

It is the year 2096. Humanity stands on the brink of intergalactic expansion. Earth, once limitless, now strains beneath the weight of its children. The planets call.

In response, Earth sends its best.

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### **The Dolus Project.**

Mission: Explore Stratus U6Y7, a planet eighty-seven light-years from Earth, identified as potentially habitable.

Crew: Four.

Objective: Survey. Collect. Return.

*Simple.*

*So they thought.*

### **I. STRATUS**

The Nosoi hovered above the atmosphere of Stratus U6Y7, its shell shimmering from the planet's two suns. Like Earth, clouds could be seen swirling like paint in water. The landing legs hit the foreign soil. The crew steps onto the planet, flag in hand, drone recording their every step to beam back to mission control.

Commander Erica Moore narrowed her eyes against the twin shadows cast by the suns.  
“Check air integrity.”

Dr. Melantha Rendón tapped at her wrist console. “Air’s breathable. Slightly more oxygen than Earth. No toxins. Uncanny.”

“Vegetation's photosynthesizing,” said Corbin Heth, eyes wide behind his visor. “We’re standing in an alien jungle and it's... alive.”

Lt. Dana Nejad scanned the horizon. “No sign of fauna. No movement. No noise, either.”

Silence pressed on them, thick and complete.

They set up camp near a clear blue lake. Samples were collected. Vitals logged. Every data point was perfect.

Too perfect.

At night, under the brilliant stars and unfamiliar moon, Erica dreamt of shifting shapes. Shadows that didn’t belong. Whispers carried by winds that left no footprints. The air was too clean, the silence too thick, and she felt watched.

They stayed five Earth-days.

When they left, none of them looked back.

## **II. THE NOSOI**

The Nosoi departed orbit with ease. But one hour into the journey, Corbin’s station beeped.

“Erica,” he said, “we’ve lost long-range comms. Satellites aren’t responding.”

“System check.” Erica responded.

“I’ve run it twice. Systems are fine. Atmosphere interference maybe?” He said.

But the planet was far behind them.

Dana entered the flight deck, her face pale. “One of the medkits is gone. The sealed one.”

Erica raised an eyebrow. “You sure?”

“I packed it myself.” Dana said.

“Anyone else touch it?” Erica asked.

They all denied it.

That night, Erica heard scratching outside her quarters. When she opened the door, no one was there.

On the third day, water supplies went missing. Two canisters. Corbin accused Melantha. Melantha blamed Dana. Dana stayed silent. The air felt heavier.

On the fifth day, Corbin snapped.

### **III. CORBIN**

They found him crouched in the engine room, shirtless and bleeding, nails torn, scratching at his abdomen.

“Get it out!” he screamed. “It’s inside me! I felt it move—just under the skin—look! LOOK!”

Melantha tried to sedate him. He fought back like a wild animal.

“He’s hallucinating,” Dana said. “Paranoia, tactile delusions, textbook psychosis. Maybe exposure to something on Stratus. Or cabin fever. I need time with him.”

But Corbin refused confinement. He stayed in the ductwork. Screamed at night. Refused food. Refused light. Whispers followed his movements.

On day seven, he was found in the recycling bay. Curled up, eyes wide, dead. His body was ravaged, dehydrated, skin lacerated. Autopsy showed no parasites.

*Just madness.*

#### **IV. DANA**

Dana kept her distance afterward. “I need to stay grounded,” she said. “One stable mind to keep us centered.” But her eyes darted when she thought no one watched.

Erica noticed the tremor in Dana’s hands, the way she hesitated before eating, the sharp flinch whenever the comms static surged.

“I thought I saw someone,” Dana whispered one night. “In the observation bay. They turned, smiled at me, but their eyes were... wrong.”

“It’s stress,” Erica said.

But even she wasn’t sure.

On the tenth day, Dana locked herself in the hydroponics module. She activated an emergency override on the oxygen supply. When they breached the door, she was unconscious. Dehydrated. Feverish. Whispering nonsense.

“Inside... we’re all infected... we’re not real anymore... it’s in our thoughts...”

*She never woke up.*

## **V. MELANTHA**

Melantha took the news with eerie calm. “It makes sense,” she said. “They didn’t want us to find something on Stratus. So they made sure we wouldn’t understand it. They didn’t expect us to survive.”

Erica frowned. “Who’s ‘they’?”

Melantha stared at her. “The architects. The real designers of this mission. Dolus—god of trickery, deception. This was never about colonization. It was a test. Or a trap.”

Erica dismissed her.

But Melantha grew erratic. Sleep-deprived. Delusional.

She deactivated backup systems. Sabotaged the mainframe. She claimed the ship’s AI was compromised. That something had come back with them, buried in their minds, their dreams, their fears.

Then, without warning, she sealed herself in the airlock. Erica begged her to stop.

“I see the truth now,” Melantha said, face illuminated by blinking red light. “This isn’t a ship. It’s a coffin. And the only way out... is out.”

*She ejected.*

The last thing Erica saw was Melantha’s body twisting into space, swallowed by stars.

## **VI. ERICA**

*Alone.*

Erica scavenged what systems she could. The Nosoi was dying—fractured wiring, unstable navigation, oxygen dwindling. She patched what she could.

Then she aimed for Earth. The return was fire and metal and chaos. The Nosoi crashed into the Pacific, somewhere near the western seaboard.

Darkness claimed her.

## **VII. TRUTH**

She woke to the rhythm of a heart monitor. Antiseptic. Bright lights. Clinical stillness. Pain wrapped her like a second skin. Two voices.

“She survived?”

“For now. Doesn’t matter. She’s been through enough trauma. By the time she gets her bearings, we’ll have it under control.

Erica's eyes cracked. Blinded by the hospital lights she could barely see the room she was in. Erica turned her head. Pain hit her head. But her eyes lay away from the lights and she can now see what lies beside her.

Bodies trailing to the end of the room. Three beds. Three bodies. Clothes cover the bodies. Name tags at the end of the bed.

Table One: Corbin Heth

Table Two: Lt. Dana Nejad

Table Three: Dr. Melantha Rendón

*Their bodies shouldn't be there.*

*Their bodies should be in space...but they aren't.*

Before Erica could think of why the bodies may be there the two voices grew louder, as if they were walking towards her.

“Don't let her speak to the media. The Dolus Project served its purpose. Earth isn't going anywhere now. People are too afraid to leave.”

Erica's blood ran cold. Truth hit her core. It was all a lie. No aliens. No infection. No entity. Just manipulation. The Nosoi's systems, the crew's descent into madness—it had all been orchestrated. A social experiment. A psychological deterrent. Flight or fight kicked in. Adrenaline hit her. She ripped out her IV. Hands pushed out the window. She jumped.

## **VIII. AFTERMATH**

She ran. Through city shadows. Through alleys. Through silence. They searched. They found nothing.

Reports said Erica Moore was dead. Unstable. A victim of trauma. But whispers persisted. Encrypted files began surfacing: satellite footage, medical logs, flight data. The truth bled into the web.

*The Dolus Project was never about exploration. It was about containment.*

Erica Moore lives off-grid now. She moves often. Changes identities. She doesn't sleep much. Every creak in the forest might be them. But she fights. For the truth.

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Stratus U6Y7 remains off-limits. The Dolus Project is scrubbed from public record. Missions beyond Earth are suspended indefinitely. Humanity looks inward again, afraid. But somewhere, in the quiet of the trees, a woman watches the stars. And waits.