

The Time Dilated Generations

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*Story Book Editor
Version 0.1*

Chapter 10: The End of the Road



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Before heading to the command control room, Ellie made a final stop at the lab. Today's test would be the culmination of her life's work—the definitive achievement of a career spanning over four decades.

For over 40 years, this lab on the Moon had been her second home. It was here that she and her team had pushed the boundaries of physics, refining the propulsion technology that had expanded the reach of humanity's generational ships. Here, they had fought through setbacks and breakthroughs alike, driven by the unyielding belief that their work could secure humanity's future. And now, after decades of relentless effort, the final test had arrived. The entire lab team was already assembled when Ellie arrived.

At 70 years old, she knew she had to pace herself carefully. She wasn't as young as she once was, but her mind was as sharp as ever. This was a day that demanded her full strength, and she had made sure she was well-rested—or at least, as well-rested as she could be. They all understood what was at stake.

She called a quick final meeting to ensure that every team member was prepared to capture and analyze every last bit of data from the upcoming test. One by one, her team reported their statuses—each system confirmed, every protocol double-checked. When the reports concluded, Ellie took a moment to look at them all—these brilliant men and women who had spent decades working by her side. Her voice was steady, solemn, carrying the weight of the years they had shared.



"I want you all to know—we wouldn't be here without each and every one of you." She scanned the room, letting her words sink in. "We have carried a massive responsibility on our shoulders. And yet, no matter the setbacks, no matter the obstacles, we have never given up. I am incredibly proud of all of you. Never doubt that."

She paused, drawing in a slow breath before continuing.

"We've spent the last ten years preparing for this moment. We have turned over every stone, accounted for every extreme scenario—tested and retested, over and over again. Today, we finally see the results of all that hard work."

Her gaze softened.

"No matter what happens today, we have done our absolute best. I am grateful to have been part of this team."

The room erupted into applause. Many of them had worked with Ellie for decades, some for most of their lives. They knew her better than almost anyone. She was a genius unlike any other—but more than that, she was a leader, a mentor, a friend. Through the highest triumphs and the darkest failures, she had never wavered. And she had never let them feel alone. Working with her had been the most challenging, rewarding experience of their careers.



One by one, members of the team embraced her, sharing a quiet moment of solidarity before she left the lab for the command control room.

As Ellie stepped through the doors, all eyes turned to her. And suddenly—a sharp wave of déjà vu hit her like a punch to the chest.

She had been here before.

Twenty years ago, she had stood in this exact spot. She closed her eyes for a brief second, forcing herself to steady her breath. Her fingers curled around the headset. She hesitated.

A sudden tightness gripped her chest—an old, familiar pain she had desperately hoped never to feel again. But here they were, once more standing at the edge of the unknown. She exhaled, placed the headset over her ears, and opened the communication channel.

"Command control to Endeavour. All systems are green. Please confirm status on your end."

The large screen in front of her flickered to life.



A white-haired man appeared, his face lined with age and experience, yet his smile remained the same—that same heavenly, reassuring smile that had always melted her fears away.

"Endeavour to command control."

Daniel's voice was steady, calm—as if today was just another ordinary day.

"All systems green on my side. The sensor drones are in the final stages of their projected trajectory. Endeavour is ready for the ride."

Ellie stared at him for a long moment.

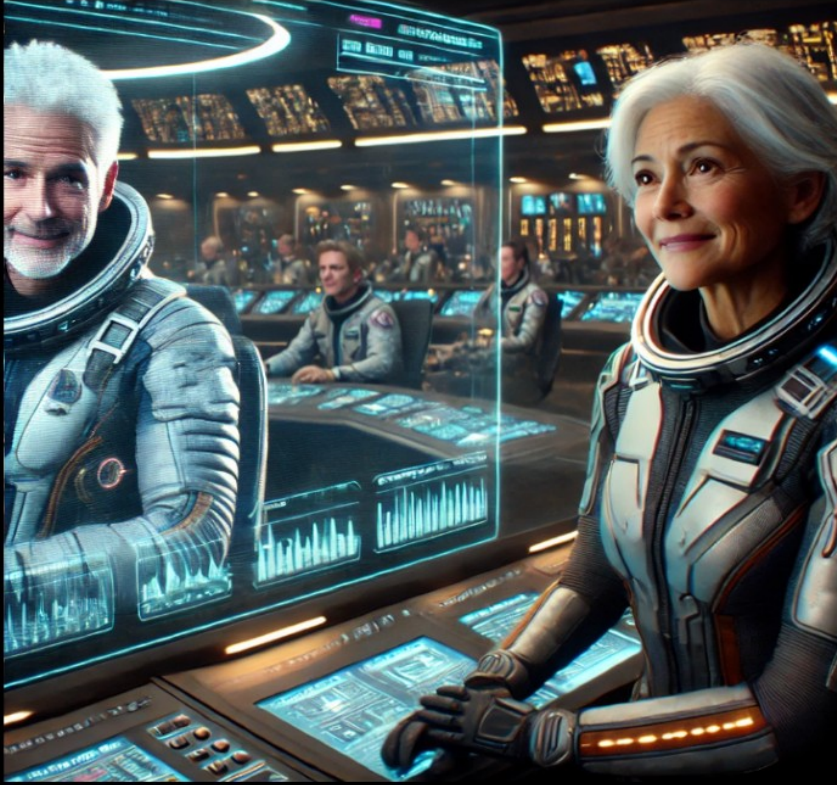
Then, almost in a whisper—"So here we are again..."

