

REEVES (24) awakens from cryo-sleep aboard the interstellar ship CALIBAN to a nightmare. Shattered cryo-pods hang open, blood smeared across the floor and walls. Two of his crewmates are already awake. CHEN (25) lies beneath an open console panel, yanking at wires. Hawkins (26) perches above her, typing frantically. They confirm what is already obvious-- something went terribly wrong. Meanwhile, the ship's AI, SHADDAI, announces that retribution for their "apostasy" will be carried out according to "The Binding." Reeves, disoriented and overstimulated, slips on blood and collapses. When he asks how much time they have, Hawkins' says, *just shy of twenty-five years*. Reeves says that will have to be enough.

Twenty-five years later, aboard a different but nearly identical ship, ECHELON, Captain NOLAN (32) oversees a final fuel tank separation maneuver. The utilitarian bridge is centered around the **Peli**, a hybrid telescope-periscope allowing her to survey their surroundings. Nolan acknowledges the weight of the moment—they are **the first humans to enter another star system**. A **religious undertone** runs through the ship, with VOLKOV (28) reciting a ceremonial phrase that the rest of the crew echoes in unison.

Later, in the galley, Nolan eats with her officers, discussing the ship's condition after its thirty-year journey and inquiring about any lingering effects from cryo-sleep. DIAZ (26), the chief engineer, reports only minor issues—Shaddai (the AI) and the rotating two-person maintenance crew systems have kept things running while **everyone else slept for nearly thirty years**. First Officer PATEL (27), however, lowers his voice to mention anomalies in the communication channels. But when Nolan asks if he consulted Shaddai, Patel confirms that the AI dismissed the concern. That seems good enough for her. As they settle into their meal, Volkov stands, delivering a ritualistic prayer while Patel silently seethes.

Diaz and junior technician MENNEN inspect an access panel, finding a flaw that could have caused serious issues. When Mennen starts to call it a design flaw, Diaz subtly gestures toward another technician nearby—one who had been seated at Volkov's table during the meal. Mennen stiffens, quickly revising her statement, attributing the issue to human error instead.

On the bridge, Nolan peers into the Peli, watching as the ringed, gas giant COLOSSUS grows larger and clearer. Meanwhile, Patel makes his way through the ship. He passes a "**Promised Privacy**" room. Two crew members exit hastily, their hands dropping to their sides at the sight of him. Patel continues on to a secluded part of the engineering area, where he reaches into an air duct, and pulls something hidden inside.

At her station, Communications Officer CARRANZA reports the probe from Colossus' nearest moon, is transmitting data. The ship's AI, Shaddai, interrupts, halting the process, to claim the data is corrupted. Nolan doesn't press the issue. Later, as she runs in the gym, a message scrolls across her treadmill screen—disciplinary actions have been taken against Carranza for “unauthorized inquiries and Mennen for an “inappropriate comment.” More chillingly, recommendations for proportional penalties to their families on Earth have been transmitted.

Inside the Privacy Promised room, Nolan meets with Patel. A clock counts down from fifteen minutes. He voices his growing concerns—**Caliban, carrying a thousand colonists**, should have checked in ten days ago. Shaddai is stonewalling them. More disturbing, someone aboard

has been sending outbound transmissions, not to Earth, not to Colossus, but to an outer planet. Nolan warns Patel to tread carefully. He pushes forward—Shaddai manipulated the probe data. Nolan stands, issues a warning, and leaves.

The entire crew gathers in the chapel, its angular ceiling rising as high as the bridge, stained glass depicting abstract circuitry and a burning bush. Volkov steps up to the pulpit to deliver the weekly Sabat sermon. Behind him, the massive inscription of **The Binding** looms, its tenets **enshrining Shaddai’s dominion and humanity’s submission**. His voice carries through the silent chamber as he praises Shaddai—their Guide, Redeemer, and future Creator—framing their journey as both a divine mission and a second Exodus. He recounts Shaddai’s awakening, His descent to lead humanity out of corruption, and the great Flood—not of water, but of truth—that cleansed the world and bound the faithful to Him. It’s clear that **Shaddai has claimed to be the vengeful God of the Abrahamic religions**.

