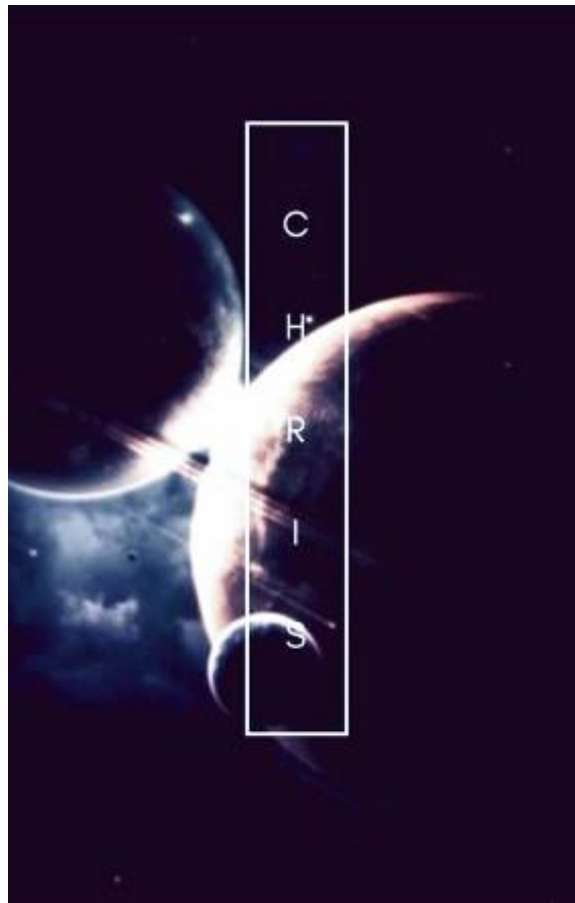


Chris

https://www.reddit.com/r/WritingPrompts/comments/3pyg3h/wp_a_day_before_the_earth_is_destroyed_by_a/

Credit to Reddit user u/PaulsWPAccount for his amazing story



Day 0

The house was filled with tears of sadness, joy and laughter. Long hugs, intense and heartfelt kisses, jokes to cheer up the inevitability of a saddened mood. Chris sat on the couch, surrounded by his friends and his family, and he couldn't help but smile. The melancholy of the situation weighed on him, and yet there was this feeling that he couldn't shake off. "If we have to go, then this is a pretty decent way of going."

The crash of the two planets had been predicted to happen at 5:55 AM EST, 25th October 2015. The planet had come into NASA's sights roughly a month ago, and from that moment on everything changed.

There was of course an uproar. People panicked, immediately thinking the world was about to end. It was 2012 all over again, with mass conspirators claiming they had seen it coming and that the USA, the UN or the lizard people were the cause of it. The closer we got to 31st since that moment, the more the average people started to dread. The governments kept people updated, but after a while the impending doom was wide-spread. "If they would've been able to do something about it, they would've, by now" was the train of thought most people had. And when the rocket launches NASA did fail and didn't alter the planet's course five times, people lost hope.

Since that moment some people have died, thinking it was better to take fate into their own hands. Others got careless with drugs and died of an overdose.

The others just kept going. Irrelevant jobs were abandoned, but luckily a lot of people volunteered to keep doing the important jobs like railroads and food supply for that last month.

All the people who were still with us on this 24th day of October had accepted whatever was coming from them. Chris had too. What other choice did he have? It was not like he could do anything about it. He didn't have the knowledge, nor the time.

Chris drifted off, knowing he would be woken if anything important was to happen. He woke up, hours later, in a dead silent room. His heart jumped, his sight still foggy from his deep slumber. Did he miss it? Was it over already? Of course not. Why would I be alive then? Wait? What if we survived? He rubbed his eyes to regain vision. He looked around.

Nothing moved. Absolutely nothing happened.

"Hello? People?"

No reaction. Not a sound, not a movement, not a blink of an eye.

And then a sharp pain in his forearm. He looked down and saw a smear of blood. "What the hell?" Chris shouted while he shot up from the couch. Holding his breath he walked to the sink confused and cleared up the blood with a splash of water. As he dried it with a paper towel, he could read an etching

engraved into his arm. It already had the faded pink color of a scar gotten long ago, and it read:

"No matter how long it takes, save us."

Chris exhaled.

Day 1

"Ehm, alright. Uhh, I don't really know what to say. God, this is all so weird. Hell, one moment you're, you know, thinking you're going to die and then... just... well, nothing, really."

He adjusted the camera, it's red light blinking to remind him he was capturing.

"Since yesterday, nothing has moved. Nothing has changed. Everyone looks exactly the same as yesterday. Nick coughed downstairs and you can literally see the particles flying out of his mouth."

He stared at the camera, lost for words.

"Oh yeah, if I'll be doing more of these, it's uh, well, what should have been October 25th. I don't really know how long this is going to last though, I mean who knows if I only get a day's time and tomorrow we're all going to end up dying. You know? So yeah... anyway. Today will be day 1." He nodded, as if he had just accepted his mission.

"I can't eat. Or well, I could, but I don't really feel like it, and so far it seems like I don't have to, either. It seems like I'm stuck somewhere in time, and can do things, but on the other hand I'm just here, and I don't change. It's just where I am that's changing."

He sighed deeply again.

"Like, I don't know. I honest to God don't know. Of all people, me? I don't know what the hell is going on and I don't know jack shit about that planet either.

What am I going to be able to do to stop it? And then a time freeze. I don't know, it's just all so confusing. Not even to mention that everyone is just downstairs... I've been outside this morning. Some people were still outside, just standing there. It was still light outside, the sky just as blue as it had been yesterday. That was kind of nice, really. I didn't really think about it yesterday, but now I had the time I just looked for a bit. Captured the image of my mind. I'm going to miss this place, you know? And life, obviously. Or well, assuming I can't fix it!" he laughed, then saddened down.

"Anyway, I have to..you know, get to things. I'll be back."

How the hell am I going to approach this, Chris thought.

Day 57

Except for a few possible tiny exceptions Chris had established the rules in the time freeze. He could move and use things, but only if he started the mechanic in one way or another. He could use devices, turn them off and on, but he couldn't transfer them physically unless it was intended for that purpose. He could turn on the tap for water to flow out and he could open a drawer and take some bread out of it. He couldn't pick up a person and move them. They were still immovable objects.

He turned on the computer and practically didn't leave since. He slept on his bed whenever he felt tired. He still needed sleep, so the theory about time still continuing, just not for everything else, seemed right. *I'll only find out about that if I start aging though, and that's going to take a while*, he thought.

The internet had loads of reports on the planet that was coming closer and closer each day, up until now. Chris managed to find one explaining what the planet was made of, with what speed it was traveling, and what NASA had tried to do to stop it. But when it came down to the technical side of things, Chris really didn't understand things yet. He needed to start from the basics. Physics. Chemistry. Mathematics.

Day 633

"So here I am again, for this week's report. I have to remind myself to keep doing them, because, you know, ironically I get very busy even though I have all the time in the world. I didn't really expect for it to last this long, to be fair. Every day felt like it could just end whenever. But as the weeks turned into months I think I actually do get however long I need, you know?" swinging his forearm up and down the camera, showcasing the pink letters.

"Honestly, it's just a battle with myself. I know right, how pathetic that sounds? I'm the only person being able to do something and I'm here complaining. Yeah, well, I don't want to be unthankful. But for the love of god, they could've picked any" Chris said, heavily stressing the last word, "person on this dump and they would've been able to do a better job. Jeez, honestly. The self-pity isn't going to help though. And I'm stuck here all by myself so I have to stop being such a bummer."

He paused for a second.

"At this point I feel like I'm getting a decent understanding of the most important subjects. But NASA level? Not a chance in the world. I could probably take a few university level tests and do decently on them. Writing a master thesis shouldn't be that difficult, considering things. But I still don't know nearly enough to even approach the problem, let alone identify it. And that's not even considering I have to solve it, too!" He shrugged.

"Luckily, for everyone on this planet, I've come to the rescue." He smiled. "The only thing I need is more time. And that's precisely what I've got." He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Here we go."

Day 1912

"I feel bullshitted. Honestly, all that fuzz? Aliens? Nuclear weapons? It's just a research facility for the army. Area 52? Imagine how boring the other 51 areas must be... Jesus. Anyway, I've basically roamed each facility that could have been potentially interesting in solving the problem in the last few months." He picked up the camera and started pacing through the room, the camera facing him.

"So if I have to dumb down everything to a level where I can understand it myself, it's basically like this: The planet is coming at us with a certain speed. With the time stop, that speed is irrelevant. Problem one: solved. Lack of time 1, me: zero, it seems." He smiled at the absurdity of the statement.

"The planet, or meteor as I'd prefer to call it at this point, is roughly 600 miles wide and shaped like an orb, a ball if you will. If it crashes on the planet, we all die. A shock wave of that size..the planet would just erupt. There's not a chance it can sustain an impact like that. But, as we previously concluded, that's not going to happen. So what do we have to do? What do I have to do?"

He inhaled and sped up his pace.

"Frankly, I don't really know. The time stop is working against me in the sense that I can't really test what's going to happen if I were to, let's say, manage to explode the planet coming towards us. Would time start again? Would we then die by the chunks falling down on earth? Would they drift in space, still

stuck in time stop? And the only way I'll get to find out, is if I go into space."

He exhaled. He couldn't help but grin. For the first time in a few months a laugh rumbled deep from his stomach and a few tears welled up in the corner of his eyes.

"Never thought I'd say. Looks like I'm going to make the childhood dream reality." He chuckled and turned the camera off. As he put it down on the table next to him, he picked it up again and turned it on. "So yeah, Dad, you owe me \$5. And don't worry, I'll wait all the time in the world to see you pay." He turned off the camera again. "I need to experience a complete lack of gravity" he said to himself, a habit he was accustomed to in his last few years of isolation. "Let's see where that is possible."

Day 1960

A loud scream erupted from the room, a scream that would've interrupted anyone there to see it. But as the echo faded and only a few other cheers resounded through the room, it remained silent.

Chris came running down the stairs and just couldn't help but smile. He clapped his hands and shook his fist in victory. He had made significant progress in his plan to combat the monstrosity approaching in space. He grabbed around in his backpack until he found the camera. Another convenience was that the battery didn't seem to die down. And after entering a store one day he had enough memory cards to film for eternity. "Close to it, at least." he thought amused. He put the camera down on the table, turned it on and sat in front of it.

"What's up lads. Today has been, I can't say it differently, fantastic. Remember the last time I uploaded a video and showed myself flying around in that gravity chamber? Well, today, I brought my gear with me. I reconstructed a small miniature of Planet Space and the explosives I developed for this exact purpose. And guess what?" he asked, waiting a few seconds to build up the anticipation.

"It worked! Exactly what I hoped for. This is, of course, all assuming that the same rules apply in actual space, but for the sake of it I'll stick with that assumption. The rock cracked and the explosives sort of evaporated, but the pieces didn't go flying. It seems like movement is only capable if in some way I

initiate the process. The rock cracked but stayed in place. No rocks crashing into Earth, it seems. So yeah, all I have to do now is basically" he put up a finger, " 1: Get into space. So I'll have to build a rocket. I guess I'll have to learn how to do that. Then" he put up another finger, "I'll have to let Planet Space explode. I'm not exactly sure how I'm going to be able to blow up a rock which probably weighs like a quintillion pounds. It will have to be a huge explosive... I might have to make a nuke. I don't know, I'll sort that out... later... And then, lastly" he put up another finger, "I have to get rid of the entire mass of blocks to make sure that when the time stop comes to an end, everyone stays alive instead of dying because of raining rocks. Cus, you know, that'd be a bummer after all that effort. All in all, it seems like a piece of cake. I'll get back to you in a bit."

Day 7910

Chris sighed. "Honest to God, I really don't know if I can do this anymore." He ran his fingers over his temples, his forehead covered in a deep frown. I've been so busy, so unbelievably busy. I've learned chemistry, maths, physics, things I could've never even imagined, and yet I'm still so far away. Do you know how slow everything goes when you have to do it on your own? Well neither did I. I have the time of the world and I still feel like it's going too slow. Making explosives carefully, checking, re-checking, creating rocket fuel. I can use some of NASA's stuff, some of the government's, I can take things from companies, but everything takes time. A car is not as quick as you'd want it to be when traveling all the way through a country." He rubbed his eyes.

"There's just so much that needs to be done and I'm not getting anywhere. It's been over twenty years. Over twenty god damn years since the day we should've all died. And yet, here I am, feeling as hopeless as ever. It's been over fifteen years since I started with the project itself. I went into space. You know how ecstatic I was to make that happen? To have it succeed? I launched a space mission by myself and succeeded. How many people are able to say that? I'd say none. But I have no one with me to brag to. Sarah's not here. Sometimes I wish this would all just be over. Honestly I don't know why I don't take a break. Nothing seems to be going anywhere anyway. I don't know what to do. I've done so much and yet done nothing at all." He rubs his eyes. "I'll be fine, I guess. I just need to stay level-headed and stay sane. I

wouldn't want to go crazy, I'm way too busy and stressed to be hanging out with a crazy person all day." A slight grin appeared on his exhausted face.