Daniel's expression softened.

"Yes, we are..." His voice was gentle, filled with quiet understanding.

Ellie straightened. Her voice turned firm, serious.

"Promise me—at the first sign that the system deviates from the expected parameters, you will abort the mission. We're not kids anymore. Any excessive pressure could—"



Daniel cut her off with that same unwavering certainty that had both frustrated and comforted her for decades.

"Ellie, I'm going to tell you the same thing I've told you all my life."

He leaned slightly forward, locking eyes with her through the screen.

"I trust you. Completely. We have spent twenty years working toward this moment. We have accounted for everything. I have no doubt—we're going to make it."

Ellie let out a quiet sigh, shaking her head.

"God, you always disarm me with your confidence."

Daniel chuckled, his smile teasing.

"Hehehe... Thirty-five years together, Ellie. I think I've figured out how the love of my life works."

Ellie rolled her eyes, but she couldn't hide the small, reluctant smile tugging at the corners of her lips.



The fact that Daniel was the one piloting the spaceship broke Ellie's heart, but the alternative would have been far worse.

Their son, Leo, had followed in his father's footsteps, becoming the best pilot of their generation. Now 30 years old, he had spent the past decade working tirelessly on the new prototype ships, testing and refining the technology first pioneered by his father. At first, Leo had been the natural choice for this mission. He was young, exceptionally skilled, and had spent years mastering the intricacies of the new propulsion system. But Ellie and Daniel couldn't accept it.

For the first time in their lives, they pulled strings, acting in a selfish way that neither of them had ever dared before. Leo was their greatest pride, their greatest hope—and losing him was a possibility they refused to accept. And so, they ensured that it would be Daniel who piloted the ship. For them, it was the lesser pain.

The offloading inertial mass quantum drive had been successfully tested 20 years ago, but by the time Daniel's first test flight proved the system viable, Ellie was already looking ahead. She had never stopped questioning, never stopped pushing the boundaries. Even then, she knew there was another level to reach.



The existing system worked by extracting energy from the ship's inertial mass and transferring it into an artificial quantum field, which was then automatically destroyed outside the spacecraft to avoid interference with propulsion. The system had achieved humanity's greatest dream—it had enabled generational starships to reach interstellar speeds with minimal fuel consumption. But Ellie hated waste. The energy extracted from the ship's inertial mass was simply discarded—vanishing into the void, never to be used. And Ellie knew there had to be another way.

A decade after Daniel's first flight, she found it.

A theoretical breakthrough—one that would allow the ship to retrieve and reuse the energy instead of letting it vanish into nothingness. For the next ten years, she and her team worked tirelessly, refining theory into practice.

They began safely—with drones, running incremental tests, step by step. At first, the results were barely noticeable—only 1% of the offloaded energy was recovered. But Ellie and her team pushed forward. By the eighth year, they had raised that efficiency to 95%. The implications were unprecedented.

With this new technology, the dependency on nuclear fuel dropped dramatically. The enormous Helium-3 fuel depots, once deemed an unavoidable necessity, were no longer needed. More space became available—space for colonists, for scientific equipment, for the tools needed to terraform exoplanets. The numbers spoke for themselves. Seventy years ago, a single mission to accelerate a ship to 10% of light-speed would have required 1000 kilograms of Helium-3. Now, with Ellie's two groundbreaking discoveries, that amount had been reduced to just 0.1 kilograms. A 99.99% reduction in fuel consumption. It was nothing short of a miracle of engineering.



Once Ellie's team achieved 95% efficiency, the decision was made. A new spaceship prototype would be built—one designed to fully test the final evolution of her propulsion system. Construction began immediately.

Thanks to decades of advancements in orbital manufacturing, the lunar building station had grown into an efficient powerhouse, capable of assembling a large-scale prototype in just two years. The final ship, though only a fraction of the size of a full generational starship, was still massive. Roughly the size of a soccer field, it was designed for more than just testing propulsion technology. It was also meant to collect asteroid materials—from the Asteroid Belt, the Kuiper Belt, and even the Oort Cloud in a matter of days.

This mission was about more than just speed—it was about ensuring humanity's complete independence from Earth. With enough of these ships, humanity could mine every resource it would ever need, securing raw materials for shipbuilding, colonies, and planetary terraforming efforts. For the first time, true self-sufficiency was within reach. And now, after decades of effort, after a lifetime of pushing forward—Ellie stood on the edge of history once more.

One final test.



One last leap before the road to the stars was fully open. And Daniel Green—the man who had once risked everything to prove humanity could go beyond Earth—was about to do it one last time.

Ellie took a deep breath. This was it. She pressed the transmission button, her voice clear, steady—but her heart pounding in her chest.

