

THE CONVERGENCE



ARTIFACT

When parallel worlds collide, humanity has but one chance.



DAVID C. STRICKLAND

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A Fiendish Story

David C. Strickland

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For: My Children Sadzi and Sol—anything's possible.

To: My Friend Ted and our constant laughter.

"The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose."

—J.B.S. Haldane

What happens when Newton's third law intersects reality and two large planetary bodies interact and one isn't of this world? What happens when the opposing force belongs to another universe entirely? In *The Convergence*, the familiar collapses in an instant. Gravity betrays us. Time fractures. Memory becomes suspect. And through it all, a reluctant leader —Jack, a warehouse worker with more potential than ambition is hurled not only into the sky, but into a reality fundamentally altered by forces beyond comprehension.

What begins as a cataclysmic accident slowly unfolds into something deeper: a test, a revelation, and perhaps, an invitation. As timelines collide and parallel realities bleed into each other, Jack must navigate a new world full of haunted memories, altered physics, and entities that may not be entirely human. He will question everything; what is real, what is destiny, and what forces him to become the man he never was, all in the wake of the convergence.

This story is not just science fiction. It is a meditation on regret, second chances, and the resilience of ordinary people and one man swept into extraordinary circumstances. It explores what we cling to when the universe is tearing itself apart, and what it means to be "chosen" when the rules of reality no longer apply.

If you've ever wondered what it would feel like to stand at the nexus of cause and effect. If you've imagined a world where the boundaries between what is and what could be have been obliterated then this is your story.

Welcome to *The Convergence*.

The Convergence

1: Pressure Loss

Newton's third law states: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction... i.e., if object A exerts a force on object B, object B also exerts an equal and opposite force on object A.

$$\mathbf{F_{AB} = -F_{BA}}$$

Jack

The day started out rather ordinary. It was around 10am and I was thinking about Sofia as usual but then, standing at my kitchen sink with a dirty plate in my hand, staring out the window at her apartment across the way, the world decided to end. I remember it clearly, a vibration ran up through my feet and into my chest and it didn't feel like a diesel passing by, it was deeper. More fundamental. Like the earth itself had groaned.

The glasses in the cupboard began to rattle. The water in the sink rippled in concentric circles. Then came a sound I'll never forget, a deep, resonant boom that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere when the sky cracked open and the roof of the apartment complex erupted and disintegrated into the air.

That day, the day the world went airborne, shattered everything anyone knew about reality. The entire human existence upended in an instant.

My name is Jack McPherson. I was thirty years old, working a warehouse job in Pittsburgh, and by most measures I was going nowhere fast. Professional underachiever, that's what my father would have called me, if he'd still been alive to say it. He died when I was twelve, a heart attack that came on suddenly and left me adrift in ways I'm still figuring out. My mother did her best with all she had. She gave everything, but something in me shut down after my father passed. I stopped trying. Stopped caring about the future. What was the point of planning ahead when the people you loved could just vanish in an inconceivable instant. This was the story of my life.

My brain's recollection potential keeps me from forgetting. I can't forget the day Dad died and I remember it with a clarity that still haunts me. He died on a Tuesday in October, leaves turning gold and red outside our house in Allentown. He'd been raking them into piles for me to jump in, something we did every fall. He stopped for a moment, put his hand on his chest, and said he needed to sit down. Just needed to catch his breath. Mom dialed 911 but he was gone before the ambulance arrived. Just like that. One moment he was there, solid, and real and laughing at something I'd said about my friends at school. The next moment he wasn't. The world didn't stop. It didn't even pause. It just kept spinning, indifferent to the fact that my entire universe had collapsed.

Mom tried to hold things together. She took on another job to make up for lost income. It was one at the grocery store during the day and her usual, she cleaned offices at night. I barely saw

her. When I did, she looked exhausted, worn down to nothing. She never complained, never made me feel like a burden, but I could see what it cost her. Every bill that came in, every unexpected expense, it aged her. As I got older, I started staying out later, avoiding home because I couldn't stand seeing what life was doing to her. What it had taken away. I told myself I was giving her space, but really, I was just running away.

School became a place I showed up to but didn't really attend. I'd sit in the back of classrooms, staring out windows, my mind somewhere else entirely, thinking of math problems. Trying to work them out in my head. I had a knack for it... math. I was good enough to be put in special math classes and advanced placements.

My math teacher would call on me and I'd answer correctly without even thinking about it. Numbers were easy. They followed rules. They made sense in a way nothing else did anymore. Thinking about the math relived me from thinking about my father, about my mother. But I couldn't bring myself to care about grades or homework or any of the things that were supposed to matter for my future. What future? The one where I worked myself to death like my father? The one where I watched my mother sacrifice everything and still barely scrape by?

Mr. Chen, my calculus teacher, pulled me aside one day during my freshman year. He was this short, intense man who wore the same brown cardigan every day and took mathematics personally, like it was a religion. He told me I had a gift. Said he'd been teaching for thirty years and only seen a handful of students with my natural aptitude for mathematical thinking. He wanted to help me apply for scholarships, get into a good university, maybe even MIT or Caltech. He laid out this whole

path for me, talking fast and excited. He talked with his hands a lot, he liked them moving through the air as if he could physically construct my future right there in his classroom.

I thanked him. Told him I'd think about it. Then I stopped showing up to his class altogether. A couple months later, I dropped out. Just stopped going. Didn't even tell Mom at first. I'd leave the house at the same time every morning, walk to the bus stop, then just keep walking. I'd end up at the library or a coffee shop, anywhere I could sit and think. Eventually she found out, of course. The school called. She cried. Not angry crying, but something worse. Disappointed. Defeated. Like I'd confirmed something she'd been afraid of all along.

So, I left. Told myself it was better for both of us if I wasn't draining her resources anymore. I bounced around for a while, living at friends' houses, or wherever someone would loan me a couch. When I was seventeen, almost eighteen. Old enough to figure things out, I thought. I headed to the east coast and lived there for the next few years. Philadelphia, Baltimore, D.C., Boston, NY for a while. I worked construction jobs, became a handyman, did the restaurant kitchens thing, delivery driving, anything that paid cash and didn't ask questions. I lived in cheap rooms, places with stained carpets and neighbors who screamed at each other through thin walls at three in the morning.

In Boston, I stayed in this boarding house in Dorchester run by an old Portuguese woman named Mrs. Santos. She rented rooms to people like me, people who were between things. People who'd given up or hadn't started yet. There was a guy named Tommy who'd been there for eight years, working the same job at a fish market, coming home every night smelling

like the sea. There was a woman named Denise who was studying to be a paralegal but never seemed to make it to her classes. We'd sit in the common room sometimes, watching whatever was on TV, not really talking. Just existing in proximity to each other. That was the extent of human connection I could manage.

Reiterated to myself that I was figuring things out. Told myself I was young and had time. But really, I was just drifting, letting the current take me wherever it wanted because I couldn't muster the energy to swim toward anything. Days blurred together. Work, eat, sleep, repeat. Sometimes I'd pick up a book on physics or mathematics from a used bookstore, read it cover to cover in a night, then put it down and forget about it. The knowledge went in but didn't attach to anything. It just floated there, drifting between brain cells, unused.

Eventually I ended up in Pittsburgh. No particular reason. A guy I worked with in Baltimore said there were warehouse jobs there, decent pay, and I needed a change of scenery. So, I bought a bus ticket and headed west. When I arrived and got off the bus, it felt different. The city, it wasn't like other places I'd been. Grittier somehow. More honest about what it was. Blue collar, working class, no pretense about being anything else. I liked that. I got a job at a Prime warehouse, moving boxes and loading trucks. The work was mindless but physical enough that I could turn my brain off and just move. Lift, carry, stack, over and over again. Eight hours a day, five days a week.

I found the apartment downtown through a Craigslist ad. Said it was the top floor of a five-story complex, one-bedroom, small kitchen, smaller bathroom. Apartment 5D. It looked nice. Met the landlord at noon for my appointment. He was this ancient guy named Sal who chain smoked and wheezed when he climbed the stairs with a gut 2 feet in front of him that led the way. We climbed up and he showed me the place. He asked if I had references. I didn't. He asked if I had a job. I told him about the warehouse. He shrugged and said first and last month's rent, cash only. I paid him and he handed me the keys. That was it. No credit check, no background investigation. Just cash and keys and a lease I barely read before signing.

The apartment became my cavern. I didn't decorate it. Didn't hang pictures or buy furniture beyond what was absolutely necessary. A mattress on the floor. A small table with two chairs I'd found on the curb with a sign on them that read FREE. A couch someone was giving away on Facebook. It was functional. Impersonal. A place to exist but not to live. The only thing that accumulated was paper. Notebooks and loose sheets

covered in equations, sketches of force diagrams, calculations of trajectories and velocities. I'd work on problems late into the night, teaching myself advanced mathematics from textbooks I'd download or pick up used. Differential equations, linear algebra, tensor calculus, quantum mechanics.

It wasn't for anything. I wasn't trying to get a degree or impress anyone. I just needed to do it. Needed to know that part of my brain still worked, that I could still understand something complex and beautiful even if I couldn't understand how to live my own life. The math was pure. It didn't judge me. It didn't care that I was wasting my potential or disappointing people. It just was. Two plus two equaled four whether I was a success or a failure. The laws of physics operated the same regardless of whether I had my life together.

Sometimes I'd spend whole weekends on a single problem. Not homework, not something assigned, just puzzles I'd find in academic papers or create for myself. What if you could calculate the exact point where a chaotic system becomes unpredictable? How would you model the distribution of forces in a structure under non uniform stress? Could you derive a novel approach to optimization in multi-dimensional spaces? I'd fill pages with work, cross things out, start over, approach it from different angles. When I finally solved something, there was this brief moment of satisfaction, this feeling that I'd accomplished something real. Then it would fade and I'd be back in my empty apartment, alone, with nothing changed.

My coworkers at the warehouse thought I was weird. I didn't talk much, didn't join them for drinks after shifts, except sometimes on Fridays when I was feeling exceptionally loathsome, otherwise I didn't participate in the constant stream of gossip

and complaints that filled our breaks or the nights out in the dirty bars and never ending night club scene. They'd ask what I did for fun and I'd shrug, say I liked to do math. They'd nod and move on. I was the quiet guy. The loner. That was fine with me. I didn't have the energy for small talk or pretending to care about sports teams or who was dating who. I just wanted to do my hours and go home.

For years, this was my life. Wake up, work, come home, work on math until I couldn't keep my eyes open, sleep, repeat. Weekends were the same minus the warehouse. Sometimes I'd walk through the city, no destination in mind, just moving. I'd end up by the rivers, the Allegheny or the Monongahela, watching the water flow past. Or I'd find myself in Schenley Park, sitting on a bench while joggers and families passed by, all of them moving with purpose while I sat still. I was thirty years old and felt like I'd already lived my entire life. Like everything important had already happened and now I was just filling time until it was over.

Then I met Sofia.

Sofia

I first saw her on a Tuesday afternoon in late September.

I remember it was Tuesday because that was the day the building super finally fixed the mailboxes, and I'd gone down to check on my UPS delivery. Nothing was there, but there she was.

