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Benjamin C. Kinney sometimes calls this story “The Martian’s Husband,” because it was inspired by his real-life experience staying at home while his wife went on a 366-day NASA-funded simulated mission to Mars. Elsewhere, Benjamin is a neuroscientist, SFF writer, and a finalist for the Hugo and Ignyte Awards as assistant editor of the science fiction podcast magazine *Escape Pod*. This is his second appearance in *Analog*, and his other stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Fireside Fiction*, and elsewhere. You can find him online at benjaminckinney.com or follow him on twitter [@BenCKinney](https://twitter.com/BenCKinney).

A Living Planet

by Benjamin C. Kinney

Maybe this time Ethan would find the right words for his one-woman audience across the void. He offered his best smile to the phone camera and pressed *record*.

"Hey baby. It's April second, mission day one hundred and seventy five. Ten days since your transmitter went down, but I know you're still getting these. I made it to work a couple minutes early, so wanted to say hi before my shift. Gotta head in before I run out of 'early,' though -- I know, I'm supposed to win this team over. In other words, not much new. Love you."

He reviewed the video. It wasn't eloquent or deep, but even an uninspired message would do good. At least he'd angled the camera correctly. Liza would be able to see the San Gabriel foothills behind him, with green slopes and open sky above. He sent the message off for upload via the Deep Space Network, to wing its way toward the Hawai'iloa on its now-silent arc toward

Mars.

Nobody on Earth could say for certain whether the Hawai'iloa's crew was receiving messages. But the Deep Space Network would resend them if it needed to. He'd gone camping once after Liza's mission started, and she'd still sent him video letters every day, a stack of messages awaiting his return.

He rinsed his face in the bathroom until no trace of salt remained beneath his eyes, and then hustled through the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's air conditioned halls. Hawai'iloa's ground control was half a world away, and he needed to focus on nearer space. In the RESCOOP mission control room, four workstations faced each other atop a single round table, huddled like travelers around the firepit of an open-plan office.

DeAndre raised a hand in silent greeting, and continued a quiet discussion with Ace. "...could just be a radar hiccup. But I'll keep an eye on it."

The callsign Ace came with the Real-Time Operations desk, the mission manager and final point of communication with the spacecraft. Ethan had tried calling her "Ace" full-time as a joke, but she turned out to prefer it over Carmen. Ethan tried to think of that as progress toward winning her approval.

Ace flicked a glare toward Ethan, without breaking stride on her conversation with DeAndre.

Ethan settled in at the Articulation workstation. If Ace didn't want him around, he'd roll with it. He dug out a sharpie and Post-it, sketched a cartoon button, and anointed the top of his screen with *TRACTOR BEAM: REVERSE POLARITY*.

He spun through the Articulation subsystems for status reports. Green lights on all control panels: manipulation arm, capture systems, storage pods. But under those green lights, the

storage pods reported a few borderline numbers. Minor load imbalance, still well within safety thresholds. Ethan tweaked some prewritten programs for the manipulation arm and set about repacking the pod. The previous Articulation controller might never know, but Ethan would make their work look elegant.

A scribbling sound drew his attention. Bituin had snuck in to the fourth desk at Power/Thermal and and stuck a Post-It to the top of their screen, with a button marked *EJECT WARP CORE*.

Ace groaned. "Don't encourage him."

DeAndre snickered. "How about we encourage him to take art classes?" He peered around the edge of his screen at the Guidance, Navigation, and Control desk. "Ethan, you keeping your spirits up?"

"Gotta keep myself entertained while the wife's traveling. A little radio trouble doesn't change anything."

Ace put on her glasses. "Maybe work isn't the place for entertainment? If you need a break, file a leave request. I'll approve it. Three months is a long time."

"Thanks, Ace," Ethan snapped. "I know how long three months is."

He winced. Maybe Ace was trying to be kind, rather than needling him. Three months, though. He'd tried not to count. Ninety-four days until the Hawai'iloa reached Mars. Orbital insertion would confirm that it'd only ever had a transmitter problem, nothing worse.

When it entered Mars orbit safely, not *if*.

Until then, he'd keep doing what Liza had asked of him: live his life. Be the sturdy rock of home, the planet's solid ground awaiting her return.

Liza had also asked him to make friends, to win people over. He tried to catch Ace's eye

over his monitor, but she was buried in her work, fingers striking her screen with the tempo of sublimated anger.

Inevitable. If he was going to butt heads with one person on his team, it had to be his supervisor.

