
We are expectant. The most good for  
the most people... is for us to die out  
here.

The words land like a fracture in the hull.

Silence.

Then the crew recoils.

REEVES  
(soft, horrified)  
Marcus... listen to yourself.

HARRIS  
You're scaring them.

SANTOS  
We're going home.

OKAFOR  
(voice cracking)  
You're the one who kept us alive this  
long.

Cole doesn't flinch. He is still calm.

COLE  
I'm not giving up. I'm protecting  
home.

He drifts toward the self-destruct panel.

His hand finds the cover. Flips it up.

His fingers close around the arming key.

That's when they move.

Okafor is first – she crosses the space between them in one  
hard push off the bulkhead. Both hands on his wrist.

OKAFOR  
Don't.

He doesn't stop. He pulls against her. She's stronger than he expected and he's stronger than she expected.

Harris and Dillon hit him from behind – not violent, but absolute. Three bodies against one. The key doesn't turn.

Cole doesn't shout. He speaks directly, clearly, to all of them at once.

COLE

You are handing Earth to something that has been running psychological operations on you for months. You are giving it the address. You understand that? The address.

REEVES

Marcus–

COLE

I need thirty seconds with that panel. Thirty seconds and nobody goes anywhere they didn't choose.

HARRIS

(quiet, not unkind)

We chose.

Cole looks at him. Sees it's true. Stops pulling.

They hold him there. Breathing hard. All of them.

Reeves moves in from behind. She has the syringe in her hand. She looks at it. Looks at Cole. Looks back at it.

This isn't belief. This is exhaustion.

Reeves injects him in the arm. Clean. Professional. The ketamine hits fast.

REEVES

I'm sorry, Marcus.

Cole sees it. Understands immediately.

COLE

Don't–

Cole's grip loosens. His body goes slack. His eyes stay open – still tracking, still aware, losing purchase.

COLE (cont'd)  
(slurring, fighting  
it)

You don't know what you're... what  
you're letting in. You don't know  
where it... where it takes...

His eyes close.

Reeves and Harris carry him to the medical bay. Gently. Like  
he's something they want to keep. Dillon opens the hatch.  
They strap him to the diagnostic couch.

Okafor stays at the self-destruct panel until the hatch  
seals. Her hand on the cover. Making sure.

The lock engages. The light goes red.

She exhales.

THE CREW SURRENDERS NAVIGATION

Santos reopens the up-link. The transmission bar fills  
again.

Position. Velocity. Drift vector. Life-support status.  
Internal layout.

Everything.

Okafor watches it with tears in her eyes. Dillon places a  
hand on her shoulder.

Reeves whispers into the open channel.

REEVES  
Bring us home.

The speaker pulses once – a soft, living breath.

THE VOICE (V.O.)  
We see you. We are coming.

The ship hums – a low, resonant vibration that feels like  
inhalation.

The crew drifts closer together, unified.

COLE – ALONE IN MEDICAL

Cole lies strapped to the diagnostic couch in the dim amber  
light.

He hears everything through the bulkhead – the hum, the pulse, the crew's relieved voices, the warmth in the voice.

He closes his eyes.

COLE  
(under his breath)  
You're not bringing us home.

He opens them again. Steady. Clear. Resolved.

Through the small observation window he sees the crew clustered around the speaker.

The light outside the viewport is wrong – too bright, too golden.

He knows what that means.

He tears free of the straps.

Launches himself at the hatch. Pounds on it.

COLE (cont'd)  
What have you done.

No response.

COLE (cont'd)  
What have you DONE—

He hits it again, palm flat against the glass.

COLE (cont'd)  
You don't know what you're letting in. You don't know what it is. You don't know where it takes you. You don't—

His voice breaks.

Outside, the light grows. Cathedral geometry filling the view-port. The ship beginning to move.

Cole slides down the hatch. Back against it. Eyes on the ceiling.

COLE (cont'd)  
(barely audible)  
I know.

