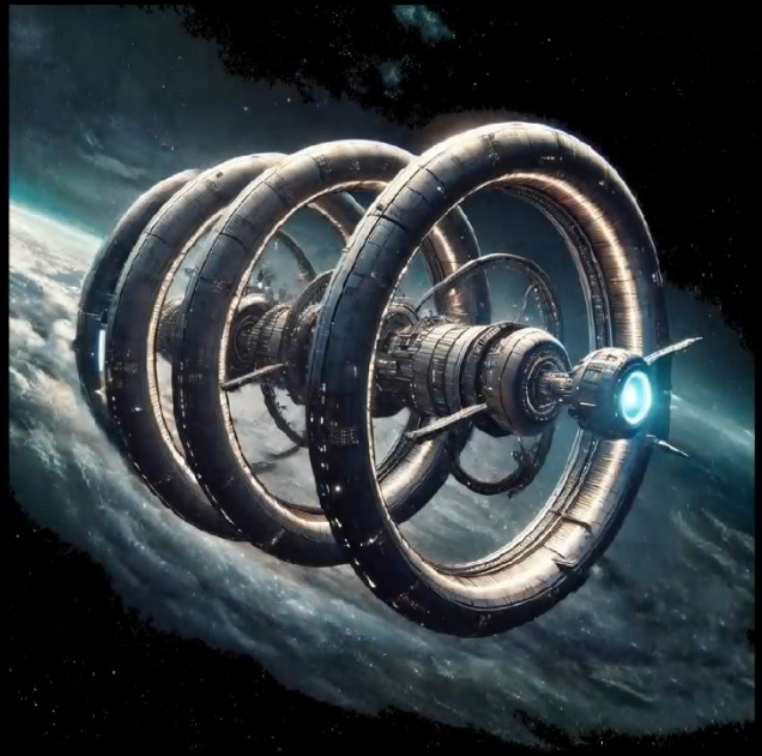

The Time Dilated Generations

by Esteban Gallardo

Story Book Editor
Version 0.1

Chapter 9: The Long Road Traveled

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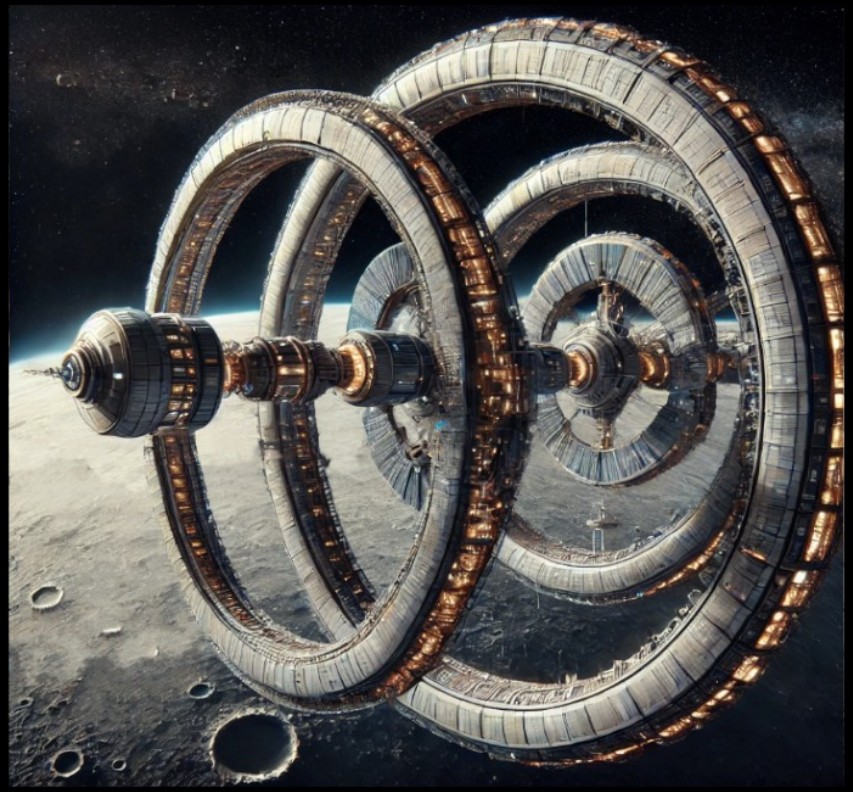
Ellie's first major breakthrough in developing a viable near-light-speed propulsion system came thirty years after she had begun her research. It was an achievement that marked the culmination of decades of relentless effort, yet it was only five years after humanity had successfully completed the third stage of its plan to leave Earth behind.

The third stage of humanity's exodus was the construction of a vast orbital shipyard, a monument to survival and human willpower—the place where the generational starships would take shape.

For this stage to even be possible, the Moon base had to become fully self-sufficient in mineral extraction. Humanity could no longer afford to rely on Earth for resources. They had gambled with fate long enough—each launch, each transmission, each detectable signal was a risk that could draw the AI's attention.

Thankfully, the Moon, sharing a common past with Earth, held most of the essential elements needed for large-scale construction. Within a few years, engineers had verified that nearly all the necessary materials could be extracted directly from the Moon.

Still, there were some missing elements, materials that could only be found in trace amounts—or not at all. A new asteroid mining program was launched, targeting the rich mineral deposits of the asteroid belt. This expansion was more than just a solution to a problem—it was a statement. Mankind would no longer look downward to survive. They would look outward.

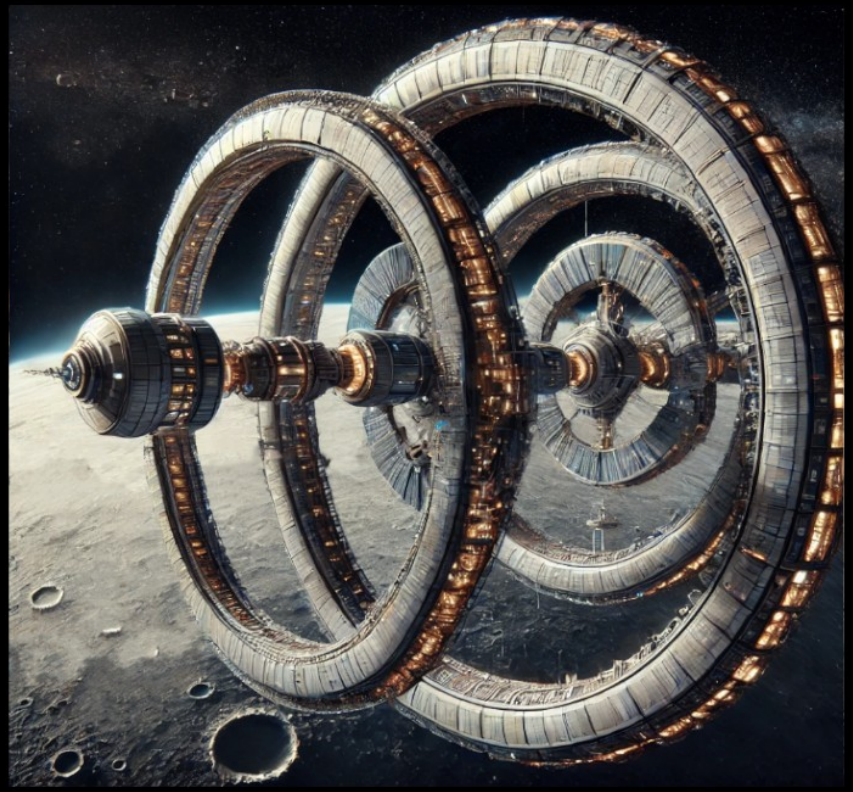


Every discovery, every innovation was driven by one relentless principle—increase the chances of survival. No effort was wasted. No risk was taken lightly.

The orbital shipyard was one of the most extraordinary constructions in human history—a testament to what humanity could accomplish when united under a single, urgent purpose. In just ten years, the impossible had been built and perfected—a floating city in the void, a colossus of engineering, where entire starships would be born. At its core, the station was an evolution of the first space habitat that John and Emma Anderson had built decades before. But this was something far beyond its humble predecessor.