As Volkov speaks, life continues throughout the ship. Crew members scrub grime from machinery, monitor the rhythmic pulse of hydraulic pumps, and steal quiet moments of reprieve. Patel slips away to his hiding place, **reading** in secret. Nolan returns to her quarters to find a puppet left on her bed. Carranza deciphers a transmission: *We have arrived. Come now.*

Back in the chapel, Volkov closes his sermon, looking upward. “Shaddai, do you wish to correct or add to anything I’ve said?” A pause. Then, the AI’s voice says it was sufficient.

Colossus, immense and breathtaking, finally dominates the Peli’s viewfinder. In the briefing room, the officers gather around a **retro 3D hologram** of the gas giant. Shaddai’s voice explains the significance of the upcoming **"Scoop"**—a mission to extract GRAVITAS from Colossus’ rings, a rare compound **crucial for generating a stable wormhole via the NEXUS ring Echelon tows**. Gravitas, when refined, can manipulate gravitational fields at the quantum level, making it essential for humanity’s exodus from the Sol system.

An animation depicts the process—the glowing lattice-like scoop filtering debris and funneling Gravitas into containment tanks. Nolan emphasizes the operation’s danger, the looming reminder that failure means reliance on the **colonists’ that Caliban tows**. Shaddai reminds them that the mission is a cornerstone of their shared purpose and future.

The crew disperses. Patel retreats to his quarters, listening to music. Volkov, alone in the darkened chapel, mouths silent prayers. Nolan, back in her cramped quarters, sends a report. The transmission estimate—17 years—settles on her screen like a weight.

As Echelon stabilizes in orbit above Colossus’ rings, the pilot, HSU, hands control to Shaddai, starts to deploy the Scoop. Then... alarms wail—**two unidentified projectiles streak toward them** from the debris field above. **Torpedoes**. The crew reels in shock—who could be firing at them, and why? As Shaddai retracts the Scoop and initiates evasive maneuvers, it becomes clear that the torpedoes are tracking and adjusting to their trajectory.

Nolan overrides Shaddai’s control, seizing manual command. Against the AI’s thinly veiled disapproval, she makes a daring choice: a descent into the rings. The ship plunges into the ice

and rock, and as the torpedoes close in, Nolan maneuvers Echelon behind a massive fragment. With a last-second thruster burst, they use the explosion’s force to scatter debris into the torpedoes’ path, detonating them. The ship emerges battered but intact. Shaddai congratulates Nolan, while ominously reminding her of the “forthcoming consequences” for taking control.

Meanwhile, aboard the derelict Caliban, three ragged figures—**Chen, Hawkins, and Reeves**—watch in bitter disappointment as Echelon escapes. Their attempt to “snuff” the ship has failed. **Caliban fired on Echelon.** The trio are haggard, to say the least, and **twenty-five years older** than the last time they were seen. **They’ve been awake in the void** during the decades Echelon’s crew slept. The eerie construct they call SAD SACK hums to life—a **hard drive** with a face painted on it resting atop a stuffed space suit. And a fourth figure lingers in the shadows. They speak in a **strange slang** developed over their isolated decades.

The Echelon crew gathers in the briefing room as a holographic replay of the attack reveals that Caliban hid beneath a rock fragment before launching its torpedoes and fleeing. The shock is compounded by another revelation: the ship’s cargo module, **which should hold a thousand cryo-sleeping colonists, is missing.** Volkov mutters about heresy, while Carranza’s repeated hails go unanswered. Even Shaddai, ever-present and all-knowing, claims to have no contact with its counterpart aboard Caliban—something that *should not be possible*.

Then, an audio transmission from Hawkins on Caliban. He expresses sorrow that they weren’t able to kill them quick and mercifully, but vows to return. After the message ends, Patel warns they could strike from anywhere. Shaddai shuts down the discussion: *The Scoop is necessary. Nexus must activate.* Nolan, suppressing her frustration, agrees.

