

FADE IN:

A SPACECRAFT drifts in orbit high above Mars. A tiny symbol of humanity against the massive red planet.

SUPER TITLE: "2023. THE FIRST MANNED MISSION TO MARS."

HOUSTON (V.O.)  
Columbia, you're go for landing. You've got three billion people watching. Make us proud.

INT. COLUMBIA, COCKPIT

ELLIS LAWHEAD sits in the pilot's seat. This square-jawed golden boy could fly this bucket blindfolded.

ELLIS  
Copy that, Houston. Initiating landing sequence.

A female CO-PILOT floats in ZERO-G, flipping switches.

ELLIS (cont'd)  
Okay, boys and girls. Helmets and seatbelts. It's show time.

A male ASTRONAUT plants a helmet on Ellis, buckling him in before settling in his own seat. Suddenly, a POP ECHOES through the vessel. Then ANOTHER. And ANOTHER --

EXT. COLOMBIA - SPACE

-- a barrage of SPACE DUST peppers the ship. Meteoroids the size of walnuts. A larger rock --

-- PUNCHES A HOLE through one of the solar panels.

INT. COLUMBIA, COCKPIT - CONT.

Unbearable NOISE. Like A THOUSAND GATLING GUNS going off at once. They have to yell to be heard.

ASTRONAUT  
What the hell? This isn't on our charts.

He straps himself in.

ELLIS  
Houston, we're passing through some sort of debris field. Taking minor damage, nothing we can't handle--

EXT. COLUMBIA - SPACE

A ROCK SMASHES THROUGH THE DISH ANTENNA --

INT. COLUMBIA, COCKPIT - CONT.

-- the ship SHUDDERS. The radio SQUELCHES.

ELLIS

Houston? Come in, Houston...

Ellis glances at his co-pilot. Then over his shoulder.

STATUS PANEL

Communication indicators all turn RED in succession.

ASTRONAUT

We've lost communications!

EXT. COLUMBIA - SPACE

Larger rocks bombard the vessel. A boulder PLOWS INTO THE MAIN FUEL TANK --

-- venting fuel sends the ship into a TAILSPIN.

INT. COLUMBIA, COCKPIT - CONT.

The crew REACTS. CONTROLLED CHAOS. Pulses pound, but hands do what they've been trained to do for years.

Still floating in ZERO-G, the co-pilot holds on with both hands as she reads the gauges.

CO-PILOT

Ellis, we're bleeding fuel.

ELLIS

Hang tight, I can handle this--

A rock PENETRATES THE HULL with a DEAFENING CRUNCH --

-- leaving a gaping wound the size of a baseball. The cabin DEPRESSURIZES.

The astronaut reaches for his helmet -- TOO LATE -- it flies across the cabin, bouncing like a violent pinball.

He flails about as every molecule of oxygen gets sucked from his lungs. His eyes POP OUT of their sockets.

The suction yanks the co-pilot across the cockpit. Her head SMASHES against a strut, killing her instantly. Blood joins the oxygen STREAMING OUT INTO SPACE.

Ellis fires thrusters, but the ship continues to tumble.

EXT. COLUMBIA - UPPER ATMOSPHERE

The ship GLOWS RED as it plunges from orbit.

EXT. MARS SURFACE - DAY

Columbia leaves a smoky trail across the dusky sky. As the ship nears the surface, its trajectory levels out.

INT. COLUMBIA, COCKPIT - CONT.

SOUND AND FURY. Ellis fights the bucking ship. The hull breach SPITS SMOKE AND FLAME.

EXT. MARS SURFACE - DAY

The spacecraft SLAMS into the rusty Martian sand. Leaving a billowing cloud as it skids for over a mile.

INT. COLUMBIA, COCKPIT - DAY

Ellis holds on for dear life as the ship shakes loose metal like the innards of a cheap watch.

Outside the viewport, the dust briefly clears -- just long enough for Ellis to see an ENORMOUS BOULDER directly in his path -- HE SCREAMS --

BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. COLUMBIA - DAY

Red dust covers the silent wreckage. Copper sky peeks through a gaping hole in the ceiling. Ellis climbs in, searches through the debris.

EXT. CRASH SITE - DAY

The ship's gutted shell sags against a pile of boulders. Crimson desert as far as the eye can see.