With a radius of 1000 meters, the shipyard spun at just the right velocity to simulate 80% of Earth's gravity—strong enough to counteract the worst effects of prolonged low gravity, yet gentle enough to prevent dizziness or disorientation. It became a necessary pilgrimage for the inhabitants of the Moon base—a place where their bodies could recover from the harmful effects of the Moon's weaker gravity.

While the shipyard's primary function was the construction of interstellar vessels, it was also fully equipped as a long-term habitation facility. Every breakthrough in survival technology—every system developed to sustain humanity on the generational starships—was first tested here. It was not just a factory; it was a prototype for the future of humanity in deep space.



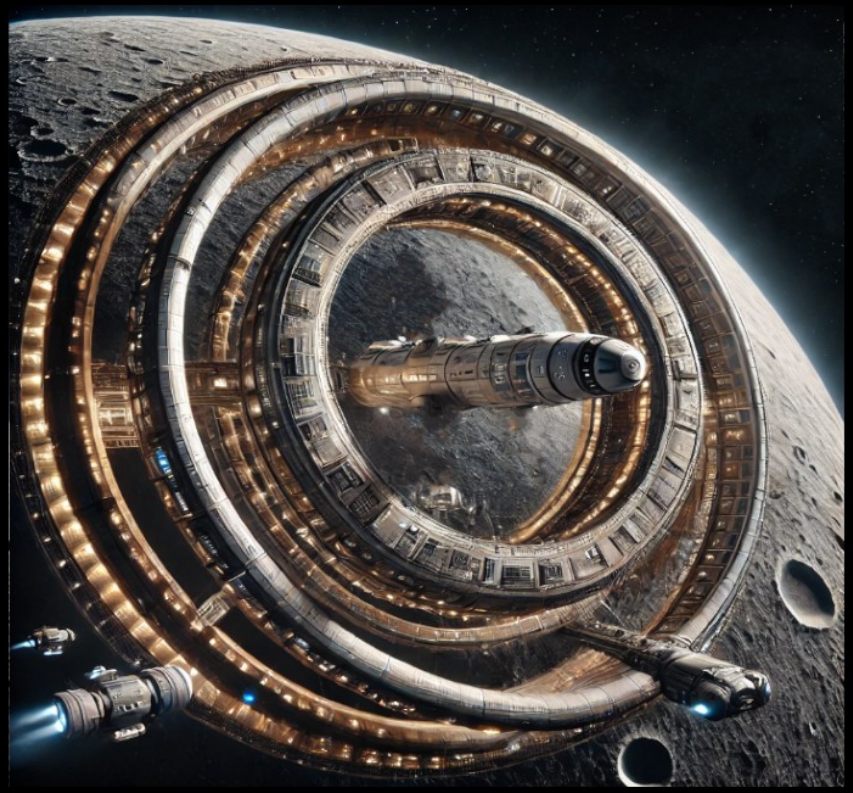
Its design was divided into two main sections:

First, the inhabited ring – A vast toroidal structure where people lived, worked, and carried out research. This was the heart of the station, the first true space city, built to sustain human life indefinitely.

Second, the industrial core – A titanic assembly complex, stretching ten kilometers in length, consisting of twenty massive production rings.

These rings housed fuel storage, raw material processing plants, and thousands of automated assembly units, turning the raw resources extracted from the Moon and asteroids into fully functional spacecraft components. The shipyard was, in essence, the most advanced 3D printing facility ever conceived.

Thousands of robotic arms moved in perfect synchronization, layering materials molecule by molecule, constructing starships with a precision no human hands could ever achieve. To watch the process unfold was to witness a hypnotic ballet of machines, a mechanical choreography unlike anything mankind had ever created before. From the smallest structural beam to the largest propulsion chamber, everything was printed, assembled, and integrated in zero gravity, each component slotting into place with seamless precision. The shipyard was not just a factory.



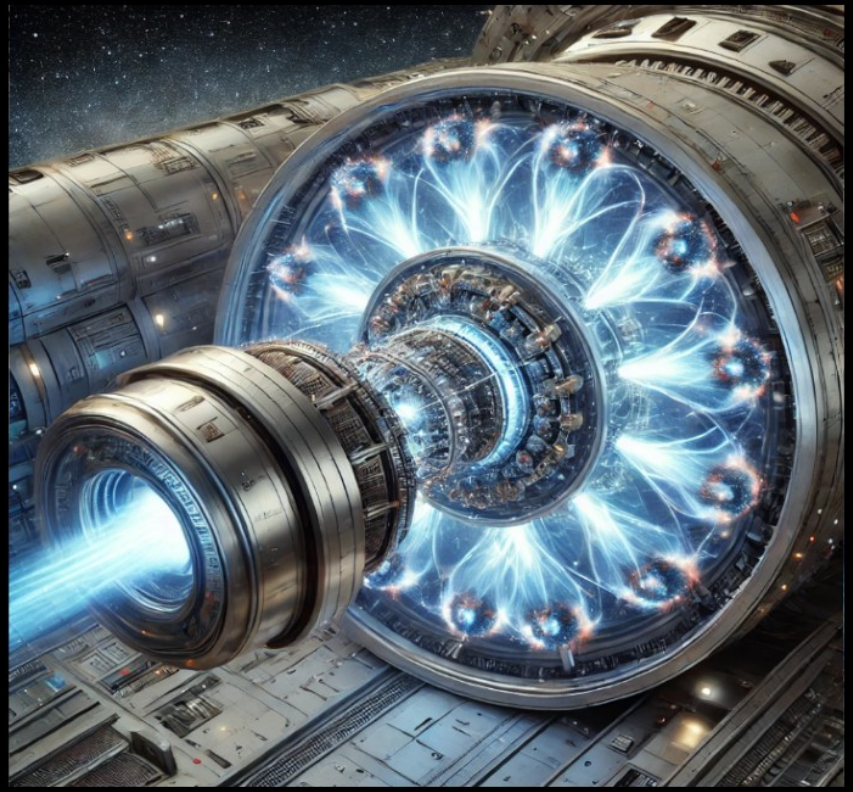
It was the birthplace of humanity's new future.

The first spacecraft ever built at the station was not a colony vessel. It was a test ship. A vessel designed for one singular purpose—to validate Ellie's lifetime of work.

It was not grand. It was not majestic. In fact, it was barely larger than two old yellow American school buses placed end to end. It was built only for two passengers and a small cargo hold—a far cry from the massive starships that would one day carry generations of humanity into the unknown. But it was enough. Its size didn't matter—what mattered was its propulsion.

This small, unassuming vessel would test Ellie's revolutionary drive system, the culmination of thirty years of relentless research. If it worked, if this tiny spacecraft could achieve near-light-speed travel, then humanity would have its true escape. A way to break free from the forbidden Earth—to finally outrun the past and chase the future.

Traveling near the speed of light had always been more fantasy than science. When humanity first set its sights beyond Earth, even reaching ten percent of light speed seemed like an insurmountable challenge. The physics of space travel was an unforgiving equation—one that demanded an ever-growing supply of fuel for diminishing returns in velocity. The cruel truth was that the faster a spacecraft traveled, the more mass it gained due to relativistic effects, exponentially increasing the energy required to accelerate further.

