

TERRA

written by

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Revision Four

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FADE IN:

INT. SENSITIVE COMPARTMENTED INFORMATION FACILITY (SCIF)
CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

CAPTAIN PETER SIMS, 28, dressed in a United States Air Force flight suit sits at the conference room table, waiting for someone to arrive.

SUPER: "Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canaveral, Florida"

The conference room door opens, and a hiss of air can be heard escaping the SCIF as MAJOR GENERAL DANIEL ROBERTS, 51, dressed in an Air Force Dress Uniform, enters the room holding two files under his arm.

Sims stands.

ROBERTS

No need, take your seat.

SIMS

Yes sir.

Sims sits, and Roberts takes the seat across from him. Roberts lays the two files out on the table, and opens one.

ROBERTS

(reading the file)

Your superior officers use words like "exemplary" to describe your conduct, and your peers say that you're the best pilot they've ever seen. Not bad.

SIMS

Thank you, sir.

ROBERTS

(continuing to read
the file)

Says here that your grade point average never dipped below a 4.0, and that you have a Ph.D in Advanced Propulsion Systems from MIT?

SIMS

That's correct.

ROBERTS

May I ask what the topic of your dissertation was?

SIMS

The file doesn't tell you?

ROBERTS

No, but I heard a rumor. Wanted to see if it was true.

SIMS

The title of my dissertation was "Practical Steps to Achieve Consistent, Sustained Transportation Speeds Beyond the Einstein Barrier."

ROBERTS

In layman's terms.

SIMS

Essentially, it was about how to achieve travel at lightspeed without the vessel or its contents being destroyed en route.

ROBERTS

I thought so. And in that case, I think what we have for you might be right up your alley.

Roberts shuts the file, and picks up the second file in front of him.

ROBERTS (CONT'D)

I'll get straight to the point. There are very few people who are aware of the existence of the file in my hand.

(a beat)

The author has been sworn to secrecy, and we have him under NSA surveillance. You are not to say a word about this file to anyone, and if anyone other than those who are already aware of its contents should question you about it, you are to deny the file's existence. Is that clear?

SIMS

Yes sir.

Roberts passes Sims the file, and Sims looks at Roberts skeptically before accepting it. Sims opens the folder and begins to read the first page. His eyes grow wide.

SIMS (CONT'D)

How accurate is this report?

ROBERTS

Well, the man who wrote it is considered the world's top mind in the field of astrophysics. I'm fairly confident that the guy knows what he's talking about.

SIMS

(continuing to read)

I'm not sure I understand. How can our sun be dying?

ROBERTS

The bottom line is that we grossly underestimated how old it is. As a star, it's much closer to death than we have always thought it to be.

SIMS

Other than you, me, and the author, who knows about this report?

ROBERTS

That would be your partner for this mission.

SIMS

Mission?

ROBERTS

Yes, in addition to providing background on the situation, that document is also a mission briefing. And before we go any further, this would not be affiliated with the Air Force, it would be a mission for NASA, so while I outrank you, your participation in the mission would be voluntary. I cannot order you to go.

(a beat)

But since you're the Air Force's best pilot, and because of the compartmentalization protocols with sensitive information like this file, it falls to me to try to convince you to volunteer.

SIMS

And what if I say no.

ROBERTS

You can certainly choose to do that.

SIMS

But the NSA would be my babysitter for the rest of my life?

ROBERTS

Your file says that you have top secret clearance, so no, the government wouldn't need to keep an eye on you.

SIMS

With all due respect, I'm not sure if I believe you, sir.

ROBERTS

Sims, the choice is for you to stay on Earth, which we now know has a much shorter life expectancy due to our dying sun, or help us move to our new home.

A beat. Sims is confused.

SIMS

What new home?

Roberts pulls a face as if to say "well, here goes."

ROBERTS

As you are aware, our universe is filled with an untold number of galaxies. Many of those galaxies have solar systems much like ours, with planets much like ours.

(a beat)

The NASA that people know about, the agency that sends people into orbit, and to the moon, is just one small part of what they do. The report you hold in your hand is about eighteen years old. When it came out, it was immediately classified, and in response to the report, NASA launched a long-range satellite, equipped with a rover vehicle, and set it on a course for our nearest neighboring galaxy. Of course, with the report being classified, everyone at NASA thought that it was a research mission. There was no mention that we were looking for a planet to move to...

(a beat)

...but we found a planet in our neighbor galaxy that is essentially Earth's twin.

SIMS

What are you saying, sir?

ROBERTS

The rover landed on the planet six months ago, and it has been sending data back to us on everything from the make up the atmosphere, to the composition of the soil. We believe that the planet can support human life.

This hits Sims like a ton of bricks.

ROBERTS (CONT'D)

Based on the data and the video we've received back from the rover, it appears that the planet is deserted, but approximately 32 days ago, the rover's batteries died.