She was moving in, struggling with a couch, a hideous olive-green Ikea special; trying to wrestle it up the stairs by herself. She was determined and she was losing. The couch had wedged itself diagonally across the stair railing, and she was pushing against it with her shoulder, I stood there and watched her for a few minutes, dark hair falling across her face, muttering a creative string of Spanish profanity.

"Need a hand?"

She looked up, and that's when I saw her eyes for the first time. Green. Not hazel, not blue-green, but true green. The color of summer leaves, of sea glass. They were striking against her tan skin, unexpected and arresting. Later she'd tell me her grandmother had the same eyes, a genetic gift passed down through generations of her family in Puerto Rico.

"I need a miracle," she said. "But a hand would be a good start."

Together, we muscled that couch up 5 flights of stairs to the fifth floor, apartment 12D, and as luck would have it, right across from mine on the same floor... top of the apartment complex. I helped bring up a few other Ikea boxes, and other belongings, and without knowing how, I found myself assembling a

bookshelf while she finished positioning the couch. She unpacked the rest of the boxes, dishes and some odds and ends, the usual stuff you'd find moving into a new place. By the time we finished, it was dark and she ordered a pizza, and I was thinking this was the best Tuesday I'd had in years.

Her name was Sofia Valentina, a name that sounded like music when she said it. She was twenty-six, a physical therapist at University of Pittsburgh Medical Center – UPMC, a job she got and moved from Philadelphia. A job she couldn't pass up. She was smart and funny and direct in a way that caught me off guard. When she laughed, really laughed, she threw her head back and didn't care who heard.

And she was beautiful. Not in the manufactured way of magazine covers, but in the way of someone who moved through the world with confidence and purpose. She ran every morning, rain or shine. Did yoga on her living room floor. Her body was athletic, toned from years of discipline, and she carried herself like someone who knew exactly who she was and didn't apologize for it.

I, on the other hand as you already know, was a mess.

I had that warehouse job. No degree. No ambition. No plan. Dawdled with numbers in my spare time, and landed in Pittsburgh after bouncing around the East Coast, kidding myself into a false sense of achievement when really, I was just avoiding the hard choices.

I wasn't much into working out, but my Irish ancestry kept me lean, the way a dock worker looks from picking up heavy objects all day. I don't think Sofia would've been attracted to me

if I'd been a beer-gutted doofus, but lucky for me, the gods gifted me some keen DNA.

Sofia saw something in me, I didn't see in myself. God knows what.

After that night, we ended up dating for eight months. Eight months of home cooked dinners, sometimes taking in a movie and the lazy Sunday mornings tangled in her sheets. It was also eight months of her trying to pull me toward something better, community college, certification programs and me making excuses, deflecting, promising to "look into it" and never following through.

It was inevitable, and I knew it, like a car going the wrong way down a one-way street. at some point it wasn't going to end well. As expected, it came to an end on a rainy night in April. We'd had dinner at her place. She'd cooked, because she always cooked. Taking her out was not an option on my salary grade. We finished the meal and she sat me down on the same couch I helped her with the first day we met... she had that look in her eyes. The one that said something serious was coming.

"I love you, Jack," she said. "But I can't keep waiting for you to want more."

"I do want more. I just—"

"You just what?" She wasn't angry. That made it even worse. She was sad. Resigned. "You're smart. I know it. I see you working through those physics problems on those blog sites. You could do anything you set your mind to. But you won't. You'd rather stay safe, stay small, than risk trying for something and maybe failing."

"That's not fair."

"It's completely fair. And you know it." She reached out and took my hand. "I'm not going to be your excuse, Jack. I'm not going to give you comfort while you waste away your life. I'm not going to be the person you point to and say, 'I stayed in that warehouse because I had it good in the warm comfort of Sofia.' I don't need you in that way, Jack. You need to figure out what you actually want from your life and get on with it."

I didn't have an answer. I never had an answer.

She let go of my hand.

"I think we should take a break," she said. "Give you some space to think."

A break? The coward's breakup. We both knew what it meant, and that was it.

I moved out that night, not that I'd officially moved in, but I'd accumulated enough stuff at her place that leaving felt like an evacuation. I carried my things back to my apartment, apartment 5D.

We stayed cordial. Waved occasionally, made small talk by the mailboxes. But the easy intimacy was gone, replaced by careful politeness that hurt worse than hostility would have.

Regrets

A couple years later, after a long week, Sofia was starting her Saturday morning routine. She woke slowly, stretching like one of her cats, feeling the warmth of the blankets against her skin. Unlike Jack's freezing apartment, she thought, a sudden memory of Jack. God, she'd hated that about him in winter, the way he refused to turn on the heat. Her place was cozy. Her physical therapy salary afforded small luxuries like that.

"Maybe Jack's watching from his kitchen window this morning," she thought as she made her way to the small bathroom. The idea made her smile, even as she told herself it shouldn't.

She showered, dried off, applied minimal makeup, just enough to feel put together then wrapped her hair in a plush yellow towel. She wasn't usually this rotten, but today, she'd deliberately go slinky when choosing her outfit for housecleaning: white thong panties and a white t-shirt, no bra.

"These should do the trick," she mused, checking herself in the mirror. She planned to prance around near the living room window where Jack might see her. "What a tease I am."

It was a game she'd been playing with herself for a couple months now. Torturing him a little. Torturing herself a lot. She wasn't sure anymore who was punishing whom.

She began her cleaning routine, sweeping the beautiful ash wood floors in her small apartment, dusting the furniture, cleaning up after her furry companions.

"Come here, Spuds," she called, trying to coax the calico away from the couch. "Simon, get down from there!"

The two cats had their own rambunctious personalities. Spuds was the troublemaker, always scratching things he shouldn't, while Simon preferred to perch on high surfaces and judge everyone below. They were her family now, her constant companions in this apartment that sometimes felt too quiet.

"Damn it, these cats!" She looked down at the left arm of couch, and it was completely destroyed. "My couch! I paid good money for this thing, and now it's a disaster!" She paused and pondered for a moment, how she'd gotten it into her apartment, and how she'd met Jack that fateful day. Other memories lingered by, one especially poignant one stuck out and lingered for a while. It was the Fourth of July, a few months after they'd started dating, she'd overcome her fear of heights, got on the roof to watch the fireworks. The hot dogs she had burnt, and that they'd both had a great time while laughing about it and ate the hot dogs anyway.

Breaking away from her quick daydream and looking back down at the couch, she shook her head, remembering how the last couch had met the same fate. "I should've known better."

She kept sweeping, moving around the living room area while trying to ignore her destroyed furniture, and deciding what to do about Jack. As she worked, her thoughts wandered back to Jack, to places, good places, good times. "The relationship with Jack was short, but sweet," she thought.

"Damn, I'm almost thirty now and I don't have a relationship in sight," "haven't been in one either." she said aloud, catching her

by surprise. The cats didn't respond. "No man to speak of. Am I just too picky?"

She paused her sweeping and leaned against the kitchen counter that separated her kitchen from the living room.

"I mean, Jack was a good guy. But I let him go. Why? He didn't make enough money?" Meandering back to the hallway, she frowned at her own reflection in the mirror. "Is that a good enough reason?"

She took the towel off her head and ran a comb through her long hair, watching it cascade down her back in loose waves. Her green eyes stared back at her, and she thought about Jack—about the way he used to look at her, like she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"Jack would've been a lucky guy," she said to her reflection. "He certainly was a lucky guy."

She set down the comb on the end table next to the couch as a decision started crystallizing as she decided to get back to her bedroom and put on a pair of tiny black shorts.

"Maybe I need to look him up again. See if he's still interested." She bit her lip. "Maybe money isn't everything. Maybe I was wrong."

The thought felt like a weight lifting off her chest. She'd go see him. Today. After she finished cleaning, she'd walk over to his apartment, knock on his door and tell him she'd been thinking about him. That she missed him. That maybe they could try again, if he wanted to.

As she made her way back to the kitchen, a beautiful blue laminate floor with a hatch pattern, she felt something she hadn't felt in months.

Hope.

As she stood there, spacing out, thinking intimate thoughts about Jack, a sudden jerk in the floor sent her stumbling sideways. Not like an earthquake. The movement felt directional, as if the floor had tilted beneath her feet for just a fraction of a second before snapping back to level. But that wasn't quite right either. It was more like the space itself had shifted, had compressed on one side and stretched on the other, warping the geometry of the room in a way that made her inner ear scream in confusion.

She caught herself against the wall, breathing hard. The floor looked perfectly normal now. Level. Solid. Unchanged. Yet her body insisted something fundamental had just broken, some rule of physics she'd always taken for granted. The angle of the room seemed subtly off, though when she tried to focus on what exactly had changed, everything appeared exactly as it should be. It was the kind of wrongness she couldn't point to, couldn't measure, but could only feel as vertigo set in when the liquid in her inner didn't match what she was experiencing visually, and her balance keeps trying to compensate for something that is no longer there.

Or perhaps was still there, but just beyond her ability to perceive it.

"What the hell was that?" she said aloud, grabbing onto the edge of her kitchen counter to stabilize herself. "It's not an earthquake; we don't get those hereeee—"

In an instant, before she could finish blinking her eye, her breath was taken away as the roof of her apartment popped into the air like soda after shaking the bottle and removing the cap too quickly. Her couch, the one the cats had destroyed, exploded upward like a missile, and up she went, past the missing roof carried along by whatever created the anomaly.

And as she was trying to process what was happening, she was hurtling away from the ground, tumbling in disarray through the air, watching the world drop away beneath her.

A shriek tore from her throat, high enough to shatter crystal.

"Holy shit! What the hell is happening?"

Airbourne

I awoke at 10:30, it was Saturday, thank God. I had a pounding headache and a mouth that tasted like death.

I'd been out late the night before; One of those Friday nights out drinking with boys from the warehouse, beers turned into shots and at the end of the night, last call, the Tequilla shots.

Stumbled home at 3 AM and passed out, fully clothed. Another wasted evening. Another morning of regret. The pattern of my life, I'd try to avoid, but somehow kept repeating like a tried and tired story. A worn-out movie that kept running in loops without an ending.

The guy in the mirror looked rough. Bloodshot eyes. Three-day stubble. Different than 2 years before, and my lean Irish frame was softening under the weight of too much beer, cheap food, and no exercise. The beginnings of a gut was forming.

Sofia would never have let me get like this. She'd have dragged me out of bed, forced me to go running, made me drink green smoothies and talk about my feelings. I'd complained at the time. Now I missed it more than I could say.

I shuffled into the kitchen and surveyed the damage. Four nights of dishes in the sink. Empty pizza boxes on the counter. The remains of my single-guy existence, sad and purposeless.

I sighed and started gathering dishes. Might as well do something productive with my Saturday.

From my kitchen window, I looked out habitually towards her apartment and I could see her living room window. When her

shades were open, I would catch a glimpse of her cleaning up. It was something I'd been doing since I first caught her prancing around in those pretty white thongs ever since we broke up. I was torturing myself, thinking that I could get back with her. "No chance of that ever happening," I thought. Sometimes she'd look up and catch me, give me a smile. That smile. Make me feel like we were still together. Then the guilt set in and I'd always feel like an idiot afterward, knowing she was just teasing, and I'd thrown away the best thing that ever happened to me. Why was I such a loser? Such an under achiever? I could've had the best life. What an idiot I am.