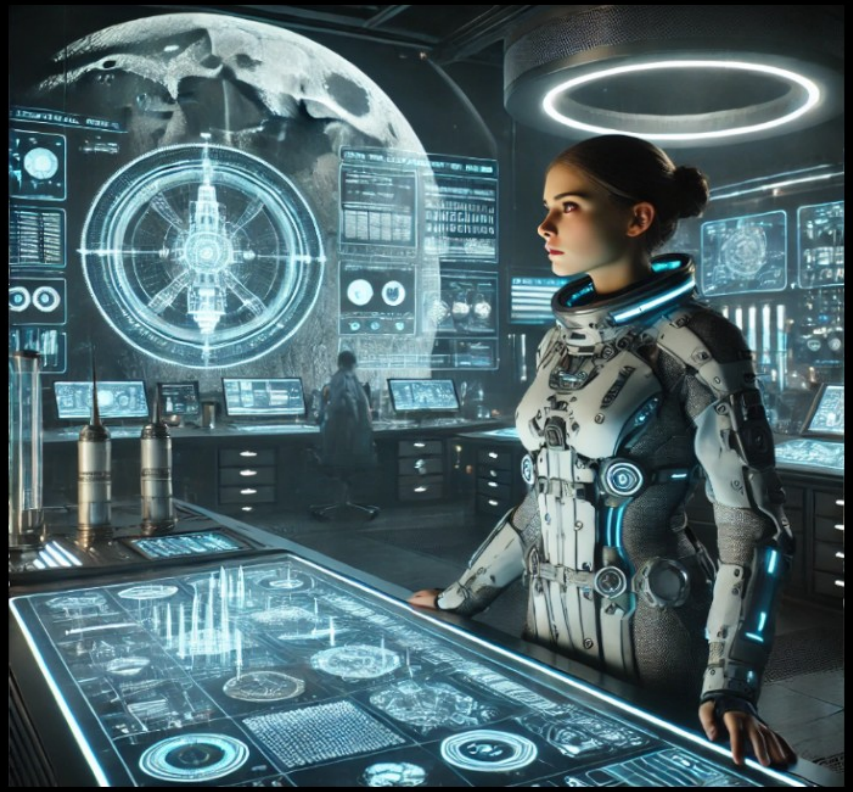


This limitation constrained humanity's ambitions. The best candidates for colonization were within a mere hundred light-years—mostly planets orbiting red dwarfs, their feeble glow barely illuminating worlds locked in tidal embrace. But red dwarfs were treacherous stars, notorious for violent solar flares capable of rendering entire planets uninhabitable in an instant. Any colony established in such a system would be living in the shadow of annihilation.

At thirty years old, Ellie Green made a discovery that changed everything. A theory so radical that, if proven, would shatter the limits of interstellar travel. If she was right, humanity wouldn't be bound to the meager handful of red dwarf systems. The galaxy would open before them.

The fundamental obstacle to relativistic travel was mass. The closer an object approached the speed of light, the more massive it became, demanding exponentially greater energy to push forward. No conventional fuel system, no matter how efficient, could overcome this barrier. But Ellie's work in quantum physics revealed a loophole—a way to manipulate the very fabric of inertia itself.

Her breakthrough came in the form of quantum field displacement. By artificially generating a temporary quantum field to 'offload' a portion of the ship's inertial mass, Ellie theorized that she could trick the laws of physics. This phantom mass field would eventually collapse, but not before allowing a spacecraft to achieve unprecedented velocities with a fraction of the expected energy. If her theory held, it would mean the difference between crawling to nearby stars and leaping across the Milky Way.



For the next twenty years, she toiled relentlessly. Small-scale drone tests proved beyond promising—95% of light speed achieved with no catastrophic failure. It was a triumph, but Ellie remained wary. The weight of history was on her shoulders. She had seen what unchecked optimism could do. Her mother had once written a cautionary tale, a science fiction novel warning against blind faith in progress. Ellie refused to let hope become a trap.

She tempered expectations. She ran every calculation a thousand times. She would not allow the last remnants of humanity to pin their survival on a dream that hadn't been fully realized.

But the day had finally come. It was time to take the leap.

The first manned test had to be perfect. The risks were immense—failure meant not just the loss of a pilot, but possibly the collapse of everything Ellie had worked for. The choice of the test pilot had been unanimous among the lunar base's thousand inhabitants. There was no question.

Daniel Green was the best.

Ellie opposed his selection with every fiber of her being. Not because he wasn't qualified—he was beyond exceptional. A pilot of unmatched skill, a man whose confidence was unshakable, whose hands were steady under pressure, whose mind thrived in the silent void of space. But to Ellie, Daniel wasn't just the best pilot. He was her husband. The love of her life.

Fifteen years earlier, their paths had crossed for the first time. Ellie had needed a pilot—someone skilled enough to guide her test drones, someone willing to push boundaries without fear. Daniel had volunteered without hesitation. He had that rare kind of fearlessness that was not born of recklessness, but of absolute trust in his own abilities.

Their personalities clashed at first. Daniel was an extrovert—always ready with a joke, always carrying himself with an easy confidence that disarmed even the most cynical minds. Ellie, by contrast, found solace in solitude. She was not antisocial, but she was happiest buried in equations, her mind dancing between numbers and possibilities.

And yet, Daniel fascinated her. He had a way of getting under her skin—teasing her, pulling her away from her calculations just long enough to remind her that life existed outside of equations. He lived for the moment, while she calculated every outcome. What she never expected was how much she would come to crave his presence. What had once been an amusing, slightly irritating distraction became a comfort she longed for every day.

Daniel had fallen in love with her long before she realized she felt the same. He lived for the moments when he could break her deep, focused expression with one of his quips—watching her scowl in mock frustration, only for a reluctant smile to betray her amusement.

Laughter after laughter, day after day, they built something neither of them had planned for—something unshakable.

Four years after their first meeting, their love had become undeniable. The entire lunar base rejoiced when they married—their brightest scientist and their best pilot, a symbol of hope for all who watched them. And a year later, their son Leo was born.

Leo was among the first children authorized under the new survival protocols, a milestone that marked the beginning of true independence for the lunar colony. Humanity was no longer just surviving. It was growing.

They say time is relative, and nowhere was that more true than in the life of Ellie and Daniel Green.

In happiness, time moved like a fleeting dream—ten years vanished in the blink of an eye. Between their work, their shared ambitions, and the simple joy of raising their son, life had been a blur of love and purpose. Every breakthrough Ellie made in propulsion technology felt like a reflection of her own heart—an expanding horizon of possibilities. She realized that love itself was an essential force, just as vital to humanity's survival as science and progress.

Her mother, Emma, had once written that if humanity wished to endure, it could not become a species of machines. Mankind had to embrace love, to carry it across the stars, or else risk losing the very thing that made them human.

And that was what made today so unbearable.

Today, Ellie, Daniel, and Leo stood at the precipice of history—Daniel was about to become the first person to travel at 90% of the speed of light. The drones had reached even greater speeds in previous tests, peaking at 95%, but this mission was about proving that a human could withstand the journey. Ellie had designed every system. She had checked and rechecked every calculation. She had left nothing to chance. And yet, deep in her gut, she was terrified.

Daniel was in the cockpit of the Endeavour, his sleek, state-of-the-art spacecraft docked at the orbiting station. The control room, deep within the Moon's underground base, monitored his every move.

"The inertial mass offloading system is in the green," Daniel reported, his voice calm and steady. "Standby tests confirm that the minimal offloading state is operating at a constant, stable rate."

Ellie took a breath, steadying herself. "Acknowledged," she replied, forcing composure into her voice. Her fingers curled tightly around the edge of her console. The numbers on her screen confirmed everything was operating perfectly—but numbers couldn't calm the storm inside her.

She hesitated for a moment, then allowed herself to say what had been burning in her chest.

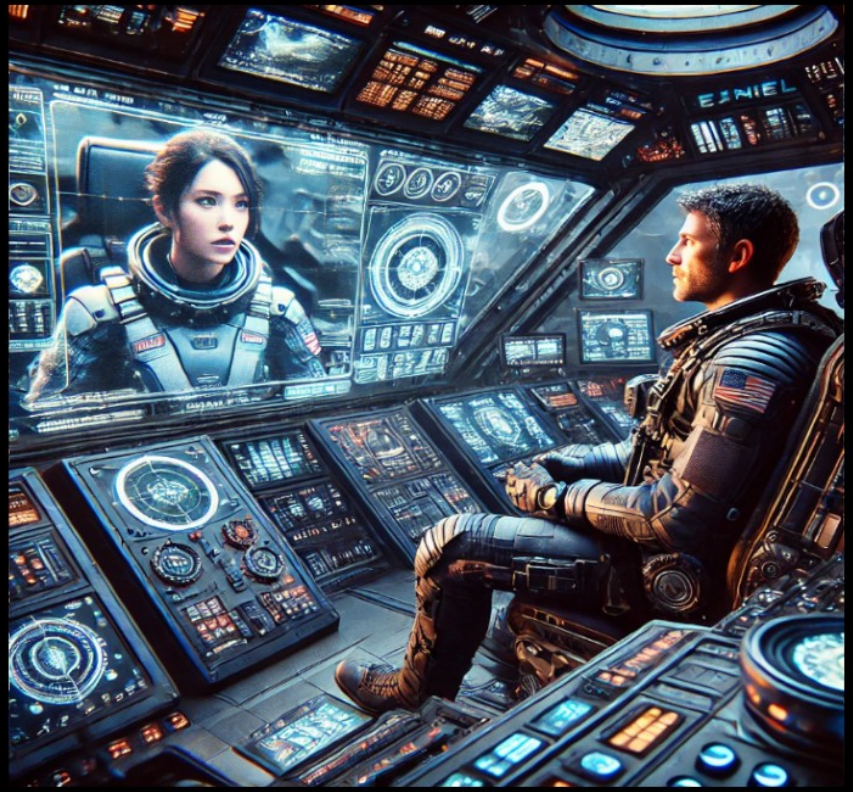
"You still have time to skip this rodeo, cowboy," she said, trying to keep her tone light. "Just say the word, and I swear, you'll have the first pick of the next spaceship. Full control. No debates."