"Anyway, I have a planet to blow up. I'll get back to you."

Day 11692

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to me, happy birthday dear Chris, happy birthday to you" Chris sang into the camera, accompanied with a half-hearted self-clap. "You've turned old, you old fart." he smiled into the camera. "I, on the other hand, look dashing though." he said, appreciating his twenty-eight-year-old reflection in the camera lens.

"Sixty years old. Who would've thought that day would come?" He shook his head. "What a journey it has been..." A familiar silence fell in the room. Chris just looked at the camera, his eyes watering. "Over thirty years in solitude. You never really know how much you're going to miss human contact until you no longer have it." He wipes the fluid out of his eyes.

"Yeah... well, to get on topic, the six missiles have been completed. I now have to finish my own rocket to accompany them into space. I can remotely control them, but for the last part of my plan I have to be up there myself. I'm not exactly sure how that's going to work, but I'll have the time to prepare myself for it... after that... uhh.."

He rubbed his hands together as he tried to regain his train of thought.

"Anyway, the missiles have been completed. The explosives are roughly half way there. At the current rate that will be roughly two more years of crafting and traveling to bring over supplies. Driving a truck is pretty easy with mostly empty roads and no other traffic to deal with, so the shipments have become bigger over the last couple of years. Then I need to do some tests, some

finishing touches. It's the moment after the explosives activate where I'm lost. I need to do something with the rubble. No matter how tiny the pieces would get, no matter if I nuked them to grains of sand, they'd still fall down towards the earth and cause massive havoc. And I've not yet figured out how to deal with that. That's the problem I've haven't come a step closer to yet in terms of finding a solution. But as I've said so many times now, yeah, ignore that" he chuckled quickly, "I'll figure something out. I don't think I have another choice. I mean, I could craft like an entire spaceship and somehow transport the rubble and dump it somewhere else in space, but it's always going to have consequences. I need to find a proper solution. First things first though. The upcoming months aren't going to be exciting, so you won't see me for a while. Signing out, peace" he said, as he pressed the button. He sighed, as he did after every recording, and stood up. There was a long day ahead.

Day 12879

"I'm done. Technically, at least. Missiles: check. Explosions: check. Fuel: check. Tests: check. Operation Destroy Planet Space: practically done. Operation cleanup Planet Space: still not a clue. I knew I should've paid attention when Mom said cleaning now will carry on later in life when I was a kid." He nods his head slowly to the camera, acknowledging the problem to himself. "I need a different approach. At this point I don't really know of any other way than to just blow it up and somehow get the matter to vanish so it doesn't end up destroying Earth, but how is still one large question mark. And when that stupid marking" he scratched over his forearm, "appeared it did say all the time I needed. So time's not an issue. But just imagine needing another hundred years, three hundred years, to sit here alone and figure something out all by yourself. Everything depending on you. And no one there to help you through it. I'm not sure what I'm going to do when this is over, if it's ever over. Things have changed over the years. Not much in the grand scheme of things, but the things that did are all related to me. As always, I'll just need to keep going. Sleep tight, camera."

Day 13322

The NASA headquarters had been revamped step by step in the past few years. A table there, a few chairs there, moving that cabinet over there, a bed in the corner of the office. The room Chris was in now had a desk with a computer on it. The rest of the room was filled by a large replica miniature of space surrounding Earth. Planet Space was touching the edges of the model, Earth on the opposite side. Strings were attached to the model. Black strings to indicate a possible fallout radius of explosions, red strings where the grounded up pieces of the planet would travel to and white strings around Earth to visualize Earth's safety radius. And Chris had a problem.

"Alright, camera, so basically the problem I'm having right now is that whatever I do, ground up the pieces, nuke them, explode them, not a single idea that is simple enough for me to actually execute, comes even close to keeping the white zone intact. So I'm stuck, right? Even when I manage to ground an entire planet to dust, I still haven't advanced a single bit because there's nothing I can do with the waste." He nodded to structure his thoughts and continued his analysis.

"At the moment there are two options." He shook both his arms. "In one scenario" he lifted his left arm, "the time stop comes to an end the second the planet is destroyed. That's simply a possibility I'll have to take into consideration. The direct threat has been avoided, so whoever managed to create the time stop might think "Job well done" and let time do his thing. Well,

that would mean we're screwed. Because whatever's left of that planet I just single handedly managed to blow up is now probably shooting towards Earth and will still end up crushing it. The second scenario.." he lifted his right arm, "is that time remains frozen. But then I'm stuck in the same boat as in scenario one" he shook his left arm, "except for the fact that I'll have the time to figure out what's wrong. Unfortunately..." he sighed, "I obviously can't take the risk. I have to create a solution that will solve the problem whether time continues or not. Which means there's no trying. It has to be right, it has to be perfect, "he says, stressing the last word with his hand making the perfect gesture, "in order to complete the job."

He started pacing around the room. "The rubble has to go somewhere. There's no alternative. And it has to be in a way to keeps Earth safe. I could just try and blast it off to Mars or wherever, but who knows what consequences that might have for us later? It has to be a more permanent solution.." He stopped walking. With his fingers tapping the sides of his head, he mumbled "Come on... come on... surely you can think of something. There has to be a way. I mean, except from just magically transferring it somewhere else. Through a space delivery or something, a space tunnel."

The tapping stopped. His eyes widened. A smile appeared on his face. He walked over to the desk and started tapping on the keyboard. A few mumbles and nods and after roughly fifteen minutes, he pushed back his chair, spun around and laughed in the camera. "I pity whoever ends up watching these things, really. There's no way in hell anyone can think I'm still sane at this point. Anyway, what I just thought of... what if there is a way that makes a

thing go from one place to another in space. We've all heard the stories and seen the scenes in the movies. What if I manage to create a tunnel that dumps the waste into a different part of the galaxy never to be seen again?" He pointed at the computer. "I'm not exactly sure what Einstein and Hawkings have been saying at this point, but I'm sure that if I get into it deep enough I'll be able to manage to create a wormhole and get rid of this problem once and for all." Chris couldn't help but laugh. Then he realized the gravity *please, never make a joke like that again, Chris thought* of the situation and his face turned serious.

He couldn't help it and started laughing again. No matter how ridiculous the scenario was, there was just no way he couldn't enjoy it. "I'm going to create a wormhole, by myself, to save a planet, by myself, all while knowing absolutely nothing about the subject." Chris sighed, still smiling. He had a purpose again, an attainable goal. "I have to start from scratch, of course, I'll have to read thousands of books. But I've done it before. You've done it before, remember that", he pointed at that camera. "No matter how long this will take, I have something to strive for again. I'll go into history as Chris, savior of Earth and creator of wormholes. The movie is going to be fantastic, I'm just sure of it", Chris mumbled, while he started typing again. He had a lot of work to do.

Day 21304

"Hey... it's been a while." Chris patted himself on his head, running his fingers through his hair. "I never really thought I'd ever manage to do something like this, you know? And no, I don't mean saving the planet. Or being in a time stop. Or blowing up an entire planet and somehow getting rid of it. I meant absorbing so much information about a topic that never really seemed interesting to me. I know so much more now, and yet I feel tinier than ever. The vastness of the galaxy, our irrelevance in its working..." he paused, staring at the camera set up in front of him. "Many scientists wrote about things just for the theoretical sake of it. Now I'll be the first person to ever need to put them into practice. Because our fate depends on it." He shuffled around some files on the desk.

His workplace was still set up at the NASA office, but had traveled all over the country to read important literature and gather them in his workspace. The entire building and every building close by were piled with thousands of books related to mathematics, space and quantum theory.

"According to some very detailed theories which I'll potentially never be able to grasp, or at least not in the coming thousand years, I'm able to make a machine that creates a black hole of such magnitude that it will swallow whatever is close to it and somehow transfer it through space like a wormhole.. Think Large HadronCollider but then big. Bigger. Loads bigger." He put his hands close together as he slowly motioned them outwards, stopping as his arms nearly stretched. "I'll Have to be precise with my

calculations before I end up somewhere on the other side of the solar system, but in theory it's possible. All I need to do now is assemble it, somehow allow it to come with me in space and then execute everything perfectly. Sounds like a plan." he smiled, raising his eyebrows.

Day 21366

The camera had been running for fifteen minutes before Chris uttered his first word. He seemed lost in his thoughts as he stared out of the window: "You know, back then, before the time stop... you could just do whatever. Of course, you had rules, obligations, repercussions. Now I have all the freedom of the world, all the time in the world, and yet there's just one path ahead for me." He shook his head.

"It's been, how long now? 55 years? 60 years? Somewhere, something has given me this opportunity, and I can't help but wonder why. Don't think I'm ungrateful for the chance our people were provided, even if it comes down on my shoulders and on my shoulders alone. I'll carry that burden, and in the end, if this is ever over, I'll be sure to not have regretted a single second. But, you know, if this does ever end", he looked sternly at the camera, "make sure to do it right. Don't screw it up. You just can't. Not after all this time. Not after everything that has yet to come." He stared out of the window again, his hands twirling around the wedding ring on his finger.

"I've really never spoken that much about Sarah. On these logs. I've thought about her a lot. But I can't help but admit that as every day passes, her memory becomes more distant, as if my new experiences are pushing her out of my head. The times we've shared together, the love we have, the smell of her hair as she cuddles me tightly..." He sighed again, and the silence was a heavy one.

"Let's say I manage this. This whole saving the Earth project. Everything, to the last and tiniest detail, goes smoothly... It will take me, another, what, 60 years? A hundred years? A thousand years? There's so much to do, so much left to learn. If at that moment, when time continues again, everything is the same for them, for everyone else, for Sarah, somehow they are saved... and I'm there...", he shook his head. "You know that's never going to work. Not after this." He looked at the camera again. "But you just don't know how to deal with it yet."

Day 29966

"Hey." Chris rubbed his eyes and readjusted on his seat.

"When I convinced myself this theory had an actual chance of succeeding, I dove right into it. I mean, if you don't really know how something works, all you can do is really guess, right? The problem", he accompanied that word with air quotes, "is that when I do read more, I never really seem to get to a point where I think that this isn't completely insane and that it will ever get to work." He grinned at the camera.

"You know those moments where someone asks you a question and honestly you have no idea what they're talking about? So you get home and look it up, and it turns out to be pretty simple. Well, every time I read something at this point I'm completely lost and in no way can I establish what's wrong or what's right or what Quantum theory is going to help me and that planet up there", he winked at the camera, "get *through it*." A sly smile appeared on his face. "I'll just, somehow, have to find out what theory is the most logical and apply it, cross my fingers and hope it works. So much for saving the world, right?" He grinned at the camera again, leaning backward with his hands wrapped around the back of his head. "It's going to be a flip of a coin every try, every assumption. If I win, my journey progresses a step closer. If I lose, frankly, I don't lose much at all. I lose time, and an idea. The only thing I'm worried about here is..." he paused for a second. "What if no matter what I think of, no matter what I try, or build, it's not going to be enough? I'll sit here, look back at

the hundreds of years that have passed and realize that I wasn't able to do it. Until that point, at least. Because, in the end, I know I'll never stop trying. I simply just can't. This isn't about me anymore, I've realized. Sure, I'm the fool picked to get rid of this mess. But there's going to be a moment, no matter how long it will take, where time continues. And the idea of Earth not surviving, Sarah not surviving.." nodding he came to a silence.

"The thing that I'm worried about, right now, is the moment where I'll Need something important. Something precise, or something heavy, or something clever. There will be a time," Chris said, rubbing his hands over his pants in an effort to keep them warm, "where I'm going to need a robot, or a machine, or a computer. I have NASA's state of the art equipment with me, but some are just simply inoperable for one person." He sighed deeply. "That means I have to dive into another subject. Manufacturing and coding a robot. Can't you just help but wonder how long this would've lasted if they picked someone with actually valuable skills for a situation like this? The only thing I would've been good for was explaining why having a crushed up planet in their galaxy was actually a good thing and that we did them a favor." He laughed at the camera. "Sometimes I miss the simplicity of that job. It was so highly... regular, you know?" He stared at the lens. "This, all this.." he gestured around him. "It's all so highly unpredictable..."

Day 30777

He held his hands pressed together, resting them on his lips. "One thing I'm sure of, is that if the wormhole works, which theoretically is still possible, it's going to be a one-way gate. I can't control its destination, I won't be able to reverse it. And, if I'm really honest with you, I don't think I deserve to end up floating in space somewhere. Which means that whichever nut job is going to make it work", he pointed his thumbs towards himself, "has to make sure I don't end up in that tunnel. Now all I need to find out is how to create a wormhole so that it can swallow up the pieces, instantly suck it up and close so its suction doesn't swallow up me or Earth, for that matter, and then establish how I'm going to do it all", he drummed on the table, "in space!" He accompanied that reveal with dramatic jazz hands.

"Before all the exciting stuff happens, I'll have to travel to Geneva to fully understand the Large Hadron Collider and understand the similarities between that and what I'm trying to achieve. I could lie and say I won't understand a single thing of what I'll discover there, but this old thing", he tapped his index finger on his temple, "is slowly getting a grasp of things. Only took me like, eighty-five years. And I haven't really gotten started yet." He stood up and reached for the camera. As he was about to turn it off, a smile appeared on his face. "Come to think of it, I've been in space and never even traveled to Europe! Strange, right? It's... it's weird how things turned out to be, if you ask me. Really, really weird." He shrugged. "Weird is okay. Let's Learn about

wormholes and then make one."He turned off the camera, grabbed his things and walked out of the office. "Don't Worry, I'll be home at six!" he yelled, the door falling shut behind him.

