

PROJECT HAIL MARY (2026)

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**Screenwriter's Breakdown for Students & Educators**

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## SOURCE MATERIAL

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SCREENPLAY: Project Hail Mary (2026)

WRITTEN BY: Drew Goddard (based on the novel by Andy Weir)

VERSION: Proofed Final

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140 pages

<https://8flix.com/scripts/film/project-hail-mary-2026-screenplay/>

GENRES: Adventure, Comedy, Drama, Sci-Fi

## PSEUDO SYLLABUS

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MENTOR: Nick Runyard

PROFICIENCY: NOVICE | **ADVANCED BEGINNER** | COMPETENT | PROFICIENT | EXPERT

REQUIRED READING: Project Hail Mary (2026) Screenplay (8FLiX.com [free account required for downloads]).

OPTIONAL READING: Project Hail Mary: A Novel by Andy Weir

DUE DATES: What you can, when you can.

## OVERVIEW

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Project Hail Mary begins with a man waking up in a medical bay. He does not know where he is. He does not know his name. A shipboard voice keeps asking him basic cognition questions while robotic arms try to keep him alive. He stumbles to a window and sees stars. Not metaphorical stars. Cold, endless, “you are absolutely not in Cleveland anymore” stars. He is in space.

That man is Ryland Grace.

The screenplay then cuts between two timelines:

1. **The present timeline aboard the Hail Mary**, where Grace slowly pieces together his mission, his identity, and the terrifying fact that he is in another solar system.
2. **The Earth flashback timeline**, where Grace is recruited by Eva Stratt after the discovery of Astrophage, a microscopic life-form consuming solar energy and threatening Earth’s future.

Eventually, Grace makes first contact with an alien engineer from the Eridian species, whom he names Rocky. Rocky’s world faces the same extinction-level crisis. Together, the two solve the scientific mystery that neither species could solve alone.

The screenplay is both an apocalypse story and a friendship story. One is the rocket. The other is the oxygen.

## WHY THIS SCREENPLAY MATTERS

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Science fiction often splits into two camps: the “big idea” kind and the “big feeling” kind. Project Hail Mary refuses to choose. It wants orbital mechanics, alien biology, molecular problem-solving, climate catastrophe, interstellar travel, and also a deeply emotional story about loneliness, trust, cowardice, courage, and teaching.

That combination is the screenplay’s biggest craft achievement.

The draft does not hide from technical material. It leans into it. But Goddard repeatedly converts scientific explanation into dramatic action. Grace does not simply explain Astrophage. He tests it. Fails. Calculates. Panics. Improvises. Builds absurd duct-tape science rigs. Finds patterns. Makes mistakes. Learns.

The screenplay’s central trick is that almost every scientific problem is also a character problem.

- Grace must learn what Astrophage is.
- Grace must learn who he is.
- Grace must learn Rocky’s language.
- Grace must learn whether he is brave.
- Grace must learn that survival and sacrifice are not opposites.

That is why the story works. The equations have feelings. Tiny little math goblins with a pulse.

## CORE TEACHING FOCUS

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### **Science becomes drama when the answer costs something.**

The most important screenwriting lesson in Project Hail Mary is not “do your research.” Research matters, obviously. But research alone is just a binder with delusions of grandeur.

The screenplay works because each discovery changes the situation.

When Grace realizes he is not orbiting Earth’s sun, the story expands from survival mystery to interstellar mission. When he understands Astrophage, the Earth timeline shifts from scientific curiosity to planetary emergency. When Rocky appears, the story transforms from lonely survival into collaboration. When Grace learns the truth about how he ended up on the mission, the film reframes him not as a noble volunteer, but as a man forced into heroism after refusing it.

That last piece matters enormously.

Grace’s arc is not “ordinary guy becomes hero.” It is sharper than that.

Grace is a good teacher, a brilliant scientist, and a decent man. But when asked to die for the world, he says no. That makes the final choice to save Rocky, rather than return directly home, much more powerful. He does not become brave because the plot says so. He becomes brave because the story gives him a second chance to choose.

## STORY STRUCTURE BREAKDOWN

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### Act I: Wake Up, You're the Plot

The opening is a model of controlled disorientation.

Grace wakes up in a medical bay. The ship's voice asks cognition questions. He tears out tubes. Robotic arms restrain him. He finds a viewing window. Stars. Then the screenplay cuts to a public discovery moment in Murphy's Bar, where Grace watches the first evidence of extraterrestrial life appear on a NASA feed.

This is clean structural bait.

The present timeline gives us immediate mystery:

- Where is he?
- Why is he there?
- Why are the others dead?
- Why can't he remember?