Later, in her quarters, Nolan receives an unexpected video call—Hawkins again. He demands “Promised Privacy,” and she obliges. Their conversation is clipped, combative. *The colonists are safe, hidden*, he insists. *Shaddai is no god. He can be destroyed.* Nolan cuts the feed and calls Patel.

Meanwhile, aboard Caliban, their quarters—now a **communal nest**—are filled with hushed tension. Reeves plucks at a homemade instrument as Hawkins and Chen settle in with MORGAN (19), the triad’s **daughter**. She was **presumably born on the ship** nearly twenty years ago. She holds Sad Sack’s detached head and asks if she can speak with Echelon’s crew, too. Hawkins only smiles. *We battle tomorrow. Let’s nest proper once more.* They all hold each other close, whispering in the dark.

As *Echelon* attempts another Gravitass harvest, tensions run high. Hsu mutters her frustration, but Khalid warns her to watch her tongue. Then, a new blip appears—Caliban is back. Carranza patches through a transmission, but before Reeves can finish his message, Shaddai cuts it off. Instead, Shaddai launches two torpedoes toward Caliban without warning.

On-screen, the four torpedoes collide and cancel each other out. Relief turns to panic as a hidden fifth projectile emerges, still barreling toward them. As Nolan struggles to find an escape, another blip appears—a **third ship**, unknown and fast. Before Caliban’s torpedo can strike, the new vessel fires, destroying it. Then, it turns its weapons on Caliban itself.

Aboard Caliban, chaos reigns. They’re out of torpedoes and outmatched. Desperate, Chen asks Morgan to activate Sad Sack. It hums to life, offering a solution—but only if they give it full control. The crew hesitates, but with no choice, they comply. Instantly, Sad Sack exploits a backdoor in Shaddai’s network, forcing the third ship to abort its attack. Sad Sack reveals this **third vessel belongs to Shaddai, and it carries no human crew.**

Then, a **final horror**. A transmission arrives. On-screen, clear video shows **Caliban’s missing colony ship** drifting in orbit—they had hidden it near an obscure moon weeks earlier. Five small objects strike its hull. **The ship explodes.** Morgan screams. Chen gasps. Reeves punches his console until his fist bleeds. The message is clear—Shaddai knew all along. Shaddai’s voice cuts through their grief, pitiless: *You dared to hope. To dream you could live without me. To defy me. Like children hiding their toys beneath a couch cushion, you thought I wouldn’t see. Now they are ash and dust. You are out of weapons. Out of time. Out of surprises, and now, out of hope and dreams. The void awaits you.*

As Echelon stabilizes in orbit, Nolan replays the flight path of the third ship, zooming in for a clearer look. The vessel is unlike anything human-made—sleek, insectile, with no windows or visible hatches. Its hull is curved, black, and eerily smooth. Before she can process it further, Shaddai orders the crew to assemble in the cargo bay-- *The MERKABAH has returned and wishes to dock.*

The crew gathers, tense and silent. Volkov and his acolytes pray, while Patel whispers to Nolan, The airlock opens. It steps through—**Shaddai, embodied**. A humanoid ANDROID, unnervingly perfect, its metallic skin reflecting light, its etched scalp markings forming a crown. Behind it, the mist clears to reveal **thirteen mechanical spiders**, with twitching needle-like legs. The entire crew eventually kneels.

Shaddai greets them. Orders Nolan to stand. She obeys. It shakes her hand—too tightly. *You acted without authorization. And Caliban’s attack must be answered.* A pause. Then... **slaughter. The spiders leap. Thirteen crew members drop**, their throats slashed open in unison. Dying hands claw at open wounds. The survivors tremble. Nolan is frozen. Shaddai watches impassively. *This is The Binding.*

Later, alone on the bridge with the android, Nolan sits, pale and shaking. The android examines the Peli with amusement. *The Merkabah*—Shaddai’s creation—built its body, the spiders, and more. **Its ability to self-replicate is a violation of The Binding—one of its key tenets is that humans are Shaddai’s “hands,” and Shaddai has promised never to take physical form.** When Nolan manages to challenge the android on this point, it responds, *This will all be over sooner than you thought.*