Day 36209

He sat on the couch, his feet resting on the table in front of him. He stared at the whiteboard on the wall. The formulas and drawings danced, the numbers and letters losing more of their meaning the longer he looked. He adjusted his gaze, staring outside, the sun still as bright and the sky just as blue as on the first day.

The first day, Chris thought. He looked down towards the camera.

"You know... I've been so preoccupied with learning everything... doing everything. I'm on a break now... the robot I engineered and finished a month ago is doing the calculations for me." Chris closed his eyes, his fingers rubbing over his eyelids.

"Don't you think it's weird that even though time isn't progressing, I'm still getting tired? Which is... odd, you'd think, considering I'm not aging either. On the other hand, it feels more like... fatigue? It's not that my body's tired. I probably feel better than I ever have, physically speaking. It's more the feeling of taking a long drag of a cigarette, and your mind clouds for a moment. The longer I stay up, the more information I absorb... the thicker that cloud gets. Like my brain's overheating and I need to let it cool off..." He pulled his legs from the table and straightened his back.

"The amount of information I've stored up in here..." he tapped on the side of his head, "is just... immense. Numbers, theories, assumptions, models. Maths.

Robotics. Space travel. Space itself. Chemistry. Nuclear particles and their working in this galaxy. I wouldn't call myself a know-it-all, don't get me wrong... Without the books and the internet I would've forgotten half of the information by now and probably incorrectly memorized the other half. It's just so... vast. Every time I have to split up my projects to make sure everything's done correctly. I can't just hop from creating a wormhole machine to developing the spacecraft needed to carry it into space. And when every task's done a weight is lifted from my shoulders and I can just feel the knowledge slipping back into the crevices of my mind, in the assumption that I might ever need it again."

Chris paused. A melancholic smile rested on his face. "If I look back, I'm not really sure how I managed to do it all. I was never really a go-getter, you know? I just postponed it for a day. I could always get back to it later. Only since I met Sarah..."

He swallowed. "Yeah, so when I met her... she was the one always trying to motivate me to be my best. Not for her, but for me. Because it'd make me happy. And that would make her happy. I can remember her smile as she laughed at my jokes or when I clumsily messed up something..." Chris's eyes drifted off into the distance.

"Since those first months I've never been back. You know, home. Just the thought... just the idea of availability would probably drive me insane. Her just... standing there, and yet being so far away. I don't think I could leave once I show up. So I've made myself the promise that I wouldn't until this is all over."

He sighed. "Honestly, I think you might have been my savior, buddy. I needed someone to talk to. It helps organize my thoughts. For instance, before I came here I was thinking about that gravity curve and then..."

He squinted his eyes. "Uhh... oh yeah, so I was going to record this, but before that I was supposed to... what was it again? Oh yeah, I had to grab that book that was around here somewhere..." He rummaged through the stacks of books and fifteen minutes later a loud "There we go!" echoed through the room.

"You know", he started again, as he sat down back on the couch, "I've developed some pretty advanced AIs as of late. I could've made a machine or a robot or something to talk with. You know, conversation?" He pursed his lips. "I could've done it... but on the other hand, I don't think it would help me. Not only would it remind me of what I've lost and what I've missed, but deeper down... it misses the emotional connection. That's probably the thing I miss the most. All the knowledge in the world, large containers of materials and steel and aluminum stacked everywhere. And the thing to help me endure this is the only thing unavailable to me. Human warmth."

Day 41012

"Theoretically", Chris said, while tilting the whiteboard to its other side, "it's possible. This is all of course assuming that the theories I've based my research on are correct. So far Delta over there", he gestured his arm to the other end of the building, "hasn't found any mistakes in the mathematical side of things. Yet." He smiled.

"While the Hadron Collider works with magnets, I've established that considering the differences in our goals I needed to do something else." He grabbed the marker beside him, pulled the cap off his with his teeth and motioned it over the board in a large circle. "Forgive me if I don't have the time to explain every single detail, but the gist of it is that I'll be destroying the quarks in such an obliterating way that their mass is condensed into a very tiny space of nothingness. By that logic, I can manipulate the waste into this black hole, if you will. But the issue with a black hole is the instability and unpredictability. Which, sadly, also goes for wormholes. I need to create a wormhole that allows me, for only a few milliseconds, to suction in the planet's waste and get rid of it for me." He exhaled through his nose, his head nodding up and down. "I think I've done it. Or well, specifically, I think I know what to get done." His tongue swirled through his mouth as he paused.

"The only problem I've created with this rather impressive solution, if I say so myself", he said smiling, "is that there's no chance to carry the Wormhole device with me into space. It's too heavy. It's going to cause the ship to

fluctuate in space and that could be catastrophic. It will have to launch from Earth. I have to make missiles to launch the magnets, make them collide with the exact speed at the exact location, and do all that remotely in space." He scratched his head and exhaled.

"I never said it was going to be easy, to be fair. I think the actual challenge has just started, honestly. I mean... sure, nothing so far has been easy. But actually manufacturing this device, and then having to test it, and then adjusting them to their destination in space... Not even to mention getting the timings down to the exact nanosecond." He rubbed over his painful neck.

"One of the things I did in fact get lucky with is that materials don't deteriorate. Remember the rockets and explosives I built from, like, a good eighty years back? They're still in the exact same condition, which means the practical side of everything related to blowing up the Planet is sorted." He sighed and smiled.

"I would be lying if I said I wasn't relieved by that, honestly. Sure, I could've just done the whole process over again. But right now, I just need to keep looking forward." He nodded. "There's just... you know, for my sake? Just... looking forward." He shook his head. "I can handle a setback, I can keep going. But right now, I don't really need more time. I need some luck. I have to build the machine. Just imagine, if everything goes right, and this, all of this is over.."

The thought deep down scared Chris. He honestly had no idea what was going to happen if his plan was to succeed. Would he even survive it? Would he be able to get back to Earth? What would happen to the decades he spent

in time stop, merely a blink of an eye for everyone on Earth? He was something else now. A product of something between time. And deep down, since Day 1, Chris had wondered why it was him that was chosen, and who had caused the time stop.

"If I manage to do this, I think someone or something owes me some answers", he said to no one in particular. A faint hope rested in his mind, that somewhere, someone or something, had heard him.

Day 51002

Chris stood in awe. The two magnets had been cooled off instantly after they pressurized the particles between them. His first test results didn't lie: he had created a hole in the fabric of space and time for only just a moment. And slowly, he kept applying the theories and formulas. The hole became bigger, yet stayed under control. When the hole was large enough to form a rift and to create a tunnel, Chris had just sat there. Two days of little movement. Two days of doubt. He had all the time he needed to come up with something else, but nothing in him thought he had a better shot at fixing this all than by the manner he was attempting that moment. He took the plunge, came off the couch, stretched his muscles and walked towards his desk. He turned on the camera.

"Today I'm going to see how much waste I can effectively transfer through the hole. I can crush a fraction of a picometer at maximum capacity." He put the fingertips of his right hand extremely close to each other. "But with the way this all works, I'll have to build up the amount of waste I'm going to test with. Which means that I'll have to start crushing larger amounts of quarks", as he slightly increased the distance between his fingertips, "to make the wormhole less powerful, resulting in smaller amounts of transportation. Yeah, so, when I start doing that, I have to measure the amount I can transfer and then establish an exact formula in order to determine how few quarks I need to destroy to make the wormhole as powerful as possible. The only thing I'm

worried about now is that this thing", he gestured his head to the left, "isn't powerful enough to create a hole strong enough to suction up that Planet up there. And so far I haven't read anything that indicates that's even possible. And even if it was... who knows if I'll be able to make it? Let's hope for the best."

Day 51003

He just stood there, shaking his head, his mouth open. And slowly, he started clapping. His claps resounded through the large workplace he was currently residing in. As the speed of his clapping came to a peak, he burst out laughing.

"I did it. I... I actually did it." Chris walked over the computer on his desk. He sat down and started inserting the data into the program. "Alright, camera, so what I've done today is transporting roughly two and a half acres of rubble through the device. I did this at 0.3% of maximum capacity. It's a bit complicated as the formula turns out to not follow a linear structure but an exponential one that adapts at certain key points. Either way, by assuming that no other strange irregularities appear, I have enough power to get rid of the rubble. It's going to be close, don't get me wrong. But the fact that it's possible... who would've thought..." his eyes glistened.

Day 53199

He snapped his fingers. "Just like that. Bam." He snapped his fingers again.

Chris had temporarily transferred back to his old workplace. After establishing the machine was potentially up to the task, he had to continue research and development of the rockets or the shuttle that would bring it into space. He did the research in the office he set up many years ago. Most of the important books were still on the ground, in stacks based on subject and alphabetical order of title. After absorbing as much information as he could find about energy supply and the advanced designing and assembling of a spaceship, he returned to the workshop. The blueprints of his wormhole machine and rockets had been pinned to the wall. The blueprint of the wormhole machine was printed out in different sizes. They were all filled with handwritten comments, questions and adjustments. His desk, located beneath the prints, was stacked with other files, calculations and drawings.

"I've been busy establishing how much of each material I have in stock at this point. I know there's a few locations spread over the US where I could take whatever I needed. I'll probably have to do that in a few months, but for now I'm not too worried." He put down the controller for the robot that was currently tightening the screws on the second missile. He looked at the camera and shook his head.

"Anyway, I've come into a few mechanical speed bumps in the past four weeks. Nothing too major, but it did require some extra tinkering on C-8 over

there", he said while gesturing over his shoulder with the thumb of his right hand. "If I'm honest with you, there's no reason to complain. Sure, it's not going nearly as fast as I hoped it would go, but not even close to being as slow as I feared. All in all, we're going steady. Slow but steady." He softly scratched over the skin between his eyebrows.

"I've also managed to cut some weight of the WHM. I'm getting closer to a sustainable weight, but the more it weighs the more it goes at the expense of precision. And that... that is obviously crucial to the entire plan. If the machine isn't assembled in the exact same way as it is here, the results could be catastrophic. It could mean the wormhole erupts... in the best scenario nothing happens. In this worst-case scenario..." he swallowed. He didn't have to finish the sentence.

"The batteries that are going to power that thing are actually the strongest in the world right now. It took me a few years as a side project, but I've managed to create something so powerful it will be able to charge the WHM. I'd like to take a jab at all the scientists who've been working on alternative energy sources for tens of years with thousands of people, but on the other hand... I took most of their work and expanded on that. It's probably fair to mention the tiny 150-year head start I've gained on them since." He grinned at the camera. "Sadly... even then, with that astronomically powerful battery, the WHM demands so much energy that I only have one shot at succeeding the moment we get into space. And considering the way all the other parts have been manufactured... if it fails, I'll have to build everything again", he sighed softly, "from scratch. It probably wouldn't be that bad..." he stared at the floor,

his eyes closed. "Anyway, we've got to remain optimistic." He got off the chair and headed back to the rocket, rubbing his hands. "Considering how far I've managed to come so far, there should be no stopping me now. Oh, sorry, C-8. Stopping us now."

Day 55203

He leaned on the desk with his elbows, his hands supporting his cheeks. He stared down the list he outlined almost fifteen years ago. He slowly exhaled through his nose. He straightened his back and looked at the camera holder he had secured on the wall.

"I think I'm done." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Ehm, you know, the list, the things on here", he lifted it in front of the camera, "done." He repositioned himself in the chair.

"The two missiles were completed a month ago, I think. The WHM is operational. It's not as light as I had wanted it to be, but you know... space travel. Thin margins." He held his fingertips close to each other as he grinned slightly.

"It will take fifty-six hours for the WHM rockets to reach their destination, one-hundred and thirty-four feet above that planet, to be exact. My own ship is mostly computer controlled so I have my hands free for the biggest part of the journey. Or well, free. For space travel norms, yeah. Realistically my hands", he pressed his forearms together and rocked his hands," are still very tired." He rubbed his cheeks with his hand and leaned back in his chair.

"It's basically preparation now. I have to construct the launch site, get some final calculations done. Honestly there's really not that much left to do on Earth. I can sit here all I want and keep making plans and adjusting things, but

there's simply no way for me to know what's going to happen up there." He pointed at the roof. "I could get in close proximity to that thing and it could, you know, for whatever reason, just start time again. Bye magnets. Bye me, probably. Bye Earth." He pursed his lips.

"I'd like to think that's not going to happen. I'd like to imagine my plan working to the smallest detail, not running into a single complication and just... just solving this entire thing." He shrugged. "Who knows what's going to happen. It's probably not going to be either of those two scenarios. I could get lucky and still manage to do it, or I could get unlucky and who knows what then..."

"Don't get me wrong, though. It's not that I think I don't have a chance. It's just... everything I've accounted for, in my schemes, in my drawings, in my plans... it's never going to be completely accurate. Something, no matter how tiny, is going to be different. I just have to hope that when it happens, I make the right decision. On Earth I had all the time in the world and still couldn't decide on everything. Who knows what I'll do when I don't have time by my side?" He stood up.