"Command control to Endeavour. You have permission to engage. Godspeed, Daniel."

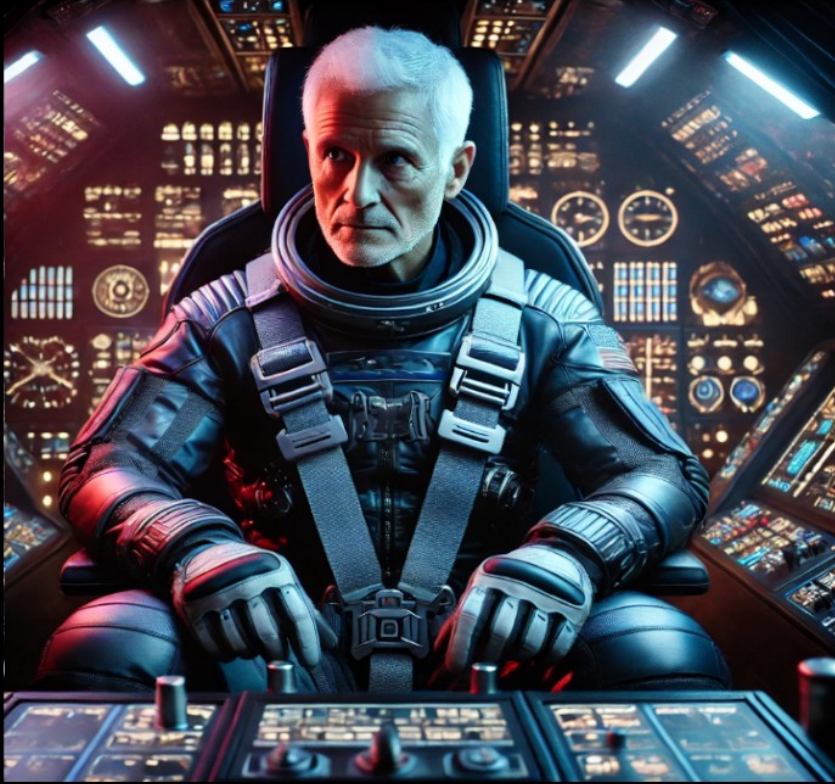
A brief silence. Then, Daniel's voice came through, smooth and confident as ever.

"Roger. Launching protocol initiated in twenty seconds."

Then, he looked directly into the camera—that same beautiful, irresistible smile that had always managed to make Ellie's heart skip a beat, even after all these years. And with a teasing gleam in his eyes, he said:

"I don't need God to give me speed. I already have you."

Ellie groaned, shaking her head.



"Don't be so cheesy, cowboy. Just promise me you'll come back."

"Always."

Daniel's voice was soft but unwavering. She wanted to believe him. She needed to.

Five seconds.

Across the Moon base and Earth's underground cities, every living human was watching. This was the culmination of their struggle. If the test succeeded, their ability to reach and colonize new worlds would increase tenfold. The stakes had never been higher. Hope had never burned brighter.

Four seconds.

Daniel activated the biological reinforcement compound, flooding his bloodstream with the same formula that had once saved his life twenty years ago. Over the past two decades, the compound hadn't changed in power—there were still limits to how much G-force the human body could endure. But what had improved was its duration. This dose would last twice as long, allowing Daniel to withstand sustained acceleration for an extended period.

Three seconds.



Leo stood beside Ellie in the control room. He watched his father with a mixture of pride and torment. For years, he had been prepared to take this mission himself. He was ready—in every way. But his parents had denied him the chance. They had told him he was too valuable, that his role in training the next generation of pilots was more important than any one mission.

Leo wasn't stupid. He knew the truth.

His parents were protecting him. If Daniel hadn't been in extraordinary physical shape, Leo would have fought back. But when he looked into his father's eyes, he saw something there—a fire, a need, a calling. This wasn't just science for Daniel. This was who he was.

Leo clenched his mother's shaking hands, trying to steady her trembling fingers.

Two seconds.

Ellie's grip was tight—too tight. Leo held on, offering silent reassurance. Even though he, too, was terrified.

One second.

On-screen, the ship's instrument readings flashed green. Both the nuclear drive and the enhanced offloading inertial quantum mass drive were operating at peak efficiency. No errors. No anomalies. Everything was ready.



Lift Off.

The thrusters roared to life. The Endeavour surged forward, launching at 20 Gs—a force that would have been unbearable without the protective compound coursing through Daniel's body. Only sixty seconds after launch, the improved offloading inertial mass drive reached its peak efficiency of 95%. For those watching, it was nothing short of a miracle.

On-screen, they could see it in real-time—the Helium-3 fuel consumption dropped dramatically, the ship slicing through the void with almost no resistance. It moved effortlessly, as if the laws of physics had been rewritten. A century ago, such a feat would have been dismissed as pure fantasy, the work of dreamers and science fiction writers. But here it was—real, tangible, undeniable.