In my hand was the plate I had just grabbed out the bottom of the pile out of the sink when, without warning, my ears popped violently. I dropped the plate; heard it shatter as if from a great distance. I clutched my head with both hands. That's when I heard the first crack from above. My sense of balance was completely thrown off, like I'd been dropped off after being spun around on a school playground merry-go-round for a half hour.

"My roof!!"

Shingles, rafters, insulation, all of it blew upward as if a giant hand had peeled the lid off my apartment. Then I was off my feet, hurtling upward through the ragged opening, surrounded by a tornado of everything I owned.

My refrigerator tumbled past me. My couch spiraled hastily through the air. Pop-Tarts cartwheeled by my face. I saw my television, my coffee table, my pile of dirty laundry, all rising alongside me in a chaotic column of debris.

The cold hit immediately. Pittsburgh in late autumn wasn't warm to begin with, but up here the temperature dropped fast, cutting through my thin t-shirt like razor wire.

People were everywhere. Tumbling. Flailing. Screaming. A businessman in a suit jacket and boxers pinwheeled past. An old woman in a housecoat clutching a small dog to her chest. A child, couldn't have been more than six; spun through the air crying for his mother. I reached for him instinctively, but he was too far away, tumbling, carried by a different current, and then he was gone.

I saw Mrs. Patterson from 4C, the nice widow who always baked cookies at Christmas. She was falling or rising face-up, what I could see of her eyes were wide and glassy, blood streaking down her face from a gash in her head that looked like she had been scalped. I knew she was already dead. Her body tumbled past me, limp and broken, and there was nothing I could do.

Pressure differential. That's what this was. Something had created a near-vacuum above the city, and the atmosphere was rushing upward to fill the void, taking everything with it.

As I was tumbling through the sky, as I tried to gain focus, I looked down and could see the roof of the entire apartment complex had been ripped off including Sofia's. Bits and pieces of it flying high above me. I wondered if she was OK, and where in the sky she might be among all the other things up here.

The air grew colder as I rose. Thinner. I was having trouble catching my breath, each inhale bringing less oxygen than the last. I remembered something I knew, knew it intimately, atmospheric pressure decreases with altitude. About one PSI for every two thousand feet. If I kept rising, I'd eventually hit

altitudes where human lungs simply couldn't extract enough oxygen to function. Somewhere around fifteen thousand feet, hypoxia would set in. At twenty thousand, I'd lose consciousness.

Then, through the roar of the rushing air, I heard something impossible, a child's giggle. It seemed to vibrate inside my bones, not auditory. For a split second, the gray Pittsburgh sky flickered. I didn't see anyone, but I saw the ghost of a hand small, dirt-smudged reaching out from a seam in the air that shouldn't have been there. Weird. It traced a quick, cyan arc in the void. Then it was gone, swallowed by the chaos of tumbling furniture.

What the hell did I just see, a hallucination? How high was I going to go? Breathing was getting harder still. How long before whatever force had grabbed us let go and gravity remembered its job?

I forced myself to think, focus, regather my thoughts, clear my mind as best I could. Think! Think, Jack! I bumped my head between the palms of my hands a few times. Shake it off.

The initial acceleration had been violent, but it felt like it was tapering off. I wasn't being continuously propelled. I'd been sucked up, like from the hose of a giant vacuum, and now I was coasting on momentum with everyone else and all the other junk up here. That meant everything was reaching an apex. A peak altitude where upward velocity hit zero and the long fall would begin.

What are my chances of surviving?

Terminal velocity for a human body in standard atmospheric conditions: about 120 miles per hour. Time to fall from, say, ten

thousand feet: roughly a minute. From twenty thousand feet: maybe ninety seconds. Not that it mattered much. At those speeds, hitting the ground would give little chance for survival. It would be like hitting concrete from any height above a couple hundred feet. SPLAT! DEAD!

I needed to slow down. I needed a parachute. I needed a—

Suddenly, I caught a flash out of the corner of my eye as I was twirling and tumbling, I saw a glimpse of something. Was it another hallucination from oxygen deprivation?

No, this was real. The flash was far to the west, beyond the chaos that surrounded me and the expanding debris field. It seemed like it was coming from the top of a mountain ridge. Not sunlight. The sky was overcast, gray, no sun to reflect. This was something manufactured. A pulse of pale blue-white luminescence, geometric and precise, cutting through the gloom like a lighthouse beam. Was it man-made? Some military thing? I wasn't sure, but the hue of the light was odd... didn't seem normal for an airplane warning light that blinks on top of towers or mountaintops. It lasted maybe two, three seconds, then vanished.

I tried to find it again, and caught something even more strange. Small but defined. It looked like a girl, standing there, making shapes, cutting doorways... luminescent. Then she was gone. What was going on? Am I going insane? The tumbling had reoriented me and now I was facing east, the Appalachian foothills lost behind a curtain of airborne wreckage.

I couldn't shake that image, had I imagined it?

Was it another hallucination, oxygen deprivation?

I don't know, my brain must've misfired under stress.

Shaking my head. No. I knew what I'd seen. Something odd, misplaced. Something that didn't belong.

But I didn't have time to dwell on it. I was hurtling through the air toward certain death, tumbling through a chaos of debris and bodies and things that used to be someone's life.

And somewhere in that same sky, Sofia was falling too.

I had to find her.

Reunion

Just past a couple minutes, and still ascending and tumbling through the wreckage, I saw her. I recognized her instantly.

Sofia.

Here we were, both plummeting through the sky in a desperate attempt to make sense of what the hell was going on.

She was maybe fifty yards away and drifting ever so slightly towards me, spinning through the same nightmare, her dark hair whipping around her face in wild tangles. Her clothes were torn. A white t-shirt and what looked like tiny, black shorts, what she must have been wearing when her roof blew, She looked shaken, and she dodging the same debris I was, swirling all around us, produced during the ejection.

But she was alive. Moving. Fighting.

Those green eyes found mine across the void, and I saw a flash of hope through her terror. Something in my chest unclenched. Recognition. Relief. The strange peace of knowing that if this was the end, at least I wouldn't face it alone.

"Sofia!" I screamed her name, but the atmosphere tore it away.

I had grabbed a small sheet that was lingering near me and I used it to slow down, to help steer me towards her. As I got close enough, she reached for me. I reached for her.

And for one concise moment, amidst this horrendous circumstance, this torment, this whatever the hell it was, after everything that had happened between us, after all the distance

and awkwardness and unspoken regrets, the teasing in the living room, the colloquial awkwardness the distance we put between us, we were reaching for each other like drowning swimmers reaching for a lifeline, and suddenly we were together, tumbling as a unit through the madness.

I let myself imagine it, the two of us falling together, holding each other as the ground rushed up to meet us. A lover's death. Almost romantic.

Snap out of it, Jack!

The voice in my head was sharp. Disgusted. My father's voice, maybe. Or my Uncle Ray's. The man who'd built a trucking empire out of a single broken-down rig and sheer stubborn refusal to accept the word "impossible." "Nothing is impossible," he'd say.

You're plummeting toward death and your plan is to die pretty? Focus, Jack. Think. I lived my life in mediocrity, but The McPherson's didn't raise a quitter. I wasn't a quitter!

"There's always a solution to every problem; you just haven't found it yet."

So, find it. Stop falling in love with the idea of a beautiful death and start figuring out how to live through a horrible event.

I forced my eyes away from Sofia just for a moment, and made myself see the chaos around me. Really see it. Not as random destruction, but as raw material. Options. Possibilities.

There had to be a way down that didn't end in a red smear on the pavement.

There had to be.

"Jack!" She had to scream to be heard over the wind. "What the hell is happening?"

My attention drew back to her. "I don't know!" I pulled her closer, and we wrapped our arms around each other, partly for warmth. God, it was cold and partly just to have something solid to hold onto. I could feel her shivering against me, her athletic body trembling with cold and fear. "Something's wrong with the atmosphere. The pressure—"

She fumbled to reach the left pocket of her shorts, where she had tucked her phone and managed to pull it out. The screen was cracked, a spiderweb of fractures across the glass, but it was still functional. "I got an emergency alert," she shouted. "Right after my roof blew off."

She held up the phone, and I squinted at the message through the chaos:

EMERGENCY BROADCAST - GLOBAL EVENT IN PROGRESS

"Seismological and astronomical agencies confirm: a brief dimensional intersection event has occurred. Two planetary bodies, Earth and an unknown exoplanet, momentarily occupied intersecting spatial coordinates. The gravitational intersection of the two planets coupled with their momentum and mass had warped spacetime itself.

NOTE: Anomalous energy signatures detected at coordinates 38.8°N, 79.4°W prior to event. We sent two military personnel in a helicopter to check on the anomaly, investigation pending.

Gravitational normalization is expected within 15-20 minutes of initial event. Seek shelter.

Emergency services are overwhelmed. This is not a drill."

"Dimensional intersection," I muttered, the words feeling absurd even as I said them. "Two planets in the same space. That's... that's impossible."

"A physics equation," I've seen it a thousand times, gravitational intersection, Einstein's field equation — " $G_{\mu\nu}$ equals eight-pi-G over c-to-the-fourth, times $T_{\mu\nu}$. Mass tells spacetime how to curve; spacetime tells mass how to move. If two massive bodies briefly occupied the same space, the curvature would be..." unbelievable, not possible."

Beyond comprehension," I finished.

But even as I said it, I knew "impossible" had lost all meaning in the last five minutes. The evidence was all around us, a sky full of people and debris, a world turned upside-down by forces we couldn't see or comprehend.

It'd be like pushing a finger into a balloon and quickly pulling it away. The air inside would turn turbulent, swirling and churning as the pressure equalized, rushing to fill the void where the finger once was. That's what happened when the two worlds briefly occupied the same space. As one planet punched through the other's atmospheric envelope and withdrew, the displaced air roiled violently, pressure waves rippling outward from the intersection, the void struggling to re-equilibrate created the pressure differential we were experiencing, and sucked everything into the air.

The coordinates in the message perplexed me. 38.8 north, 79.4 west. Somewhere in the Appalachians, if I remembered my geography. The same direction I'd seen that impossible light. The shadow of that little girl drawing light shapes.

"How long do we have before we start to fall," Sofia said, snapping me back to the immediate crisis.

"The message said about 15-20 minutes."

I looked down. The ground was far below us now how far, I couldn't tell, but far enough that individual buildings had become indistinct smudges in a gray-brown landscape. We were still rising, but slower now. I could feel the deceleration in my gut, that momentary weightlessness that comes at the top of a roller coaster headed towards the apex.

"We need to find something to slow our descent," I said.

"Anything that can create drag."

Sofia nodded, already scanning the debris field around us. I'd always admired this about her. The way she could set fear aside and spring into action when it mattered. Like the time we snuck up to the apartment roof to set off fireworks. She'd been nervous at first, hesitant, fear of heights, but the moment we lit that first fuse, all her apprehension vanished. She was the same way now. While I was still processing our situation, she was already solving it.

We spent the next several minutes grabbing at whatever floated within reach, our bodies tumbling through a sky filled with the debris of a thousand shattered lives.

The first thing I snagged was a curtain, a heavy brocade, the kind your grandmother might have hanging in her living room. It was still attached to its rod, the brass rings clinking against the metal as it spun past me. I grabbed it and immediately felt the drag increase, the fabric catching air and slowing my rotation. Not much, but enough to notice.

"Jack! Over here!"