(a beat)

It was exploring the interior of a cave, and got caught between a couple of rocks. Without sunlight, the solar powered batteries can't charge.

SIMS

Can't you just send another rover up there?

ROBERTS

No.

SIMS

I'm afraid I'm not following, sir

ROBERTS

If our sun is dying, it's going to start exhibiting symptoms of its age, which could start affecting Earth's climate in our lifetime. I'm talking about the polar ice caps melting; Antarctica would be gone. We cannot wait until our sun is almost dead before we start evacuating the planet.

(a beat)

But we can't start evacuating the planet until we know whether or not this new planet, which we call Terra, can support human life. The rover can give us numbers that tell us the atmospheric composition, but we won't know if it's difficult to breathe, or if the water makes humans sick without--

SIMS

Without humans to test it.

A beat. Sims gets it now.

SIMS (CONT'D)

You want me to be a guinea pig.

ROBERTS

If that's how you see it, then yes. But if you do this, and you'll be saving humanity. By signing this document, you'll be accepting the most important mission in the history of mankind.

SIMS

Sir, I have an immense amount of respect for the chain of command, and I understand that I am your subordinate, but may I speak freely?

ROBERTS

Of course.

SIMS

If I do this, and I succeed, meaning that I can breathe the air and drink the water once I'm on planet, only then will I be saving humanity. There are an untold number of obstacles to success here. And let's not even get into the possibility of interacting with other life forms.

(a beat)

Do you understand the gravity of your request?

Roberts sighs heavily.

ROBERTS

Sims, I can guarantee you I understand my request.

(a beat)

Do you understand that if we don't send someone to Terra now, we'll start experiencing weather anomalies that cannot be explained. Extreme fluctuations in temperature, not just day to day, but hour by hour, minute by minute. Weather patterns that don't make any logical sense. I'm talking 85 degree highs in New York, in the middle of January.

(a beat)

That will lead people to ask questions. Questions that we cannot answer right now, because the answers have been classified.

SIMS

I have to admit, I didn't peg you as someone who would be so concerned with keeping something a secret.

(a beat)

You seemed like a straight shooter.

ROBERTS

I gave you permission to speak freely, not to insult me.

(a beat)

Do you have any idea the level of mass panic that will ensue if and when the general public learns that the end of this world is much closer than anyone thought?

(a beat)

I value honesty and integrity as much as any other officer in the U.S. military, but I also recognize that I have a responsibility to help maintain order among the general public.

Sims sits back in his chair and collects his thoughts.

SIMS

It's a lot to take in at once, that's all.

ROBERTS

I understand that.

SIMS

Who's this partner you mentioned, sir?

ROBERTS

Captain Miranda Lane, she's got a doctorate in Biomedical Engineering from Johns Hopkins. From a research perspective, she'd do the heavy lifting once you're on planet.

SIMS

Is there a reason why she's not in on this briefing?

ROBERTS

She was briefed this morning.

SIMS

Does she have a family? A husband, kids? Are her parents still living?

ROBERTS

I don't think the Air Force wants me to share personnel information--

SIMS

Sir, if I accept this mission, I'm going to spending a significant amount of time with Captain Lane. You've leveled with me once today, can you do me a solid and level with me again?

A beat. Roberts knows he must admit the truth.

ROBERTS

She's an orphan. And she doesn't have any significant other, or children.

SIMS

Like me.

ROBERTS

Yes. Like you.

A beat. Sims considers this, and realizes the gravity of Roberts's words. He could protest here, but decides to hear more from Roberts.

SIMS

Is it really going to take 18 years for us to get to Terra?

ROBERTS

The good news is, in the time between when we launched rover and now, we've made significant strides in human spaceflight, much of which have been classified due to their potential use on this very mission.

(a beat)

We now have the technology to get you to Terra within two years, with the help of NASA's LuxDrive technology.

SIMS

LuxDrive? Are you saying what I think you're saying?

ROBERTS

It allows the spacecraft to move at the speed of light.

A beat. Sims is stunned by this statement.

SIMS

All this time, I thought lightspeed was theoretical.

(a beat)

How did I not know about this?

ROBERTS

Turns out the U.S. Government can still keep a secret or two, contrary to popular belief.

SIMS

How did the developers solve the vibration issue? I mean, I know the hypothetical answer to that question, but in practice, I always thought the vehicle would break apart once you moved beyond the Einstein Barrier.

ROBERTS

Well, that's why we need you.

(a beat)

You're the only person that has the background or the intellect to fix a problem mid-flight, should anything go wrong.

SIMS

What exactly could go wrong?

ROBERTS

LuxDrive technology is incredibly difficult to test. When we have tested it, we've lost contact with the satellites that have been equipped with it.