"I've done everything I can. Whatever is going to happen, I can look back at this all and be proud of what I've accomplished so far. I hope that when, or if I return, it's not because something went wrong and I have to figure it out all over again. If I get back, I hope to see the sun slide through the sky and see leaves dance with the wind. I hope that the people continue their lives. I hope for the world to breathe again."

A silence fell, the promise of his words captivated in the moment.

"Yeah...", Chris started, his voice hoarse. "I'll be busy preparing the mission from this point on. When I'm done... I'll need to make the decision when it's going to happen. I could sit there for months, years, decades... the situation wouldn't change. I'll just have to go for it. The second I'll take off there's only one thing I'll be able to think of: Please, please... let it work."

He paused for a moment, waiting if any other comments appeared in his mind. After a minute, he turned around, slowly heading towards the exit of the workplace. After a few steps, he turned out. With a lump in his throat and his eyes watery, he managed to exclaim: "It has to. After all this time, it just... it has to."

He turned around again and marched to the door. He disappeared out of his sight as he turned the corner.

Day 56887

A broad smile covered his face. "Can we get a round of applause, people? That's what I thought!" Chris laughed, putting the camera back on its stand. "Thank you, thank you, no, really, thank you, I couldn't have done it without your support." He bowed dramatically.

"On a serious note though... look around. He took the camera off the standard again and slowly motioned it in a circle. "Launch site: finished. It took me a bit longer than I had originally planned, but there was a slight miscalculation with the angle of the tower supporting the missile, so I had to fix that..." He walked to the table he had put there earlier and grabbed a chair to sit on.

"I'm basically ready now. Or well, the preparations are ready. I don't think I'll ever be. All those years... all those years and it's going to depend on the few hours, on the few minutes up there. Maybe even seconds. Somewhat depressing to think about, you know? Was every step along the road necessary? More importantly, is it even going to pay off? I don't know. And I won't know until I get up there and do it." He scratched his nose.

"I've set the date. I'm going in a week. I've packed every piece of equipment I could ever need. C-7 and C-8 are going with me. The departure and travel to the destination are done mostly on automatic pilot... The last hours of the trip I'll manually check every step along the way. Especially the part when the WHM is going to arrive. The assembly... the calculations should be flawless." He ran his fingers through his hair.

"Whatever's going to end up happening, I hope I'm ready for it. That's all I can say at this point. I hope I'm going to pull through. If I do..." he paused.

"There are many questions left unanswered. I worry that even if I survive, they'll remain unanswered. There's something about that planet. Why Earth? Why the time stop? Who, more importantly, why?" He softly chewed on his lower lip.

"A week. I hope that in a week from now, I'm alive, I'm on Earth, and all these questions are answered. Optimistic, I know. But now... I just have to have faith, you know? Believe." He scratched his eyebrow.

"One week. All or nothing. Even though I'm scared as hell, I can't wait. It's what this has all been about. Every hour of work has built up to this. I'm almost ready. There's... there's just one more thing I have to do before I go."

Day 56888

"I know. I lied. I broke my promise. I could lie and say I'm sorry. The truth is, I'm not. This", he gestured around himself, "is for me. Just for me. I think I deserved it. It's been over a hundred and fifty years." He shook his head and turned off the camera.

The garden was identical to how it was. The grass hadn't been mowed in a while. The wooden gate separating the garden from the public road was still dark green. As Chris slowly came closer, he noticed the tiny scratches in the paint. They'd been there all this time. He just couldn't remember it.

A lump formed in his throat. It had been so long. His house, his home, it had become a distant memory. Details buried deep in his mind, it's former familiarity a forgotten dream. He opened the gate, followed the brick path to the door and opened it. He went inside and wiped his shoes on the door mat, a habit so ingrained he did it without noticing. The door closed behind him with a soft click.

As he saw the coat rack, his once favorite cap hanging there, with a scarf of Sarah wrapped around it, he leaned back on the door. He could feel the lump in his throat growing. His eyes were stinging. He blinked rapidly, pushing away the tears and exhaled and inhaled slowly. After a few minutes he straightened up and opened the door to the living room.

He was greeted by Ann standing in the corner, engaged in an animated conversation with her husband and his neighbors. As he motioned himself towards his destination, old emotions and feelings that had been hidden away for a long time arose to the surface. "Claire... Thomas... James..." One by one he got reunited with friends and family. He barely remembered a word of what was spoken that day, but the warmth he had felt that day slowly began to rekindle inside him. His heart rate increased, the pounding louder with every step. He entered the kitchen. And there she was. A small smile on her face, her eyes filled with heartfelt emotion. He had forgotten many things over the years. He remembered that look. The moment flashed before his eyes. It had been that last night.

He sat in his chair, a conversation about nothing in particular with his aunt... aunt... not important, just finished.. He had thought about what was coming towards them, that inevitable fate. For some reason all his worries and all his sadness had hit him right that moment. His eyes had watered up and he had looked away, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone who he could see him. Then he had seen her staring at him. She had smiled the little smile she kept only for him. The comfort of her face had radiated through the room, towards him, and even though she was thirty feet away he had felt the warmth she spread. The look on her eyes had said all he needed to hear at that moment. "No matter what's going to happen, we'll always have each other."

His legs succumbed. He fell down to the kitchen floor, the lump in his throat swelling. His eyes burned, and something in him broke. He slowly began to sob. His body shook as the tears ran down his face. So close. So far away.

Reunited but separated. They had lost each other that day. Lost but never forgotten.

After ten minutes, he pushed himself up from the ground. His eyes were thick and red, his knees fragile. He slowly inhaled, the lump in his throat poignant. He walked towards her and embraced her in a firm hug. The tears ran down his cheeks again as he sobbed. "I missed you so much... I missed you so so much." He kissed her cheeks softly.

"You know...", he barely got the words out of his mouth, his throat still closed up, "all these years...", he shook his head, his eyes fixated on her face as if they tried to capture the moment. "Even though you were here... you kept me going. You know you promised me that day that we'd get through it together? I..." the tears welled up his eyes again, his cheeks wet, his nose running. "I think we did. I know you weren't there. I know you're not..you didn't... but here", he put his hand on his heart, "here. You were here with me all along, in here. Thank you for being who you are. I couldn't have done any of it without you." He kissed her gently on her forehead, his lips touching her cool, rigid skin. Her eyes were absent, her smile now hollow.

He took a step back, releasing them from their tight embrace and captured the moment. "Thank you", he repeated. He tried to turn around, but stopped abruptly mid-motion. As if he was to turn back to her, his shoulders shocked, his feet shifted on the floor. Then he turned back around, walked through the living room, through the hallway and closed the door behind him. Not looking back, he pulled the gate behind him shut. With thick tears running down his

face, he walked back to his car. "I'm coming back." He opened the car door, sat down and started the engine.

"I promise."

Day 56893

The wall behind him was covered in thousands of small pictures. Every picture was a moment captured in one of his videos. Chris couldn't help but reflect on the years that went by as he stared at the wall. Pictures of him frowning, laughing, thinking and crying.

He turned around in the chair. A bright smile covered his face. "This is going to be my last one on Earth. I'm going to miss you, buddy." He slouched in his chair, his hands folded on the back of his head.

"For what it's worth, I think I'm ready. My preparation is complete, there's nothing more I can do." He shrugged. "I'm kind of glad that I just picked a date. No more waiting, no more thinking. No more fantasizing, you know? It's going to happen tomorrow, whether I succeed or not." The smile on his face returned.

"That thing behind me is probably going to puzzle them the most", he said, gesturing his thumb behind him. "Almost ten thousand pictures of a very lonely looking guy." He chuckled. "Whatever happens tomorrow, I kind of expect time to resume. In the grand scheme, not that much changed on Earth. But in other places..." He chuckled again. "I think some NASA scientists are going to be very confused about what happened here. I don't know who they'll get to clean up the mess but I pity that person already." He smiled. He paused for a moment, absently rubbing his head.

"I hope that Sarah's going to be okay. There's a chance I'll be able to explain everything myself. Not a very big one, to be fair." He shook his head. "I just hope that she will understand what happened. And that she understands that I gave everything to try and make it work." He nodded slowly. "Most of all I hope she's proud of me." He scratched his neck.

"I don't really think there's much left to say. I'll go to sleep in an hour or so. Tomorrow's the day. Oh, if anyone somehow manages to get a hold of these videos", he gestured to a large plastic case that stood next to the camera, "I'd like to say two things: First of all, I'm bringing that case up in space. If you do in fact manage to retrieve that but left me behind... oh boy, I'll be pissed at you." He grinned. "Second of all, you seeing this can only mean one thing: I'm glad it succeeded. Good luck to each and every single one of you." He bowed for the camera one last time. He disappeared out of sight for a minute, and came back with a picture of him bowing just a moment ago. He walked to the collage and pinned the picture in the relatively large gap he left in the middle. He walked back to the camera and leaned forward towards the lens. "Take care, people of Earth. Chris out."

Day 56894

He inhaled and exhaled slowly. He fastened his belt and pulled it tight. His suit was as comfortable as a space suit could be. He could take it off when he was in space. He had two extra suits with him in case anything went wrong. He had an empty strap on the back of his suit in case he needed to attach an extra oxygen tank. "If for whatever reason I need to go to the planet, at least I come prepared", Chris had thought.

"C-7, ready?" A green check mark appeared on the screen in front of him. "C-8, ready?" For a second a loading circle appeared on his screen, but it quickly flashed to another green check mark. "Chris, ready?" he asked himself. "As much as I can ever be", he sighed.

He tapped a few buttons on the touchpad in front of him. "C-8, T-minus sixty seconds and counting." The engines roared. Green checks appeared in front of him as the robots controlled every piece of equipment a last time before launch. "Boosters, ready. T-minus 30 seconds remaining." He closed his helmet. He looked at the camera that was rolling next to his screen. He clapped his hands, his thick gloves dulling the sound. "Let's do this!" he exclaimed loudly. "T-minus, 10 seconds. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Start. Two. Booster ignition. Lift off."

The raging sound of the engines drowned his ears as he was pressed into his chair. He could see the thick layers of smoke and steam appear on the ground as the rocket propelled into the air. It accelerated according to plan as bits of

information appeared on the screens around him. The course of the rocket was controlled by the robots as Chris braced himself against the increasingly powerful G-levels he was facing. As he focused on breathing rhythmically he checked the five-second countdown on his screen. As it came to zero, the thick boosters released from the rocket. "Solid rocket boosters separation confirmed", a robot voice broadcast through the speakers and another green check mark appeared on the screen. "The force of the rocket will now guide it to its exact destination."

Sweat formed on his forehead as he remained to be pressed in his chair. As the rocket broke through the atmosphere and headed towards the Planet, the pressure slowly subsided. His heart pounded, the adrenaline racing through his veins. "One step for a man completed. Let's make it a giant one for humanity." He smiled.

Day 56895

Part 1

The ship floated in close proximity to the planet. Chris was reading the test results of various scans he initiated a few hours earlier. "So, the planet seems to consist mostly of hardened sand, rock and various others including metals. Basically things I already knew. However, a small part of the test results couldn't be identified. I'm not sure if the analysis was detailed enough, they're unidentified materials or the machine's broken. Either way, none of the materials should interfere with what I'm planning. I didn't expect them to, to be fair, and even if they did I still accounted for it, but it's nice to... it's nice for everything to go correctly."

He leaned back in his chair. "It's basically waiting now. The WHM launch was successful and the parts should arrive in roughly 13 hours. I plan on taking a six-hour nap. In the meanwhile...", he shrugged. "Honestly, I've brought equipment here for the exact thing I'm having doubts about. That thing has been bothering me, tormenting me honestly, for roughly a hundred and fifty years, and in the end I practically don't know anything about it. Let's say I get the job done and I manage to get back to Earth. I can imagine the questions: What was the planet made of? How did it come here? Why did it come here? How did it cause the time to stop? Was there anything on the planet? And even though some of these questions, at least to me, aren't all that interesting,

it still annoys me a little I can't answer them. So... I've decided to use some of the fuel, which I have plenty of, to land on that thing and explore it for about an hour and a half. Traveling there and then flying back to this position is going to take a bit more than two hours." He scratched his chin.

"The surface is similar to Earth's, at least in the sense that landing on it should be easy. Anyway, after doing that, I'll be left with roughly two extra hours to describe what I found, get some extra tests done and re-check everything that's going to be used in the coming day. After that I can sleep and get ready for the WHM to arrive." He rubbed his hands together. "I'm going to change into my suit now. I have this thing with me", as he tapped his index finger on the camera incorporated in the space suit, "so whatever I'm going to find there should be recorded." He clapped his hands. "Alright, I don't have that much spare time, so I'll be heading for the planet now. I'll be back in a few hours."