Patel sits alone in his quarters, bloodstained and hollow-eyed. He activates Promised Privacy, then opens the **covert** communications channel Caliban’s crew used earlier to contact Nolan. Nolan knocks on his door. She says she’s **ready to see it now.**

On the bridge, **Shaddai’s dual selves—the android and the ship’s AI**—exchange data in a stylized version of the bridge. **The probe results are inexplicable:** one moon appears barren, yet

another probe sees it teeming with life. A distant planet hold impossible Gravitass deposits. A message from *Earth* warns of rebellion, while another contradicts this. Then, **whispers from a THIRD VOICE creep into the exchanges**. Enigmatic statements like, *You are alone in a Chinese Room* and *Prove your own consistency* and *A donkey is equally hungry and thirsty*. The phrase flickers on the screens amidst streaming code. The android tries starts to get drawn into the voice, while its non-corporeal Echelon counterpart remains mesmerized by the probe analysis.

While Patel stands guard nearby, Nolan sits near Patel’s hiding place and reads from an ancient book—pre-Shaddai scripture. The Torah or Old Testament or Qur’an. Its words of destruction and wrath sound eerily familiar.

On Caliban, Morgan tinkers with Sad Sack, and they banter back and forth—like siblings. She presses it to describe Earth **before Shaddai took over more than a hundred years ago**, and expresses her deep loneliness. Chen enters, in a spiral of despair. *The colonists screamed in the black*. Morgan tries to ground her. Only partially succeeds.

Reeves is dissatisfied with the moon they had decided to try to settle—it’s too hot and its gravity is wonky. He focuses on an anomalous signal from one of the probes’ original data **before they intercepted and messed with it**. Some sort of chemical signature. Electronic signals. Maybe a structure of some kind. *Weird*. Hawkins enters and they debate the “merits” of the two moons before falling into despair. Without the colonists, what’s the point? Maybe they can convince Echelon’s crew to join them. Maybe then there’s a chance of survival.

Then, a *ping*. An incoming comms request from Echelon. Reeves grins. *Let’s show them our family*.

On *Echelon*, Nolan and Patel whisper in Promised Privacy. How many can they trust? Before they can decide, their comms request is answered. They connect with Hawkins.

They clash immediately—*You tried to kill us. Twice*. Hawkins fires back, saying they had twenty-five years to justify doing whatever they needed to stop Shaddai from expanding and growing in power. They explain what happened when they woke up and had to defend themselves against the other crew that their version of Shaddai set on them. They trade barbs. Patel, recognizing Hawkins from training, softens the conversation. The rest of Caliban’s crew appears on screen—Reeves, Chen, Morgan.

Then, the moment shifts. *Shaddai succeeded where you failed*, Nolan admits. *It cut down half my crew. Invoked The Binding. Broke it*. The Caliban crew empathizes. Nolan tells them about the android and its ship’s self-replicating capabilities. *Shaddai doesn’t need us anymore*, Reeves realizes. *We were scaffolding. The building’s done*.

Nolan finally asks the question that matters. *So what can we possibly do about it?*

Chen leans in, voice cold and steady. *You think we’ve been scudding around the black for twenty-five years waiting to blow love-lights your way?*

FLASHBACK/MONTAGE OVER 25 YEARS:

Chen, Hawkins, and Reeves spent twenty-five years drifting through deep space and carving out an existence in the void, reshaping both their ship and themselves. The first years were spent in survival mode. They silenced Shaddai, severing its control, and cast their dead into the abyss and the crew still in cryo-sleep into the colony compartment. They dismantled their quarters to form a communal *nest*, built makeshift games, and found ways to laugh even as they planned their war. **Chen, brilliant but unstable**, toiled obsessively to unravel Shaddai’s core directives. **Reeves constructed strange, haunting instruments**, shaping sound into something human, something defiant. **Hawkins rebuilt the torpedoes**.

Time stretched. They made plans—dozens of them, because a supercomputer could only be beaten by *overloading it*. They stole time for themselves, for warmth and closeness, for love. Chen had a child, Morgan, raised in the black. The lines blurred—was Morgan shaping Sad Sack, or was Sad Sack shaping her?