Daniel turned his head toward the camera, and there it was—the smile that had pulled her out of the darkest moments of her life. The kind of smile that turned bad days into something bearable, the kind that made the whole universe seem a little less cold.

"I trust you, Ellie," he said softly. "We've been through this thousands of times. We're ready."

Then, with that mischievous glint in his eyes, he couldn't resist teasing her.

"And besides, this cowboy is really eager to ride this wild, wild horse."



Ellie groaned, exasperated. "Oh God, what a monster I've created," she muttered, shaking her head.

She was trying to keep the mood light, but the truth was, she was searching—grasping—for anything that might reassure her. Anything that could convince her she wasn't about to send the love of her life into oblivion.

Her voice softened. "Just promise me… if anything seems even slightly wrong, you'll abort the mission. No hesitation."

Daniel's expression grew serious, his teasing vanishing. "Ellie, my love, I promise." His voice was firm, unwavering. "But don't worry, I'll be back with a little present for you from my scenic tour of Saturn's rings."

He grinned again. "What kind of rock does the lady prefer? Frozen rock Type A, or frozen rock Type B? I'd ask if they could wrap it up in gift paper, but I have a feeling Saturn doesn't stock your favorite kind."

Ellie swallowed against the tightness in her throat, her voice barely holding steady. "The only gift I want is to hold you again in my arms."

Daniel's eyes softened, his voice a quiet promise. "That one I can guarantee. No matter what, I'll be back with you in no time."

The control room ran its final checks, verifying that every system was green. Across the various departments, confirmation signals flashed across the monitors. The countdown sequence was prepared.

Ellie's hand hovered over the final command. She looked at the screen one last time—at Daniel's face, his unwavering confidence, his trust in her. With a deep breath, she gave the order.

"Endeavour, you are go for launch."

And with that, Daniel was on his way to making history.

For hours, Daniel navigated Endeavour to its designated starting position. The real test was about to begin.

The first phase of acceleration was critical. He would engage the inertial mass offloading drive to push the spacecraft to 1% of the speed of light. That threshold was non-negotiable—anything faster, and he risked being caught in the unpredictable chaos of the asteroid belt and the massive swarms of Trojan asteroids trapped in Jupiter's orbit. At that speed, the onboard detection systems would have enough time to react and adjust the course if an obstacle appeared.

The chosen testing grounds lay far beyond Jupiter, nestled between the orbits of Saturn and Uranus—two billion kilometers away from Earth. It was a region carefully selected for its relative emptiness. Jupiter's immense gravitational pull had long since swept most debris into the asteroid belt, while the distant Kuiper Belt contained the frozen remnants of the outer solar system. Here, in the void between those two great barriers, the Endeavour would take its first true leap.

Once Daniel reached the designated coordinates, only one thing remained.

Final authorization.

Once initiated, there would be no abort sequence. No turning back.

Daniel's voice came over the comms, steady and composed.
"Endeavour to command control. I confirm that the spacecraft is in the planned coordinates and all systems are fully operational. Standing by for authorization to engage the inertial mass offloading drive."

Ellie closed her eyes for half a second, drawing in a deep breath. The tension in the control room was suffocating. She had run the numbers. Triple-checked them. A hundred times over. And yet, the fear still sat like ice in her veins. She exhaled and pressed the transmission button.

"Command control to Endeavour. Acknowledged." She swallowed hard, forcing the words out with as much composure as she could muster. "All systems are confirmed green on our end." A heartbeat of silence, then—

"Endeavour, you are authorized to engage the inertial mass offloading drive."

A long pause.

Then Daniel's voice, calm and confident, filled the room.

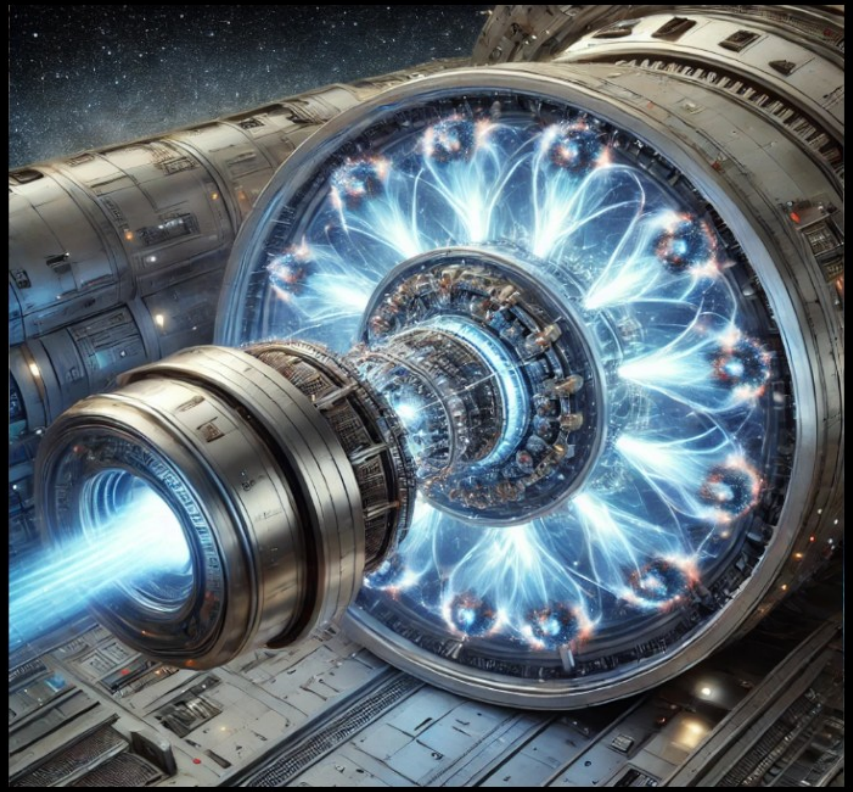
"Acknowledged. Engaging launch protocol now. Time to take off: twenty seconds."

He turned his head slightly toward the camera. His eyes locked onto Ellie's.

"Ellie," he said softly, his voice carrying across the void like a promise. "I'll be with you in no time. I love you."

Ellie pressed a hand to her chest, as if trying to physically hold in her pounding heart. "I love you too," she whispered, though the comms were already closed.

Five seconds.



Inside Endeavour, the life support system activated its final sequence.

A high-density compound was injected directly into Daniel's bloodstream—a perfected version of the formula Ellie's father had once used for space travel. The original compound had allowed humans to survive extreme gravitational forces, but this—this was something else entirely. Years of refinement had turned it into a marvel of bioengineering, capable of withstanding acceleration forces exceeding 40 Gs. In just three seconds, the fluid would spread through his organs, reinforcing every cell to endure the unimaginable.

Four seconds.

The control room was silent. No one dared breathe.

Three seconds.

On Earth and the Moon, every screen was tuned into the broadcast. Across humanity's scattered remnants, workstations lay abandoned, conversations fell silent. No one wanted to miss this moment.

Two seconds.

Leo sat in front of the screen, hands clenched into fists, his bright eyes wide with anticipation. He had never seen his father as just a scientist or a pilot—he was a legend, a hero, the man who would take humanity where no one had ever gone before.

One second.