Sofia had found something better, a queen-sized flat sheet, pale blue with little yellow flowers, probably ripped right off someone's bed. She was already wrapping one corner around her forearm, the fabric snapping and billowing in the wind. We clutched hands and pulled ourselves closer together, our bodies colliding with a familiar force that neither of us had felt in a long time, it took us both by surprise. For a moment we just held on, spinning as a unit through the madness, the sheet and curtain trailing behind us like the world's most pathetic kite tail.

"We need to tie these together," I shouted over the roar of the wind. "Create more surface area."

Sofia nodded, already working on it. Her fingers moved with the practiced efficiency, like tying resistance bands and securing braces. She knotted the corner of the sheet to the curtain rod, then wrapped the other end around both our waists, binding us together.

It helped, and I could feel our descent slowing slightly, the combined drag of the two fabrics fighting against gravity's pull. The wind was brutal. It pressed against our faces, flattened the skin against our cheekbones, made our eyes water and our lips go numb. But we were falling together with our bodies-oriented feet-down, the makeshift drag devices streaming above us.

"What else can we find?" Sofia scanned the debris field around us, her green eyes narrowed against the wind.

There was plenty to choose from. The sky was a graveyard of human existence, furniture and appliances, clothes and toys, all the accumulated stuff of modern life ripped from homes and hurled into the atmosphere. I saw a recliner tumbling end over

end, its footrest extended as if someone had been sitting in it when the world ended. A refrigerator door, torn from its hinges, covered in alphabet magnets that spelled out a child's name. A bicycle wheel, still spinning, its spokes catching the gray light like a pinwheel.

And bodies. I tried not to look at the bodies.

"There." I pointed toward a tangle of fabric about thirty feet away something large and colorful, caught up with what looked like aluminum tubing. "What is that?"

We angled ourselves toward it, shifting our weight and adjusting the drag from our improvised devices to steer through the chaos. It was slow going. Every movement had consequences up here. Lean too far one way and you'd start spinning, catch a gust wrong and you'd tumble out of control. We learned quickly to make small adjustments, to work with the wind rather than against it.

As we got closer, I recognized what we were looking at: a backyard canopy, the kind you'd set up for a graduation party or a summer barbecue. Its fabric top cheerful yellow and white stripes was still mostly attached to the aluminum frame, though one corner had torn loose and flapped wildly in the wind. The whole thing was tumbling slowly, lazily, like a drunk stumbling home after last call.

"That's perfect," Sofia breathed.

Perfect was an overstatement, but it was the best thing we'd seen. The canopy was maybe ten feet square, with four aluminum poles forming its frame and a fabric top designed to provide shade. It wasn't a parachute, but it was a hell of a lot better than a curtain and a bedsheet.

The challenge was getting to it and getting control of it once we did.

"I'll go first," I said. "Once I've got a grip, you follow."

Sofia shook her head. "We go together. If one of us misses, we both miss. I'm not losing you up here."

I wanted to argue, but she was right. We'd tied ourselves together for a reason. Whatever happened next, it would happen to both of us.

We maneuvered ourselves above the tumbling canopy, matching its rotation as best we could. The timing would have to be precise. Grab too early and we'd miss entirely, too late and we'd slam into the aluminum frame at speed. The wind wasn't helping, gusting unpredictably, shoving us off course every time we thought we had it lined up.

"On three," Sofia said, her grip tightening on my arm. "One... Two..."

"Three!"

We dove together, arms outstretched, reaching for the aluminum poles. My fingers brushed against cold metal, slipped, found purchase on a crossbar and locked down with everything I had. The jerk nearly ripped my arm from its socket. My shoulder screamed in protest, and for one terrible second, I thought I'd lost my grip entirely. But then Sofia was there beside me, her hands wrapped around the frame's lattice just above me, her body swinging wildly as the canopy bucked and twisted above us. By sheer determination, I found a way to pin my feet to its metal floorboard, one of the flat surfaces that were

welded to the bottoms of the poles. This gave me a moment of reprieve and some much-needed leverage.

"Hold on!" she shouted needlessly, since I had no intention of doing anything else.

The canopy was fighting us. It wasn't designed for this, wasn't designed for anything except sitting in someone's backyard providing shade for a picnic table. The aluminum poles were thin, cheap, the kind that bent without much force. The fabric was already stressing at the corners, the stitching stretching under the wind pressure, strains it was never meant to handle.

But it was catching air.

The moment we got our weight balanced, the canopy billowed upward like a sail, the fabric snapping taut between the poles. Our descent slowed dramatically, not to a safe speed, not even close, but enough that I could feel the difference in my gut. We weren't plummeting anymore. We were falling. Controlled falling, sort of.

"The poles are bending!" Sofia's voice was tight with strain. She was right, the aluminum was flexing under our combined weight, the frame deforming into a shape its designers never intended. If the poles snapped, we'd lose the canopy entirely and be right back where we started.

"Spread out!" I shouted. "Distribute the weight!"

She scrambled precariously, moving across the canopy frame like a kid on monkey bars. Using this technique, she managed to get to the opposite corner of the frame, each of us gripping a different pole, she had oriented her feet like mine, trying to balance the load across all four supports. The sheet and curtain

we'd tied around our waists trailed behind us, adding their own small measure of drag. It wasn't elegant. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't nearly working, but it was something.

The canopy continued to buck and twist, caught by gusts of wind that sent us spinning in unpredictable directions. We'd have to fight to get back upright, to get it catching air again. Other times a crosswind would hit us sideways and we'd go careening off at an angle, drifting like a hot air balloon caught in the air currents. The cheap aluminum frame groaning in protest.

My hands were cramping. The thin metal poles offered little to grip, and the wind was trying constantly to tear us loose. I wrapped my legs tighter around the pole, locked my ankles together, using the flat bottoms, trying to distribute my weight so I give some relief on my failing grip strength.

"How high are we?" Sofia shouted.

I risked a look down. The ground was closer now, much closer than before but still impossibly far away. I could make out individual features in the landscape below: a patchwork of brown fields, a ribbon of highway cutting through them, scattered farmhouses and barns that looked like they'd been gutted by the same force that had destroyed our apartment building. We'd drifted a good distance during our ascent, and with the canopy, carried by the air currents away from Pittsburgh, out over the rural areas to the northeast.

"I don't know," I admitted. "A few thousand feet, maybe? It's hard to tell."

Sofia didn't respond. She didn't need to. We both knew what a few thousand feet meant. At terminal velocity, we'd cover that distance in less than a minute. And terminal velocity for two

people clinging to a backyard canopy wasn't much different from terminal velocity without one.

We were still going to die. We'd just bought ourselves a little more time.

I forced myself to focus, to think through the problem like it was one of those physics puzzles I used to obsess over. Drag force equals one-half times air density times velocity squared times drag coefficient times reference area. We'd increased our reference area with the canopy, which was good. But we also had more mass, two people instead of one which partially offset the gain. The net effect was a slower descent, but not slow enough.

What else could we do?

"The sheet," I said suddenly. "The curtain. We need to get them above us too, catch more air."

Sofia understood immediately. Working together, fighting the wind and the bucking canopy and our own exhausted muscles, we managed to untie the fabric from around our waists and secure it to the aluminum frame. The sheet we stretched between two poles like a secondary sail. The curtain we let trail behind, its brocade fabric adding drag without blocking our view of the ground.

It helped. Every little bit helped.

The canopy was making sounds now that left an even greater uneasy feeling in my gut, if that was possible. Creaking, groaning, the aluminum flexing in ways that suggested imminent structural failure. One of the poles had developed a visible bend near the middle, a stress point where the metal

was slowly giving way. If it snapped, the whole frame would collapse, and we'd lose everything we'd gained.

"It's not going to hold much longer," Sofia said, echoing my thoughts. "The frame's failing."

"I know."

"Jack..." Her voice caught. "If we don't make it—"

"We're going to make it."

I said it with a certainty I didn't feel, a confidence that came from somewhere deeper than rational thought. Maybe it was denial. Maybe it was the survival instinct kicking in, refusing to accept the mathematics of our situation. Or maybe it was something else. Something that had been dormant in me for years, buried under all that comfortable mediocrity, and was only now clawing its way to the surface.

I was not going to die in the sky, clinging to a party tent. Not today. Not like this.

"Look," Sofia said, pointing toward the horizon. "Is that water?"

I followed her gaze. In the distance, catching the gray light, was a glimmer of reflection. A lake, maybe. Or a reservoir. Water was better than ground. The surface tension would still hurt like hell at speed, but it was more forgiving than dirt or concrete. If we could reach it, if we could angle our descent toward that distant shimmer and slow enough...

"That's got to be three miles away," I said.

"Then we better hope the wind's on our side."

We shifted our weight, stretching ourselves out, first in this direction then in that... trying to steer the canopy toward the

water. It was like trying to sail a boat with a torn sail and no rudder. Every adjustment was a fight, every course correction a negotiation with forces beyond our control. The wind pushed us one way, we pushed back, and somewhere in the middle we found a compromise that might, if we were very lucky, carry us in roughly the right direction.

The ground was getting closer. I could see individual trees now, their bare branches reaching toward the sky like skeletal fingers. A farmhouse with a collapsed roof, debris scattered across the surrounding fields. A highway with abandoned cars, their drivers probably among the bodies tumbling through the sky above.

The bent pole was getting worse. I could see the metal fatiguing, the crease deepening with every gust of wind. It wasn't going to hold. Minutes, maybe less, and the whole canopy would tear itself apart.

But minutes might be enough. Minutes might be all we needed.

I tightened my grip on the cold aluminum, ignoring the cramps in my hands, ignoring the burning in my shoulders, ignoring the voice in my head that whispered we were only delaying the inevitable. Sofia was across from me, her dark hair whipping around her face, her green eyes fixed on mine with an intensity that made my chest ache. "I was looking at a ghost," I thought. This might be the last time we see each other alive.

"I'm sorry," I said. I had to scream for her to hear me, and the words came out before I could stop them. "For everything. For wasting all those years. For not being the man you deserved."

"Jack—"

"If we get out of this, I'm going to be different. I swear to God, Sofia. I'm going to be the person you always saw in me. The person I should have been all along."

She stared at me in a kind of disbelief, inquisitive face. The wind roaring around us, the canopy bucking and groaning overhead. Then she smiled; that smile, the one that crinkled the corners of her eyes, the one I'd fallen in love with on that first Tuesday afternoon.

"Who are you right now? This isn't the Jack I remember."

"Maybe he's the Jack I should have been all along."

"When we land, I'm holding you to that," She said.

When. Not if. When.

The canopy shuddered violently as another gust hit us broadside, and I heard the sickening sound of tearing fabric. One of the corner seams was giving way, the stitching pulling apart thread by thread. We were running out of time.

But the water was getting closer now. And slightly slower was better than nothing, that's the lie I kept telling myself to keep hoping. The fabric and the frame were buying us precious seconds, adding friction we desperately needed. It wasn't a parachute. It wasn't even close. But the math was simple: every mile per hour we shaved off our descent was a slightly better chance of surviving impact.

In probability, statistically, slightly better than zero was still better than zero.

As we drifted, the lake was approaching ever closer. Close enough that I could make out the shoreline, the trees

surrounding it turning autumn gold and red, a small dock jutting out into the water. The makeshift parachute was falling apart quicker and we were falling faster. The air was thicker which helped slow us down, but it wasn't enough. We were coming in too fast, too steep.