The flashback timeline gives us context in controlled doses:

- The sun is dimming.
- The Petrova line exists.
- The black dots are alive.
- Grace understands what others do not.

The script wisely does not explain everything upfront. It lets the audience feel what Grace feels: confusion first, then recognition, then dread.

#### **Writer takeaway:**

A mystery opening works best when the audience is confused about the situation, not confused about what to care about. Here, we care immediately: this man is alone, afraid, and in trouble.

## STORY STRUCTURE BREAKDOWN (cont.)

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### Act II: Earth Builds a Hail Mary

The Earth timeline introduces Eva Stratt and the global response to Astrophage. Stratt pulls Grace out of his classroom because his rejected academic work on non-water-based life suddenly matters. Grace's expertise is not random. The apocalypse arrives through the exact intellectual door he once tried to open.

The screenplay's exposition is brisk because Stratt is brisk. She does not arrive as a mentor with soft lighting and a mug of cocoa. She arrives like a human executive order in shoes.

The aircraft carrier sequence widens the story. Once Grace explains how to breed Astrophage, the room turns from scientific curiosity to world-saving logistics. The revelation of Project Hail Mary gives the plot its true shape: Earth must send a ship to Tau Ceti because it is the only nearby infected-star exception. The mission is desperate, one-way, and powered by the very organism destroying the sun.

That is elegant genre design. The problem becomes the fuel. Very tidy. Very rude of the universe.

#### **Writer takeaway:**

Great science-fiction premises often turn the threat into the tool. The same thing destroying Earth becomes the only way to save it.

## STORY STRUCTURE BREAKDOWN (cont.)

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### Act III: First Contact, But Make It Awkward

Once Grace reaches Tau Ceti, the screenplay introduces the alien ship and eventually Rocky. This is where the story could easily collapse into exposition sludge or rubber-suit nonsense. Instead, it becomes a communication story.

The first-contact sequence is smart because it is physical before it is verbal. The ships blink thrusters. Objects are exchanged. Models are built. Maps are interpreted. Grace and Rocky begin with geometry, movement, mimicry, and trial-and-error.

When Grace finally sees Rocky, the scene is funny, terrifying, and oddly tender. Rocky looks like a large, five-legged, rock-like spider wearing a shirt, communicates through musical whale-like tones, and waves because Grace waved earlier.

That wave is doing a lot of work.

- It tells us Rocky observes.
- It tells us Rocky learns.
- It tells us Rocky is not hostile.
- It tells us communication can begin with imitation before language.

The screenplay understands that friendship does not start with speeches. Sometimes it starts with two terrified scientists tapping on glass like idiots with PhDs.

#### **Writer takeaway:**

First contact is strongest when communication is dramatized as behavior, not dumped into instant translation.

## STORY STRUCTURE BREAKDOWN (cont.)

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### Act IV: The Buddy Movie Saves the Species

The Grace/Rocky relationship becomes the emotional engine of the screenplay. They are both scientists. Both stranded. Both trying to save their worlds. Both lonely. Both ridiculous in their own very specific ways.

Their bond builds through shared problem-solving. They teach each other language, compare technologies, build equipment, test theories, and eventually work as pilot and co-pilot. The screenplay's humor comes naturally from cultural misunderstanding, scientific precision, and Rocky's blunt translations.

The Adrian sequence, where Grace and Rocky attempt to collect Taumoeba from a planet's atmosphere, is a strong example of turning a technical challenge into a suspense sequence. The plan is complex, dangerous, and visually understandable: maintain velocity, drag a sampler, avoid burning up, don't die in seven exciting new ways. Rocky's summary that there are "many ways to die" is both funny and accurate, which is really the mission statement for hard sci-fi adventure.

#### **Writer takeaway:**

Technical suspense works when the audience understands the rule, the risk, and the consequence. The science does not need to be simple, but the danger must be legible.

## STORY STRUCTURE BREAKDOWN (cont.)

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### Act V: The Truth About Grace

The late reveal that Grace did not volunteer is one of the screenplay's most important character turns. Stratt offers him the mission. Grace refuses. He argues that his place is in the classroom, preparing children for the future. Stratt calls the argument what she believes it is: cowardice. Then she has him taken into custody for the mission.

This is a huge adaptation and character moment because it complicates the protagonist.

- Grace is not the perfect chosen hero.
- He is not a saint in a lab coat.
- He is not *Mark Watney* with a slightly different playlist.

He is afraid. He wants to live. He hides behind a noble-sounding reason. And Stratt, morally terrifying but narratively useful, sees through him.

This revelation makes the ending work. Grace's final choice to go back for Rocky is not just friendship. It is redemption by action. He finally chooses the dangerous, selfless path when no one is forcing him.