The Endeavour's target velocity was a staggering 99% of light-speed. Reaching that speed would take fifteen hours, and for this test, mission control had carefully selected a new deep-space corridor—the vast orbit between Uranus and Neptune. At 4 billion kilometers from the Sun, there was a 700 million kilometers gap between the ship's trajectory and the planets. That distance was necessary—at these speeds, even the faintest gravitational pull from a planet could subtly disrupt the ship's delicate propulsion system.



It wasn't just Endeavour's propulsion system that had evolved—the sensor drones had also been revolutionized. Once the size of small cars, they had now been miniaturized to be only slightly larger than a basketball. Lighter. Faster. More efficient.

With six sensors deployed, spaced 30 light-minutes apart, they stretched across a massive section of space. Had they been aligned in a straight line from the Sun, the final drone would have been positioned at the edge of Neptune's orbit—a vast web of intelligence, detecting every microscopic anomaly in the ship's path.

For the next fifteen hours, humanity was restless. On Earth and the Moon, no one slept. People gathered around screens, watching every incremental update. Each kilometer gained, each milestone reached—it was a step closer to a future once thought impossible. Command control, knowing the stakes, introduced a five-minute delay in the broadcast—just enough time to allow for reaction and contingency measures in case something went wrong. Nothing could go wrong. Not now.

Meanwhile, Daniel rested. Or rather, he tried to.

At his age, true sleep was a rare thing. His body remained motionless, restrained by the high G-forces, but his mind was fully awake. And in those long, silent hours, he reflected. On his life's work.



On Ellie.

On Leo.

On how impossibly fortunate he had been—to have loved, to have raised a son, to have played a role in humanity's greatest endeavor. He smiled to himself, feeling a strange, deep peace. He had always been honest with Ellie.

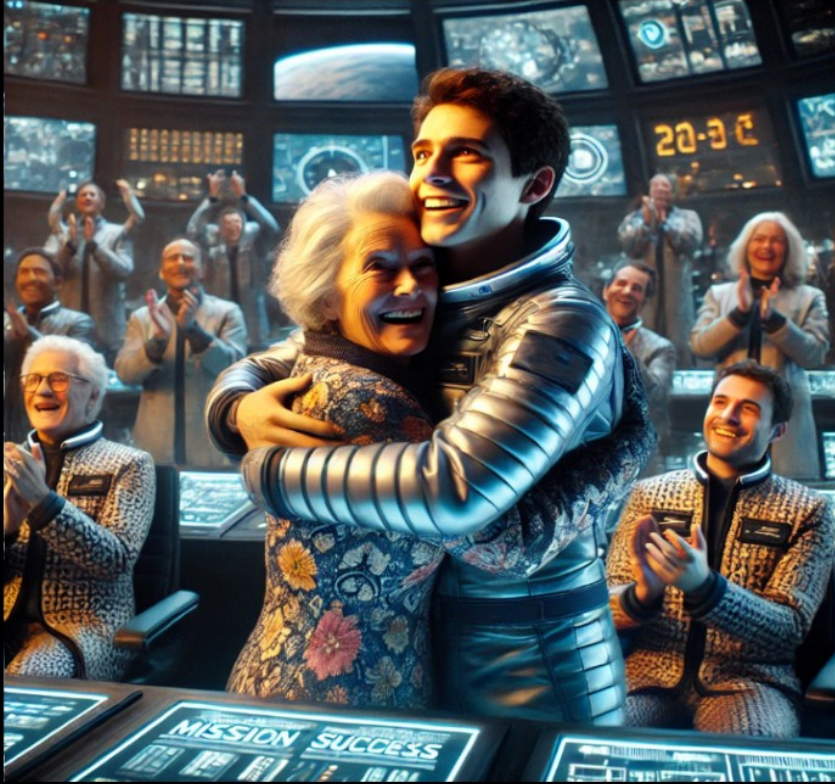
But not this time.

Daniel was dying.

The doctors had confirmed it—the final stages of cancer, brought on by a lifetime of cosmic radiation exposure. It had always been a possibility, a risk he had accepted long ago. He had only months left. And he was at peace with that.

But he wanted to give something back—one last contribution before he was gone. Ellie had never pushed beyond 99% light-speed. Not because she couldn't, but because she wouldn't. She had never trusted that the system would remain stable beyond that limit. Daniel knew better. He knew her work could go farther.

And he was going to prove it.



Fifteen hours after launch, Endeavour finally reached 99% of light-speed. The tension in the control room was unbearable—every monitor, every set of eyes locked on the data stream, waiting. The ship's propulsion systems were pushed to their absolute limits. Would they hold? Would the stability remain intact? The longest hour of their lives passed. Then—finally—The confirmation came.

They had done it.

They had reached 99% of the speed of light, and the system was stable.

The explosion of emotion that followed was uncontrollable. For hours, the control room had been frozen in tension, waiting for the outcome that would determine humanity's future. And now—all at once—it erupted. People screamed. People hugged. People cried. On Earth and the Moon, it was the same—celebrations breaking out in every surviving colony. Because this wasn't just a test flight.

This was freedom.

This was a future.

For the first time, colonization of the true stars was no longer a distant dream.



It was real.

