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RHYTHM IN THE LINE

Lead Focused / Sci-Fi / 5-6 min
Cast 4-5 Female x2 Male x1 Any x2

Ash is a junior pad technician who has been watching a raw pressure feed since three in the morning. Eleven minutes before launch, Ash blocks the crew hatch to tell the commander what the automated system missed. The transfer window will not open again for twenty-six months.

CHARACTERS

ASH OKORO (LEAD) - 20s to 30s, junior pad systems technician, second stage pneumatics, awake for twenty hours
COMMANDER VALE - 50s, mission commander, has waited four years for this window
RUIZ - 40s, pilot, wants to board
PETTERSEN - 30s, flight engineer, has flown this engine twice
CONTROL - any age, launch director heard over the white room speaker, can be cut

SETTING

The white room at the top of a launch tower, eleven minutes before liftoff, on the last day of a launch window.

The white room at the top of a launch tower. Through the open hatch, the crew module. VALE, RUIZ and PETTERSEN are suited, helmets under their arms, about to board. ASH, in coveralls with a tablet, stands in the hatch.

CONTROL

(over the speaker)

Crew, Control. T-minus eleven minutes. We need you in the module.

VALE

You're in my doorway.

ASH

Yes, Commander. I know. I need ninety seconds.

RUIZ

Nobody has ninety seconds.

ASH

Then I need sixty.

VALE

Who are you?

ASH

Ash Okoro. Pad systems. Second stage pneumatics. I check the helium purge lines on the tower side.

PETTERSEN

Purge lines were green at the poll. I heard the poll.

ASH

They are green. They're green because the system averages the pressure over four seconds. I've been watching the raw feed since three a.m. It's not flat. It's oscillating. Small. Three psi. But it's not random.

VALE

Three psi is inside tolerance.

ASH

It's inside tolerance by a lot. That's why nobody flagged it. But it's oscillating at eleven hertz, and it's getting cleaner. Sharper. Every hour it's more of a rhythm and less of a noise.

RUIZ

Meaning what?

ASH

Meaning something upstream is cavitating. A pump, a valve seat. Something with a bubble in it that's growing. At eleven hertz on the purge side, my best guess is the number two turbopump inlet.

PETTERSEN

Your best guess.

ASH

Yes.

PETTERSEN

I've flown on this engine twice.

ASH

And this is a new pump. Swapped nine days ago. I read the log.

Silence. VALE looks at the tablet, not at ASH.

VALE

Has launch control seen this?

ASH

I sent it up. Forty minutes ago. They said it was inside tolerance and to hold my position.

VALE

And you left your position.

ASH

Yes, Commander.

VALE

(into her collar mic)

Control, Vale. I have a pad tech at the hatch. Okoro. Talk to me.

She listens.

VALE

(to Ash)

They say you're a good tech and you're wrong. They say you've been awake for twenty hours and you're seeing patterns.

ASH

I am seeing patterns. That's the job. Commander, if you don't board in the next two minutes, you miss the window. I know. I know it doesn't come back for twenty-six months. I know what that costs. I know the three of you have trained four years for this and I'm a person you've never met.

RUIZ

Then get out of the doorway.

ASH

If that pump comes apart at ninety seconds
you won't have twenty-six months. You won't
have anything.

VALE

(evenly)

Do you have anything the computer doesn't?

ASH

(a beat)

I have the sound.

PETTERSEN

The what?

ASH

The line has an acoustic sensor. Nobody
looks at it because it's for leak detection.
I pulled it into audio.

*ASH taps the tablet. A faint, low, rhythmic thrum
comes from the speaker. Steady. Almost like a
heartbeat, but wrong. Too regular. Too fast.*

ASH

That's the line at three a.m.

*Tap. The thrum again, louder. Clearer. A hard
edge on each beat.*

ASH

That's the line at nine.

*Tap. The same rhythm, louder still. A faint
metallic click at the top of each pulse.*

ASH

That's now.

*No one speaks. RUIZ looks at the deck. PETTERSEN
closes her eyes and listens.*

PETTERSEN

(quietly)
That's a bearing.

RUIZ
You don't know that.

PETTERSEN
I've heard that. On the test stand, year two. That is a bearing.

CONTROL
(over the speaker)
Crew, Control. T-minus nine. Hatch closure in two minutes. Commander, please board.

VALE
(still looking at the tablet)
Okoro. If we scrub and you're wrong, that's two years. Some of us won't get another slot. You understand that.

ASH
Yes.

VALE
If we go and you're right, that's a fireball on the pad at ninety seconds with three people in it.

ASH
Yes.

VALE
And you're standing in my doorway.

ASH
I'm standing in your doorway.

VALE looks up at ASH for the first time. A long beat.

VALE
(into her collar mic)
Control, Vale. Commander's call. We are scrubbing. Say again, we are scrubbing. Safe the vehicle. I want the number two pump pulled and on a bench by tonight. And I want Okoro in the room when they open it.

CONTROL

(over the speaker)

Commander, Control. Confirm scrub. Confirm
you understand the window.

VALE

I heard you the first time. Scrub.

She lowers her hand. Turns to ASH.

VALE

Twenty-six months.

ASH

(stepping out of the doorway)

You'll have them.

*VALE sets her helmet down on the rail. RUIZ walks
to the window and stares at the rocket. PETTERSEN
is still listening to the tablet. The thrum keeps
going. Lights fade.*

END OF SCRIPT