#### **Writer takeaway:**

A late character reveal should not contradict the hero. It should expose the truth the story has been quietly orbiting all along.

## STORY STRUCTURE BREAKDOWN (cont.)

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### Act VI: Save Earth, Save Rocky

The ending gives Grace a powerful double choice. He launches the Beetles containing the Taumoeba solution back toward Earth, along with logs and instructions. Then, instead of simply heading home, he changes course and returns to Rocky's ship. Grace finds Rocky alive, battered, and overjoyed. Rocky's body language says what language barely needs to: Grace came back.

That choice completes the arc.

Earlier, Grace refused to leave Earth to save humanity.

Now, with humanity's solution launched, he gives up the easy path home to save one friend.

The final scene lands with beautiful symmetry. Grace ends up teaching Eridian children. The story begins with Grace in a classroom explaining the dying sun to human sixth-graders. It ends with Grace in a classroom on another world, asking alien students about the speed of light. He is where he belongs, just not in the zip code he expected.

That is clean emotional architecture. Chef's kiss with a soldering iron.

## CHARACTER STUDY

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### Ryland Grace

Grace is a teacher disguised as a reluctant astronaut.

His defining trait is not brilliance, although he is brilliant. His defining trait is translation. He can turn complicated ideas into understandable language. That is why the classroom scenes matter. They are not just cute contrast. They are the key to his survival.

Grace survives because he can teach himself, teach Rocky, learn from Rocky, and turn chaos into explanation.

But the screenplay also gives him a flaw with teeth. Grace is afraid. He wants to help, but he does not want to die. His self-image is nobler than his actual courage at the moment Stratt asks him to go.

That contradiction makes him human.

His arc is not from ignorance to knowledge. It is from forced participation to chosen sacrifice.

## CHARACTER STUDY (cont.)

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### Rocky

Rocky is the screenplay's miracle ingredient.

On paper, he should be impossible: a five-legged alien engineer who communicates musically, lives in a different atmosphere, and comes from a species with a completely different sensory world. In lesser hands, he becomes either mascot, monster, or walking exposition crab.

Here, Rocky becomes character through function.

- He builds.
- He learns.
- He worries.
- He jokes unintentionally.
- He protects Grace.
- He becomes lonely.
- He becomes loved.

The screenplay makes Rocky emotionally accessible without making him too human. That is crucial. He remains alien, but his needs are legible: survival, duty, curiosity, friendship.

He is not a pet. He is not a sidekick. He is a co-protagonist with different tools.

## CHARACTER STUDY (cont.)

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### Eva Strat

Stratt is the story's most morally complicated Earthbound figure.

She is ruthless, funny, competent, terrifying, and almost certainly correct more often than is comfortable. She has been granted enormous authority because normal political processes are too slow for extinction. That makes her both necessary and dangerous.

Her treatment of Grace is ethically monstrous. She forces him into the mission after he refuses. But the screenplay refuses to make the question easy. If Grace is the only viable candidate and billions may die, what is the moral cost of letting him say no?

Stratt embodies emergency power. She is what happens when the trolley problem gets an office, a security detail, and no patience for committees.

#### **Writer takeaway:**

Stratt works because she does not ask the audience to like her. She asks the audience to understand why everyone keeps handing her keys.

## **CHARACTER STUDY (cont.)**

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### **Dimitri Komorov**

Dimitri brings warmth, humor, and scientific enthusiasm into the global crisis. He helps make the Hail Mary project feel international without turning the supporting cast into flat “countries at a table” tokens.

His function is partly technical, but his personality matters. He gives the Earth timeline texture and helps keep the science from becoming sterile.

### **Yao and Ilyukhina**

Though dead in the present timeline, Yao and Ilyukhina matter because their absence defines Grace’s loneliness. The scene where Grace gives them a makeshift burial in space is a major emotional pivot. He begins by treating the dead crew as horrifying evidence of his situation, but gradually restores their dignity by naming their lives, their objects, and their loved ones.

That scene quietly moves Grace from panic to responsibility.

## MAJOR THEMES

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### **1. Survival Requires Translation**

The screenplay is obsessed with translation: translating science into classroom language, alien sound into meaning, data into decisions, fear into action, and selfishness into sacrifice.

Grace's superpower is not just knowledge. It is making knowledge usable.

### **2. Courage Is a Choice, Not a Personality Type**

Grace is not naturally heroic in the clean movie-poster sense. He is frightened, avoidant, and sometimes overwhelmed. But the screenplay argues that courage matters most when it becomes a choice made after fear.