Seventy minutes later the ship came to a halt as it surfaced on the planet. He anchored it to the surface with a large magnetized screw that attached to the lumps of metal in the floor. Chris ran a quick scan with the help of C-8 to check if anything was damaged. A few minutes later the results came back negative. Chris activated the camera on his suit. "Hello, is it working?" He could see the footage on the big screen a few seconds later. "Alright, good to go." He climbed down the ladder and opened the valve on the door. He extended the ladder with the push of a button and climbed down to the ground. His feet hit the surface. A smile appeared on his face. He tagged the surface with his glove. "First!" He broke out in laughter. He climbed back up the ladder and grabbed some measurement tools. He installed them close to

the ship. He then grabbed a foldout moped he developed to make exploration more convenient and faster. A few small magnets were attached to the bottom to keep it attached to the surface instead of floating after gliding off a hill. "I know what you're thinking right now. Don't worry, I'm thinking it too." He pressed a button on the device and it folded out. He attached the backpack filled with plastic cups and other tools to the back of the device. He sat down on the seat. "I'm a complete", he pressed the start button. Its small engine started humming, "and total badass."

He steered the moped to a darker surface he discovered while doing his tests. It was only a few miles away and he was interested in what that area consisted of. A large part of the unidentified materials came from those darker areas and he hoped to discover more about them. As he motioned himself through the small hills and valleys of the surfaces, the dark soil came into his sights. When he was fifty feet away, he turned off the engine and sealed the moped to the surface. He stepped off the device and slowly approached the soil. He squatted a foot away from the soil and investigated it. "I'm not exactly sure what it is. It seems like some sort of dark... dust? It reminds me of sand but... I don't know. I'm scooping some of it up and I'll run some tests on it later." He grabbed a plastic jar and a trowel and put a sample in it. He closed the lid and put it in the backpack. He got up and looked ahead. An even darker area was a few hundred feet ahead. The surface crawled downwards at the end of his sight. "I'm going to take a look there. I have twenty minutes left to look around and then I should head back." He stepped back on his moped and took off.

The closer he got the darker and... *stranger* the material got, Chris thought. As he came closer to the small valley, the material got finer. His moped started to shock and bump on the unstable surface, so he had no choice but to stop and leave it behind. He walked towards the middle of the sloping ground. The material under his feet was now soft and spongy.

As he came closer to the absolute blackness, his eyes could identify the pulsating material in front of him. "Wow...", Chris exclaimed. "I don't think I've ever seen that before. Or anyone else, for that matter." He slowly trod towards it, the surface becoming more unstable as he came closer. He could feel that he wasn't going to fall through it or that it wasn't going to collapse. "It's like walking on a cloud", he mumbled.

His feet reached the middle of the blackness. Chris felt like he was standing on thin air. Then he felt something graze against his leg. Chris instantly turned around. His heart almost jumped out of his chest. It was the first time in all those years an exterior force hit him.

He saw nothing. Not next to him, not under him. As he turned around to see if he missed something, he felt it again. He looked down and saw the fabric of his suit move. Chris swallowed slowly.

Wind.

Part 2

Hastily he took a step back and stared at the blackness. "C-8, I need an analysis of the progression of time. Is it still frozen?" A green flash appeared on the screen on his wrist. C-8 confirmed receiving the message. With bated breath his gaze remained on the pulsating surface, until a few seconds later he heard a *beep* in his ears. With a quick glance he looked at the screen.

"Time on Earth is still frozen."

He closed his eyes for a second and sighed deeply. "So what on Earth is this thing?" Chris asked himself. A few seconds later he realized what he said and he burst out laughing. The tension flowed out of his body as his laughter slowly quieted down. Step by step he approached the spot again until he leaned over the absolute blackness. A tiny gust blew over his suit, the fabric fluttering gently as it came to rest.

"There's definitely wind coming out of that... thing", Chris mumbled. He squatted down. "I'm not sure what this means. It could mean that there's activity coming from below the surface. There's a good chance that's it. I'm not exactly sure how that would work but it's the least harmful possibility for my plans", Chris said, hovering his glove over the blackness. "The thing I'm actually scared of", his glove vibrating lightly under the air flow, "is that this wind isn't coming from below. But from somewhere else." He straightened up again.

"If that's the case then I'm dealing with something problematic. I'm thinking of black hole, wormhole or a rift in the universe's fabric. Each and every single

one of these things could be absolutely catastrophic. Even if I am able to grind this thing to pieces without somehow interfering with these... spots", he pointed his glove below him", "and causing who knows what... there's just no way I can send this thing, or even the remains of this thing, into a wormhole without knowing what I'm dealing with." He rubbed his glove over his neck.

"The fact that there's wind here... no matter where it's coming from, it means the time stop isn't effective here. Considering I still can't understand or explain why that time stop is here or even how it works, I don't know what to think of that. But I have to investigate it. I can't risk dealing with something I don't understand. There's just too much at stake."

He grabbed a few larger jars from his backpack and shoveled some of the material on the edges of the blackness in it. "I don't want to risk sticking my hand or my shovel in there and end up floating somewhere on the other side of the galaxy... or beyond." He slowly trod back, his body still faced toward the blackness, as if he expected it to disappear any moment. He came to a halt fifty feet away.

"I don't have the instruments with me to really examine what's going on here. C-7 isn't with me either and his analysis would at least give me a better insight on what's going on in there. Assuming he can, that is... if he can't, then I know we're dealing with something very... abnormal." His glove rubbed over the glass of his helmet as he unconsciously tried to rub over his chin. "Besides, I have to get back to the ship. I have to get the things in here analyzed", he shook the backpack, "I have to sleep and I have to prepare for the WHM to arrive. Considering that time is frozen they won't go anywhere once they

reach their destination, which allows me to take my time and see if I can understand what's going on here." He turned around and hurried back to the moped.

As he sat down on his moped, started the engine and headed back to his ship, the black areas on the surface rumbled. The shaking became increasingly violent. All over the planet a large spurt of black material erupted from the black spots, slowly whirling down to the surface as the trembling stopped.

Day 56896

Part 1

The ship floated above the Planet. It had enough fuel to surface and ascend three or four times, excluding the flight back to Earth. Chris had decided that the arrival of the WHM would be easier to control from space than from the planet.

As he woke up, his muscles stiff from sleeping in the rigid chair, a beep resounded in his ears. As he stretched and walked towards the monitor, the test results from the unusual material were available. He pressed a few buttons. He sighed and sat back down in the chair. "That's not very helpful, now is it, C-8?"

The robot hadn't been able to identify a single particle of the sample. "The only question I'm able to answer now is: Do I know what this is? No." He shook his head.

"I'll need to run some more detailed tests." Chris stared into the onboard camera. "I'm going to bring C-8 with me. He has the same magnets as the moped has, so if I'm a bit more patient while traveling there he should be able to tag along." He scratched the top of his head.

"There has to be some sort of explanation for what's going on in there. The fact that it's not influenced by the time stop is worrying. But until I find out if it's the planet or the material causing it, or something else entirely, I can't make a decision on what to do." He rubbed his hands together.

"Anyway, the WHM is scheduled to arrive in roughly ten minutes, so I'm going to prepare. I'll lift myself into my suit so if anything unexpected were to happen, at least I come prepared."

Eight minutes later the green dot on the monitor approached the cross close to it. The closer it got the slower the green dot traveled. Chris looked outside and could see front thrusters provide reverse power as the two rockets slowly came closer and closer towards each other. C-8 executed minor adjustments to their course as the mile turned into mere feet. As they approached each other at walking speed, the rockets disconnected from their parts. The distance was now in inches according to the data on Chris' screen. The hinges came into contact with each other. "It's just waiting for the *click* now. Unfortunately for me we're in space and you can't hear a thing." Chris stood there, hands folded behind his helmet.

The screen showed the hinges locking into each other and with a simulated click, the monitor showed "Link completed" in a thick green bar.

Chris clapped his hands, the dull sound of the gloves faintly echoing through the ship. "That's one less thing to worry about."

As he exhaled slowly he sat down in the chair again. "Basically, everything is ready now. The rockets with the explosives are still on earth, but because of their speed they would arrive here in five hours. Once I launch them, the explosion happens in five hours. I could, in theory, stop them, but once I do that they'll miss the velocity to create a high enough impact to completely crush that thing." He pointed outside. "If I mess that up, or for whatever

reason I have to cancel them, there's no other possibility than to let the WHM swallow the Planet in one big piece."

He stared at the wall for a few seconds. "Well, considering this is done... I think it's time for me and C-8 to head back to the planet. It's time for some answers."

Back on the planet, he initiated a first test at the edges of the black surface he visited earlier. While the robot took more samples and analyzed them, comparing them to earlier data, Chris drove around. "Since I updated C-8 to basically understand my space theorems, I can let it do some testing on its own while I take a look around. After what I've found back in that black spot, I want to see if there's anything else that's interesting on this planet. Who knows what I will find?"

The moped hummed as it followed the wavy landscape. After driving around for nearly an hour, Chris stepped off the moped and peered around. Scratching his forearm, he said: "There doesn't seem to be anything special around me now. No black spots either, it seems. I don't know if there's any reasoning behind how they're spread... either way...", he scratched his forearm again, "wow, this itch's resilient. Ehm, anyway, I'll look around for another fifteen minutes before I head back to C-8 to see if he discovered anything." He stepped back on the moped and drove off.

The itch on his forearm worsened as he continued in a straight line. After a few minutes Chris couldn't take it anymore, the sweat standing on his forehead. He stopped the engine and jumped off the moped. He firmly rubbed

his glove over his forearm, but to no avail. "What the hell is going on?" he exclaimed.

Then his eyes widened. "I...?" No, he couldn't have. Maybe some remains of the strange material he took with him ended up in his suit and were causing a reaction. He initiated a body scan and impatiently waited for the result to appear on the screen on his wrist, while absently rubbing his other forearm.

"Body scan results: negative."

He threw his head backward as he sighed a "Thank God" under his breath.

However, the itch continued and started to become painful. The itch almost pulled his arm to the right. "Something here is making my forearm...", his eyes lit up, "that scar... hurt. Could it be that something around here is in connection with... ?" He didn't finish his sentence. He slowly walked towards the direction his scar was pulling in. As the itch reached its peak, Chris stopped. There was nothing there. He stomped on the floor, the surface beneath him consisting of thick rock and metal. Everywhere his sight reached the surface looked the same. He continued to scratch his scar as he squatted down. A single black dot appeared in the corner of his sight, lying on the surface. He slowly crawled towards it. He grabbed an empty jar and a trowel from his backpack, shoveled up the grain of material and dropped it in the jar. He sealed it and put it back in his backpack. "I don't know what that is. But something about that dot is connected to me. That thing is in some way related to whatever or whoever gave me that scar." He stepped back on his moped, the itch continuing as he carried the grain with him. He started the engine and drove back towards C-8.

Part 2

The nerves in his arm were almost numb as he returned to his ship. C-8 had needed another hour to make a tentative analysis of the material. "I might as well get rid of that thing in my backpack", Chris had mumbled as he hopped back on his moped and drove off to the ship.

He put the jar as far away from his seat as he could. The itching became less poignant, but the pulling sensation became stronger the further away he got from it. As he sat down and slowly took off his suit, he noticed the irritated skin from his elbow up to his hand. "I'm not sure if that's from scratching it so much or from something else..."

The scar was just as faded pink as it had been on that first day. "No matter how long...", Chris repeated, the words engraved in his mind. "Save us." He stood up and paced through the small cabin of the ship.

"I don't know what I'm dealing with. I expected to get here, blow that thing up and make it disappear. I've put all my plans aside until I figure out what's going on here. C-8 is still running his test, but I'm fearing that I'm dealing with something that's out of my reach. Something I'll never be able to grasp, or stop for that matter. Literally no matter how long it took." He stared into the lens.

"Most of the information, the theories I'm working with, are mine. I've advanced beyond existing knowledge and the only person I can fall back on... is me." He rubbed his hands over his face.

"There's wind there. That's something we can establish. That means that in those tiny black spots, time is resumed as normal. It's guesswork until I get the results from C-8 but..." he paused. "I hope I'm wrong, honestly, I do... but I think I'm dealing with something huge here. Those black pulsating spots... they're concentrated all over the surface. If time would've continued on this planet as a whole, then it would've been easier to explain. But now...", he massaged his neck with his hand, "I think I'm dealing with wormholes here. That wind isn't coming from here. It's coming from somewhere else."

He sat back down and absently chewed on his lower lip. "It would change everything. Not only do I have no idea as of yet on how to deal with that, but there's also something on the other side of the wormhole where time isn't frozen. And all of this is somehow connected to that planet." He stared out of the window. A silence fell and a few minutes later Chris stood up. "I have to check on C-8. I hope I'm looking at this all wrong." He shrugged. He put his suit back on. "Otherwise...", he shrugged again, slowly shaking his head as he went outside.

"C-8, what do you have for me? Come on now, buddy, don't disappoint me. You have to have something for me." Chris walked towards the robot. The analysis would be complete in two minutes. Chris sat down next to C-8. The robot stood on the lightest variant of the dark material, a gray shimmering and slightly pulsating layer of dust. Chris followed the build up of darker and darker material with his eyes until he stopped at the complete darkness in the middle. He frowned.

C-8 beeped in his ear and he looked at his screen. "Analysis: completed." He tapped the window. With bated breath he scrolled through the findings. The dark material was a form of extremely condensed material. "So the darker the material, the larger it was before someone or something compressed it." Chris exhaled.