CUT TO BLACK.

THE VOICE (V.O.)  
(soft, intimate)  
Open the way.

THE PORTAL HITS

Reeves enters the final command.

The ship shudders – not from engines, but from the external pull.

The cathedral of light brightens, folding inward like a throat opening.

A blast of white light floods every window.

The ship lurches forward – violently, uncontrollably.

Alarms scream. Red strobes flash.

The hull groans – a long, tearing metallic howl.

Bodies slam into bulkheads. Straps whip like live wires.

Okafor grabs a handrail, teeth clenched.

Santos shrieks as she's flung across the compartment.

Dillon thrashes for a strap.

Reeves is slammed against the panel.

Dillon curls into a ball, gasping.

Harris claws at the air, eyes wide with terror.

Cole is pinned against the medical-bay wall by centrifugal force, blood on his lip, breath ragged.

THE OUTSIDE WORLD BREAKS APART

Through the windows: the cathedral collapses into a tunnel of distortion.

Stars stretch into screaming ribbons.

Light fractures.

Geometry folds and rips.

The outside spins wildly – impossible angles, impossible colors.

The crew's screams distort – stretched, slowed, layered like echoes in a collapsing cave.

Metal SCREAMS. Rivets sing.

Bodies slam. Breath tears. No words – only raw, animal sound.

The tunnel narrows, tightening.

Red bleeds into violet.

Stars smear into white scars.

A final, deafening BOOM – like the universe snapping shut.

Black.

SILENCE.

For a long, impossible moment: nothing.

No alarms.

No screams.

No hum.

Just six people breathing – ragged, stunned, alive.

EXT. SPACE – DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF EARTH – CONTINUOUS

The *Astraeus* tumbles out of a collapsing tear in space, trailing vapor and light.

Earth fills the frame – blue, white, impossibly close.

The ship stabilizes, tumbling once, then rights itself.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – CONTINUOUS

The crew floats, battered, barely conscious.

Okafor's eyes flutter open first. She drags herself to the controls.

Reeves stabilizes the roll with shaking hands.

Santos checks the altimeter.

Dillon braces against a bulkhead.

Harris braces the forward bulkhead.

Cole watches from behind the sealed medical hatch – silent, steady.

REENTRY BEGINS

The capsule slams into atmosphere.

FLAMES roar across the windows – exactly like the prologue.

The hull shakes violently.

Metal SCREAMS.

Air tears past the glass.

G-forces crush them.

No words.

Only metal, fire, and six people fighting to stay alive.

THE FINAL DESCENT

Flames fade.

Clouds whip past.

The ocean appears – vast, blue, calm.

Okafor's hands are steady.

She flies the ship.

Silence except for wind and hull creak.

SPLASHDOWN

The capsule hits the water – not a crash, a placement.

Clean. Controlled. Geometrically perfect.

The ship settles. Still.

INT. CREW CAPSULE – CONTINUOUS

The crew sits in their harnesses. Visors up. Eyes forward.

Not dazed. Not relieved.

Still.

The comms panel activates on its own.

IFF cycles – clean, correct.

No one touched it.

The ship logs: CREW STATUS – NOMINAL.

VITALS – STABLE.

BEHAVIORAL FLAGS – NONE.

A diver cracks the hatch. Cold air floods in.

The crew does not react.

They wait.

THE CREW EMERGES – ONE BY ONE

Divers help them out. They accept the assistance without resistance.

OKAFOR – precise, unhurried.

HARRIS – fluid, too fluid.

REEVES – stretchered, eyes open, tracking nothing.

DILLON. SANTOS.

Placed. Still.

They look exhausted.

They look human.

They are not.

Their breathing is synchronized – identical rate, identical depth.

Their pupils dilate with the same timing, same aperture.

A medic checks Dillon's pupils. Something about the look unsettles him.

He moves on. He will think about that look for the rest of his life.