I did the math in my head, the numbers tumbling through my brain like the debris around us. Impact speed, water density, surface tension. At this velocity, hitting the water wouldn't be much better than hitting concrete. We'd shatter bones. Rupture organs. Die on impact or drown seconds later. But it kept us hoping.

2: The Pilot

Newton's First Law of Motion states: *an object in motion stays in motion unless acted upon by an external force, i.e., when the sum of all forces equals zero, velocity remains constant.*

$$\Sigma \mathbf{F} = \mathbf{0} \Rightarrow d\mathbf{v} / dt = \mathbf{0}$$

Rescue

Hoping became hopeful, because just then, outta nowhere, I heard it. A deep, rhythmic thrum cutting through the chaos. I craned my neck and saw the helicopter approaching from the east, angling toward us with purpose. It must've seen the unmistakable yellow and white canopy. It was a sleek military aircraft, black with all the regalia, and I remembered the message from the Emergency Broadcast... "we sent out two military personnel to check on the anomaly—investigation pending." The anomaly; the same light I saw flashing on the mountain. They had somehow stayed airborne through the chaos. It was flying erratically, dodging debris, banking, and weaving, it looked like it was hanging by a bungee cord bouncing up and down, and it was heading toward us. "Must be a hell of a pilot," I thought.

"Thank God, they see us." Sofia exhaled.

We both clung to our canopy poles like our lives depended on it because they did. My arms burned, fingers cramping around the

slick metal, the fabric above us snapping violently in the wind, canopy poles crumbling.

It matched our descent, hovering alongside us with a skill that bordered on miraculous. As it drew closer, I could make out the markings on the fuselage. Someone had painted a row of small silhouettes beneath the cockpit window, the kind used to mark confirmed kills. Fifteen of them.

Through the windshield, I could see the pilot, a woman, her face set in grim concentration, hands steady on the controls. In the open side door, a crew member in a flight suit wrestled a rescue basket into position, one hand gripping a safety strap as the rotor wash whipped at his clothes.

"Come on," I muttered. "Come on, come on, come on."

As he lowered the basket, it swung toward us, dangling from the cable, buffeted by the same winds that were carrying us down. The crew member, a young guy, couldn't have been more than twenty-five, had a face pale with panic but hands steady on the cable; shouted something we couldn't hear over the noise and gestured upwards frantically as if calling a disobedient dog.

Getting into that basket while falling through debris-filled air was not easy, wasn't even logical, but there was no other choice. It was either getting in the basket or die.

Sofia went first; she had already found her way back to my end of the canopy. I got one hand loose and used it to boost her toward the basket opening pushing her off my back. I watched as she grabbed the edge, tilting it towards her, then the cable, her fingers white-knuckled on the metal rim, and she pulled herself in with the athletic grace that had always made me feel clumsy by comparison.

With her in it, she used her weight to help swing the basket towards me, I grabbed it with my freehand, letting go of the other hand, and for one terrible second, I felt my fingers slip off the basket edge. I was falling free, the wind screaming past me, the basket receding. I reached out, fingers straining, and felt metal scrape against my palm, slipping...

With the reflexes of seasoned martial artist, Sofia reached down and grabbed for me, closed her hand around my wrist and pulled.

I reached for whatever I could grab of the basket with my freehand and tumbled into the it beside her, gasping, shaking, my heart hammering so hard I thought it might crack my ribs. We collapsed against each other, tangled and trembling, and out of breath, petrified having just escaped certain death. Neither of us spoke for a while. We just sat staring at each other, breathing in deep breaths while the basket lifted us into the helicopter.

Nearly just a thousand feet or so above the ground, the helicopter banked hard left, and lifted us into the disoriented sky as the crew member slammed the door shut. Through the window, I could see the lake below... it was lake Conneaut. I recognized the coastline as I watched our canopy tumble away into the chaos below, that cheerful yellow-and-white fabric disappearing into the gray.

We'd made it. We'd survived, we were banged up and tired, but by God's grace, we were still alive.

The crew member, his name tag read TORRES, handed us thermal blankets without a word. His hands were shaking. He'd

probably seen things in the last hour that would haunt him forever. We all had.

I wrapped one of the blankets around Sofia's shoulders, then my own, and we sat there in the belly of the helicopter, watching the end of the world scroll past the windows. Bewildered and sad, but grateful, feeling blessed.

Langley

Flying slow and purposeful, the short flight south, down to Langley took nearly 5 hours; far longer than the distance warranted. The sky had become an obstacle course. Most of the bodies in the lower atmosphere were already making their terrible descent back to earth, but some bodies and a lot of the debris remained suspended in the upper atmosphere stuck there waiting for the pressures to fully equalize and for gravity to exact its unforgiving revenge then it would rain mayhem all over again.

If felt like we'd push a mile forward, then two backwards as we encountered all sorts of obstacles along the flight path, broken up aircrafts, small sections of buildings, vehicle parts (doors, windows, tires etc.), and every type of machine and junk ever created by man drifted and tumbled through the air currents, turning a simple flight into a deadly maze.

The pilot, a stone-faced woman named Captain Reyes, threaded through the chaos with a skill that bordered on supernatural. She didn't speak except to issue terse commands to Torres, her eyes never leaving the windshield, her hands moving constantly on the controls.

Thankfully, the military craft, a CH-53E Super Stallion, was designed to withstand a certain amount of damage. It was built for war. Stable, precise, long range and surprisingly maneuverable for its size. I knew the captain was a veteran, and judging by the decorations on her jacket and the fifteen kills I

saw painted on the pilot side of the fuselage, she had survived many hours flying this beast through countless hostile skies.

"GPS is shot to hell," she said over the intercom. "Satellites got knocked out of alignment. We're flying visual and dead reckoning. Old school."

I didn't respond. I was too busy staring out the window at the apocalypse surrounding us.

The scope of what I saw was beyond anything I could have imagined. Debris stretched in every direction. Cars tumbling end over end, furniture, appliances, entire sections of rooftops spinning like boomerangs through the thin air. I saw the tail section of a 777 zoom by under us... its tail number, N6QDY still visible on the white paint. A world's worth of possessions scattered across the heavens like some giant had upended a massive junk box.

And the bodies. God, the bodies. Still falling, some flailing, tumbling round and round.

Some drifting motionless, their faces peaceful, almost serene. The ones who'd lost consciousness in those first seconds when the air turned too thin to breathe. Others were contorted, frozen in their final moments of panic. A woman in a bathrobe, still clutching a coffee mug. A man in a business suit, his tie floating straight up like an accusation pointed at whatever had done this. A child—"Jesus," I thought, looking away before I could see more.

They floated alongside with the wreckage of their lives, separated from their homes, their families, everything that had anchored them to the world.

But it was the ground that told the true story of what happened.

Below, off to the right as we flew south, past the places we were carried away from. I could see the aftermath of the event. Miles of cities burning. Highways clogged with crashed vehicles. Overturned delivery trucks and entire neighborhoods flattened as if a massive tornado had touched down and idled through every city and urban neighborhood, greedily siphoning up everything in its path before dissipating into the atmosphere then simply let go allowing everything to return.

And return it did. The landscape was littered with the fallen. Fields dotted with dark shapes. Streets, rivers, land, and ponds choked with the bodies and all the wreckage.

About the 30 minutes before landing, most of what had gone up had already come back down. We were seeing the straggling leftovers, the last remnants still drifting in the upper atmosphere. The main event had already ended.

Humanity had been deconstructed, and the pieces discarded across the earth like broken porcelain.

Sofia sat beside me, her hand in mine, watching the same horrific panorama. Her face was blank, expressionless. The shock setting in, that thousand-yard stare that trauma victims get. All this time, she hadn't mentioned her family. Not once. I'd caught her staring at her phone a few times, thumb hovering over her mother's contact, but she always put it away. Like if she didn't call, didn't hear the silence on the other end, then maybe her parents were still on the porch in Mayagüez, her brothers still arguing over the TV remote. Maybe the island was fine, maybe her friends were fine. Maybe she just had a bad signal, she joked. But now, watching the smoke rise from a

dozen different places, looking at the faceless bodies below, I saw the moment that lie stopped working. Her jaw tightened. Her eyes went wet, a quiet moment of self-realization and some long-deserved relief. I looked at her, but I didn't say anything. I didn't have to. I squeezed her fingers and as if to say thank you, she squeezed mine back.

Torres, observing our solemn interaction, gestured to Sofia toward a closed chest. We both opened it and looked inside. We saw clothes and fatigues, stacked, folded neatly. She grabbed whatever lay on top, a pair of camouflaged pants and a matching jacket, and slipped them on, giving her some much-needed reprieve from having endured all of this in just a pair of tiny shorts and a tee shirt.

She smiled, nodded, giving a thumbs up.

"This is everywhere," she whispered. "Isn't it? Not just Pittsburgh. Everywhere."

I thought about the emergency message. Global event. Eight billion people on Earth, and most of them had just been thrown into the sky.

"Yeah," I said. "I think so."

She closed her eyes. "How many do you think survived?"

I didn't answer. I didn't want to do that math.

When we finally touched down on the runway at Langley Air Force Base, the silence was almost worse than the chaos had been. The base looked like a war zone, hangars collapsed, buildings half-demolished, vehicles overturned and scattered like a child's discarded toys. And everywhere, the evidence of the fall. Bodies lay where they'd landed, some on the tarmac,

others draped over wreckage, still others visible through the shattered windows of buildings. The base had become a graveyard.

"Everyone got pulled up," Sofia said quietly as we stepped off the helicopter. "Just like us. And then they came back down."

The thought settled into my chest like a stone. Of course. If Pittsburgh had been affected, if rural Pennsylvania had been affected, then everywhere had been affected. All the cities we saw along the way, everyone on Earth had been yanked into the sky at the same moment.

And now most of them had fallen. Gravity had reasserted itself. Military bases. Hospitals. Police stations. Fire departments. All the infrastructure of rescue and recovery, all the people who would normally respond to a disaster, they'd been victims too. There was no cavalry coming. No help on the way.

Captain Reyes killed the engine and sat motionless until the rotor blades stopped spinning, staring at nothing. For a moment it seemed like she might never move again. Then she unbuckled her harness and stood.

"I need to try to raise command on the hardened comm systems, the landlines," she said, her voice flat. "Torres, secure the aircraft. You two..." She looked at me and Sofia, and for the first time I saw the cracks in her composure. The terror she'd been holding back. "Just... stay close. Don't wander off."

Together, we explored the base. Looking around it seemed that some of the old war bunkers, built to survive artillery bombardment, looked like they had come through intact, but we'd need to explore them to be sure.

We searched for what felt like hours, finding devastation everywhere we looked. It was mid-afternoon now, and an urgency filled Reyes.

"Fuel. We need fuel." Her voice was tight. "We need to get back home and check on our loved ones."

This became our next focus, and it wasn't long before we found what we needed.

Reyes had guided us to the old Cold War bunker, built in the sixties, designed to survive a nuclear blast. Reinforced concrete walls, not sheet metal. A heavy slab roof supported by steel I-beams thick as tree trunks. And it had held. We didn't waste time. Inside we found bottled water, military rations, clothing, snacks, supplies and most importantly, jet fuel.

But we also found the bodies.