If he messed up this job, he had plenty further to fall. His wife made him too famous to fire, but NASA could silo him again, this time to a spacecraft where Articulation had nothing to do but reposition solar panels. RESCOOP was a better posting than he'd earned after NASA dissolved his last team.

He deserved the siloing. At first he'd raged at getting thrown under the bus, but Liza talked him down. Asynchronous conversation was good for that. You couldn't react, so you had no choice but to think and digest.

He'd brought it on himself. Not with technical errors, but with social ones. His bosses had encouraged him to take part in the government-approved Hawai'i'iloa hype, so he dove into the spotlight. But he'd never asked his coworkers how they felt, never noticed their growing resentment.

In his new silo at RESCOOP, he'd made a promise to Liza and himself: to wield his jokes for inclusion, not mockery.

Ethan pulled up a text editor and started working on the code for their next capture. In a few hours, RESCOOP would need to snag another broken cubesat. The flimsy ten-centimeter cubesats barely lasted a year, so they gave RESCOOP most of its work. In another day or two he'd get to parachute a storage pod full of them back to Earth for refurbishment.

Programming was short-term, structured, solvable. Time passed quickly in a task like that. You could handle anything, one step at a time.

"Hey, Ace?" DeAndre's usually-deep voice rose into a squeak. "The Space Surveillance Network is confirming that anomaly. Can you call Vandenburg?"

She tapped open the approved secure-call app. RESCOOP wasn't military, but it depended entirely on Strategic Command and its willingness to share Space Surveillance Network data.

Ethan closed his text editor. "Get us close, I've got an itchy gripper over here."

"You'll need it, grabby-hands. Too big for a cubesat." DeAndre's gaze flicked across his screen. "It's in a stable orbit. Why isn't it in the Stratcom database?"

Ethan dug out his phone and refreshed a news search. "No recent launches."

Ace held a hand over one ear and said into her phone, "Could you repeat that, Colonel?"

"Hold on." DeAndre's voice shook. "I'm seeing a second radar anomaly."

The room fell silent. Ethan scribbled out a new button, and pressed his finger against *HAILING FREQUENCIES*.

Ace set down her phone. "Please turn off your cell phones, everyone. Stratcom is on their way to brief us. Until then, no communications with anyone outside this room."

Bituin ran a hand over their buzzed-short hair, and gave Ace a quizzical look.

Ace ticked off the possibilities on her fingers. "No known origin. No plausible launch trajectory from Earth. Not from any of the orbital factories." She took her glasses off, turned them over in her hands, and put them back on. "Unidentified flying object."

A giggle slipped from Ethan's lips. He clasped a hand over his mouth, and DeAndre gave him a puzzled stare. "You all right, man?"

"I need a t-shirt." He lowered his hand, despite the laughter trying to crowd its way up his throat. "It's going to say, *My wife went to Mars and all I got was this lousy alien spacecraft.*"

If everyone else wanted to freeze up with appalled stares, their loss.

#

Like so many other jobs, running mission control for an orbital spacecraft involved long spans of boredom punctuated by moments of stark terror. They had spent the last hour in orbital maneuvers bringing RESCOOP closer to the anomaly, and its shape was just starting to emerge from pixels as the Strategic Command officers drove down from the heliport.

The four mission controllers crowded around Ethan's desk. For these last few minutes, they would remain the only humans in all of history to see something of alien make. He could've piped the articulation arm's camera to the other computers, but without anyone asking, everyone had drawn close, as if huddling for warmth against the mysteries of a primeval night.

On the video, a pale blur became a silver blob, which became a reflective cone two meters long. Hollow, judging by its open base.

Ethan tapped the screen. "Breakthrough Starshot."

DeAndre squinted at him, then at the cone. "You say that like I should know what it means."

"It was a plan to send cameras to Alpha Centauri, back when I was in high school. They were going to build tiny light sails like this one, and accelerate them with lasers. They thought they could get the sails up to twenty percent of lightspeed." He slid a finger along his lapboard, and the tacglass stayed flat, recognizing his gesture as a drag rather than a button-press. He highlighted the material's impossible thinness, visible at the cone's hollow base. "Not a lot else you can do with a tin-foil cone."

DeAndre scoffed. "That's the most early-century space nerd bullshit I ever heard. No way to adjust course once it's gone anywhere. You can't laser a projectile into another planet's orbit."

"I know, right? These things are way better than Starshot."