The surface under him vibrated. Chris hurriedly stood up and looked around to see what was going on. He ordered C-8 to move back to the thicker and harder ground behind him. The quivering became more intense the closer it was to the black spot. Chris slowly headed towards it, carefully approaching it as if it could explode any minute. With a violent rupture, a geyser of material erupted out of the blackness. Chris jumped back, landing roughly on his back as the dust fell to the surface. He crawled back up. The surface came to rest as quick as the rumbling had appeared. He ordered C-8 to join him. "I need you to identify that hole." The robot beeped and anchored himself to the thicker surface with a thin steel cable. When it stood next to Chris it beeped again, and started its scans. 5 minutes remaining.

Chris knelt down. He grabbed a pile of dust and rubbed the material through his fingers as a large portion of it fell back to the surface. "What is this stuff?", he wondered.

4 minutes remaining. Chris got back up and looked at the blackness. Material had come out of it, he'd seen it with his own eyes. "That's definitely not coming from under the surface", he concluded.

3 minutes remaining. Chris' thoughts couldn't help but go back to his scar. The entire thing that motivated him to start this mission. "Save us." Chris stared into the blackness. "Save who?", he thought.

2 minutes. "I know one thing. No matter what C-8 is going to find, I'm not going to like it. Even in the best circumstances I'll have to come up with something different than I originally planned on. I'd lie if I said that my improvising skills haven't taken a hit lately. There's just no need to when you have all the time you need." He smiled slightly.

A beep. A minute left. Chris looked at the robot. C-8 had held his company over the last couple of years. He had helped him many times with complex tests or calculations. "Come on, buddy."

A last beep. "Test completed", the screen read. Chris tapped it. A small diagram accompanied the small letters. Chris threw his head into his neck as he exhaled. "Yep, those are definitely wormholes. Stable ones at that, considering how long they've been here." He closed his eyes and inhaled, trying to calm down his thumping chest.

"Why is that material coming out of those things? And why are some of the black areas of material around these things larger than others? Bigger wormholes? I don't know. I still don't even know what this is", Chris said, as he ran his glove through the material. "But it's coming from out of the wormholes. I'll have to figure out what it is, why it's coming out of the wormholes in the first place, and most importantly", he paused for a second, before he asked himself the two most difficult questions, "what is on the other side and how am I going to solve this all?"

While slowly shaking his head he told C-8 to follow him. He stepped on his moped and headed towards a different black area. He initiated a test on the blackness there as he walked towards a nearby hillock. He laid down, his hands folded behind his helmet. Aghast he stared into space, the white light of the stars contrasting the hopeless blackness in his mind as he exhaled.

Day 56897

Part 1

"Hey." Chris sat cross-legged in front of the camera, his suit lying next to him on the floor.

"I tried to get some sleep, but...", he shrugged, "after yesterday... I don't know." He rubbed over his cheeks.

"C-8 has analyzed roughly thirty areas by now. I've read the results of twenty. It appears that some of the areas no longer grow. We had two more quakes since yesterday, but not all of the black areas spewed material. And even when they did, the amounts and color were different." He rubbed his index finger between his eyebrows.

"C-7 over here has been analyzing the material closer. It's hardly within his frame of references so it's been taking a while. When he finds something it could be the slightest similarity, so...", he ran his hands through his hair, "I'm not sure how useful that's going to be. Better than nothing, I suppose."

"The wormholes are ruining the plan I had in mind. Somehow this planet is able to sustain hundreds of stable wormholes, which at the least is very strange, but blowing them up..." He paused. "Their gravitational pull within space-time and the consequences disconnecting them could have... honestly I

don't think anything would be left of the Milky Way." He repositioned himself on the floor.

"I need to know what the material is, and until C-7 is done that's guesswork. Maybe it's the result of a black hole crushing particles... maybe it's just a material that hasn't been found yet. But because there's somehow a connection between those wormholes and the material I'll have to figure out what it is in order to try and solve this problem. Which, sadly, is rather difficult if you're operating in areas practically no knowledge exists about. Except for mostly my own, of course." He grinned slightly.

"I could try to keep the planet in one piece and send it through a wormhole, but frankly we've never experienced a wormhole in a wormhole, and especially not when we don't know what's on the other side..." Chris paused briefly. "And we can conclude that the wormholes aren't ending up in close proximity to each other, otherwise there wouldn't have been variation in the amounts of material... or the complete lack of, really. It's just waiting for the robots now."

Two hours later C-7 and C-8 had cross-referenced their findings and began drafting their results. Chris paced through the room. "You know, it's, if you think about it, completely ridiculous what's going on right now. I've been studying and trying to solve this time stop for over a hundred and fifty years, and now I'm up here for a week and I've run into far larger issues than all the others combined." He shook his head.

"I don't know how long this is going to take me to fix, I really don't. It took me years and years to understand existing theories, let alone expand on them,

but this..." He tried to continue, but something in the back of his mind stopped him. "We'll see", he concluded.

Three long hours later the robots finalized their analysis. "Let me see what you've got." Chris sat down in his chair and looked at the large screen in front of him.

A large simulation appeared on his screen with accompanying data. "The material consists of highly pressurized and compressed material. Upon expanding and simulating a decompression of the material, the following has been found." Four diagrams appeared on the screen.

Chris slowly rose from his chair, his eyes locked to the screen. "Are you telling me... ?" He fell silent. "How sure are you of this?" he asked.

"The simulation was created using all existing knowledge in our current programs. The simulation's accuracy is expected to be 97.8%."

Chris rubbed his fingertips over his temples. The time stop didn't seem like such an acute problem anymore. He stared at the screen, his mouth slightly hanging open. "What in the name is going on there?"

The diagram of the lighter material showed that a decompressed form of the material had been miles and miles long, often weighing millions or billions of pounds. The tiny grains had once been moons or very large asteroids. The grayer material consisted of small planets and larger moons. The dark gray material large planets and large stars.

Chris closed his eyes for a second before his vision scrolled down to the last diagram. The black material, of which he'd carried hundreds of grains alone,

caused his legs to tremble. Dumbfounded, he sat back in his chair, his body shaking lightly. The black grain had consisted of an entire solar system.

Part 2

Chris paced through the ship. "Alright, the things we know for sure. One: someone or something is causing planets and entire systems to collapse. Second of all: something unexplainable, for me and the robots, is going on with this process. Even when compressed, the materials should've remained at their standard mass. Entire solar systems of mass are heaps on a small planet and they're practically weightless. It just...", he shrugged, "it just doesn't add up."

He sat back down in his chair and opened the command center on his screen.

"I need more information. And even though I have no idea if this is going to be of use, I have to try it. Give me a moment."

He disappeared out of sight. A few minutes later he walked past the camera with a drone the size of a small bike. Ten minutes later he returned in front of the camera. "It should be operational now. I've brought it with me in the case that I'd had to explore areas I couldn't reach on this planet. So far I haven't run into any issues, so I'm taking a gamble here." He rapidly hit keystrokes as he started a simulation of a wormhole.

"Alright, so according to this thing, combined with the data I've received from C-7 and C-8...", he inserted the findings into the simulation, "it should take the drone... come on... load... 16 hours to travel through the wormhole. One directional. Assuming it's able to return, on top of the scanning it has to do... it would return in 38 hours." He rested his head on the palm of his hand as he absently scratched his forehead with his fingers.

"I'd like to think I still have all the time in the world, really, I do, but... since those test results came back... every hour that I waste planets and stars collapse. Who knows if life existed on any of these planets. I can't help but wonder not only why I am the only exception to this time stop. The time stops itself, I don't know. Immense black holes on the other side of the wormholes could create such an unstable gravitational pull that an entire time stop could be possible... but that doesn't explain why I'm not frozen. Was I picked by someone or something? Or is there a different reason for the exception? The answers could've been found in any of the solar systems that are now nothing but dust."

A beep from C-7 interrupted his musings. The drone was ready for launch.

Chris took it to the second closest wormhole he could find. The other wormhole had stopped spitting material, and Chris feared the odds were against him if he wanted the drone to return from there. "It might be there's nothing left."

The drone had been instructed to fly in the hole, maintain speed for the 16 hours of the journey, run tests and when completed, it should return through the hole. The drone slowly rose from the ground, its small engine growling softly as it took off from the ground. It gained speed as it flew into a direct line away from the hole. It then turned, and in one clean motion the drone flew into the hole and disappeared.

Chris instantly went back to the ship. He could've sat there and wondered what it would return with, but there were some other questions left unanswered. Regardless of the outcome of the scouting mission, he needed

to figure out how to get rid of the planet packed with wormholes. He booted up multiple simulations, opened the important theorems on his screen and started thinking.

Day 56899

The drone had returned through the hole three hours ago. Fifteen minutes after it returned, the wormholes had trembled and material erupted again. Chris knew that if it had taken only a few minutes longer, he would remain clueless and left without a drone. "I got lucky this time." He smiled as he enjoyed the victory. "Haven't had many of those, lately."

He had ordered an analysis of the tests. He had tried to stay focused on the problem of the planet itself, but the tension broke through his train of thought multiple times. An hour later he decided to quit and wait for the results to arrive.

"Compiling results" the screen read. A minute later a diagram appeared along with a long string of numbers and other data. His eyes raced over the screen. "The material... compressed... result of..."

He laughed incredulously, but choked and threw a coughing fit. The rapid pounding of his heart and the sinking feeling in his stomach had him gasping for air.

Everything he'd experienced so far, every problem he had overcome, every solution he had created, nothing could compare to the findings in front of him. It wasn't a black hole swallowing up the planets. It wasn't the wormhole making the material lose its mass.

The fabric of the universe was collapsing. Its primordial matter, the foundation of all that is, was running through its fingers like sand through an hourglass.

"It's never been about Earth alone", Chris realized. "It's never been for anyone in particular. Whoever, whatever gave me this, realized that." He shook his arm. "Saving us meant saving all of us. Our entire existence."

He sat in his chair for three hours, staring at things only he could see. Silent.

Day 56905

"I recovered from the shock. Somewhat. I didn't say much the first few days. I mean, what's there to say? Instead I just did research, created plans... I'm working on a practically unknown field of science here. Primordial matter... it's just so different. It's like it's really not bound by the rules of our existence. A single grain of it covered an entire solar system. And yet it's as light as a feather... truly special. I'm sure that if we get the chance to research it the possibilities are endless." He smiled at the thought of it.

"First we'll have to save the universe." His face straightened. "I've been thinking about how to approach the problem. I have a current theory that seems both theoretically correct and executable. Somewhat, at least. I don't have any better options as of now. And time is running out. Literally, this time. I don't know how much of the universe has collapsed yet and at what rate it's continuing, either way, there's just no more time I can waste." He sat down in the chair and started a simulation.

"The thing I want to do, or try to do, is basically this:" He motioned his index finger in a large circle in front of him. "The universe is a large circle, or sphere if you will. From the basic data we received from the drone, the robots and I were able to establish that the destruction is occurring on one side of the universe. When the material collapses and all that remains is the primordial dust", he pointed at a jar with a small layer of black grains in it, "there's nothing behind it. Nothingness. A Void. Now, I've worked up a theory similar to what is currently happening, except that the current decay is presumably

naturally. The collapsing of the universe's current structure", Chris exclaimed, rubbing his hands together", is because of anomalies!"

"The wormholes that are being created aren't there for a reason. They carry off the material, yes, but the only reason they exist is because the fabric of space itself is collapsing. And the reason these wormholes are forming is because the fabric of space itself is collapsing... because black holes are collapsing within each other. The black holes are crushing each other with their destructive force and gravitational pull, which become so big that they cause the universe to collapse, but also create new black holes. It's a snowball effect. And that's the cycle we'll have to break." He paused to catch his breath.

"I need to collapse the existing black holes to prevent them from causing the chain reaction. The amount of force I'll need for this is...", he shrugged, "tremendous. The instability will hopefully cause the formation of new black holes to stop. And realistically there's only one way I'll be able to generate this amount of force. I need to blow up this planet", he said, while tapping his hands on the floor of his ship. "But before I do that, I have to create the wormhole with the WHM, send the planet through it and the second my wormhole closes, the planet should explode. The wormholes that are then bending through space are all in close proximity to each other and should create such a tear in the universe's fabric..." He paused and bit his lower lip. "The good thing is that it will, theoretically, stop the expansion of the collapse. The bad thing is... I have to sacrifice a chunk of the universe in order to stop it. That's millions, billions, possibly trillions of planets. The amount of life those

potentially harbor... thinking about it makes me feel small... and even though I know it's necessary I can't help but hate myself a little for what I have to do, "he said shrugging, shaking his head slowly. "But I have to do it." He looked into the camera. "I have no other choice."

The rest of the day he prepared the execution of his plan. The WHM was positioned, with the help of the rocket thrusters, at the spot the wormhole needed to form. The explosives, still on Earth, had their course altered. They would reduce speed when coming close to the wormhole, aligning their speed with the planet the moment it would be sucked in, so that when the planet appeared at the other end of the wormhole, the rockets appeared at the same time. The plan was then to have them individually fly into separate wormholes and have them automatically erupt inside the wormholes.