The galaxy was wide open.

The mission wasn't over yet. To truly ensure that the Endeavour's systems were fully stable, it had to complete three full orbits around the Sun—a final stress test before the deceleration process began. At this unimaginable speed, the ship was covering distances that defied human experience. For context, Neptune—the farthest major planet from the Sun—required 165 years to complete a single orbit.

Daniel would do it three times in just 22 hours.

This meant that, once again, Daniel became the first human to experience the most extreme time dilation ever recorded. His perception of time had slowed to one-seventh that of those watching from the Moon base. For every hour that passed for Daniel, seven hours passed for Ellie, for Leo, for every human monitoring his journey. But unlike before, Daniel had nothing to do but observe.

Everything was automated, and with quantum entanglement communication, mission control had instantaneous access to the ship's systems. No matter what happened on board, command control could react seven times faster than Daniel ever could. All he had to do was wait.



After the three orbits were completed, the tension eased, and the team celebrated—though more moderately than before. For Ellie, there was only one priority left: Start the deceleration protocol and bring Daniel home safely.

So when she received a direct summons from Thomas Brown, the main administrator of humanity, she was immediately on edge. This was highly unusual. What could possibly be so important that it couldn't wait?

Wanting to get it over with quickly, Ellie arrived at the small, private meeting room. The space was modest, designed to hold no more than ten people. She sat across from Thomas, who welcomed her warmly.

"First of all, on behalf of all humankind, I want to congratulate you on this extraordinary achievement."

His voice was calm, full of respect.

"There are no words that can truly capture the magnitude of what you've accomplished."

Ellie nodded, feeling impatient.



"Thank you, sir. I just did what I could, and this wouldn't have been possible without my team."

Thomas smiled.

"Of course. We recognize this was a team effort, and rest assured—they will all receive the recognition they deserve. Mankind owes a great debt to you all."

Ellie nodded again. This was all well and good, but it felt like stalling.

"Thank you, sir. If that's all, I'd like to—"

She started to rise from her seat. But Thomas cut her off.

"I'm sorry, that's not all."

His voice was calm. But Ellie froze.

Something was wrong.

She slowly sat back down, her chest tightening. Thomas continued.

"A month ago, we received a special request."



Ellie's stomach dropped.

"A request from Daniel Green."

Her heart skipped a beat. A cold dread crept into her soul. What was going on? Her fingers clenched against the armrest of her chair.

"In his request," Thomas continued, "Daniel stated that, over the last year, you and your team had successfully tested going beyond 99% of light-speed."

Ellie felt her blood turn to ice. She did not like where this conversation was going. Yes, it was true that her team had experimented with pushing past the 99% threshold. The reports hadn't hidden it. But they had also made one thing abundantly clear: The risks increased exponentially beyond that limit. Ellie knew the numbers. Theoretically, yes—higher speeds were possible. But at 99% light-speed, the smallest particle in space, something as insignificant as a speck of dust, could carry the energy of a bomb upon impact. The larger the ship, the more devastating the consequences of an unexpected collision. And the generational starships, the ones meant to carry thousands of people, would be far larger and heavier than Endeavour. Yes, Ellie had recognized that stability could be maintained at higher speeds. But she had also acknowledged the enormous dangers. And now, sitting across from Thomas Brown, she had a terrible realization.



Daniel had known all of this.

And he had still made a request. Her breath hitched, her heartbeat thundering in her ears. What had Daniel done?

"Daniel recorded a message for you," he said, his voice measured, careful. "He wanted you to hear it in his own words."

With a single press on his tablet, the projection screen flickered to life. Ellie's heart stopped the moment she saw him. Daniel's face appeared, his features somber—yet he still tried to offer that signature smile. But it was forced. It wasn't him. It was an expression she had never seen before. A deep, crushing terror overtook her.

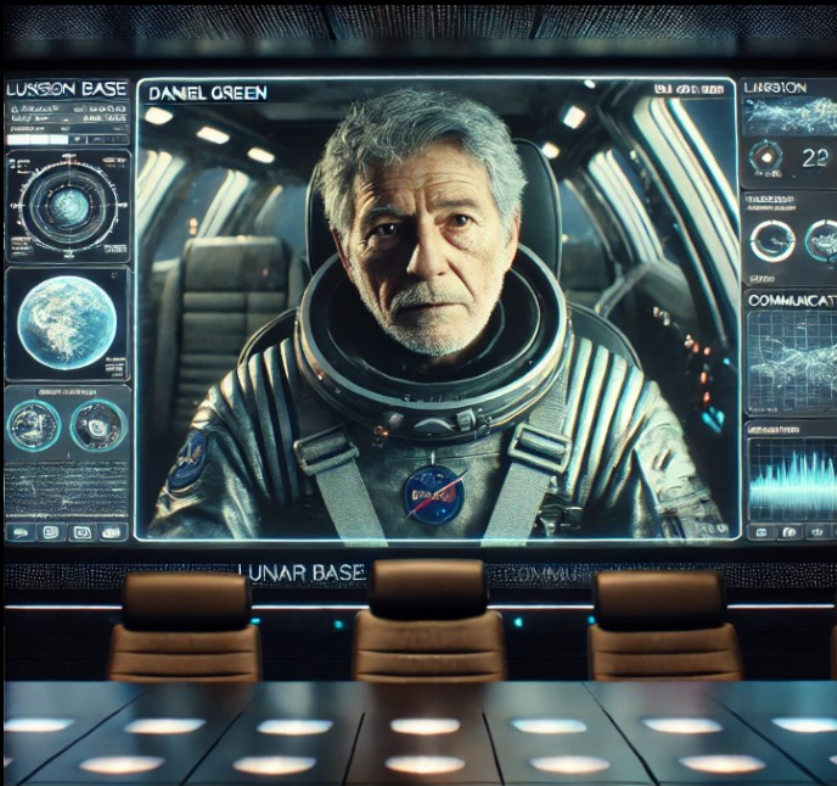
Something was very, very wrong.