Ace released her breath. "Damn good sign, though. Would've been easier to launch these like darts. Someone put a lot of work into *not* slaughtering us all."

"Not picking up any kind of broadcast," DeAndre said. "If they're trying to talk to us --"

A posse of Space Force officers strode in, their service-dress blues like a battering ram. In the lead, a bald man with a general's stars and a payload of orders. Stern and serious words about NASA's relationship with the military, RESCOOP's relationship with Space Force Strategic Command, and their joint mission to steward Earth as arms of the United States Government.

Stratcom needed their expertise. Ace's status in the Space Force Reserves was active, effective immediately. She would follow their orders now; and through her, the RESCOOP mission controllers.

Ethan took refuge in the break room as soon as he could. The cream-colored walls wrapped him in dull comfort, alongside the refrigerator's melancholy hum. With most of the building's employees sent home, he had the room all to himself.

Ace rapped her knuckles against the doorframe. She leaned against the open door, a veneer of relaxation over a compression spring.

"You sure ran off fast," she said.

Ethan glanced at his empty mug, black with a coppery JPL logo. How long had he been holding it? He poured himself a mug of whatever blend had wallowed in the pot all morning.

"Just a little overwhelmed. Crazy day, huh?"

"Get ready for more. This is our chance in the spotlight," she said. "Centcom wants to extend our shift to twenty-four hours. Fewer people need-to-know and all that. Which means the

aliens are all ours."

"I've had enough spotlight, thanks." He'd enjoyed it, after the Hawai'iloa's launch. So many people who wanted to hear from him. So many people who sounded like they cared.

"Easy for you to say. I'm still trying to build a career here. And that doesn't mean running ops for an uncrewed garbage truck." She poured herself a mug of coffee. "Don't tell me you're happy siloed down here?"

At his workstation, in their windowless control room, he was the sturdy rock of home and the planet's solid ground. An answer too large to fit into words.

"I like uncrewed. Articulation's more fun without humans up there to cramp your robot's style."

Ace growled, low and exasperated. "I worked with Liza once. I was a controller on one of her early missions. She seemed like a total badass. Not the kind of woman to sit and get comfortable with good-enough dead ends."

Ethan sat at the break room table, his back to Ace. A poster above him showed an artist's rendition of one of the Voyager probes, white disk and three long antennae, long since flown beyond the reach of humankind.

He said, "Fuck off, Ace."

She cursed, stifled it. She slid out a chair across from him, metal legs scraping across tile.

"Yeah," she said. "That was shitty of me. Look, you and I don't make a good team. You know that. I know that. But all I'm asking is twenty-four hours. I'll put up with your bullshit if you'll take the work seriously."

"Take the work seriously," he repeated, his tone as weary and burnt as the coffee in his mug. Every morning he'd cleaned up his colleagues' work, and she hadn't noticed. But flying

under the radar was part of being a team player. If Ace never knew his resentment, maybe he was doing it right.

Trying to explain would only make things worse.

"Aliens, Ethan!" She leaned forward. A spring ready to loose; not at him, but upward.

"Intelligent, tool-using, projectile-launching aliens."

"I really do need that *my wife went to Mars* t-shirt, don't I?"

Ace didn't smile. "The general knows what a screw-up you are. I told him you won't be a liability. Was I wrong?"

Over her head, the Voyager poster stood clean and perfect, too high on the wall for finger-smudges. Out of reach, searching for messages that had long since passed it unseen.

"Liza would've loved this," he said. "But I guess you get me instead."

#

Through Ace's speakerphone, a voice said, "What's our timeline? There are kids in their backyards right now, looking through their telescopes and wondering why you're not following the posted schedule."

Ace said, "Capture commands go from Articulation over to Guidance, Navigation, and Control for cross-check with other sensors. It'll take however long it takes."

"Almost done," Ethan said. "Let's get these tucked away nice and safe. The lost & found never returns my calls up here."

The Stratcom voice said, "Hurry it up. The Space Surveillance Network gives us about twenty hours' lead on the rest of the world. Five down, fifteen to go."

Ace twisted her mouth, and glanced at the military silhouettes outside the door.

"Stratcom, that's not -- we need to focus right now. I asked you all to clear the room so we could

work, now I need you to clear the line. If you don't trust me, replace me. Call me if it's an emergency, text if it isn't."

Ethan adjusted the last few parameters in his code. There was no way to know how the light sail might respond to RESCOOP's induction-net grasp. Too aggressive, and he might crush it. Too cautious, and he might bump it without getting a good hold. If he knocked it into a long-axis flip, RESCOOP might never be able to grab it.