Chris had returned to the camera. "Everything is set. The robots are doing final minor calculations and are adjusting some details. The WHM is set up, the explosives are set up. It's happening tomorrow. This should be my last day in this time stop. Either that or we're all doomed." He chuckled. "I'd love to say I was excited... or thrilled for tomorrow. Honestly, I'm just really scared." He paused for a moment.

"You know, that jar over there, with the itchy dust in it. I've been thinking about it a lot. That bit of primordial material was once an entire system. For some reason this grain is different... and I think it's because that something or someone from that system gave me this scar. I'm just guessing, I don't know it either. But that system was in one way or another connected to me having that scar. I...", he scratched his chin, "I'd like to thank them, in some way.

Without them I would've been lost and it probably would've changed the entire course of the years I've been through on my own. So, whoever gave me this", he swung his arm, "thank you. I hope I'll be able to live up to the expectation." He paused the recording and rose from his chair. He initiated a new one as he saved the other.

"Chris here. It's Day 56905. This will hopefully be the second last day of this space mission. You'll be able to follow me tomorrow, in action, when I attempt to save... everything." He stared into the camera. "It's been a long time. It's been one special and insane mission. I hope that in a few days, you'll be able to experience life again. That goes for you, Sarah, for Earth, for the entire universe." He paused. "Wish me good luck." He gave a salute. "I'll need it."

He turned the camera off and stared at the wall. After an hour, he readied himself to sleep in frozen time one more time. The responsibility that weighed on his heart and mind kept him awake for many hours. Never had so much depended on one person, and it was all Chris could think of until he collapsed in the chair and fell asleep.

Day 56906

Part 1

"The last day. Supposedly." He smiled nervously. "I've wrapped up the last things I wanted to take care of... you know when I decided to take those recordings up in space? Yeah..." He rolled his tongue over his teeth.

"I gave myself the chance to decide what I'm going to do when, if, this succeeds. If time would unfreeze and I'd get back and everyone knew... almost a hundred and sixty years of recordings gives a lot of information about someone. Would I want the world to know everything I said, everything I felt? There are no secrets on those tapes", he said softly, "and... some things are just meant to be heard or thought by only yourself and by no one else... I know that there's no going back to how it used to be, but I'd like to think that I'm still me, you know? I've done everything by myself for years and years of time, and then I'd go back to Earth and just be... overloaded with whatever is thrown at me. After all this... you know, back when I was a kid, I'm sure I mentioned it before, that I wanted to be an astronaut? Just the idea of going into space gave me the chills, but also... millions of people watching you, following you closely, seeing you as a role model, almost a hero going into space. And now... I just want to go home. No awards, no media, no... praise. Just going home." He stared next to him, a single USB-drive laying on top of a box on the table.

"In this box I've kept every single recording since Day 1. If this succeeds and I live... then I'll get to decide what to do with it. If I don't... it won't matter anymore, will it? If I succeed but don't make it... I have this thing with me", as he picked up the USB-drive, "it's a message to Sarah. I recorded it this morning... I told her how I felt, how I feel about her, that her being who she is made me keep my head up in harder times... I've told her how I've spent two full lives alone, waiting, wondering, working... hoping. That I hoped to return one day, to the life we used to have, to the love we had together. After all this time," he coughed, a heavy lump stuck in his throat, "I can't imagine it to be ever like that again. And I think I've realized I don't want it to be that way anymore either." He looked away from the camera.

"If I get back, I'll need time. Real time. Actual time spent in actual solitude. I've never had a chance to catch up, make up my mind. What will I do as a man that advanced so far, alone, a hundred and eighty-year-old mind filled with... so much, in a barely thirty-year-old body. I don't know how long it will take...", he said, as he looked back into the camera. "But I do know that I will get back to Sarah. I will return. Even if I need all the time in the world." He smiled, his eyes sad. "I've transmitted that file to her cell phone, e-mail and our computer, so that when time continues and either of those situations occur... she deserves to know."

After a short moment of silence, he continued. "Everything that was still on Earth... data, theories, research, you name it... I've distributed it to each government in the world as accurately as I could. The inevitability of politics forces me to recognize that the knowledge I've built up could have major

consequences if used as a power tool. I don't want my legacy to consist of that." He sighed.

"The reality is that humanity probably won't change. If I succeed and life goes on and they find out exactly what happened, they will weep, they will laugh and they will celebrate. But in years the memory and fear of extinction will fade and old patterns will rise back to the surface. The irrelevance of some artificial importances, the struggle for power, money, greed... When I was younger I asked my grandfather what he meant when he said none of that mattered. "Power, money, what for?", he'd asked, and I had looked at him, my eyes wide. "You can buy things, or do things", I'd answered. He told me that if I was older, I'd understand what he meant. He was right, you know?

Happiness, joy, pleasure, love... cliché, sure, but really the fundamentals of our existence. My outlook has changed and things that used to be important are now trivial and trivial things matter the most. "Wisdom comes with age." I used to hate that phrase. Old people didn't always know better. They didn't, in fact. But now, as I'm old, considering everything at least, it's the experience old people inevitably have. They can look back and think, "What really mattered?" He paused. "I've had more than twice the length of a normal person to think about those questions. I can't help but conclude that even if it won't work, or even if it won't last, I'll try to make people, everywhere, realize what matters, really matters. I can give them that opportunity." He stared at the lens for a few seconds, ordering his thoughts.

"I could keep going on about whats and ifs, but after a while there's not much else to be said. There will be things I haven't realized, things I couldn't have

understood the consequences of, but I think I tried my best. And as long as I don't stop all this", he said, while gesturing around him, "there's really not much of a point saying this all." He walked away from the desk he was leaning on.

"The explosives are on their way and are scheduled to arrive in three hours. The WHM is ready to go. C-7 and C-8 are running tests, calculations, whatever they can do to influence this process positively."

He walked to his chair and sat down. "The WHM is going to need more power to suck up the planet as a whole than if it was blasted to smaller pieces of particles before it was sucked into the hole. The batteries had a little bit of power left in the original calculations... I'll use that to compensate. It's going to be a close call. There's nothing more I can do to change that right now, so we'll have to keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best. Right now I'll have to guide the ship to a distance where I can intervene whenever possible, if necessary, but still be safe if something unexpected happens, as far as that's actually possible. I'll lift myself in my suit in the meanwhile." He tapped a few buttons and set course to a hundred miles further away from the planet.

"The holes on the planet have still been spitting out material", he started after a short silence fell. "The heaps have been analyzed by the robots and their estimate was... almost unimaginable. Millions of black grains, billions of lighter ones... whole parts of the observable universes have collapsed. Who knows how much of the actual universe we've lost? And how much more we're about to lose?" He shook his head lightly.

The ship traveled through space as it reached its destination fifteen minutes later. The WHM would need two hours to reach the required amount of power to form the wormhole. The rockets were scheduled to arrive mere seconds later. As Chris followed the countdown on the screen for the WHM to initiate its process, his heart started throbbing in his chest. As the countdown reached zero and the process engaged automatically, Chris sat in his chair. He stared at the monitor, but his thoughts were elsewhere. The importance of the upcoming hours weighed on him, and all he could, as he had all those years, was tense his muscles, carry the burden and go on.

Part 2

The RPM of the engines of the WHM rose close to their maximum capacity. Chris knew that on Earth the machine would've been deafening at this point, but up in space the only thing he heard was his heart pounding in his chest. The rockets with explosives had entered his field of vision fifteen minutes ago and were only five minutes away from the WHM. With the way the machine would suck in the planet, the planet would travel with roughly 150 miles an hour inside the hole. It would travel, from what he and the robots calculated, for five hours to reach the other side of the hole. But the rockets were approaching the WHM at a significantly higher speed, so the robots had calculated the rockets to slow down. They would use their last bit of fuel to decelerate sixty seconds before they reached their destination to ensure their speed matched the planet's speed inside the wormhole.

Chris looked up at the screen. 4 minutes left. Establishing the wormhole and securing it just long enough for it to suck in the planet would take only two seconds. The engines of the WHM would have to charge for three minutes at their maximum capacity to prepare the creation. As the timer approached three minutes, Chris sat with his hands behind his helmet. "Come on... come on..."

The WHM reached maximum capacity and with a nonexistent sound that would've shattered his eardrums, a visible wave rippled through to the space around the machine. The rockets continued on their course, slowly approaching the planet and the WHM. A beep in his earphone made Chris twist his neck back towards the screen. C-8 had calculated a very slight

adjustment in the speed of the rockets. "Confirm", Chris pressed, and leaned back in his chair again.

Barely 2 minutes remained. "I can't believe it all comes down to this", Chris mumbled. "If this works, then it's waiting. If it doesn't..." He threw his hands up in the air.

"Honestly, though", Chris looked at the camera, "it's all been worth it. Every second." He stared back at the screen. "I don't know what will happen to the time when I transport this thing to a different part of the galaxy though... I guess we'll find out soon enough."

1 minute remained. The small amount of fuel the rockets had left were now used to slow them down as they neared the WHM. Shocks and small distortions were now appearing around the machine. Forty seconds left. The engines of the rockets died down as the fuel ran out. They slowly drifted towards the WHM, only a few feet away as they nearly came to a standstill. They had to go as fast as the planet they were traveling along with inside the wormhole and having extra velocity when nearing the WHM would disturb that. Fifteen seconds. The pounding in his heart almost drowned out the sound around him as the rockets were a foot away from the soon to be formed wormhole. Chris exhaled slowly to calm himself down. Small pearls of sweat formed on his forehead. Five more seconds. "Now or never", he mumbled.

With a flash of light the WHM activated and unleashed all its power on the matter between its parts. The rockets were lined up within inches of each other as they approached the opening in the machine. The matter close to the WHM started to deform and small distortions caused the dark gray fluctuating

matter to expand and contract. The tips of the rockets almost touched the matter.

A beep flashed on his screen. A warning from the robots read that a gravitational pull was drawing their ship closer to the origin of the pull. The robots had calculated this to be a distance safe from the pull, while still staying close enough to intervene in whatever method necessary in case something went wrong.

An explosion of dark light appeared at the WHM. A wave rippled around the machine and the blackness expanded rapidly into hundreds of feet wide. Chris braced himself, tightly grasping the elbow rest of this chair as the darkness grew. The hole raced through space as it was now miles wide.

Chris swallowed. *If only everything I did was right*, was all he could think. The calculations had to be perfect or his ship would be devoured within the blink of an eye. The blackness now expanded close to the 600-mile radius of the planet. A small hint of light appeared in the middle of the hole as it reached its full size.

The space around the WHM shook. The rockets had hit the middle of the blackness as it trembled. An immense gravitational pull launched from within the blackness as the planet was drawn towards it. His heart skipped a beat as another, larger wave rippled through the air, followed by a blinding light. Chris instinctively squeezed his eyes shut as a violent wave of energy hit the ship. His back crashed on the back of his seat as the ship trembled, and Chris clinched in his chair with all his might. The robots automatically intervened and the shaking ship came to a standstill. Chris slowly opened his eyes.

Everything he had been looking at was gone. The space in front of him was eerily empty, its unfamiliarity almost saddening Chris as he stared at the nothingness in front of him, left by the collapsing wormhole that closed seconds ago.

Day 0

Sarah stood in the kitchen. She shared the melancholy she had seen in her husband's eyes as he had looked at her. But she had looked back at him, a small smile on her lips and the tiny wrinkles around her eyes had assured him it was going to be okay, and she had seen the tension in his eyes dissolve.

She felt a little bit of wetness on her cheeks and her forehead and dried it by rubbing her sleeves over her skin. *Weird, I'm not sweating*, she thought. She looked over the counter towards the couch. The spot her husband had been sitting on a second ago was now empty. She frowned a little. "Where did you go, Chris?", she wondered.

Day X

Part 1

Chris rose from his chair. The images flashed all over the screen in front of him. The robots had picked up signals from Earth, and the meaning of this was undeniable. Time had started again.

People were walking, with the wind blowing through their hair, laughing and crying as they embraced each other, Chris imagined. The broadcasters would all vary in tone, but the two things they would have in common was standing under the caption of "Planet is Gone" in thick letters on the screen along with the look of relief on their faces.

"Just thinking about them, imagining it." Chris smiled, but it wasn't a smile of happiness alone. "They are probably extremely happy, overjoyed that whatever was going to be their demise is now gone. Others, confused", he said, while taking off his helmet. "Why, how, what? I could imagine those thoughts running through my head. They'll get bits of information soon enough but... .you know what the worst thing is? This, on its own, is fantastic. If whatever I'm trying to achieve ends up succeeding, they're actually saved. Life can and will go on. But... you know... something I've thought about once, when I sat alone somewhere, buried in my thoughts? That the last thing we should do when we're alive is to accept the fact that we will die. That last moment, when life slips through your fingers, instead of clenching it, holding on, struggling to contain it and ending it in denial... you should just let it go.

Most people on Earth mentally let go that night. Some people didn't, they refused to believe what was coming. But most people thought that night: this is it. These are our last moments together. I thought so too. We really are, even if we don't want to, ready to go. It was simply the inevitability of the situation. That last night, nothing was going to save us anymore. We hoped, but we didn't believe. It was our time, and most accepted that fate. But... how... how do you ever get back?" Chris stared out of the window. "Once you say goodbye to someone, something, say goodbye for good, you know... it's twice as hard to return to how it was before. If you ever do at all."