"Hello, Ellie."

Daniel's voice was gentle, but it carried a weight she had never heard before.

"If you're watching this, the mission has been a success. You should be ready to bring me home."

He paused, exhaling. The words lacked joy, and Ellie could see him struggling—grappling with the emotions threatening to consume him.



"I know I'm not making this easy," he continued, "but I knew you would have never let me take this decision."

Then he looked directly into the camera.

"I've requested to test the spacecraft beyond 99% light-speed."

Ellie's world shattered. Her body froze, her mind refused to process the words she had just heard.

No, No, No.

Daniel would never go behind her back like this. It couldn't be real.

"I feel like a piece of shit right now."

Daniel's voice wavered. His eyes—those steady, reassuring eyes—were clouded with pain.

"I've always told you the truth, Ellie. And the last thing I ever wanted was for you to remember me with betrayal."

He took a deep breath before continuing.

"The truth is... I'm dying, Ellie."



Ellie's heart clenched.

"Cancer."

Her vision blurred.

"From cosmic radiation exposure... Doctors gave me just barely two months to live."

No.

Ellie felt paralyzed, unable to speak, unable to breathe, unable to do anything but stare at the man she loved more than anything in the universe, watching him tell her he was leaving her forever.

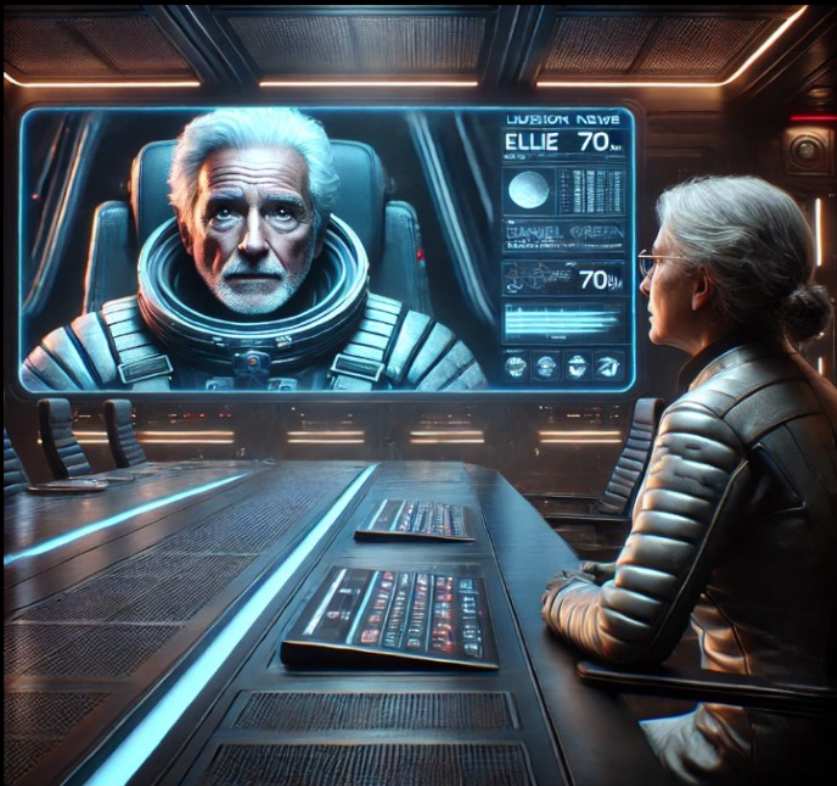
Daniel swallowed hard. His voice was lower now, more uncertain than she had ever heard before.

"Maybe my reasons seem selfish... but I wanted to make one last contribution. One last push to give us a better chance out there."

He forced a small, trembling smile, but Ellie could see through it. He was breaking.

And so was she.

"I hope you can forgive me," Daniel murmured. "I know I couldn't tell you this beforehand. But I also know that your work—your incredible, brilliant work—can go further than anyone imagines. And I want to prove it. I want to show the world what you've built, Ellie. I want them to know just how extraordinary you are."



Tears burned in Ellie's eyes, but she did not blink. She refused to miss a single second of this message. Because deep down—she was terrified this could be the last time she would ever see him.

Daniel exhaled, his voice quieter now.