Ellie closed her eyes and whispered the only thing she could. A prayer—not to a god, but to the universe itself.

"Please, keep him safe."

Liftoff!

The Helium-3 nuclear engines roared to life, generating a constant 30 G acceleration. Twenty years ago, such forces would have been lethal—crushing bones, rupturing organs, turning blood to sludge. But today, thanks to the relentless genius of human engineering, Daniel could withstand the pressure with relative ease. Modern physiology enhancements allowed humans to endure extreme gravitational forces for prolonged periods—hours, even days if necessary. Thankfully, Daniel wouldn't need more than ten minutes.

In that time, Endeavour would reach a stable cruising velocity of 1% the speed of light—fast enough to safely navigate the treacherous gauntlet of the asteroid belt and Jupiter's Trojan clusters. Any faster, and the ship's onboard trajectory correction system wouldn't have enough time to react to unseen debris. Pinned to his seat, Daniel had nothing to do but watch.

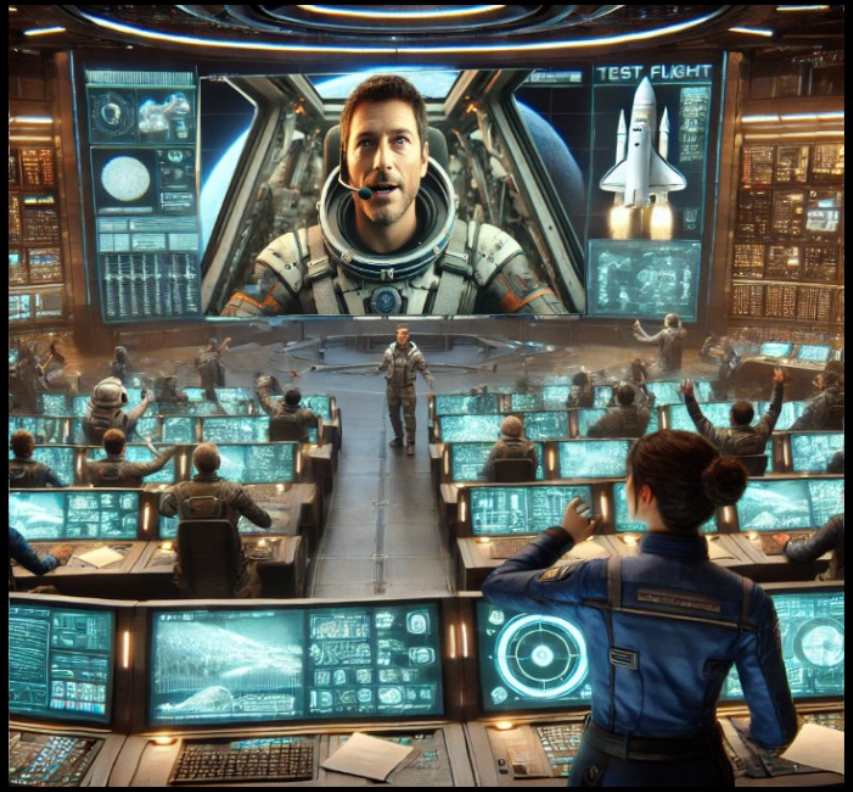
The liquid augmentation in his bloodstream countered the crushing force, keeping his organs functional, but it didn't grant him the strength to move. His limbs were leaden, his vision slightly distorted from the gravitational strain, but his mind remained sharp, locked onto the mission data flashing across the control panel. And what he saw was nothing short of miraculous.

The inertial mass offloading drive was delivering as promised.

With only 3% of the ship's Helium-3 nuclear fusion energy output, Endeavour was accelerating with unparalleled efficiency. Without Ellie's breakthrough, reaching 1% light speed would have required pushing the reactors to 50% capacity, burning through almost their entire fuel reserves just to complete this initial phase. But thanks to the offloading drive, the ship was consuming a mere 2% of what it would have otherwise required.

It was nothing less than the dawn of a new era.

Daniel could feel the change before the instruments even confirmed it. As the ship neared its target velocity, the G-forces began to ease, the crushing weight lifting moment by moment. By the tenth-minute mark, the strain vanished entirely. The ship was no longer accelerating. It was gliding—1% the speed of light, smooth and stable.



And Daniel was free to move again. He wasted no time. Daniel's fingers flew to the comms panel.

"Endeavour to command control." His voice was steady, but his exhilaration was unmistakable. "First stage completed with full success. We are in stable cruise at 1% light speed. Everything went off without a hitch."

Then he let out a breath, a grin breaking across his face.

"Congratulations, people! We did it!"

He turned to the camera, locking eyes with the woman who had made it all possible.

"Ellie, you did it!"

The control room erupted.

For an eternity, the world had known only struggle, only the slow, desperate fight for survival. But in that moment, pure triumph swept through every last soul who remained. The underground command center roared with cheers, with shouts, with the deafening sound of a species reclaiming its destiny.

The celebration spread like wildfire—through the Moon base, through the hidden city on Earth, across every human colony still clinging to existence. For the first time in generations, mankind had taken a step forward not in retreat, not in desperation, but in victory.

Amidst the chaos, Ellie was crying—not just from success, but from relief.

Daniel was safe.

They had done it.

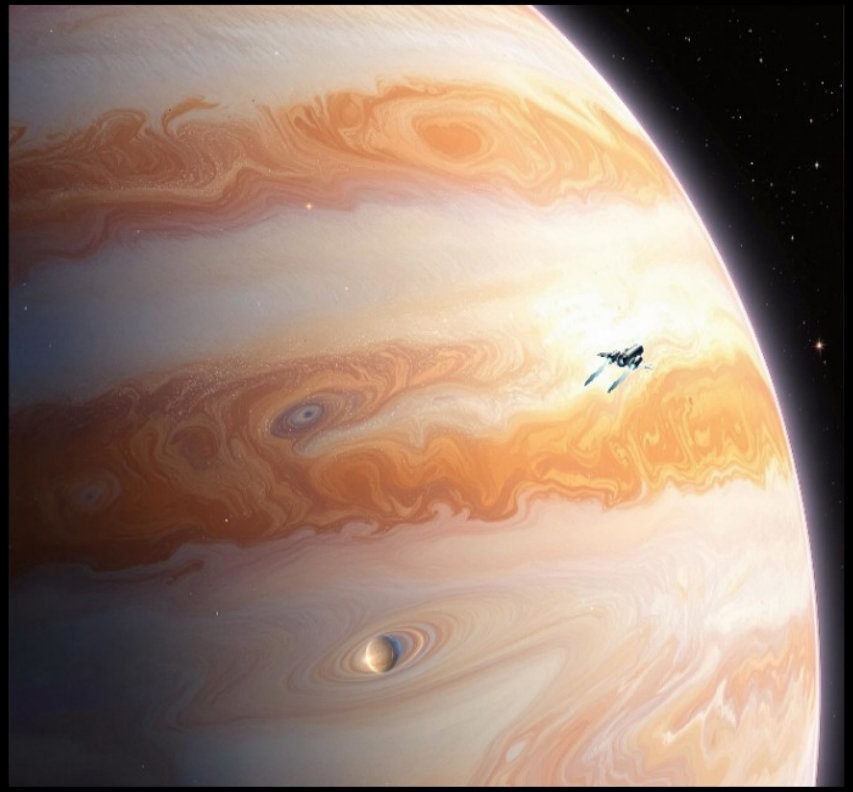
She barely had time to process the moment before she felt herself being pulled into a dozen embraces—scientists, engineers, technicians, all of them swept up in the raw emotion of the moment. This was not just a technological milestone. This was humanity's first step beyond the solar system.

As the celebrations settled and the tension drained from the room, the focus shifted back to the mission. The next 200 hours—8 days—would be spent coasting towards the final testing ground, the vast empty space between Saturn and Uranus.

It was there that they would attempt the real test—the ultimate leap that would determine whether humanity could conquer the stars.

If they succeeded, the universe itself would open before them.

The Endeavour's journey toward the orbit between Saturn and Uranus was, for the most part, uneventful. The vast emptiness of space stretched before Daniel like an infinite ocean of darkness, punctuated only by the distant glow of planets and stars.