SIMS

They haven't fixed the vibration issue?--

ROBERTS

We don't know if excess vibration caused the loss of contact--

SIMS

But those satellites could have been destroyed.

A beat. Again, Roberts must admit a hard truth.

ROBERTS

They could have been destroyed yes, but they also could have reached their destination, and possibly had damage to their homing beacons.

An uncomfortable silence.

SIMS

So, you want me to fly a ship equipped with a brand new technology that when tested has produced unknown results, meaning that we could either end up at Terra safe and sound, or disintegrate as soon as we push the button to engage LuxDrive.

(a beat)

Sir, this is an honest question: How do you expect me, Lane, or anyone else to volunteer for this mission?

Roberts has reached his breaking point, and decides to drop any pretense.

ROBERTS

You know what Sims, I don't know. I don't know how to get anyone to accept this job, because it's a shitty job.

(a beat)

"Here, blast off in this rocket ship that may or may not work, go to this unknown planet where you may or may not be able to breathe, drink the water, or do much of anything, and don't fail because if you do, humanity's done."

(a beat)

Do you think I like being the one to sell this to you and Lane? Put yourself in my shoes.

SIMS

I don't envy you, or the job you have to do--

ROBERTS

You shouldn't. I can't talk to anyone about this, not even my wife. I've spent more time in a SCIF trying to rack my brain about how to pitch this to you, knowing full well that both you and Lane are smart enough to figure out why we picked you.

SIMS

Because if we fail, the government can bury a box of our stuff in two unmarked graves in the middle of...Iowa for all they care, and no one has to know.

ROBERTS

Exactly, and I hate both the secrecy behind all of this, and the cold-hearted cynicism with which I have to operate, but it's necessary, and I don't know what more I can do to convince you. I've tried flattering you, I've tried stressing the importance of the mission...

(a beat)

You are certainly free to say no, but if you do, I have to find a sub-par pilot who will probably fail before the spacecraft makes it to Terra.

(a beat)

We have to try to save humanity. And if the only thing we have control over is our effort on this mission, then I need to make sure we put forth the best effort possible, which means getting two of the best people in the world at what they do to fly to our new home, and test it out for us.

(a beat)

That means getting you and Lane.

SIMS

Look, you can hardly blame me for not wanting to die in the vacuum of space.

ROBERTS

Why, what's the difference from dying here on Earth?

(a beat)

You're one of the best pilots the U.S. Government has ever seen, but you still put your life in danger every time you suit up. You could have died in the cockpit of any one of the planes you flew. Hell, you could die in a car crash leaving the parking lot today.

(a beat)

This is an opportunity for you to save the world, Sims. You'd be one of two people who get to leave a doomed planet. Your concerns about the LuxDrive are legitimate, and I know you're weighing the risks right now, but there's one thing I don't think you've considered.

SIMS

What's that?

ROBERTS

What if you sign up for the mission, and you succeed?

A beat. Roberts gets up to leave, and leaves a pen for Sims to use.

ROBERTS (CONT'D)

I can give you 48 hours to think it over. Just let me know when you've made your decision.

Roberts heads towards the door. Just as he goes to open the door...

SIMS

Wait.

Roberts stops and turns towards Sims.

SIMS (CONT'D)

You know, you're right. I've taken for granted the number of times I've faced death in the cockpit and won.

A beat. Sims looks down at the papers in front of him, then turns back to Roberts.

SIMS (CONT'D)

I didn't know my birth mother or father. But I had a foster dad who once gave me a piece of advice that has guided me ever since. When I was 13, I'd been busted for, quite literally, stealing candy. I was oblivious enough to try to do it in front of a cop.

(a beat)

Long story short, the cop stopped me right as I was about to leave the store. He didn't arrest me, but he did tell my foster father.

(a beat)

Now, with past foster fathers, I would have expected a beating, but this one was different. He told me that we don't have total control over what we're remembered for, but we do have a little bit of control over it, and we have to work as hard as we can to control what we're remembered for.

ROBERTS

Is that what inspired you to join the Air Force?

SIMS

No.

(a beat)

But it will inspire me to sign this paper.

(a beat)

That candy shop owner will probably only remember me for being the punk who tried to steal from him. But at least you'll remember me for being the guy who said yes.

ROBERTS

If you succeed, the world will remember you for that.

SIMS

What am I supposed to tell my friends?

ROBERTS

You'll be given a cover story for now. It'll be something to do with a top secret project, something that we can easily integrate into the truth, should you and Lane succeed.

Sims nods, looks down at the papers in front of him, and signs the document. He stands up, walks over to Roberts, handing him the document and the pen.

SIMS

Do you know if Captain Lane signed her copy?

ROBERTS

Yes, earlier this morning.

SIMS

Well then, let's hope for the best.

ROBERTS

It's all we can do at this point. Wait here, and I'll introduce you to Lane.

Roberts exits the room.

FADE OUT.

THE END