Grace's final return to Rocky is powerful because he has already failed that test once.

### **3. Science Is Collaboration**

No one saves the world alone.

Earth's response requires global coordination. Grace needs Stratt, Dimitri, Xi, the Hail Mary crew, the Beetles, and countless unseen scientists. In space, Grace needs Rocky. The screenplay treats discovery as communal, not solitary genius cosplay.

Even the title is a team sport.

## MAJOR THEMES (cont.)

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### 4. Friendship Across the Impossible

Grace and Rocky should not be able to connect. They share no language, biology, culture, atmosphere, or sensory assumptions. And yet they form the story's strongest bond.

The screenplay's emotional thesis is simple and lovely: intelligence may solve the problem, but trust lets the solution survive.

### 5. Teaching Is an Act of Hope

The classroom frame is not decorative. Grace begins as a teacher trying to explain catastrophe to children. He ends as a teacher again, on another world, after helping save two civilizations.

That ending says teaching is not lesser than heroism. It is one form heroism takes when the explosions stop.

## CRAFT LESSONS FOR SCREENWRITERS

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### **Lesson 1: Start With Immediate Human Panic**

The opening does not begin with lore, maps, committees, or a solemn voiceover explaining Astrophage. It begins with a man waking up, terrified, injured, confused, and alone.

That gives the audience an emotional handle before the mythology arrives.

#### **Craft principle:**

Before audiences care about the world ending, make them care about one person in trouble.

### **Lesson 2: Use Flashbacks As Answers, Not Interruptions**

The flashbacks in **Project Hail Mary** are not memory confetti. Each one answers a question raised by the present timeline.

- Who is Grace?
- What is Astrophage?
- Why Tau Ceti?
- Who built the mission?
- Why is Grace aboard?
- What did he forget?

Because the flashbacks are motivated by mystery, they feel like forward motion instead of backstory parking tickets.

## CRAFT LESSONS FOR SCREENWRITERS (cont.)

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### Lesson 3: Make Exposition Combative

Grace explaining scientific concepts to sixth-graders is a brilliant exposition strategy because it does three things at once:

- It explains the crisis in plain language.
- It reveals Grace's personality.
- It establishes the teacher identity that pays off at the end.

That is efficient writing. NASA-grade fuel economy.

### Lesson 4: Let Problem-Solving Reveal Character

Grace's calculations, experiments, breakdowns, and improvisations are not just plot mechanics. They show how his mind works. He panics, then organizes. He jokes, then tests. He resists, then teaches himself the next step.

Problem-solving becomes characterization.

### Lesson 5: Keep the Alien *Alien*

Rocky is emotionally readable but not biologically softened into a fuzzy human substitute. His atmosphere, body, language, technology, and assumptions remain strange.

That balance is hard. Too alien, and the audience cannot connect. Too familiar, and the wonder collapses. Rocky works because the screenplay lets him be both unknowable and lovable.

## **CRAFT LESSONS FOR SCREENWRITERS (cont.)**

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### **Lesson 6: Delay the Hero Reveal**

The screenplay withholds the truth that Grace refused the mission until late. That delay protects the audience's early identification with him, then forces a reassessment.

This is a strong dramatic move because it turns backstory into a moral reveal.

### **Lesson 7: Pay Off the First Image With the Final Image**

Grace begins in a classroom.

Grace ends in a classroom.

But the meaning has changed. The first classroom is Earthbound, anxious, and full of children facing an uncertain future. The final classroom is alien, hopeful, and proof that Grace's identity as a teacher survived the apocalypse.

That is how you make circular structure feel earned instead of cute.

## KEY SCENES TO STUDY

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### Opening: Grace Wakes Up

Study how the screenplay creates immediate suspense using limited information. The ship voice, robotic arms, dead crewmates, and starfield all escalate the same question: Where is he?

#### **Discussion question:**

Why is amnesia useful here as a structure device rather than just a gimmick?

### Classroom: Bad Space Algae

This scene translates the premise into human stakes. Grace explains the dimming sun to children, then realizes he has scared them. The scene is funny, informative, and emotionally revealing.

#### **Writing exercise:**

Write a scene where a character explains a world-ending concept to someone who cannot understand technical language.

### Stratt Recruits Grace

Stratt's entrance gives the Earth timeline its momentum. She is efficient, intimidating, and funny without becoming comic relief.

#### **Writing exercise:**

How does Stratt's dialogue establish authority before the story explains the full scale of her power?

## KEY SCENES TO STUDY (cont.)

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### Grace Discovers Astrophage Reproduction

This is science as detective work. Grace's messy lab, improvised infrared setup, and startled reaction make discovery visual.