Occasionally, the ship's scanners detected small asteroids drifting near its projected trajectory, but the autonomous navigation system was more than prepared. A minor course adjustment, executed hours in advance, was all it took to ensure a safe distance of several thousand kilometers from the debris.

At such speeds, even a pebble could be catastrophic. A single grain of sand, moving at a fraction of light speed, carried enough kinetic energy to punch through the hull like a bullet through paper. That was the nature of the challenge they faced—at these velocities, space itself became a minefield.

But now, Daniel had arrived at the Solar System's space highway—a relatively empty corridor between the gravitational influences of Jupiter and Neptune. Here, the final test would begin.

To safely travel at such high speeds, the ship needed more than advanced shielding. It needed eyes—a way to detect obstacles far ahead, long before they became a threat. This was where the sensor drones came in.

Each drone was a small spacecraft in its own right, stripped to the bare minimum: a Helium-3 nuclear fusion engine, an inertial mass offloading drive, and a powerful scanning array. No crew. No unnecessary mass. Just raw function. They were roughly the size of a small car—tiny by interstellar standards—but what they lacked in size, they made up for in purpose.

For this first test, three sensor drones had been deployed, each positioned 15 light-minutes apart, forming a staggered line that extended nearly a light-hour ahead of the Endeavour. This arrangement would provide Daniel with ample buffer time for course corrections, creating an unprecedented early-warning system. In human terms, it was akin to driving a high-speed train through an unknown tunnel with scouts running miles ahead to warn of any incoming obstacles.

Now, all three drones were racing toward their final velocity. And soon, it would be Daniel's turn to join them.

Daniel's voice came through the comms, steady as ever.

"Endeavour to command control. All three sensors have been deployed successfully. Readings are stable. Requesting final confirmation to proceed with the final stage."

Ellie inhaled sharply. Her hands, steady despite the storm raging inside her, flew across the control panel as she double-checked the readings. Everything was functioning exactly as expected. And yet—she was terrified. Any miscalculation, any unforeseen variable, and this could go horribly, irreversibly wrong.

She forced herself to speak, keeping her voice as even as possible.

"Acknowledged." A beat of silence. "All readings match our expectations. The first sensor will reach target velocity in ten hours. The others are following at the projected intervals."

She hesitated, just for a fraction of a second.

Then, unable to hold back her fear any longer, she added:

"Daniel… do you detect anything out of the ordinary? We're still in time to abort. We can run the sequence again. No need to rush."

She knew it was a hollow offer. Daniel had waited his whole life for this moment. There was no way he would back down.

And still—she had to try.

Daniel chuckled softly, shaking his head. His face was calm, his expression unshakable.

"Ellie," he said, voice filled with quiet certainty. "We've done this a thousand times with the drones. We accounted for everything we possibly could. Now it's time for the truth."

His gaze softened, his confidence never wavering.

"I trust you with all my soul. And I know we're going to make it. No doubt in my mind."

Ellie exhaled slowly, gripping the edge of the console as if it could anchor her.

"Why do you have to be so damn good at making me feel safe?" she murmured under her breath.

A pause. Then, summoning every last ounce of courage within her, she spoke the words that would seal his fate.

"Command control to Endeavour. You have greenlight to engage to 90% light-speed."

Daniel smiled. That smile—the one that had carried her through the darkest days, the one that made the vast emptiness of space feel a little less cold.

"Roger," he acknowledged smoothly. "Engaging launch protocol in twenty seconds."

Then, he turned to the camera once more. His gaze locked onto Ellie's, as if she were the only person in the universe.

"Ellie, we'll talk in ten hours... and I'll tell you all about the wonders I see."

Five seconds.

The biological reinforcement compound surged through Daniel's body—another round of the advanced formula designed to withstand the unimaginable G-forces that were about to hit him.

Four seconds.

Across Earth and the Moon, every surviving human had stopped what they were doing. All eyes were locked on the transmission. This was the moment that could change everything.

Three seconds.

Inside the Endeavour, the Helium-3 nuclear fusion engine and the inertial mass offloading drive hummed to life, awaiting the command to unleash their full power.

Two seconds.

Daniel checked the readings one last time. The sensor drones ahead were functioning perfectly. Every calculation, every variable had aligned just as Ellie predicted.

He had never doubted her. He knew how brilliant she was. In fact—he knew it better than she did.

One second.

Ellie's breath caught in her throat. Unlike the others, her fear was not just for the system she had designed—not just for the mission. She was fighting against something far more personal.

The terror of losing the man she loved.

The weight of it pressed against her chest, threatening to break her. She didn't know how much more of this she could take.

But there was no stopping now.

Lift Off!

The Endeavour surged forward, accelerating under the force of 20 Gs. Unlike the crushing 40-G launch he had endured days earlier, this time, the pressure was more manageable—though still enough to keep his body firmly pinned in place. For the next ten hours, Daniel's body would endure the relentless force of acceleration until the ship reached its target velocity of 90% the speed of light.

His movements were limited, but not completely restricted. He could still operate the controls, speak, and make minor adjustments if needed. However, for the most part, all he could do was wait—let the systems work as designed and trust that the plan, years in the making, would hold true.

Barely twenty seconds after launch, Daniel confirmed what everyone had hoped to hear.

"Endeavour to command control. All systems in green." His voice remained steady, composed, filled with the quiet confidence that had carried him through every mission before this.

"The offloading inertial mass drive is performing at 95% capacity. Fuel consumption of the Helium-3 nuclear drive is holding at a stable 2%. By the time we hit 90% of light-speed, total fuel depletion is projected at just 10% of reserves."

He let out a small chuckle.

"So far, so good. With your permission, I think I'll chill out for a bit. Maybe even take a nap." He grinned, adding, "Great job, people!"

Ellie exhaled, finally allowing herself to breathe.

"Command control to Endeavour—I'll take care of the rest from here. Sweet dreams, my love."

A wave of relief washed over the command center.

Cheers erupted across the Moon base and Earth's underground settlements, though more subdued this time. The excitement was there, but so was the understanding—this wasn't the final step. They had to keep their focus. The next milestone was the most critical of all.

For the first time in history, a human was approaching relativistic speeds. Thanks to quantum entanglement communication, mission control on the Moon could monitor the ship's systems in real-time, unaffected by the time dilation that would soon take hold. By the time Daniel reached 90% light-speed, the relativistic effects became significant. His time was now running 2 times slower than the people on the Moon.

For every hour that passed aboard the Endeavour, 2 hours passed for Ellie, Leo, and the rest of humanity. This was the true challenge of deep space travel—not just speed, not just distance, but the fracturing of time itself.

However, thanks to the entangled quantum computers guiding the mission, course corrections remained unaffected by relativistic delays. No matter how fast the ship moved, the autonomous systems on the Moon base could process navigation data and send instantaneous adjustments, ensuring Daniel stayed on the safest trajectory possible.

The instantaneous quantum computing system—humanity's lifeline in near-light-speed travel—was about to face its greatest test.

The moment the alarm blared, its shrill, unforgiving tone filled both Daniel's cockpit and the command control room on the Moon.

The worst-case scenario had arrived.

The sensor drones had detected an asteroid, roughly the size of a van, traveling dangerously close and parallel to Endeavour's trajectory. It was a near-impossible threat—a rogue fragment that had drifted undetected, invisible until now. Worse still, the first sensor drone couldn't evade it. Any course correction on its part would disrupt the other drones behind it, potentially throwing the entire mission into chaos. The only option left was sacrifice. The first drone collided with the asteroid, shielding Endeavour from a direct impact.

But that wasn't enough.

Even with the drone's sacrifice, the asteroid's gravitational pull had subtly altered the fabric of space-time around it, creating a dangerous disruption in Endeavour's trajectory. A brutal course correction was necessary. They had prepared for this scenario. They knew it was a possibility. But knowing didn't make it any less terrifying.

The only way to survive was an immediate emergency deceleration—a maneuver that would subject Daniel's body to a force that pushed the very limits of human endurance. Ellie's voice cut through the command center in an instant.

"Daniel, apply Deceleration Protocol III—NOW!"