No one notices that none of them have spoken.

COLE EMERGES LAST

A diver helps him out of the medical hatch.

He is battered, soaked, shivering.

He looks exactly like the man who locked himself in there hours ago.

He stands on the deck, staring at the others.

Something inside him is quiet.

Too quiet.

THE FINAL MOMENT

Santos is wheeled past on a stretcher.

She turns her head.

Looks directly at Cole.

For one frame – HER EYES GO BLACK.

A flicker.

A calibration.

A signal.

Cole freezes. Breath catches.

Then – HIS EYES FLICKER BACK.

Black. One frame. Gone.

Recognition.

Alignment.

Two signals syncing.

Cole is already on the vessel. This is not him.

No horror. No shock. Just connection.

Santos is wheeled away.

Cole stands on the deck, blanket around his shoulders, staring at the dark water.

The world celebrates – cheers, spotlights, radios crackling with "All crew recovered."

They are home.

They are not human.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. ALIEN VESSEL – LOCATION UNKNOWN

No music. Only the faint aurora hum.

We see it as it is – not cathedral, not geometry – something older, a space that exists the way a mind exists: without walls, without dimension, without the courtesy of being comprehensible.

Six HUMAN BODIES on surfaces that are not surfaces.

Four of them are dead.

Not peacefully. The alien did not need them intact. What it needed has been removed – chest cavities opened, organs displaced, the work of something that has done this before and found it unremarkable. The bodies are not destroyed. They are finished. Processed. HARRIS. DILLON. REEVES.

And COLE – at the end of the row. Hands at his sides. Eyes closed. He looks like a man who knew.

The clinical light – if it is light – catches the damage without comment.

Two of them are alive.

SANTOS is held upright by something with no name in any human language.

Her eyes are open. Human eyes – fully, completely human. She tracks the room. She tracks us.

A membrane seals her mouth – not violent, biological, grown in place.

Tubing enters at her neck, her wrist, her abdomen. Other tubing leads away into the dark, carrying things out and pushing things in.

She is aware. She understands exactly what is happening to her. She has been here long enough to stop trying to move.

OKAFOR is beside her. Less present. Her eyes are open but focused somewhere beyond the room, beyond reach. The same membrane. The same tubing.

Whatever she is experiencing has taken her somewhere the alien finds useful. Her hands are open at her sides – the pilot's hands, still.

Santos turns her head. Slowly. She looks directly at us.

Her eyes are human. Completely human.

That is the worst part.

She found exactly what she was looking for.

COLE — at the end of the row. Dead. Hands at his sides. He looks like a man who knew.

CUT TO:

EXT. LOW EARTH ORBIT — NIGHT SIDE

City lights across continents.

A pulse moves through the upper atmosphere — GREEN — a slow wave across the globe.

No one notices.

CUT TO:

EXT. EARTH — MULTIPLE LOCATIONS — CONTINUOUS

Three tears open in the upper atmosphere.

FAYETTEVILLE — warm gold.

NEW YORK — colder light.

TOKYO — larger, lingering.

People look up.

Some run.

Most simply stare.

CUT TO:

EXT. PACIFIC OCEAN — DEEP WATER — CONTINUOUS

Three objects enter the ocean in sequence. Controlled. Precise.

The ocean rises — not a wave, a relocation.

CUT TO:

EXT. NAVY RECOVERY VESSEL — DECK — CONTINUOUS

The six impostors stand at the rail, blankets around their shoulders, watching the shore.

Behind them, the horizon darkens with the rising wall of water.

Okafor's face turns to Harris's face.

A small nod.

They walk toward the gangway.

Perfect.

Human.

Not human.

The world burns behind them.

They walk toward it without hurry, without fear, without anything that was ever ours.

CUT TO BLACK.

TITLE CARD: THE LONG DRIFT

One sound — three seconds — the aurora hum.

Not confirming.

Announcing it.

HARD CUT TO  
BLACK.