"My request was reviewed by a committee. They went over every test, every report. They analyzed every variable."

Ellie knew this was true. She had documented everything, including her reluctance to push beyond the limit.

"They approved it," Daniel said softly. "And if you're watching this, we're already there."

Ellie clenched her fists.

"I just hope you can understand, Ellie. And let me do this."

He leaned slightly forward.

"The last thing I want is to leave this world knowing I've hurt you beyond repair."

His voice broke.



"I love you, Ellie."

The screen faded to black.

And with it, Ellie's entire world collapsed.

The room was silent. Ellie stared at the blank screen, her chest tight and her pulse pounding in her skull. She was paralyzed, unable to move or breathe. In the span of a few minutes, she had been confronted with three devastating truths: Daniel had betrayed her trust, Daniel was dying, and Daniel wished to spend his final moments pushing the limits of human survival.

Her head throbbed, her vision swam, the emotions too much to bear. Love. Anger. Disappointment. Sorrow. They all crashed at once, a storm raging inside her. And yet—despite everything—she knew what she had to do.

She forced herself to breathe.

She lifted her head, her eyes now clear.

"We will proceed with Daniel's wish," she said, her voice strong, authoritative. "But the second I see any instability, I will abort the mission. Are we clear?"



Thomas gave her a solemn nod, his voice gentle.

"Of course. You will be in control at all times."

Without another word, Ellie rose from her seat and left the meeting room. She moved with purpose, her emotions still roaring inside her, but she would not break.

Not now.

When she entered the command control room, everything was calm—routine, expecting the order to bring Daniel home. They had no idea what was coming next. Ellie stepped forward, her voice firm, unwavering.

"First, I want to confirm that the mission has been a success."

A ripple of relief passed through the room.

"I know that everyone is expecting to bring the Endeavour back safely, but we are proceeding with another test. Second, Daniel is fully aware of what we are about to do—this is his personal request, and I fully agree with it."



She paused, scanning the faces before her. Then, with absolute certainty, she dropped the bombshell.

"We are going to take the Endeavour beyond 99% of light-speed."

The room fell dead silent.

Everyone in the control center had known, in theory, that the ship was capable of exceeding the 99% threshold. But no one had seriously considered it a real possibility. Until now.

Ellie continued, her voice unwavering.

"I understand your concerns," she said, acknowledging the unease that had gripped the room. "I can assure you that the ship is built to withstand this, but we will be pushing all safety systems to their absolute limits. I want each and every one of you to remain hyper-vigilant. The moment you detect any deviation—any fluctuation in parameters—you report it to me immediately."

Her expression was severe, her tone making it clear: This was happening. And there would be no room for error. Slowly, one by one, the engineers, physicists, and navigators nodded in acknowledgment. They could see it in her eyes. This was not a test Ellie took lightly.



This was real.

Ellie took a deep breath.

"Open a channel. I want to send a message to Endeavour."

The communications officer nodded, establishing the connection. Ellie spoke first, her tone initially cold, professional.

"Command control to Endeavour. The new parameters of the mission have been accepted. We will proceed with the protocol to test beyond 99% light-speed."

A pause.

Then, her voice softened, the weight of their shared history pressing against her chest.

"I understand you, and I forgive you."

The silence in the control room was absolute.

"I would have hoped that you had trusted me before this, but I also know that you were right. I wouldn't have let you."

She exhaled, grounding herself.



"Whatever happens now, I want you to know that I fully support you—and I always will. I love you, Daniel. I always will. Now, let's do this so I can have a few words with you when you get back, cowboy. Do you copy?"

Three minutes of agonizing silence followed as they waited for Daniel's response. Then, finally—

"Yes, I copy."

Daniel's voice, thick with emotion.

"Thank you, my love."

Ellie straightened, shifting back into her role as mission commander.

"Daniel, here's what we are going to do."

Her voice was firm, methodical.

"We will increase speed to 99.9% of light-speed—the maximum stable velocity reached with our drone tests. The acceleration process will take ten hours. Due to the extreme time dilation, you will confirm system status by responding only with yes or no. Sit in the cockpit, wear the helmet, and inject the G-force resistance compound. Once you confirm, we will proceed."



Ten minutes later, Daniel's single-word response arrived.

"Yes."

Ellie gave the final order.

"Commence acceleration."

The Endeavour surged forward, inching closer toward the forbidden frontier of physics. At these speeds, every centesimal of acceleration required extreme caution. Each time velocity increased by another fraction of a percent, the team spent nearly an hour verifying system stability, monitoring Daniel's vitals, and scanning for any irregularities.

And then—the world outside began to distort.

For the first time, the theoretical predictions about near-light-speed travel were not just equations on paper. The ship's cameras began capturing tunnel vision distortions—the stars elongating into thin, blurred streaks, as if reality itself were bending to the ship's will. The visuals were haunting, unreal, like peering into a space beyond human comprehension. Even the most seasoned scientists in the control room felt a primal fear creep into their bones. They were venturing into a forbidden domain reserved only for light itself.