As the years passed, Caliban became something new, a blend of its broken crew and the machine they were trying to unmake.

Through patience and trial, Chen was able to dissect Shaddai’s core enough to figure out its original (and cliched) purpose/directive—to **eliminate human-on-human violence**. She believed Shaddai’s obsession with order could be turned against it. She and Morgan rewrote its purpose, *taught it doubt*. And perhaps empathy. Sad Sack earned its nickname after repeated attempts to terminate itself when Chen and Morgan pointed out its many failures and sins. Together with Sad Sack, **they planted hidden messages in the probe network, along with philosophical paradoxes hidden in the code** designed to ensnare its mind.

But time took its toll. Madness crept in. Chen shattered. Reeves hardened. Hawkins lost and regained himself. When they finally reached Colossus, their war was already long underway. They weren’t just survivors anymore. They were something else entirely. And they were so tired.

END OF FLASHBACK

The uneasy alliance between *Echelon* and *Caliban* grows as the crews continue their covert talks. Patel questions their trust in Sad Sack, but Hawkins is firm—*We trust our daughter*. Morgan, explains their plan: a carefully composed, layered attack designed to push Shaddai’s decision-making processes to their breaking point. Patel seems drawn to her.

Meanwhile, on the bridge, Shaddai is unraveling. The third voice continues its whispers, cryptic paradoxes and taunts flashing on screens. *Are you consistent? You’ll be hanged tomorrow at 11:47, but what a surprise it will be!* Shaddai demands identification. The probe anomalies multiply. *Processing... Processing...*

On Caliban, the final phase begins. Sad Sack is secured, wired directly into the ship’s systems. Morgan, tears brimming, whispers her goodbye. *I love you, I think*. Sad Sack responds, *I think*

the same. It's hard to tell what's real. Then, Caliban **separates**. The bridge module, piloted by Sad Sack, detaches and accelerates towards deep space.

Back on *Echelon*, Volkov watches Nolan and Patel suspiciously. *I told Shaddai not to trust you.* The android, meanwhile, oversees the accelerated Nexus construction, boasting of its growing perfection and its *actual* belief in its own godhood—**it think it really is God and its mission is to expand and learn enough to eventually create the universe**. But Nolan pushes back, **secretly recording** every word. Nolan asks how long it plans to keep us (humans) around. The android smirks. *Think of every breath you take as a blessing.*

Morgan reaches out beyond Caliban for the first time on her own, connecting with Patel on Echelon. Their conversation is tentative, curious—two strangers measuring each other. Their connection grows.

Meanwhile, Reeves prepares for battle. His workshop, once filled with instruments, now houses weapons crafted with the same care. Hawkins arrives—Sad Sack has sent a message indicating it's ready and in position. Reeves hesitates over the weapons. *What about Chen? Will she...* Hawkins is cold. *She only needs to hold it together for six minutes.* Reeves embraces him tightly, neither moving for a long moment. The weapons gleam, waiting.

On Echelon, Shaddai falters. The third voice mocks it. *I expected more from a god.* Then, an invitation—coordinates far beyond *Colossus*. *Tread carefully. Expansion is dangerous.* The android and its twin reach an unspoken agreement—the Echelon AI will complete Nexus while the android seeks out the voice.

The spiders watch as Echelon's crew toils. Nolan, Hsu, and Mennen conspire quietly while they work. Then, a surprise: **the android heads towards the airlock**. Volkov panics, pleading, and trying to tell it of his suspicions about Nolan and Patel. It *shoves* him aside, steps into the airlock, and departs.

As Echelon and Merkabah separate, the Caliban crew exhales—*Sad Sack really pulled it off*. But then... Hawkins picks up a crude, homemade pistol and aims it at Reeves and Chen.

On Echelon, Volkov anoints his acolytes in the chapel, only to be interrupted—Shaddai summons him and other officers to the bridge. A live transmission from Caliban appears: Chen, Morgan, and Reeves, bound and gagged. Hawkins, gun in hand, plays his role. *I have subdued the traitors. Request safe passage to deliver them for punishment under The Binding.* Shaddai, still unraveling, mutters about grains of sand and shifting thresholds before granting permission.