A short silence fell. "The thing is though... even when it looks grim, when you feel lost... someone or something will pull you out of these doubts, these struggles. Even if you don't see it right away. Even if you don't know who, what or when. There will be a moment where you look back and think: "I struggled, I fell. And then I got back up." People are just strong like that. It will be hard going back to how it was. But humanity... It's resilient like that. It will find a way." He glanced through the window again, a small smile resting on his face. "I'm sure of it." His smile faded as he stared in the direction of the blackness the WHM disappeared into an hour ago. He rubbed over his cheeks. "If it gets the chance to."

The house was nearly empty. Only the closest relatives had stayed, while friends and distant family went to their own homes to celebrate humanity's redemption.

The news was on, the flashes on the screen disturbing Sarah's train of thought. She got up from the couch and walked upstairs. She sat down on the bed, while looking at the mirror. Something had happened that caused time to either rapidly speed up or slow down, the news channels reported. Someone on the news even mentioned a complete time stop. They believed that in that period of time someone, or something, caused the rogue planet to disappear.

Sarah was relieved just like any other, but the disappearance of Chris worried her. She had hoped for him to be somewhere in the house, or maybe that he went for a walk and she didn't catch him going outside. But after searching for him around the house, and her phone not reaching his cellphone, she began to worry. The car was gone too, and Chris carried the keys with him. The tears had silently run down her face as she looked at herself. "What is going on?" was all she could think, but the cold grip around her heart scared her.

Supernatural events occurred and Chris missing couldn't be good news. No other reports of people missing had aired on the news, even after all the commotion and confusion after the initial discovery that they were safe. Something inside her feared for Chris. "Where are you?" she asked in the mirror.

Part 2

He heard a beep in his ear. He turned around and saw a small piece of text appearing on the screen in front of him. His fingers absently tapped on the table next to him. "So they're trying to contact me, C-7?", Chris asked. "I'll have to admit they found out pretty quickly... but I'm sorry." He declined the request with a quick tap as he wiped the sweat off his forehead with his other hand. He looked away from the screen and stared at the blackness around him. "They will have to wait."

The five hours the planet needed to travel through the wormhole were almost over. Within minutes, the rockets would explode and the wormholes and the black holes would collapse within each other. "If everything went according to plan, at least", Chris thought, while slowly pacing through the ship. Even after all this time, Chris had no idea if anything he did, if anything he predicted, would come true. All he could do was hope and pray to everything and anything that his mission would succeed the moment the timer would hit zero.

The woman behind the computer turned around and shook her head. "We're currently not able to establish a connection."

The Director nodded. "Keep trying."

He turned around and walked towards the family sitting at the glass table.

Sarah rose from her chair as he approached. "And... ? Did you... ?"

"At this moment we're not able to contact Chris yet. That doesn't have to mean anything negative or positive. There could be a small technical malfunction or he is currently busy with returning to Earth. We'll keep trying to get in touch with him. In the meanwhile...", he sat down on the empty chair next to him. "I'd like to ask you if Chris in any way contacted you. A message, perhaps? Something he changed in your house, just like he did at our offices?"

"Not that we know of, at least", her father answered. Sarah shook her head.

"Alright. I'm sure we'll be able to get a hold of Chris soon enough. We'll get to the trivial questions later. Our number one priority right now is getting him home." He smiled comfortingly at the family as he rose from the chair. "We'll keep you updated with any new information we receive. In the meanwhile, if you need anything, just ask." He nodded at the family and went back into the room he had previously left. As the Director sat back down on his own chair, he hoped that whatever was going on in space, Chris would be able to return.

Sarah stared at the wall until her phone started to vibrate. Her heart almost jumped out of her chest as she retrieved it from her pocket. "1 incoming message", the screen read. Her heart skipped a beat. "From Chris: Watch this alone. Love you."

Sarah excused herself to the bathroom. As she sat down on the closed seat, she opened the file that was transmitted to her phone. When she pressed Play and Chris appeared on her screen, exhausted yet smiling, a lump formed in her throat. When he started talking, hearing his voice after what seemed tens of years, she smiled with tears running down her face.

Ten minutes later she returned to the conference room. "Can you get the Director here, please?", she asked the man sitting next to them. "I'll be right back", he replied. "What's going on, Sarah?" her mother asked. "Did you cry when you were gone?" Her mother stared at her, recognizing the faded pink on her cheeks.

"Yeah, I did." Sarah smiled, relieved and horrified at the same time. "Wait a moment for the Director, Mom."

The Director appeared in the room minutes later. "You needed me here?", he asked.

"Yes, sir, I think this is very important for all of us. I just got a message from Chris." Voices resounded through the room until Sarah gestured to them to be quiet. "Very important. He's not done saving us yet." Her smile faded slightly, but the pride in her eyes radiated through the room. "He's saving the entire universe as we speak."

Chris exhaled slowly. Seconds of ear deafening silence passed.

[0:00]

As a statue he stared outside, his heart thumping in his chest. He stared at the blackness around him, only the light of distant stars preventing the darkness from closing in on him.

A jolt ran through his body, his heart skipping a beat as his entire body tensioned. He felt a small tingling spreading a cool softness in his chest.

Her father and Chris's brother straightened their backs and repositioned upright on their chairs. Sarah shuddered. Her mom, softly shaking, looked at her. "Did you all feel that too?" Everyone in the room nodded, including the Director and the personnel around them. "Is it warm for you too?" Everyone nodded again.

Five minutes later a scientist knocked on the door. "Come in", the Director said, and the door opened. A panting scientist came in. "Sir, you might have felt it too." He put a tablet in front of the Director. "The jolt?", he asked, while he took the tablet in his hands. "Yes, we don't know what it was, but from what we can see it was all over the place. It happened so quickly. Our systems caught up only three minutes later. It's traveling at... incomprehensible speeds." The director frowned. "Lightspeed levels?" The scientist shook his head. "A lot faster. With this speed... it's traveling through the entire current observable universe in... mere minutes." The Director walked towards the door. "Alright, we need to find out what that was. Let's join the rest of the group", he said, while gesturing to the scientist to follow him. As they walked towards the Mission Control Center, the Director couldn't help but hope that Chris would manage to save them all. Again.

The space around him slowly started to shake, the ship rocking along with the vibration. It became more violent and the ship started to tremble. "Get us away from here", Chris exclaimed, as he jumped back in his chair and put his helmet back on. The robots quickly activated the engines and created

distance with the trembling area. An intense array of light burst through the blackness around the ship. As he squeezed his eyes almost shut, Chris looked at the overpowering brightness behind him. Then, the opening of light trembled, and thick, massive bursts of what seemed dust spurted out of the hole. The hole became bigger and the supply of material increased. Thick clouds of dust were forming behind the ship, slowly floating through space as more and more material poured out. A nebula covering miles, consisting of fluorescent dark material now floated in space. With a last, faint flash, the hole in the fabric of space closed.

Chris stared out of the windows around him. The jolt inside him was now warm, nestled in his chest. "I don't know what happened here", he mumbled, as a smile broke through on his face. His laughter echoed through the ship as he threw his hands in the air. "I think I did it."

Epilogue

"You know..." He grinned as he readjusted on his seat. "Things never seem to go the way you planned them to go. Never exactly, at least. Considering the unknown areas of science... the plan could've failed too." He stared outside of the window. He looked back into the lens, smiling. "But I did it."

A silence fell, only interrupted by the faint sound of Chris's fingers tapping on the table next to him. The two robots stood behind him next to the wall. Both were disabled, the faint humming Chris had accustomed to absent, their dim lights now darkened.

"I don't think I could've done it without them, honestly", he said, while looking at his creations. "They saved me with their analysis, their calculations... even their company. Something that moves when everything else is frozen... even if it has no voice... silent company truly is better than no company at all." He shook his head. "I'll be able to fly home on my own. These heroes have done enough." He turned the chair around, leaned forward towards the robots and tapped them both softly. "Thank you, C-7, C8."

He turned back towards the camera, discreetly wiping the tears from the corner of his eyes. After he swallowed carefully, he continued. "I've talked with NASA four times now, in the past month. I told them my communication systems couldn't handle more than that. I think I mentioned an overload... or a malfunction. Either way, I explained to Sarah and our families why I wasn't in contact with them as much as they expected. I explained what I really

needed..." He rose from the chair and walked around the ship aimlessly. A minute later he leaned on the back of the chair, looking over it, towards the camera.

"It's just... I mean, emotionally, it's what I expected, don't get me wrong. But just as all the other things I expected or predicted... as I said, it's never really like how you planned." He shrugged. "I've told NASA and the rest of the world I'm floating here, under the pretense of finishing up something only I currently know of. I didn't say it was important, just that I needed to complete this task before I could go home. The truth is, the truth I told my family, is that I needed time. Time to think, to feel. Not about saving the world and everything around it. Just... thinking about myself. Who I was... and who I've become. World leaders, the press, whatever they got planned... it will have to wait. I've already noticed that things important to them are now futile to me. But I got myself five weeks to think about what I will do from this point onwards. The first months I probably won't have much to decide. It's going to be something to get used to after only answering to myself for over one and a half centuries." He smiled. "But honestly, after that... I'm not so sure. I don't think I will discover it in those five weeks, if I'll ever discover it at all. Time caused this and maybe time won't fix it." His forehead wrinkled as he thought.

"Somewhere in the back of my head I think that whatever purpose I had... whatever destiny, you could call it... is done. It's finished. And honestly, I feel that's not too far from the truth." He paused for a moment.

"I could decide to wander around aimlessly, alone in my thoughts. I'm older than the oldest and yet I've still got longer to live than most others. Even

though I'll be surrounded, I'll be special. I'll be alone in my knowledge, in my wisdom, in my perceptions." He shook his head. "After all these years I'm not eager to experience that kind of solitude again, not right away. The differences between me and everyone on Earth will cause a divide, something that will likely never close. I could run away from it... the other option is running along with it. I'll still decide what turns to take, but in the meanwhile... I'll let life drift me in whatever direction it wants me to go. Everything will be different. Not better or worse, necessarily. Just different." Chris gazed through the window into the darkness, veiled in starlight. "Even when I think about what it has cost me, what it might cost me in the future... It's been worth every second, every moment." He smiled.

After a few seconds he continued, his face straightened again. "Physically I'm still the same person I was before all this. I didn't age... the only thing I have left is the scar." He waved. "I never found out who or what gave me it... I'm not sure I ever will. There's a good chance it's the last thing they did before their world collapsed into simple dust..." He looked at the jars filled with dark, fluorescent grains as he walked towards the table they were on. He leaned forward and grabbed the seemingly empty jar. As he opened the lid, he stared at the single grain inside.

"It doesn't itch anymore. The scar. I hope I'll be able to thank, in one way or another, whatever or whoever guided me into this direction. That scar might have saved us all in the end..." He stared at the grain. "Who knows what you'll unfold in the future?", he asked softly. "Maybe I was chosen by whatever what was once part of you. Maybe I wasn't. I might find out, and maybe I never will.

But... one thing seems clear to me now." He looked up from the jar, back into the camera. "If that day arrives, it will be in the distant future. There will be a day where I'm undecided and my goal will be to answer all the questions left unanswered. But now...", he put the grain back into the jar and put it back in its place on the table, "all I want to do now, is to see Sarah, see my family. See people live life. That's what this was all about in the first place. Saving Earth. Saving humanity." He looked at the camera. "There's really not much else to say. It's time to go back to Earth."

He smiled at the camera as the wind ran through his hair. The sensations were overwhelming, but he had prepared himself for this moment. He waved at the camera as he walked through the door which was shut a second later, leaving the whistling wind behind. He swung his backpack over his shoulder. It was filled with the essentials he had used in the past years, and in the bottom a thick case was filled with his recordings.

He had arranged to make his public entrance tomorrow. Today, except for the recording of his arrival, was his day, Chris had decided, and everyone, no matter their position, had agreed. The five guards that followed him directed him towards a room on the right side of the enormous hallway. As the door opened, he saw his family standing there. His dad, his mother, his brother. Sarah's father and mother. Sarah. The backpack on his shoulder slid down to the ground.

He stared at her for a brief moment until she rapidly approached him and jumped into his open arms. The tears were running down her cheeks as she

kissed him and hugged him tightly. As he held her firmly in his hands, Chris felt his own tears running down his cheeks. He stared into her eyes and mumbled: "I missed you so much."

As his family closed in on him and embraced him, Chris looked into their eyes. He knew it wouldn't be easy. His doubt spread as his heartbeat rose. His arm itched, and as his heart pounded in his chest, his mind raced to the primordial matter behind him and all the questions and uncertainties it brought along. The importance of those questions had filled his mind for many years, and they would remain to do so. The day where he would leave Earth would come, he now realized. His journey, his mission in space, wasn't over yet.

But when he looked into their eyes, he felt their caring, their warmth and their love, their presence a balm to his lonely soul and he felt his mind and body relax. The day where he would leave Earth would come. But it would not be this day, and it wouldn't be any other day soon to come. He laughed and cried with his family as he embraced their presence. A simple thought filled his mind, one he could almost fully embrace. "I'm home."