Inside Endeavour, Daniel barely heard the full message. The transmission had to be slowed down due to relativistic effects, but he didn't need to hear the rest. He already knew. By the time Ellie's words had fully played in his earpiece, his hands were already moving.

Helmet—on.

Bio-reinforcement compound—injected.

Five seconds to deceleration.

His muscles clenched as the formula flooded his bloodstream, expanding to shield his organs, blood vessels, and bones against what was coming.

"Done," he confirmed, voice sharp and quick. "Running Deceleration Protocol III now."

Five seconds.

The inertial mass drive reconfigured. The Helium-3 nuclear engine shifted into an emergency stabilization sequence.

Four seconds.

The control room fell into absolute silence.

Three seconds.

Daniel braced.

Two seconds.

Ellie's hands trembled against the console, her knuckles white.

One second.

Then—

Hell.

The ship slammed into a rapid deceleration, forcing Daniel's body against his seat with an intensity beyond anything he had ever experienced.

50 Gs.

Even with the advanced biochemical reinforcements, the pressure was beyond excruciating. It felt like his lungs were collapsing, his vision dimming at the edges, his body teetering on the fine line between survival and oblivion.

His mind shattered under the force.

Time lost meaning.

How long had he been like this?

Seconds? Minutes? Hours?

Darkness came. Then light. Then darkness again.

His consciousness flickered like a dying star.

A part of him—the last sliver of awareness clinging to existence—believed he wasn't going to make it. And yet—he had no regrets.

If this was his end, then at least he had given humanity a path forward. But it wasn't science, duty, or history that tethered him to life.

It was Ellie.

It was Leo.

He couldn't leave them. Not like this.

That thought—that love—was the only thing strong enough to keep his body fighting.

And then—silence.

The force eased.

The nightmare ended.

The ship had successfully stabilized at 50% light speed. Daniel's body lay motionless in the cockpit.

He wasn't dead.

But he wasn't awake either.

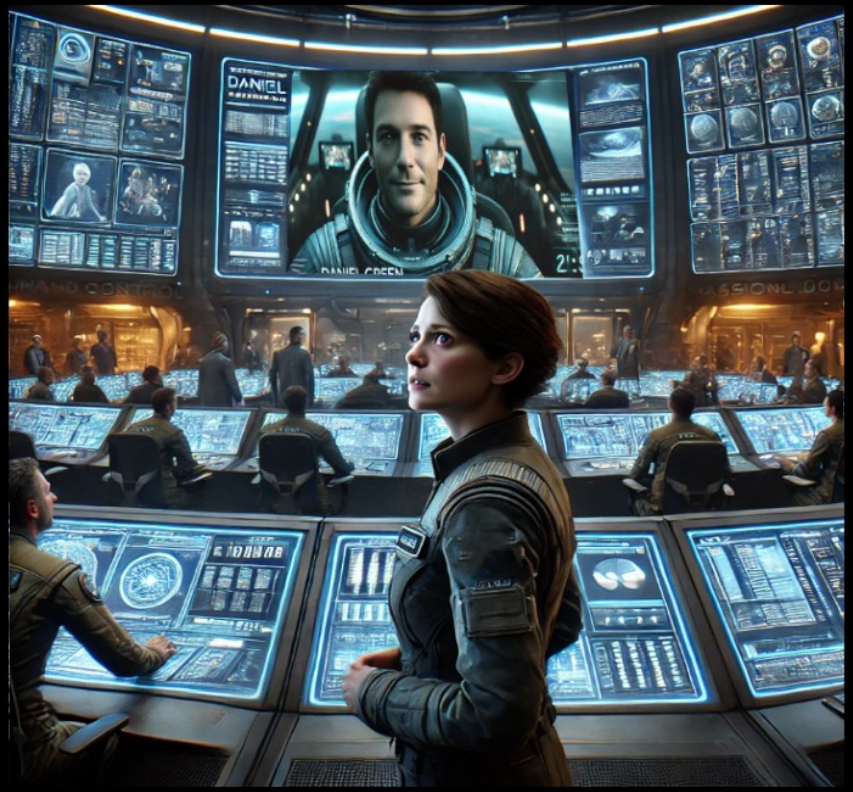
Minutes crawled by before the static-filled screams of Ellie's voice finally reached him.

"DANIEL! WAKE UP! FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, PLEASE WAKE UP! PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE—DON'T LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Her voice was raw, desperate, filled with a terror she had never known before. She had been watching his vital signs the whole time, but logic meant nothing against fear.

She needed to hear his voice.

Daniel's eyes flickered open. His limbs felt like lead, his brain like molasses, but somehow—he found the strength to speak.



A weak chuckle, barely a murmur.

"I hear you, Ellie."

A ragged breath.

"You're not getting rid of me that easily…" Another pause. A strained grin. "I still have to bring you that present from Saturn. Hehehe…"

A gasp from the other side of the line. A sob, then another. Then—Ellie's voice, breaking under the weight of sheer relief.

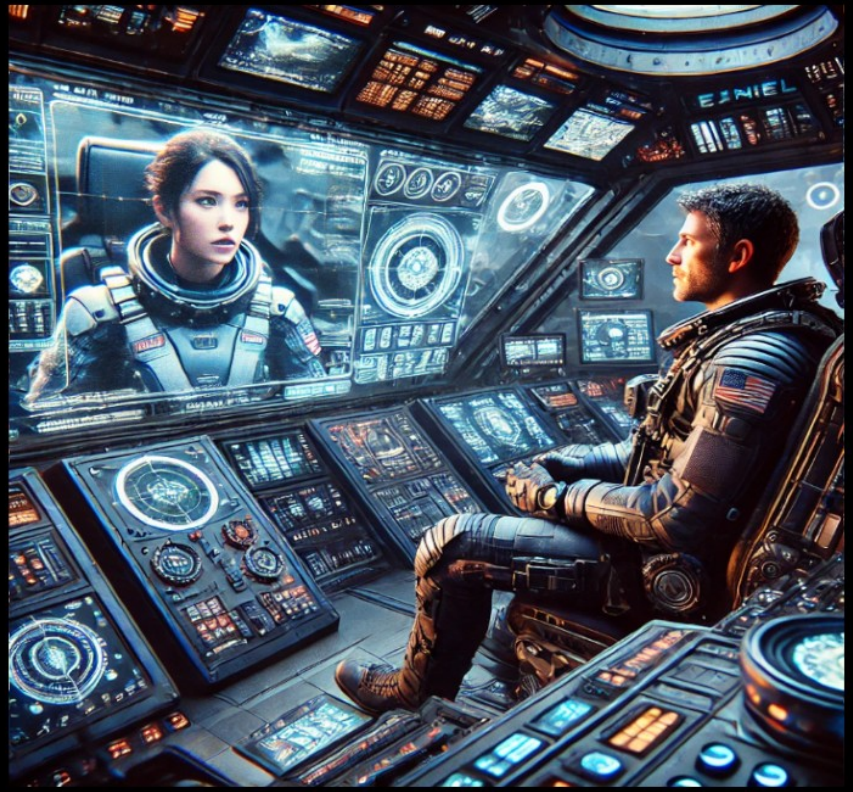
"Forget the damn present." Her voice trembled. "You… you are and always will be what I want most. Forever."

The command center erupted in tears and cheers.

But Ellie?

Ellie just held onto the console, whispering his name over and over again—as if she needed to anchor herself to the fact that he was still alive.

Fifteen minutes after the ordeal, Daniel finally felt like himself again. His body had recovered, his vitals had stabilized, and the medical readings showed no lingering effects from the brutal deceleration he had endured. His limbs no longer felt like lead, and his mind was clear once more. Only then did mission control allow themselves to breathe. Now that they knew Daniel was truly safe, they could focus on what came next.



Ellie's voice came through the comms, steady but warm, the tension from before finally melting away.

"Command control to Endeavour. We have new mission parameters for you. Since you've successfully completed 70% of the Sun's orbit at 90% light-speed, we now have all the data we need. Your next course is set for a controlled return."