The people inside had been ripped upward like everyone else. They'd hit that heavy roof and stayed there, trapped against the ceiling until gravity took over. Then they'd fallen to the concrete floor forty feet below. One body had been impaled on the hydraulic lift of a half-disassembled F-22.

Reyes stood frozen, forcing herself to look. Forcing herself to see what the Convergence had done to her people. Her military brothers and sisters. The ones she left not too long ago when her and Torres left the base to go and investigate the light.

None of the communication equipment had survived. It had experienced the same violent journey as the bodies. But secured to the concrete floor with seismic braces, untouched by the chaos, sat six, fifty-five-gallon drums of JP-8 aviation fuel. Beside them, mounted on a wheeled cart, was a manual rotary

pump with a hundred feet of reinforced hose also held in place with its own set of seismics.

"Torres," Reyes called over her shoulder. "Get over here."

Torres rushed over, his face pale from the horror, but holding it together. Barely.

"Help me get this pump hooked up."

They worked in silence, the only sounds, the clank of metal fittings and the wet gurgle of fuel beginning to flow through the hose. It took them around forty minutes to transfer enough JP-8 to fill the helicopter's tanks. It was exhausting work but working in five-minute shifts at the hand pump they balanced the fatigue and got it done. When they finished, the fuel gauge read full.

"Enough to get home," captain.

While they worked, Sofia and I walked through the adjacent bunker and gathered supplies from another one of the few structures still partially standing. We sorted through what we'd found, taking stock of food, water, clothing, and medical supplies. We found a supply closet full of blankets and military jackets. "Hypothermia's going to be a real risk tonight," Sofia said. "Temperature's already dropping, and without power, without shelter..." She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't have to.

With everything we found, we had enough to survive for a while. Enough to figure out our next move.

We were organizing everything into piles when Reyes and Torres appeared in the doorway.

"Tank's full," Reyes said. She looked different now. Exhausted, and still haunted, but with a sense of purpose that hadn't been there before. "We're heading out."

Sofia stood up. "Where to?"

"Harrisonburg. My kids are there." Reyes glanced at Torres. "His mother and sisters too. Same direction."

"What about you two?" Torres asked. "Where's home?"

"Pittsburgh" I said. "Pennsylvania." – I'd already known we were headed to the Appalachians, to check on that flashing light, but was reluctant to let Reyes know as it was a military target before the Convergence.

Reyes shook her head slowly. "That's... that's too far. We don't have time for a detour like that, and honestly, I'm just too damn tired and I need to go see my family. See if anyone is still alive."

"We understand," Sofia said, and I could tell there wasn't any room for negotiation. "You've already done more than enough. You saved our lives, and that's more than we could've hoped for"

An awkward silence settled over us. These were people we'd survived the impossible with, and now we were going our separate ways, probably forever.

"Motor pool's on the east side of the base," Reyes finally said. "If any vehicles survived, that's where they'll be. Keys are usually kept in the dispatch office." She hesitated, then added, "if your aim is to head home, and if it's still standing, head out on 134 to 17 and there's a supply depot about 20 miles north at 105 Fort Eustis Blvd intersection before crossing over to Hwy 64. There's

also a gas station there where you can fill up. you'll find more rations, maybe some useful gear."

Torres stepped forward and pressed something into my hand; a folded piece of paper. "Radio frequencies," he said. "Military emergency channels. If you find a working radio, try these. Someone might be listening."

"Thank you." Sofia's voice was thick. She surprised everyone, including herself, by stepping forward and hugging Reyes. After a stiff moment, the captain hugged her back.

"Survive this," Reyes said quietly. "Both of you."

"You too," I said. "I hope your family's okay."

Reyes nodded once, something flickering behind her eyes. Then she turned and walked toward the helicopter, Torres falling in step beside her.

Sofia and I followed them out to the tarmac. We stood at the edge, watching as they climbed in and ran through their preflight checks. The rotors began spinning up, building speed until the familiar thunder filled the air.

Through the windshield, Reyes gave us a small salute. Torres raised his hand and waved goodbye.

Then the helicopter lifted off, banked west heading north, and climbed into the gray sky. We watched until it was just a speck, then nothing at all. The sound of the rotors faded, replaced by the wind and the distant crackle of fires still burning somewhere in the ruins.

Sofia slipped her hand into mine.

"Just us now," she said quietly.

I squeezed her fingers. "We'll figure it out. We've made it this far."

She managed a small smile. "Yeah. We have."

We stood there for a while, two people watching the last connection to their rescue disappear over the horizon. Then Sofia straightened her shoulders.

"Come on," she said. Let's find a suitable place to stay the night. We've got a lot to do Tomorrow. "And a long way to go to get to the Appalachians," I thought."

Homebound

Torres's home was in Charlottesville, on the way. His mother, his two younger sisters, his grandmother who lived with them and still cooked the occasional menudo on Sundays. Reyes had met them once, at Torres's graduation from bootcamp. Good people. Warm people.

Were they still alive?

Captain Reyes' mother was closer along the same route home—Richmond, a two-hour drive from Harrisonburg on a normal day, but she wasn't going to have time for a stop over to check on them. She thought about her husband Carlos, who taught high school chemistry and coached the junior varsity soccer team. Her daughter Selena, fourteen years old, probably in the middle of 2nd-period algebra when the sky reached down and grabbed her.

Had they fallen and survived? Had they fallen at all? Were they lying broken in some field somewhere, waiting for help that would never come? Or, God forbid, were they dead?

She couldn't think about that. Not yet. First, fly. Then, find out.

"Captain." Torres's voice was quiet, tentative. "Hope the two remain safe." They've got shelter. Supplies. They'll figure it out," Reyes replied.

Torres nodded and gave a small reassuring smile as they headed home.

Or whatever was left of it.

As they got higher up and a bit more relaxed, as they looked around, the world looked like it had been shaken by an angry god and then abandoned.

The Chesapeake Bay stretched out below them, its waters filthy with debris. Boats of every size drifted aimlessly, some capsized, others simply empty, and their passengers torn away and deposited who knows where. Near Torres' house, a massive container ship had run aground near the mouth of the James River, its hull breached, thousands of shipping containers spilled across the shoreline like a child's building blocks. Some had burst open on impact, scattering their contents across the mudflats. We saw furniture. Electronics. What looked like a thousand white refrigerators gleaming in the fading light.

And bodies. Always bodies.

They floated in the water, pale shapes bobbing among the waves. They draped over the exposed pilings of destroyed piers. They lay scattered across the decks of listing sailboats; like some sort of nuevo holocaust imposed by an invisible hand. Their limbs bent at angles that made a hardened war veteran, like Reyes,' stomach clench.

"Jesus," Torres whispered. He'd said it maybe fifty times since they'd taken off. It was the only word that seemed to fit.

Richmond, sprawled across the northern shore of the James River, a maze of shipyards and refineries and suburban neighborhoods that had once housed nearly two hundred thousand people. From up here, Reyes could see that at least a third of it was burning.

The fires had started in a dozen places, ruptured gas lines, overturned vehicles, industrial accidents in the shipyards.

Without firefighters to contain them, without water pressure to feed the hydrants, they'd spread unchecked. Entire blocks were engulfed, the flames painting the underside of the smoke clouds a hellish orange. The old Richmond Shipbuilding facility, where they built torpedo boats back in the 1900s, was an inferno. Reyes could see the skeletal of some industrial buildings still under construction, its scaffolding collapsed, flames licking at its steel bones.

Torres pressed his face to the window as they passed over his neighborhood.

"There," he said, pointing. "That's my street. Monument Avenue. The blue house, you see it? Third from the corner."

Reyes banked the helicopter, dropping lower. She saw the blue house, a modest two-story with a chain-link fence and what had once been a neat front lawn. The lawn was torn up now, gouged by something heavy that had fallen then dragged. The fence was flattened. The front windows were shattered.

But the frame of the house was still standing with the roof blown off. That was something.

"I don't see anyone," Torres said. His voice cracked. "They should be... They should be there."

Reyes circled the block once, twice. The streets were chaos, devoid of life. Cars crashed into trees, into houses, into each other. Power lines down everywhere, their cables snaking across the pavement. She saw a school bus on its side, its yellow paint scorched, and made herself look away before she could count the small shapes scattered around it.

"I have to go down there," Torres said. "Captain, I have to—"

"I know." She was already looking for a landing spot. The intersection at the end of his street was clear enough, if she was careful. "We'll set down. You check on your family. I'll wait."

She didn't say for how long. They both knew fuel was precious, that every minute on the ground was a minute not flying toward Harrisonburg, toward Carlos and her daughter, Lydia. But Torres had been solid through all of this, steady hands, quick thinking, no complaints. He deserved this much.

The helicopter touched down in a shower of sparks and scattered debris. Torres was out before the skids had fully settled, running toward the blue house. Reyes watched him go, then turned her attention to the surrounding streets.

Movement caught her eye.

Three blocks over, a man emerged from a collapsed garage, dragging something behind him. A body, she realized. He was pulling a body by the ankles, hauling it toward a growing pile in what had been someone's front yard. Even from this distance, she could see the methodical way he moved, the grim efficiency of someone who'd been doing this for hours.

He wasn't the only one. As she watched, she spotted others, survivors emerging from the wreckage, dazed and bloodied but alive. A woman sat on a curb, her arm in a makeshift sling, rocking back and forth. Two teenagers picked through the ruins of a convenience store, stuffing bottles of water into backpacks. An old man stood in the middle of the street, staring at the sky with an expression of total incomprehension.

The lucky ones. The ones who'd grabbed something solid, or just been blessed by random chance. Were low enough, below the suction threshold. Maybe one in a hundred. Maybe less.

Reyes tried to fathom it and felt something inside her break.

One percent survival rate. One percent of Richmond meant maybe two thousand people alive in a city of two hundred thousand. One percent of Virginia meant eighty thousand survivors in a state of eight million. One percent of America meant three and a half million people in a nation of three hundred and fifty million.

One percent of Earth meant eighty million survivors out of eight billion.

This was probably, by any measure, optimistic.

Torres emerged from the blue house twelve minutes later. He walked slowly, his shoulders slumped. He didn't look up as he approached the helicopter. He didn't say anything as he climbed back into his seat.

Reyes saw it in the set of his jaw, in the red rims of his eyes, in the way his hands trembled as he buckled his harness. She'd seen that look before, on soldiers returning from doorways they wished they'd never opened, from rooms that would haunt them forever.

"Torres—"

"Harrisonburg," he said. His voice was flat. Dead. "You need to get to Harrisonburg. Your family."

"We can stay. If you need—"

"Just fly, Captain." He turned away, pressing his forehead against the window. "Please. Just fly."

She flew.

They followed I-64 northwest, using the highway as a navigation reference since the GPS was still useless. The interstate was a graveyard of vehicles. Thousands of cars and trucks that had crashed back to earth, still smoldering, some burned down to blackened husks. The pavement was cracked in places, buckled in others, as if the earth itself had spasmed in sympathy with the chaos above.

Twice they passed over pile-ups that stretched for miles, hundreds of vehicles tangled together in knots of twisted metal and shattered glass. Bodies lay everywhere, slumped over steering wheels, sprawled across lanes, hanging from shattered windshields. Some had clearly died in the crashes. Others had fallen from the sky afterward, landing on top of the wreckage like broken dolls tossed by a careless child.