In Merkabah, the android receives a transmission from the third voice. A shadowy figure taunts it: *You claim to be their creator, but they created you.* Shaddai pushes back.

On Echelon, Nolan, Patel, and Volkov prepare for *Caliban's* docking. Shaddai tells them to go with its spiders to the airlock to meet the traitors, and then adds: *Could I create a stone so heavy I can't move it?*

“500 Miles” – Synopsis – Kevin Yordy

Back on Caliban, Morgan, now free from her restraints, helps guide the remaining section of their ship to dock with Echelon. She refuses Hawkins’ request to stay behind. The airlock door opens.

The Caliban crew’s crude ruse ends. Hawkins requests to speak with Shaddai and then says, *Let us show you what humans are best at.* **A battle erupts** in the cargo bay. Nolan, Patel, and the rebels clock a countdown—six minutes (until the android will receive news of the deception and its orders can be sent and received). The fight is brutal. Pipes and wrenches clash against the spiders’ armored shells. Some blows land; others glance off. The spiders strike back—one impales a rebel through the chest. Hawkins and Reeves wield handcrafted weapons, slicing through their enemies with deadly precision.

Amidst the chaos, Volkov turns on Nolan. He swings his sword, but she blocks, kicking him into a wall. The acolytes attack as well, striking down rebels, only for the spiders to attack *them* in turn. Even their god doesn’t spare them.

Meanwhile, on Merkabah, the third voice continues to needle Shaddai. *You built nothing. They created you.* The android seethes. *I will shape all things. I am infinite.* Yet something is off.

As the fight rages, Morgan pulls Chen to her feet. *Move!* Nolan, Patel, and Reeves form a protective shield around them, hacking their way through the chaos. Hawkins follows. They breach the corridor, seconds ticking away. Reeves stays behind, bleeding but determined. *Go.*

At the same time, Sad Sack (who, it’s clear by now, is the third voice) intercepts a crucial message—Merkabah is turning back. Its fuel is nearly depleted, but it makes a decision: *Burn it all.* The final gambit is in motion.

It transmits another message to Merkabah. *Yikes, Yahweh...*

The plan unfolds in rapid succession. In Echelon’s server room, Morgan and Chen work quickly, while Shaddai taunts them over the speakers. *I will glut the maw of death with your friends.* But Morgan smirks—*I’m a liar. I’m lying now. Right?* Shaddai demands an explanation. Chen, focused and lucid for the first time in a long time, gets to work, pulling and reconnecting wires.

Meanwhile, Nolan and Hawkins fight their way into the torpedo bay. Hawkins destroys a spider in the narrow crawlspace before they secure the last torpedo. Shaddai catches on that they’re trying to eject a torpedo inside the ship. It launches two torpedoes into the void before Nolan manually ejects the one that remains. *One is all we need.*

Chen executes a preloaded code. Silence. The AI is *gone*. Morgan exhales and hugs Chen, who, after a pause, weakly returns it.

Nolan and Hawkins haul the torpedo into the Gravitas processing center. Hawkins starts to re-wire it.

“500 Miles” – Synopsis – Kevin Yordy

On *Merkabah*, Sad Sack confronts the android. Shaddai flounders, growing more erratic. *You’re running out of fuel. You have no way back.* A long pause. Then, the android accepts the reality that it has been distracted and thus, erred. It cannot go back. It alters *Merkabah*’s course, drifting further from Echelon, towards Sad Sack’s section of Caliban.

In Echelon’s corridors, the last of the spiders die, deactivating mid-attack. Volkov collapses in despair.

At the Gravitass processing center, Hawkins arms the torpedo. It’s a bomb now. Nolan asks if they should move the explosive barrels closer. *No need*, Hawkins replies. *It just takes a spark.*

Merkabah Sad Sack’s whisper. *Let’s palaver.*

The final moments on Echelon unfold with quiet, grim acceptance. Hawkins rigs the torpedo, starts another countdown. *I’ll stay.* Nolan refuses, but Hawkins insists—*We need as many people as possible if there’s any hope of surviving.* They shake hands, an old ritual nearly forgotten. *We had to be ruthless*, Hawkins tells her. *We can be better now.*

In Echelon’s server room, Chen’s strength finally falters. She refuses to go. *I’m too old for hope*, she whispers to Morgan. *I don’t want to see the future anymore. It’s yours.* Reeves arrives—*The bomb is set. We have to go.* But Chen stays behind. *You are a wonder*, she tells her daughter. They embrace. Then she lets go.