Ellis emerges with a tool box. He scans the horizon, takes his bearings. Sets off for a distant hill.

EXT. MARTIAN HILL - DAY

Ellis trudges up the slope under an unforgiving sun. He drops to his knees, exhausted. Sucks water from the hose inside his helmet.

EXT. MARTIAN HILL - LATER

Ellis struggles to the crest. Stops to catch his breath. With a pair of binoculars, he surveys the plain below --

-- EUREKA! Relief floods across his face. With renewed energy, he scrambles down the hill.

EXT. PROBE SITE - DAY

The toy-like SOJOURNER ROVER lies half-buried in sand. Ellis takes a knee and pulls it out.

ELLIS

Long time no see, little buddy.

He digs nearby, uncovering -- the MARS PATHFINDER.

Ellis dismantles the small probe with tools from the toolbox, exposing the communications array. He tries several spare batteries, finally finds a fit.

He splices a cable, connects it to his space suit. Leans back with a heavy sigh.

He pulls out a folded scrap of laminated paper, skims the text. Tosses it aside. So much for momentous words.

He pushes the "TRANSMIT" button on his wrist.

ELLIS

Mayday, Mayday. Houston, this is Lawhead. Columbia crashed on entry. Ship destroyed, crew dead. Forty days oxygen and water remaining. Require immediate rescue. Respond this frequency. Lawhead out.

He gazes up at the empty sky.

Alone.

300,000,000 miles from home.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

RED NEON flashes in the dark night, illuminating a smattering of vehicles parked in the dirt lot of a lonesome building.

The name BLINKS on the roof: THE HIDEAWAY.

SUPER TITLE: "PLAINVIEW, KANSAS - 15 YEARS LATER."

INT. HIDEAWAY - NIGHT

Sawdust. Longnecks. Deer antlers. Welcome to Hicksville.

Sitting at the end of the bar, Ellis nurses a beer. Shabby beard, bleary eyes, not so golden anymore. Behind the bar, a TV set broadcasts a football game.

He motions to the BARTENDER for another beer. A DRUNK MAN stumbles up.

DRUNK MAN

Goddamn Chiefs can't get past the fifty-yard line.

BARTENDER

That's nothing new.

(to Ellis)

Eight bucks.

Ellis throws down some cash. The drunk stares at him.

DRUNK MAN

Hey, I know you. I heard you moved out here.

He takes an exaggerated step toward Ellis.

DRUNK MAN

(cont'd)

That's one small stumble for Man, one giant fuck-up for Mankind.

Ellis grabs the man by the collar, seething.

ELLIS

Maybe we should go outside so I can show you how to do it properly.

BARTENDER

Whoa, easy fellas!

(to the drunk)

Take a hike, you're cut off. Go on, get outta here!

DRUNK MAN  
See ya later, Flyboy.

The man leers at Ellis before wandering out.

BARTENDER  
Sorry about that.

ELLIS  
Forget about it, there's one in every town.

EXT. HIDEAWAY - NIGHT

Ellis crunches across the gravel lot. He opens a door and climbs in. HEADLIGHTS FROM BEHIND suddenly flood in.

A uniformed POLICE OFFICER struts up and spotlights Ellis with his FLASHLIGHT.

OFFICER  
Step out of the vehicle, sir.

Ellis opens the door...

WIDE: Ellis steps down from a SINGLE ENGINE AIRPLANE, not from an automobile.

ELLIS  
Evening, Officer.

OFFICER  
Mr. Lawhead, I'm going to need you to come with me.

ELLIS  
No, I'm fine, really.  
(gestures)  
I'm just a few fields over.

OFFICER  
Get in the car, sir. Please.

The policeman motions to his car with the flashlight.

EXT. AIRPORT - NIGHT

The same squad car speeds across the tarmac, stopping in front of a LEAR JET and VALENTINA ROSOV -- the statuesque Russian beauty waiting by the plane.

The police officer gets out, opens the back door. Ellis wobbles out.

ELLIS

Am I under arrest? Or is this the  
stripper who never showed up on my  
birthday?

Valentina approaches, sets a briefcase down on the hood.

VALENTINA

My name is Valentina Rosov. I represent  
Ian Thorn.