Some discoveries need a little risk. You don't get human boots on Mars without sending six souls across eighty million kilometers of irradiated vacuum.

Ethan wrote *ENERGIZE FORCE FIELD* on a Post-It, and added it to the growing yellow-paper control panel along his monitor's edge. He ran his code through the simulator one last time, and submitted it. "Over to you, GNC."

"Let's take a look at your mess." DeAndre grinned, then tapped his hand against his screen with the click of fingertips against tacglass. "Integration is good. Commands built and ready to go."

"Transmitting to spacecraft," Ace said. Text and color flickered in reflection across her glasses. "Confirmed."

Ethan piped his arm-camera view to the other desks. The team held their breaths, as if a single whispered word might bump them from their orbits.

Above the arc of the Earth, RESCOOP's four-jointed titanium arm moved through the variations of its programmed dance. The hand opened, two grip paddles apart and parallel as they crept toward the cone's wide base.

Ethan toggled the view from shoulder camera to wrist. The alien material drew close, its rim so thin he could hardly see it, if not for the half-centimeter nodules studding its rim.

Ace's phone beeped. She muttered a curse, and the sound choked into silence.

RESCOOP's paddles slid into place around the alien device, with one safe centimeter of vacuum between it and humanity's tools.

"Induction net engaged," Ace said. "Contact successful."

DeAndre cheered. Bituin pumped their fist. The two spacecraft flew onward, their orbits conjoined, their eternal fall in balance with Earth's curve.

Ace checked her phone. "Stratcom says there's a third anomaly, but it's a ways off. We'll worry about it after number two."

"They keep coming." Ethan fake-whistled. "Who wants to bet they won't stop at three?"

"If more come, we'll see them." Ace's eyes returned to her control screen. "How many can we hold?"

"We have two empty pods, four induction hooks each, so eight's the limit. Assuming their mass is as low as it looks. Which it'd better be, because our delivery system doesn't do heavy."

Ethan paused over the code that would tug their prize to a cargo pod. "I hope Stratcom has a plan for getting these to Earth, because I don't."

"No rush." Ace didn't check her phone. "The goal is to play this careful. That means keeping the anomalies up in space, out of view, until we know more."

Ethan knew he shouldn't ask questions. Liza had asked him to be her rock, which meant *not* rocking any boats.

But Liza would've asked.

When he first met her in a cluttered Manhattan Beach tea shop, she'd just left the Space Force. She couldn't follow orders she didn't understand, and she couldn't advance if she asked too many questions. In the long run, switching from military to NASA was the right call. Success

in space required more than just pilot-astrobiologists. It also needed people who were willing to challenge uncertainty, and fight it until it became clarity.

He took his hands off his lapboard. "We can't just leave them in space."

DeAndre hissed, "What are you doing?"

Ace stifled a sigh. "Planetary protection, Ethan. Think of it like the Hawai'iloa's decontamination time. No contact until we're sure we can't harm each other. Stratcom knows the anomalies aren't weapons. But they're still alien artifacts, Ethan! We can't rush this."

Decontamination had meant a month with Liza beyond his reach, even before her journey began. Two weeks before launch, two more in orbit. He'd dreaded it all, but the second half landed with a shock of unexpected wonder. They had humanity's greatest spacecraft to explore, side by side via video link.

The hardship began after launch, when the distance grew. Lightspeed delays lengthened, and real-time communication became impossible. Even that, he learned to bear. One-way video messages became normal, the rhythm of a long-distance marriage.

But he could no more adapt to total silence than he could adapt to a knife in the stomach.

Ace said, "Articulation? We're waiting on those mass tests. Take the work seriously, remember?"

DeAndre glared at him. Bituin stared at their lap.

Ethan rubbed a knuckle against his eye. He'd made his promises, and he had no choice. He needed to protect the sturdy rock of home for Liza's return.

"Confirmed, Ace." He plucked the *FORCE FIELD* note from his screen and crumpled it in his hand.

#

In the hours of tedium after the third anomaly, Ethan jogged up and down the building's dreary concrete stairs. No amount of exhaustion would let him nap. He ate whatever food the Space Force guards brought in, tried to fiddle around with his phone. His eyes wouldn't focus on text, and Stratcom had the internet jammed.

There was only one thing left to do.

He settled into the back of the break room, stood his phone on the table, and looked into its video camera. He knew better than to try on a smile.