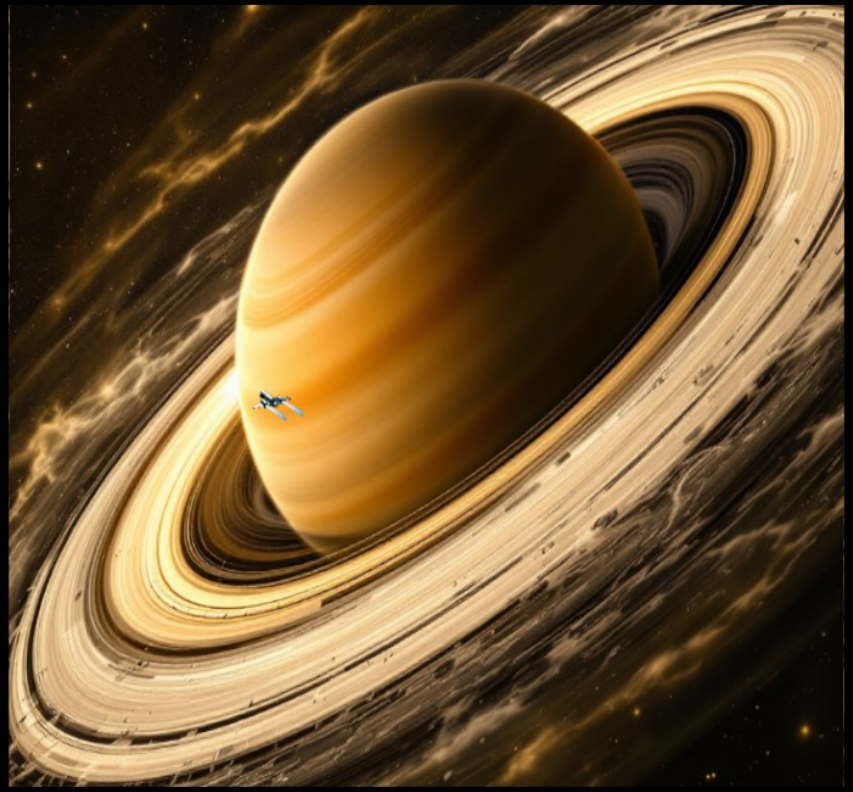
There was a brief pause, then a note of finality in her voice:

"Daniel, no more wild rides. I want you home safe. We have enough data to work with for years. You've done a perfect job."

Daniel exhaled, sinking into his seat. He let out a small, tired chuckle.

"Roger that." He grinned at the camera, his voice carrying a familiar teasing warmth. "You don't have to convince me. This wild horse has given me a ride I'll never forget. See you soon, Ellie."

The journey back to the Moon was smooth, free of any further incidents.



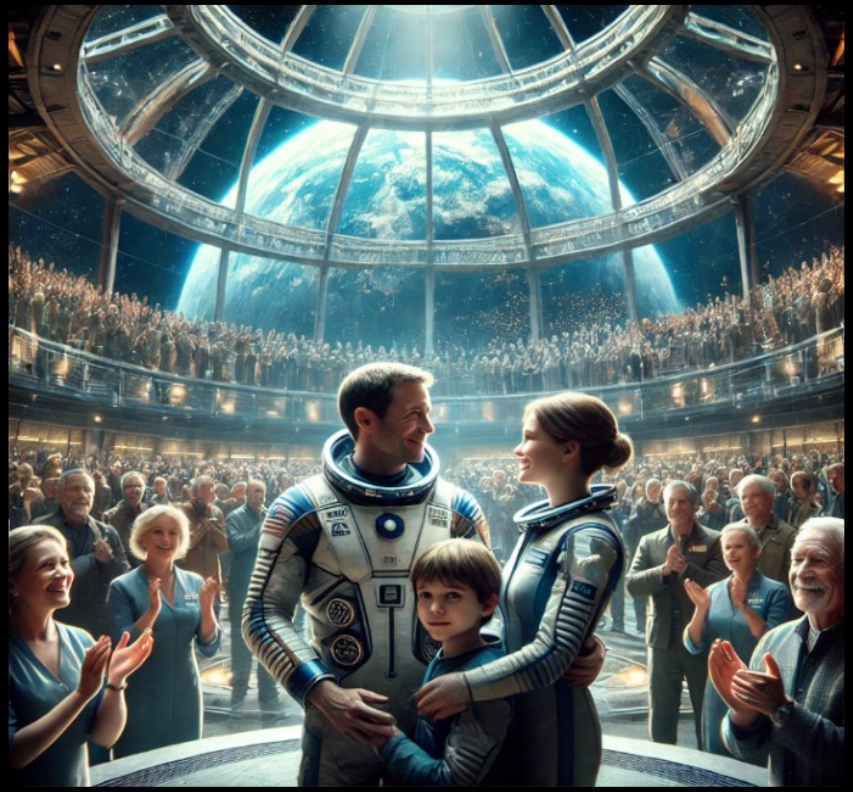
Daniel had ample food, stable communication, and plenty of data to analyze from the mission. As his body fully recovered, his calls with home became more relaxed. He laughed with Ellie, shared insights with mission control, and, most importantly—he talked to Leo.

At only ten years old, Leo Green had just watched his father achieve what no human before him had ever done. His excitement was boundless. His father was a real-life hero. And yet, he had no idea how close Daniel had come to never coming back.

The truth of the near-disaster was kept between a select few—those who needed to know in order to improve the technology for future flights. For everyone else, the mission was flawless.

The reality was different, but the illusion served its purpose. Humanity needed hope, not fear.

When Endeavour touched down on the Moon, the reaction was overwhelming. A grand celebration awaited him—almost every single person had gathered to welcome him home. This was more than just a successful mission. This was the moment that changed everything. Doors that had once been closed forever were now wide open. The stars—the true, distant stars—were no longer unreachable. Humanity no longer had to settle for the crumbs of the cosmos, for the barely habitable worlds orbiting red dwarfs. Now, the galaxy itself was within reach.



For two days, both the Moon and Earth’s underground cities celebrated. Ellie, of course, found herself thrust into the spotlight, much to her discomfort. It was her genius that had made this impossible dream a reality. She couldn’t escape the recognition—nor should she. Humanity needed to honor those who ensured their survival, and Ellie had just drastically increased their chances. Daniel, always close to her side, helped her endure the endless parade of admiration.

He couldn't have been prouder. His near-death experience hadn't changed him fundamentally, but it had deepened his appreciation for what he had.

For Ellie.

For Leo.

For the fragile miracle of being alive.

As the first night of celebration drew to a close, Daniel finally granted Ellie’s wish—an escape from the spotlight. She was supposed to give a speech, but instead, they vanished together into one of their favorite places: the observatory.

It was a quiet, sacred place.

A vast projection of Earth stretched across the ceiling—a beautiful, ghostly blue sphere. A constant reminder of what had been lost. A silent vow to reclaim what had once been theirs. In the empty observatory, it was just them.

Ellie turned to face him, her eyes filled with a storm of emotions.

Then, she kissed him—deep, fierce, desperate.

When they finally parted, her voice was shaking.

"Please, don't leave me again."

She closed her eyes for a moment, fighting back the memories. The horror of watching him fade from consciousness. The helplessness. The raw, unbearable pain.

"I never imagined how painful it would be to watch you slipping away. I couldn't think. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't stop it—the pain was unbearable. Too much. Way too much."

Daniel cupped her face, his fingers gentle, warm, grounding her. His voice was quiet, but filled with absolute certainty.

"Ellie… it was you and Leo who kept me alive. It was your love that pulled me through. I won't leave you. Not ever."

He brushed a strand of hair behind her ear, his thumb tracing along her cheek.

"But you know I had to take the risk. It was me or no one. And I knew your contingency plans would work. You're smarter than you realize. And I'll be here to remind you of that—forever."

Ellie exhaled a soft, shaky laugh.

Then she wrapped her arms around him, burying herself in his warmth. They stood together, bathed in the ethereal blue light of their lost home, savoring each second of this fragile, beautiful moment.

Yet, deep in her mind, Ellie already knew. This would not be the last time. The achievement they had just made was monumental, but it was only the beginning. There was still so much more to do. Still, she pushed the thought away.

Not tonight.

Tonight, nothing else mattered except Daniel.

Tonight, she wanted him. Needed him.

Tonight, humanity's salvation could wait.