Hearing Thorn's name, Ellis turns to get back into the squad  
car.

ELLIS

Screw this, take me back to my plane.

Valentina opens the briefcase - it's full of CASH.

VALENTINA

Mr. Thorn wishes to purchase twenty-four  
hours of your time.

Ellis hesitates. A briefcase can hold a lot of money.

VALENTINA

Fifty thousand dollars to listen to what  
he has to say. No strings attached.  
You'll be home by this time tomorrow.

Pride versus cash... Ellis thinks it over. He closes the  
briefcase, takes it and strides to the plane.

ELLIS

Want me to drive?

INT. OUTER OFFICE - NIGHT

Valentina leads Ellis through ten-foot-tall doors made of  
dark glass. Stylized "THORN" logos glitter on the doors.

INT. THORN'S OFFICE - NIGHT

A study in simplicity: obsidian surfaces, chrome edges,  
marble walls. Not a paper product in sight.

One entire wall displays numerous SPLIT SCREENS: stock  
tickers, scrolling news feeds, still images, surveillance  
video, e-mail.

Behind a glass desk, IAN THORN swivels around, exuding the  
kind of confidence only a billion dollars can buy.

THORN

Have a seat, Commander. Thank you for coming.

He reaches out a manicured hand. Ellis ignores it.

ELLIS

Cut the crap. I'm here on your dime, let's get down to business.

With a slight nod, Thorn dismisses Valentina. Ellis takes a chair and kicks his feet up on Thorn's spotless desk.

THORN

You've heard about the discovery of microscopic life on Europa?

Hidden mics pick out keywords in Thorn's dialogue and display RELEVANT IMAGES on the wall monitors: pictures of Jupiter's moon EUROPA and the EUROPA PROSPECTOR probe.

ELLIS

I may be out of the loop, but I don't live in a cave.

THORN

Well, you haven't heard this: we're going there. Not another unmanned probe. A manned mission.

ELLIS

Impossible. Congress hasn't approved a manned space mission since Mars.

THORN

Correct. Which is why NASA was more than happy to take on another financial partner. Me.

Ellis perks up, intrigued.

ELLIS

So what's in it for you? The world knows you're no philanthropist.

THORN

Naturally, I have a financial interest in the expedition and its associated discoveries.

ELLIS

Sounds familiar. I suppose you've found another poor sap at NASA to feed to your PR machine.

THORN

You could say that. Though you were a bit hard to find.

ELLIS

Me? Maybe you forgot, NASA washed me out years ago. Thanks in part to you.

THORN

I'm paying for the mission, which means I choose the crew. I want you to lead it.

ELLIS

I think I'll pass. Have fun.

Ellis stands up.

THORN

You want to dust crops for the rest of your life? You almost lost your pilot's license last year. I'm offering you a second chance.

(beat)

How about a piece of the action? You need the money.

The two men stare each other down. Finally:

ELLIS

One percent.

THORN

One-half percent. And a ten-million-dollar bonus if you get me back in one piece.

ELLIS

What do you mean, "get you back"?

THORN

You know I like to supervise my investments personally.

Ellis finally cracks a smile.

ELLIS

You won't even get through liftoff  
without crapping your jumpsuit. This  
could be fun after all.

EXT. ANTARCTICA - DAY

The icy continent stretches away to the horizon.

A HELICOPTER SWOOPS OVER THE FROZEN DESERT --

SUPER TITLE: "VOSTOK RESEARCH STATION - ANTARCTICA"

-- nearing several domed structures and vehicles. The only  
sign of life for thousands of miles.

HELICOPTER: next to Valentina, Ellis looks out the window.

VALENTINA

(over radio)

Been training here for five months.  
There's a lake the size of Maine down  
there, under two miles of ice. Best place  
to simulate conditions on Europa.

RESUME

The helicopter descends toward the base.

EXT. RESEARCH STATION - DAY

Ellis follows Valentina to a structure half-buried in snow. A  
sign printed in both English and Cyrillic reads: "RUSSIAN  
ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, VOSTOK RESEARCH STATION."

INT. RESEARCH STATION, ENTRYWAY - DAY

High-tech gadgetry shares space with folding chairs and  
wooden crates. A bare-bones operation. JULIA MANDRAKE,  
crisply efficient, meets them as they enter.