A tractor-trailer had jackknifed near an overpass, its cargo, live chickens, thousands of them scattered across the highway in a carpet of white feathers and broken cages. Some of the birds were still alive, wandering dazed among the carnage, pecking at things Reyes didn't want to think about.

They passed over Charlotteville, and Torres made a small sound in his throat. The historic district, with its preserved eighteenth-century buildings were burning. The old wooden structures had gone up like kindling. Three hundred years of preserved history, erased in an afternoon.

And still the bodies.

They hung from trees like grotesque ornaments. They lay draped over the peaked roofs of colonial houses like some sort of grotesque Salvador Dali painting. They floated in the reflecting pools of tourist attractions. A group of what had once been a

school field trip was scattered across the lawn of the Governor's Mansion, their bright yellow t-shirts making them easy to count. Reyes counted seventeen. She made herself stop.

Twenty minutes outside Harrisonburg, something slammed against the roof. A loud thump, then a sickening clang, metal on metal, the unmistakable sound of rotor blades striking something solid. Something had struck us. Warning lights flashed across the dash as the engine pitch changed, and started winding down.

“Damn it! Got careless, Torres. The sky had gone quite and I let my guard down.”

"We're going down!"

“Hold on!"

The helicopter shuddered; we're losing altitude fast. Captain Reyes fought the controls, eyes scanning the ground below.

"If we have a chance of making it," she said. "I need somewhere to set down. Now."

She scanned the terrain below. Suburbs, mostly housing developments and strip malls and the sprawling infrastructure of American exurbia. Most of it was damaged. Some of it was burning. But there, on the outskirts of a neighborhood that had fared better than most, she spotted a high school football field. The goalposts were stacked with bodies. Piled up like chunks of chicken on a skewer, the bleachers collapsed, but the field itself was clear.

Close enough. It would have to be close enough.

She brought the helicopter down as gently as she could manage, the skids sinking slightly into the torn-up turf. As the engine wound down, the clanging rushed in like a physical thing, filling the cockpit, pressing against her ears.

"This is where we part ways," she said to Torres. "The school might have supplies. Water, first aid, maybe some food in the cafeteria. You should check it out, gather what you can."

Torres didn't move. He sat staring straight ahead, his hands limp in his lap. "What are you going to do?"

"Walk." She unbuckled her harness. "Harrisonburg maybe ten miles from here. I can make it before dark if I move fast."

"You're just going to leave the bird?"

"Bird is damaged, and unable to fly." She popped open the cockpit door and swung her legs out. "Go out, take a look around, maybe you can help people. Do some good."

She meant it as encouragement, but Torres just laughed, a hollow, broken sound that held no humor at all. "Do some good," he repeated. "Yeah. Sure."

Reyes paused, one foot on the skid, the other dangling in the air. She wanted to say something meaningful. Something that would help. But what words existed for a moment like this? What comfort could she offer a young man who'd just found his family missing, presumably dead.

"It wasn't your fault," she said finally. "None of this was anyone's fault. It just happened."

"I know," Torres said. But he didn't sound like he believed it.

Reyes dropped to the ground. Her boots sank into the soft turf, and she steadied herself against the helicopter's fuselage. The air smelled like smoke and something else, something organic and unpleasant that she didn't want to identify, couldn't identify.

"Good luck, Torres."

"You too, Captain."

She turned and walked toward the gate, out to the road and toward Harrisonburg, toward whatever remained of her family. Behind her, she heard Torres climb out of the helicopter and move off toward the school. She didn't look back.

The sun was setting now, painting the smoke-filled sky in shades of orange and red and purple. It would have been beautiful, under other circumstances. Now it just looked like the world was bleeding.

Reyes walked.

Behind her, the helicopter sat silent on the torn-up football field, its rotors damaged and its mission complete.

Reyes walked following the stars that were beginning to appear in the smoke-stained sky, she was still miles away, walking through a landscape of nightmares, chasing the hope that somewhere ahead, in a modest house on a quiet street, her husband and daughter were still alive.

3: The Bunker

The second law of thermodynamics states: *entropy in a closed system always increases. Order degrades into chaos, and the process is irreversible... unless energy is introduced from outside the system.*"

$$\Delta S \geq 0$$

Gravity

Back at Langley, as it was already getting dark, it started.

At first, I thought it was hail. A persistent drumming on the fortified bunker's roof, irregular but intensifying. Then the drumming became pounding, and the pounding became a continuous rumble, a severed roar of increasing intensity, and I reluctantly realized what I was hearing.

"Oh God," Sofia whispered. Her face went pale. "It's the rest of the stuff. It's all coming down."

Cautiously, we made our way to the nearest window. A heavy, bulletproof piece of reinforced glass made to structurally withstand the fallout from an atomic blast.

The view was chilling. The sky was falling, torn inside out. Across the airfield, on tops of the other buildings... the rest of those people, the stuff that had been sucked up into the upper atmosphere, above 70,000 feet, and stuck up there, along with

millions of objects, some broken to pieces, some whole, all plummeting back to Earth as gravity finally reclaimed its due.

A minivan door still attached to its hinges cartwheeled past the window, tumbling end over end before disappearing into the darkness. Behind it came a cascade of smaller debris: roof shingles spinning like playing cards, a child's bicycle twisted into an unrecognizable pretzel of chrome and rubber, a section of wooden fence still wearing its coat of white paint. Each piece caught the floodlights for a fraction of a second before vanishing, replaced by the next falling nightmare.

The sun had gone down now. The bunker shuddered.

Something massive had struck the roof. Not the soft percussion of flesh or the sharp crack of small debris; this was different. A deep, resonant boom that vibrated through the concrete floor and up through my legs. Dust cascaded from the ceiling, coating Sofia's dark hair in gray powder. Emergency lights flickered. For three heartbeats, everything went black.

When the backup generators kicked in, I saw her face in the red glow of the backup emergency lights, saw the terror I felt reflected in her eyes.

"The roof," she breathed. "Jack, the roof—"

Another impact. Closer. The fluorescent lights above us exploded in a shower of glass and sparks. Something had punched through, not all the way, but enough. A section of ceiling tile dangled precariously, and through the gap I could see twisted rebar and cracked concrete. Water, or something darker began to drip through, splattering against the floor in an irregular rhythm that somehow cut through the constant thunder from above.

"We need to move," I said, grabbing her arm. But where? The bunker was supposed to be safe. The bunker was supposed to hold.

We backed away from the window just as a filing cabinet; a full-sized, heavy duty six-drawer metal filing cabinet, streaked past the glass like a gray meteor. It struck the tarmac outside with enough force to embed itself two feet deep, papers exploding outward in a white burst that was immediately shredded by the rain of debris following behind it.

The objects came in waves, each wave worse than the last. First came the heavier debris: A section of aluminum siding, easily twelve feet long, speared through the air horizontally before slamming into the hangar across the airfield. The entire structure groaned, and I watched in horror as the corner of the building collapsed inward, swallowing the debris into its wounded metal belly. A pickup truck—an honest-to-God Ford F-150, still recognizable despite the damage, tumbled from the sky and crashed through what remained of the hangar roof, triggering a secondary collapse that sent a plume of dust and debris mushrooming into the air.

"Jesus Christ," Sofia whispered, her voice cracking. "That was someone's truck. Someone was driving that this morning. Someone was—"

She couldn't finish. Neither could I.

The falling intensified. Refrigerators. Office chairs. A washing machine that split apart on impact, scattering its drum and springs across the runway like mechanical entrails. A wooden deck, an entire deck, complete with railing and what might have

been a barbecue grill, landed intact for a single impossible second before shattering into a million bits of different sizes.

Something heavy struck the bunker again. This time, I heard the crack of concrete giving way. A fissure raced across the ceiling above us, zigzagging its way from one side to the other. More dust rained down. The emergency lights flickered again, and in that strobe-light darkness, I saw genuine panic in Sofia's eyes for the second time since this nightmare began.

"The reinforced section," I shouted over the roar. "Central corridor. Now!"

We ran. Behind us, I heard the ceiling finally surrender. A chunk of concrete the size of a dining table crashed down where we'd been standing, followed by a twisted mass of metal, part of an air conditioning unit, I realized, still trailing copper tubing like mechanical intestines. It had punched clean through eighteen inches of blast-resistant concrete. The bunker, designed to survive nuclear fallout, was being murdered by the ordinary detritus of suburban life.

The central corridor was narrower, deeper, better protected. We pressed ourselves against the wall, our backs to cold concrete, our hands finding each other in the near darkness. Above us, the bombardment continued, muffled now; but no less terrifying. Each impact translated through the structure as a physical sensation, a tremor that reminded us how fragile our shelter had become.

Through a small observation window at the end of the corridor, I could still see the airfield. The scene had become something from Hieronymus Bosch's fever dreams. Fires had started. A fuel truck had been struck and now burned with an intensity

that cast dancing orange shadows across the carnage. In that hellish light, I watched a grand piano, its lid torn away, spin lazily through the air before shattering against a parked Cessna. One of the Cessna's wings snapped clean off and went pinwheeling into the night, new projectiles joining the endless rain.

Sofia was crying uncontrollably now. Silent tears cutting tracks through the dust on her face. I pulled her closer, felt her body shaking against mine, and realized I was shaking too. My teeth chattered, though the bunker wasn't cold. Shock, I thought distantly. We're both going into shock.

"Make it stop," she whispered into my chest. "Jack, please make it stop."

I couldn't answer. There was no answer. All I could do was hold her tighter.

The sounds from outside had taken on a new quality. Layered, like a symphony of destruction with multiple movements playing simultaneously. The bass: heavy impacts from the larger debris, cars and machinery and sections of buildings torn apart in the upper atmosphere and now returning to Earth with devastating force. The midrange: the constant patter of smaller objects, household items and personal belongings and all the scattered remnants of lives interrupted. The treble: glass breaking, metal screaming, the sharp reports of things striking things in an endless percussion of chaos.

And beneath it all, worse than everything else, came the sounds that weren't sounds at all. The wet, heavy thuds. The crack of bones shattering. The softer, somehow more terrible sound of bodies hitting grass, the earth offering no real mercy. Others

struck buildings, vehicles, each other. The lucky ones, if you could call them lucky, splashed into a waterway in the distance.

After about what seemed like forever, the bombardment slowed a moment of hope immediately crushed by the next wave of falling destruction. It felt like a cruel joke. Thirty seconds of near silence, enough to make you believe it might be ending, then a surge of impacts so intense it made the first surge seem mild by comparison.

Through the observation window, I watched the Langley airfield transformed into a junkyard, a graveyard, a monument to chaos. Debris piled upon debris, creating strange hills and valleys where flat tarmac had been. Fires burned in half a dozen locations. The wind or perhaps the displacement from so many impacts had kicked up a swirling cloud of dust and ash and paper that reduced visibility to yards, then feet, then nothing at all.

The bunker groaned around us. Something in its structure had been compromised. I could hear it in the way the walls creaked, could feel it in the subtle shift of the floor beneath our feet. We were still safe, probably, for now, maybe. But the certainty I'd felt when we'd first entered this supposed sanctuary had evaporated entirely.

I looked at Sofia, she looked back at me, and we held each other, clutching tight, the way you do when you first hear of a loved one that had just passed. I squeezed my lips, pressing hard, tears filled my eyes as I tried to hold them back. Remorse was all I felt as we held tighter and tighter, crying.