**Writing exercise:**

Write a discovery scene where the character's process is as entertaining as the answer.

### First Contact With Rocky

The ships communicate through movement, models, and cautious exchange before language arrives. The scene builds wonder through behavior.

**Discussion question:**

Why does the wave matter so much?

### Rocky Comes Aboard

This scene turns the Hail Mary from a tomb into a shared space. Grace cleaning up before Rocky enters is a tiny domestic action with huge emotional value. He is preparing for company in deep space. That's adorable and existentially devastating. Tiny spaceship houseguest etiquette.

**Writing exercise:**

Write a scene where a lonely character prepares a room for someone very different from themselves.

## KEY SCENES TO STUDY (cont.)

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### Stratt Forces Grace Onto the Mission

This is the moral wound of the screenplay. Grace refuses. Stratt calls him a coward and has him taken into custody. The scene complicates both characters.

**Discussion question:**

Is Stratt wrong, right, or both?

### Grace Returns For Rocky

The ending choice completes Grace's arc. He could go home. Instead, he saves his friend.

**Writing exercise:**

Why is saving Rocky emotionally necessary after saving Earth?

### Final Classroom

The last scene reframes the whole story. Grace is not defined by Earth, NASA, Stratt, or the mission. He is defined by teaching.

**Writing exercise:**

Create a final scene that returns your protagonist to their first identity, but in a transformed world.

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Why does the screenplay begin with Grace's confusion instead of the discovery of Astrophage?
2. How does the script make scientific exposition feel dramatic?
3. What does Grace's classroom reveal about him before the space mission does?
4. Is Eva Stratt a hero, villain, realist, or emergency monster?
5. Why does the story need Rocky emotionally, not just plot-wise?
6. How does the screenplay keep Rocky alien while making him lovable?
7. What is the significance of Grace refusing the mission?
8. How does humor help the screenplay handle extinction-level stakes?
9. Why does the ending choose friendship over a simple return-home victory?
10. What does the final classroom say about Grace's true purpose?

## WRITING EXERCISES

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### Exercise 1: The Amnesia Engine

Write a two-page opening where a character wakes in an unfamiliar place and must learn three facts:

- Where they are
- What danger they are in
- Something unsettling about themselves

Avoid exposition dumps. Use objects, environment, and action.

### Exercise 2: Explain the Impossible

Write a scene where a scientist explains a complex disaster to children, politicians, or ordinary people. The goal is clarity, but the emotional subtext is fear.

### Exercise 3: First Contact Without Words

Write a first-contact scene where two intelligent beings cannot speak to each other. They may only use objects, gestures, drawings, or repeated behavior.

### Exercise 4: The Moral Reveal

Write a late-story scene revealing that your protagonist is less heroic than the audience believed. Then write the later choice that allows them to become better.

## **WRITING EXERCISES (cont.)**

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### **Exercise 5: Science Buddy Scene**

Write a scene where two characters solve a dangerous technical problem together. Give each character a different strength. The solution must require both.

### **Exercise 5: The Transformed Return**

Write a final scene that echoes your opening location or role, but changes its meaning. A classroom, kitchen, office, battlefield, train station, spaceship bathroom. Whatever sings.

## VOCABULARY FOR STUDENTS

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**Mystery-Box Opening:** A beginning that withholds key context to create curiosity, while still giving the audience immediate emotional stakes.

**Exposition:** Information the audience needs to understand the story.

**Active Exposition:** Exposition delivered through conflict, discovery, teaching, testing, or decision-making.

**Flashback Structure:** A narrative structure that moves between present action and past events.

**First-Contact Story:** A story about initial communication between humans and extraterrestrial intelligence.

**Character Reveal:** A moment that changes the audience's understanding of who a character really is.

**Circular Structure:** A story shape that returns to an image, setting, or situation from the beginning, but with changed meaning.

**Moral Climax:** The point where the protagonist's deepest ethical choice matters more than the external plot victory.

## FINAL TAKEAWAY

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Project Hail Mary is not great science-fiction screenwriting because the science is clever, though it is. It is great because the science is always attached to need.

- Grace needs answers.
- Earth needs time.
- Rocky needs help.
- Two civilizations need one another.
- And one frightened teacher needs a second chance to choose courage.

The screenplay's real engine is not Astrophage. It is connection.

A man wakes up alone in space with no memory and two dead crewmates. By the end, he has helped save Earth, saved his friend, and found his way back to the classroom, just with smaller desks, more claws, and a faculty lounge that probably smells like ammonia and hot rocks.

That is the magic trick.

Project Hail Mary turns survival into science, science into friendship, and friendship into grace.

Title character pun absolutely intended.

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