ELLIS

Julia Mandrake. What's a bureaucrat like  
you doing in the field?

MANDRAKE

Trying to keep NASA's involvement to a  
minimum.

ELLIS

Should be easy. Doing nothing is what you  
do best.

MANDRAKE

Let's get this over with. Come on, I'll introduce you to your crew.

INT. CREW QUARTERS - DAY

Mandrake leads them into a small common room. Four people sit at a table playing cards.

MANDRAKE

Everyone, I'd like you to meet your new commander, Ellis Lawhead.

(sarcastic)

You may have heard the name before.

No one looks up from the card game. Mandrake circles them:

MANDRAKE

Hank Newman is your co-pilot. The only NASA astronaut on your crew.

Crew cut. Skin-tight tank top. A NASA poster boy. HANK grins like he's holding a flush.

HANK

Rough break on Mars, Lawhead. Shit happens. Welcome back.

MANDRAKE

And your mission specialists. Lizzy Franco, exobiology.

LIZZY nods slightly, a raven-haired firebrand under a ballcap with an alien head patch.

MANDRAKE

Louis Jackson, geology.

JAX

Call me Jax.

Short and stocky, JAX looks like a geologist -- he's a ROCK himself.

MANDRAKE

And Gunnar Thorsen. Oceanography.

GUNNAR, Norwegian sea dog. Tall and windblown, salt water in his veins.

MANDRAKE

Valentina will brief you on tomorrow's training mission. Until then, try not to break anything.

Mandrake moves for the door.

ELLIS

Where's Thorn?

MANDRAKE

He hasn't logged any training hours yet.  
(grins)  
He's your problem now.

She exits. Ellis leans close to Valentina.

ELLIS

(sotto)  
Poker?

VALENTINA

(sotto)  
As long as you don't mind losing.

Ellis grabs a folding chair.

ELLIS

(to the others)  
Got room for two more?

BEGIN TRAINING MONTAGE

EXT. ANTARCTICA, ICY PLAIN - DAY

Ellis holds up one side of a metal frame. He slips on the ice, dropping the frame. The others shake their heads. Undaunted, he picks himself up, grabs the frame.

INT. RESEARCH STATION, SIMULATOR ROOM - DAY

Ellis handles a joystick, controlling a ROBOTIC ARM. He grasps at a soda can. Keeps knocking it over. Hank swaps the can with a beer bottle. Ellis finally grabs it.

EXT. ANTARCTICA, HILL - DAY

The astronauts race up a craggy, ice-covered hill in full space suits. Hank's in the lead. Ellis takes a detour, spider-climbs up a sheer face, reaches the top first.

INT. CREW QUARTERS - NIGHT

Back at the card table. Ellis lays down a full house, rakes in the pot. The others throw their cards at him.

END MONTAGE

EXT. EUROPA, ICE FLOE - DAY

Distant sunlight sparkles on the sharp edges and bluish bergs of Europa's glacial surface. Jupiter's mottled face dominates the sky.

The EUROPA PROSPECTOR PROBE bores into the ice with a large drill. Part metallic spider, part Panzer tank.

NEWSCASTER (V.O.)

...Twentieth century science fiction was dominated by stories of contact between the human race and alien beings. From the ruthless invaders of H.G. Wells to the benevolent creatures of Steven Spielberg, humankind has always been fascinated by the prospect of first contact...

The probe retracts the drill and moves ahead on its stout treads. Behind it, THE ICE FRACTURES. The probe moves on, oblivious, as the crack widens.

EXT. KENNEDY SPACE CENTER, LAUNCH PAD - DAY

A shiny new SPACECRAFT stands at a large gantry, strapped to three large booster rockets. Not a sharp edge in sight. A Space Shuttle on steroids.

NEWSCASTER

...But as often happens, reality is less exotic than fiction. The aliens on Europa are microbes, and first contact will take place under the lens of a microscope. Nevertheless, the world will be watching when the seven-person crew of the Beagle makes history three months from today...

Emblazoned on the hull, the vessel's name -- "BEAGLE" -- with NASA and THORN logos.

EXT. KENNEDY SPACE CENTER, ACROSS THE BAY - CONT.

CROWDS of visitors and media people wait expectantly. Flags and streamers flutter in the wind.