"I shouldn't be telling you this, babe. But this won't send until I'm allowed to tell you, so I guess I can tell you." A single weak 'hah' flopped from his mouth like a laugh reheated in the microwave. "Sorry. I'm a little tired. Twenty-two hour shift and still going."

He rubbed his palms against his eyes. Afterward, the view on his screen was unchanged, an unshaven face searching for meaning in the camera lens.

"Looks like I found extraterrestrial life before you did. No joke. Someone out there in the galaxy made a Breakthrough Starshot, and we've picked up the first three with RESCOOP. It feels unreal. I mean, not just for the obvious reasons." He gestured at an empty wall, out of frame. "Why am I the one to find alien life, while you and your ship float dead--"

The word caught in his throat. He darted his hand toward the pause button. He hit the phone too fast, and it spun off the tabletop and clattered onto the floor. Face up. Still recording.

Ethan tensed his eyes until the sting faded, and then cradled the phone in his hands.

"Sorry. If you're watching this, you're still alive. Obviously. And now you have to watch me melt down." He swallowed.

"I know I'm no good at putting this stuff into words. But I'm not going to stop trying, baby. You get this whole video, messy as it is." He brushed his thumb beneath the camera lens,

his fingertip a blur that came so very close to contact.

Footsteps pounded in the hall outside. He said, "Sorry babe, someone's coming. Love you."

Ace slammed the door open. "We need you on desk, now. The anomalies are moving."

"Moving? How?"

"You tell me," she said curtly. "They're doing it in your cargo pod."

#

Ethan tapped a sharpie against a blank Post-It as he waited for DeAndre to pass his code to Ace for transmission. He piped his arm-camera view to the rest of the team, awaiting the moment when it would show something closer than the stars, out-of-focus and untouchable.

Integration, transmission, confirmation. Stars slid across the video until RESCOOP brought itself into frame. Solar panels, then fuselage, then the two white orbs of cargo pods.

Nothing looked amiss, but Bituin tightened their lips. "Pod #1. Vibration sensors still active."

The most words Ethan had ever heard from them, and he was too damned busy to joke about it.

He centered RESCOOP's wrist camera on the cargo pod, and adjusted the focus until he could read the stamped logo of Blue Orbit's orbital factory on white ceramic. An indicator light blinked green on Ethan's screen. The pod petaled open, baring the thin striations of layered insulation and the contents within.

A web of milky fibers linked the three anomalies together as they hung side-by-side beneath their induction hooks.

"Huh," Ace said. A smile snapped across her face like a spring released from its load. She

tapped a message into her phone.

Nothing seemed to move on the camera, but Bituin's instruments showed ongoing vibrations in the cargo area. Ethan took a snapshot and placed it next to the video feed.

Ethan overlaid the video and the still, then swapped back and forth. The web seemed denser in the live image.

His mouth went dry. "Pretty sure that wasn't part of the Breakthrough Starshot plans."

Ethan squinted at the pattern in the growing lace. Eight concentric loops, not quite round. A heavy knot at the center, a smaller knot on the third loop. A sketch of Earth's place in the solar system. The one pattern the aliens might expect them to recognize.

Or a construct of his sleep-deprived and lonely imagination.

The human mind craved patterns so fiercely it heard messages where none existed. It drew rabbits on the moon and faces on Martian mountains. He needed a second opinion. The trick would be cuing someone else without telling them what to look for.

Ethan's mouth said, "If the aliens came this far to tell us the good word about space spiders, I am slamming the door on them."

A good line, perfect delivery. Even better than the t-shirt line. But he'd meant to say so much more.

Ace slammed her knuckles onto the desk. "Damn it, Ethan! It's not funny!"

DeAndre said, "Ace, slow down. We have to--"

"You're damn right we have to!" She stood and yanked one of the Post-Its off the top of his screen. "Ethan. You cover with bullshit when there's something you don't want to say. Out with it."

Her phone buzzed. It vibrated atop the desk, again and again, waiting for an answer.

Ethan rubbed his palms against his slacks. "Okay. Okay? I just, I need a minute."

Ace narrowed her eyes, snatched up her phone, and stepped away from the table to hear the word of Stratcom.

"Ethan, you--" DeAndre's expression softened, its mocking armor folded away. "You all right?"

Righter than a prograde orbit, he almost said. But DeAndre watched him not with pity, but with long-suffering hope, like a father ever watchful for his prodigal son.