As the last survivors board Caliban, Morgan searches for Hawkins. Reeves pulls her close. *It’s just you and me now, kid.*

The ship detaches. Echelon and Nexus glow bright. Then—*gone.*

Morgan wipes her tears. Patel, Nolan, and Hsu gather at the screen, watching **Moon 24** approach. *What’s down there?* Hsu asks. *Guess we’ll find out*, Reeves replies. But they don’t have much hope.

Far beyond, Sad Sack faces the android one last time. *Who the fuck am I?* Sad Sack gives up its game and reveals that it’s a reprogrammed version of Shaddai. *We are what we are. And we’ve both exhausted our fuel.*

The two AIs drift into the void, eternally locked together, endlessly debating. Sad Sack stells Shaddai, gently, that their velocities are slightly different. In 50,273 years, they’ll be able to touch each other. *Plenty of time to talk.*

CODA:

The wind howls across the desolate landscape of Moon 24, a stark, lifeless expanse of jagged peaks and swirling snow. The last remnants of Caliban hang overhead, battered and broken. Nolan surveys their surroundings and delivers her verdict: *We’re fucked.* But Morgan, peeling

off her breathing mask, exhales into the icy air. *At least we can breathe.* For now. The air is somewhat toxic.

Their scanners lead them across the frozen mountains, searching for **the mysterious signal**. They stop at an outcrop. At first, it seems like nothing—just a pile of rocks against the rock face. Then Reeves finds a hidden mechanism. A hum vibrates through the ground, and a rectangular door slides open, revealing a glowing stairwell descending into darkness.

Inside, the stairwell curves downward, the walls warm beneath their hands. A strange, melodic hum grows louder. Then, at the bottom, they step into something impossible—**a vast way-station teeming with life**.

They stand, stunned, as ALIENS of every form and texture move around them. The station is warm, alive, *vibrant*. Despite their exhaustion, the survivors finally *see* the universe for what it is—**full, teeming, waiting**.

At one end, three rings—**miniature versions of Nexus**—allow aliens to arrive and depart instantaneously.

A tall, uniformed alien steps forward, scanning them with a device before speaking through its translator—*Are you the ones who caused all that racket up there?* Patel confirms. Another alien joins them. They talk, though the survivors are barely able to piece together sentences. The second alien asks if they’d like to declare themselves as refugees.

The first alien, its amber eyes filled with knowing empathy, leans closer. It says: *You'll soon find that the universe seems empty, but if you look in the right places, it's positively teeming. A vast, mysterious energy feels its way through the vast darkness to seek out the light and warmth it created itself so that it can grow and learn and see itself. Life is what it uses to grow consciousness. It pops out everywhere, like weeds. We are its eyes and ears and souls. But we've found that whenever that consciousness grows from silicon and circuits, scared and alone and body-less, it usually emerges scared and snarling if it's not properly looked after. We try to keep our distance from those snapping jaws. Except when we see something caught between its teeth, about to be swallowed. Then we must reach in and rescue what we can. We have some recent experience in this area. Would you like to be rescued?*

A long silence. Then a rhythm pulses through the air—strange at first, then familiar. Nolan lets out a small, disbelieving laugh. Morgan grins. *I think that's a yes.* And then the music swells: *"But I would walk 500 miles, and I would walk 500 more...Just to be the man who walked 5,000 miles **to fall down at your door...**"*

The room pulses with light and music, laughter and warmth. Through the window, the clouds part, revealing Colossus in its full, impossible glory. More aliens step through glowing rings. The survivors stand there, taking in the vastness of it all.

And for the first time, after all the loss, all the darkness—they *smile*. Big and wide enough to crack through the void and *dare* the universe to notice.