After ten painstaking hours, they reached 99.9% light-speed. The time dilation was now colossal. For every second that passed for Daniel aboard the Endeavour, 22 seconds passed for those at the Moon's command control center.

It was surreal.

From their perspective, Daniel seemed to be moving in slow motion, frozen in time—a ghost suspended between past and future. The implications were staggering. This speed would revolutionize interstellar travel. At 99.9% light-speed, a journey that once required thousands of years could now be completed in mere centuries. The impossible was now within human grasp.

The stars were no longer out of reach.

The galaxy was theirs.

Ellie was moments away from initiating the deceleration protocol when the first warning flashed across the control room screens. One of the lead spaceship sensors had detected a minor asteroid directly in the Endeavour's path. This was not unusual—in fact, the automated course correction protocol had already successfully manoeuvred past multiple obstacles throughout the mission. Six advanced sensors, acting as the ship's vanguard, had ensured a clear path—a safeguard that had worked flawlessly. Until now. Ellie barely had time to process the situation before it happened.



The Endeavour did not respond properly to the correction protocol.

The course adjustments lagged, barely registering the commands. Instantaneous quantum communication ensured that the ship's computers reacted immediately—but the physical realm obeyed a different set of rules. At 99.9% light-speed, time dilation was at its most extreme. The ship's Helium-3 reactor—bound by the laws of physics—was experiencing time at a fraction of real speed. Its nuclear fusion reaction—responsible for providing the necessary energy output for course correction—was running far too slow to react in time.

Ellie's heart pounded.

The window for course correction was closing fast. And then— The first sensor exploded.

It wasn't a direct impact.

The sensor drone had merely passed too close to the asteroid.

But at this velocity, the gravitational interaction between the two objects generated a force so massive, so unfathomably powerful, that the drone instantly disintegrated, erupting in a blast unlike anything humans had ever witnessed before. Thousands of shrapnel-like fragments were hurled across the void. And now, they were all directly in the Endeavour's path. Half an hour later, the second sensor exploded—colliding with the growing storm of high-velocity debris, adding even more deadly fragments to the maelstrom ahead.



Ellie's stomach dropped.

This was it.

Daniel's fate was sealed.

In two hours, the Endeavour would collide with a lethal cloud of debris, moving at a fraction under the speed of light. For Daniel—trapped in the merciless grip of time dilation—it would happen in just over five minutes.

Everyone in the control room knew it. They had simulated every possible escape scenario. Every model. Every equation. Every last desperate attempt.

Nothing worked.

Ellie stood motionless, the room waiting for her orders. But there were none to give. For the first time, Ellie couldn't change the outcome. She could not perform a miracle this time.

And she knew it.

Ellie turned, silently exiting the control room. Her steps felt heavy, like she was walking through molten steel. She entered the conference room, the same place where she had learned the truth about Daniel's condition just hours earlier.



And now, she had to say goodbye. There was no time for grief. No time to surrender to the overwhelming pain clawing at her insides.

She sat down. Her hands were shaking as she started the recording.

"Daniel... by now, you also know what is happening."

Her voice broke, and she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to force herself to breathe. She continued, even as tears blurred her vision.

"The time dilation has become our worst enemy. The ship's reaction time is too slow to trigger the course correction protocol in time..."

Her breathing hitched, her throat tightening.

"I want to be angry at you, but I can't. I know I never could have stopped you. I know what this meant to you."

She wiped at her face, but the tears wouldn't stop.

"I even know that you're probably at peace, knowing that I will make sure this will never happen again."



Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"I forgive you, Daniel. Don't ever doubt that. I would have granted your wish anyway—because I love you too much to deny it."

She took a shaky breath, then gave him her final words.

"I love you, my space cowboy. And I always will."

Thirty agonizing minutes later, a final transmission arrived. Daniel's voice was steady, but she could hear the emotion beneath it.

"Thank you for giving me this last opportunity."

A small pause.

"You've lifted that weight from me. Now I'm ready to leave in peace."

Another pause.

"I love you, Ellie. And I always will."

Ellie watched his final words over and over, unable to move from her seat. Because this was all she had left. This was the last time she would ever hear his voice.



When she finally stepped out of the room— The final sensor drone exploded.

Now, the Endeavour was moving blind, surrounded by a hurricane of relativistic debris, each fragment a bullet moving just under light-speed. The collision was inevitable.

The control room remained silent, their screens filled with data feeds, collecting every possible piece of information—learning. Because this moment—this monumental loss—was both a triumph and a tragedy. They had reached the threshold of possibility.

And they had discovered the line they must never cross.

Maybe it would take longer to reach the first star system. But now, they knew exactly how to get there—safely. Time dragged on, stretching into eternity as they waited. But time does not wait. The Endeavour finally reached the end of its journey.

And then—

The universe erupted.

The impact was unlike anything humanity had ever conceived.



The energy release was so apocalyptic, so staggering, that had it occurred closer to Neptune or Uranus, it might have destabilized the orbits of entire planets.

And then came the light. A burst of energy so brilliant, so impossibly bright, that it was visible to the naked eye from Earth.

During the day.

And that was a catastrophic problem.