"Not so great, honestly. All this makes it hard to think about anything other than Liza." He swallowed. "I'll survive. But thanks for checking in. I mean it."

Ace pocketed her phone. "Orders are in. We don't know what the anomalies are doing, we have to stop them. Deliver the pod with a dead parachute, burn it all up in re-entry." She let out her breath, a hand against her temple. "Shit."

Ethan's throat closed, as sudden and deep as mourning. The aliens would never know what happened. Their radio telescopes silent, hunting the skies in vain.

Bituin said, "I, ah. This isn't right. They haven't hurt us."

"Hold on." DeAndre's eyes flicked between windows on his screen. "Anyone else see rings? They look like the solar system. Check Mercury's eccentricity, that can't be coincidence."

Ace shook her head, eyes slipping away from her screen. "I believe you. I know. But planetary protection, we're supposed to --" She took off her glasses and turned them over in her hands. "We have our orders."

"We can refuse." DeAndre glanced at the door, and the silhouette of a guard outside. "We can push back. Say something."

"Not if we ever want to work in astronautics again. And that's best-case." She flung her

glasses at her screen. They clattered to the floor, out of view.

"Working on it," Ethan heard himself say. He opened the cargo-pod delivery code. He deleted the subroutine that would trigger the parachutes, and then both of the failsafes.

His fingers slipped on the tacglass. Bituin sat with eyes shut, hands clenched on their lap. DeAndre growled at his screen in wordless hate.

Ace said, "There'll be more light sails. This won't be the end." She wilted into her chair as if she hadn't even reassured herself.

She looked as miserable as Ethan felt.

"Fine," DeAndre spat. "But let me just say for the record, screw this." His fingers slid across tacglass, slow and resentful, assembling the pieces of destruction.

This won't be the end, Ace had said. Had guessed. Had hoped. After Ethan's shift, the rest of the world would know. Stratcom might never again let the sails huddle together for warmth. Any of a dozen countries might start lobbing missiles, thinking they might save the Earth.

Who knew how long the aliens might need to wait, before a voice replied from across the void?

Liza would do something brilliant here. But whatever she might choose, Ethan had no idea.

All he had was his team. Even Ace, who had tried so hard to tell him how he could be the sturdy rock of her launch.

He swapped one number in his code, directing his updates to the wrong pod.

"Bituin, how are those vibration sensors looking?" Ethan watched the kid's face to make sure they'd understood.

"Looking... Fine?" They furrowed their brow, then startled. They dragged a slider down

their screen and bit their lip. "Fine."

Ethan overrode the manipulator-arm's failsafes, and ensured the spacecraft and its cargo would remain forever joined. The system was robust against errors, not sabotage. He'd always hoped the second-shift Articulation controller cleaned up his mistakes every day, just as Ethan had for the third-shift person. The next controller at this desk would find the arm irretrievably stuck, its gripper paddles jammed in the cargo drop mechanism.

He tapped his sticky-note button for *TRACTOR BEAM: REVERSE POLARITY*. "Over to you, GNC."

DeAndre frowned at his screen, and pressed firmly against the tacglass's corner. On any desk, that gesture would show recent activity. Even with the vibration sensors off, their history would tell DeAndre which pod would drop.

Ethan could only hope DeAndre understood all the things he couldn't say.

"Integration is good." DeAndre met his eyes. "Commands built and ready to go."

Ace said, "Transmitting to spacecraft."

The manipulator arm drew back until its camera could see only the curvature of Earth, bright clouds blotting out whatever stars might lie above.

A cargo pod launched from RESCOOP's side. A sacrifice, falling through space, while his spacecraft clutched another pod against its heart.

Ace said, "That's it. Unless another anomaly drops right on our head, our shift's over." She tipped her head back and stared at the ceiling, or something far beyond.

Numbers blurred on Ethan's screen. Whatever price would come, he'd chosen it. His team had chosen it. Ace might never thank him, but she alone would keep flying.

He blinked his eyes clear. "Thanks for everything, folks. It's been an honor."

Ace gave him an odd look, but he waved her off and wandered outside. They'd fetch him if they needed him. Dawn light filtered between the buildings, a few narrow needles of sun amidst shadow.

The aliens had tried to make contact. Their methods obscure, neither eloquent nor deep, but they deserved to know they weren't alone.

If he was a sturdy rock, that rock needed to be Earth. A living planet. Not some passive and selfish world, but a lighthouse. And in its beam, every lonely voice that called out across the void would hear an answer.

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