Above us, the sky continued to empty itself. And all we could do was wait, and hold each other, and pray to whatever god might

still be listening that the roof would hold, that the walls would stand, that morning would eventually come to this endless, terrible night.

I stood frozen in the aftermath, watching the horror unfold through dust-choked air, my mind unable to process the scale of it. This wasn't a disaster. This was an extinction event. The end of human civilization, happening in real-time before my eyes.

Finally, just as quickly as it started, it all stopped. Everything went silent, eerily silent. We waited, anxiously, for 30 or 40 minutes... nothing. We decided to make our way through shredded metal scraps laying across the bunker floor around the few bodies that made it through the bunker roof and head outside to see in real time what the world looked like now.

As we headed out the bunker's main door, Sofia grabbed my arm.

"There!" She pointed toward the base's main gate. "There's someone moving!"

I saw them, a cluster of figures, five or six people, staggering through the carnage. They'd survived somehow, maybe found shelter during the ascent, or like us, they'd gotten impossibly lucky on the way down. They looked exhausted, dejected and looking for anyone to help.

"We should help them," Sofia said. She was already moving, running toward the gate.

"Sofia, wait—"

But she didn't wait. That was Sofia. See someone in need, run toward them. Don't calculate the odds, don't weigh the risks. Just act.

One more thing I loved that about her. I also hated it, because it made me feel like a coward by comparison.

She sprinted across the tarmac, dodging fallen debris, her borrowed military jacket flapping behind her. I ran after her, sprinting, my beer belly body in full payback mode; my legs burning, my lungs screaming.

She was about halfway to the survivors when a large shadow like a gigantic prehistoric creature passed over her.

I looked up and saw it: a delivery truck, a big box truck like the ones I'd loaded a thousand times at the Prime warehouse. White sides, company logo faded with age, the kind of truck that was so common you stopped seeing them. It was tumbling end over end, falling from God knows what altitude, and it was coming down directly in Sofia's path.

I screamed her name.

SOFIA!!

She looked over and saw me pointing upwards. In that frozen instant, our eyes met. I saw her realize what was about to happen, saw her try to change direction, try to dive out of the way. Her body twisted, athletic and graceful even in this moment of pure terror, her legs pushing sideways, dug into the tarmac.

The truck, unrelenting and without remorse, smashes into the tarmac about thirty feet to her left, The sheer force of the impact sent a shock wave of debris, asphalt, metal, glass all

spraying upward and outward like shrapnel from a homemade bomb. Sofia was lifted off her feet from the impact, her body rag-dolling, crumpling to the ground.

I reached her in seconds that felt like hours.

She was still alive when I got there, but barely. I grabbed hold of her and as I looked down at her body, I saw a piece of metal, part of the truck's undercarriage, I think, twisted and jagged. It was embedded in her chest. Her breathing was ragged, wet, each inhale accompanied by a bubbling sound that I knew, even with my limited medical knowledge, was not good.

"Jack." Her voice was barely a whisper. Blood flecked her lips.

"Don't talk." I was crying, shaking. I realized. Tears streaming down my face. "Save your strength. I'm going to get help, I'm going to—"

"Jack." Her hand found mine, her grip weak but insistent. Her skin was cold. Too cold. "Stop."

I stopped.

"I'm glad," she said. Her green eyes found mine, and somehow, impossibly, she smiled. That smile. That damn smile that had haunted me for all the days we were apart. "I'm glad it was you. At the end. I'm glad I wasn't alone."

"You're not going to die. You're going to be fine. We're going to—"

"Tell me something." Her voice was fading, each word requiring visible effort. "Tell me something good. About before."

I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think, knowing the woman I'd loved—still loved, had always loved was dying in my arms.

A faded memory permeated its way through the haze filling my brain. "The Fourth of July," I heard myself say. "About two years ago, I think it was. Remember? We watched the fireworks from the roof. You were scared, insecure but somehow you found strength and got on that roof. You burned the hot dogs and we ate them anyway, and they were terrible, and you got that mustard on your nose and didn't notice for like an hour." We laughed, oh what laughter. We laughed and laughed. I was babbling now, words spilling out uncontrolled. "You laughed so hard you snorted, and you were so embarrassed, and I thought..." I had to stop. Had to swallow the lump in my throat. "I thought it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard."

Laughing was hard now... but she laughed. Or tried to. It came out as a gargled, a gurgling cough, like talking with a mouth full of water. I watched blood spill from her mouth and run down her chin, and I wanted to scream, wanted to howl at the unfairness of it all.

"I remember," she whispered. Coughing. "I remember."

Her hand went slack in mine.

I stayed there for a long time. Minutes. Hours. I don't know. Nothing else had fallen. The sky was emptied, that awful last thing, last of the falling debris lay in silence across about 100 feet from us.

The survivors Sofia had been running to help made their way over, but I barely noticed them. I just sat there in the middle of the broken tarmac, holding her hand, staring at those green eyes that had stopped seeing.

When I finally stood up, my legs were numb and the sun was setting. The world had gone quiet. The terrible quiet of

aftermath, of this extinction-level devastation. The survivors; three men and two women, all shell-shocked, all strangers stood in a loose semicircle, watching me.

"I'm sorry," one of them said. A middle-aged man with a graying beard and kind eyes. "Was she... was she your wife?"

I looked at Sofia one last time. At the woman who'd left me because I wasn't enough, who'd found me again at the end of the world, who'd died trying to help people she didn't know. At the woman who'd been planning to come back to me that very morning.

"No," I said. "But she should have been."

I picked up an American flag that had fallen with the debris torn, dirty, but intact, and draped it over her body. It was all I could think to do. A small gesture for someone who deserved so much more.

Then I turned to the survivors.

"We need to find shelter," I said. My voice sounded strange to my own ears. Flat. Distant. Like it belonged to someone else. "More debris could fall. And it's already getting cold; it's going to get colder."

The bearded man nodded.

"There's a bunker we found. Fortified. It got a bit damaged from the falling debris, but it'll be safe there."

"Then that's where we're going," they all agreed.

I didn't look back at Sofia as we walked away. I couldn't.

Survivors

As we all made our way towards the bunker, the gray haired, bearded man, introduced himself as Marcus, and said, they had spotted the military facility during their desperate search for cover.

There was something odd about the way he spoke. Not hesitant, but direct, purposeful. His words reflected wisdom, wise beyond his years, as if he'd lived a longer life than you'd presume, judging by the features of his face. He seemed middle aged lacking the normal creases around his facial features that are usually present, especially in human males when they reach this age. He described things that any normal person would not have known of at this stage in life. He had a peculiar way of speaking. Phrases that felt lifted from another century, or perhaps no century at all. He called cars "conveyances" and asked if Jack wanted to "take refreshment". He described the sky fall as "the sky expressing its temperament," as if it were a living thing he'd personally negotiated with. Walked as if in charge...when he immediately took the lead and led the way; I let him. I grew suspicious about his intentions and wanted to observe from behind. And even stranger, it felt like he already knew my intentions. It was all unusual, uncomfortable. He led us through the bunker corridors without a single wrong turn, his footsteps never faltering even in the near-darkness. I didn't question it.

In the still of the backup emergency light's hazy red glow, as we traversed the wreckage inside the bunker, back through the narrow hallways, I started thinking about Sofia, I couldn't help

it. This was one of the last times I saw her face, saw her alive. My thoughts were visceral, I saw her laying there, on the ground wrapped in that flag. I could feel her hand going limp in mine, I didn't want to notice anything else. I wanted to dwell on the moment as long as I could. But I had to force myself back to reality, back to the task at hand, I filed away the small inconsistencies about Marcus. A thread I could pull up later.

The deeper we traversed down the hallways, Marcus still leading the way, it started getting musty, the air seeping through the cracks, and the busted-up windows and ceiling, thick from the decomposing bodies outside. Suddenly, as if emerging from a deep sleep, the primary emergency lights flickered to back to life and we descended further... took a left and down a set of stairs, through a narrow hallway that was about 4 feet wide with smaller than usual steps, leading us one level down, beneath the main floor, revealing a large room without a door and rows of metal bunks decked with thin mattresses. The bed frames painted gray, typical for this style of military hardware. There were piles of stacked crates, full of supplies preserved for situations that necessitated hunkering down for long periods while the threat was eliminated. They were all a single matte forest green, marked with white faded, large, bold stenciling that read SUPPLIES, typical of military armaments of the time. We opened a few to check their contents and found that each one was loaded with a distinct payload but had multiple iterations. There must've been a hundred of them, copies of the same cargo rations, water, clothes, munitions.

There was a small command center with equipment that looked like it hadn't been updated since the Reagan administration.

Banks of the same olive-drab matte paint, consoles lined the walls, mounted atop a long wooden table made of oak. Their faces cluttered with analog dials, toggle switches, and indicator lights behind thick plastic covers, the kind you had to flip up before accessing any of the switches underneath, designed to prevent being accidentally activated. A row of rotary phones sat on an adjacent thick, metal desk, each a different color: red, black, yellow. The red one had a scared label that simply read PRIORITY.

CRT monitors with curved glass screens sat on the desk, dark and silent, their phosphorescent glow long dead. A massive reel-to-reel tape system stood in the corner like a museum piece, its magnetic spools frozen mid-rotation. Paper readouts from ancient dot-matrix printers spilled from a tray, the perforated edges still intact.

The main backboard was a wall-mounted status board with hand-labeled sections: DEFCON STATUS, COMMS, ENVIRONMENTAL, BLAST DOORS. Small plastic tabs had been slid into place decades ago and never moved. Whoever had last manned this station had left it at DEFCON 4—probably during the Russia U.S. tensions before the Berlin Wall fell back in the Gorbachev era.

A hand-crank emergency radio sat on a shelf beside a Geiger counter in a canvas carrying case. Laminated procedures were taped to every surface. There were checklists for scenarios no one ever wanted to follow. IN EVENT OF NUCLEAR ATTACK, one began.

There was a sort of faint metallic tang of electronics that hadn't been powered on in decades cutting through the thickened air. It was an odd sick smell that we had no choice but to endure for the night.

"Home sweet home," muttered one of the other survivors, a young woman with a shaved head and a tattoo of a phoenix rising from flames on the side of her neck. She'd introduced herself as Dez. "Well, at least we're all safe in here. Good for one night, eh."

There were six of us now. Six strangers bound by nothing else except the will to survive.

We each claimed a corner, a bunk, a stretch of cold floor or whatever small territory we could call our own in this inverse, concrete tomb. It wasn't much. But after what we'd been through, walls that didn't collapse felt like a luxury.

Then it got silent. It was unsettling, awkward. My Apple watch that was about to die read 5 minutes to midnight. I laid back propping my head up on the flat, thin pillow and began to relax and reflect... in my thoughts, I started searching for patterns in the chaos, for some thread of logic that might explain how the world had broken apart and why we were still in it. I remembered the emergency broadcast... two worlds occupying the same space for a brief period. It didn't make sense then and it still doesn't make sense.

Then, breaking the silence, Marcus, odd, almost out of place, started. He claimed to be a professor at William & Mary, History. He was maybe late 40s or early 50s, with that gray hair, beard and eyes that were an unusual shade, almost silver in this dim light. He carried himself with a quiet confidence that seemed out of place given the circumstances. Everyone else was rattled, traumatized, barely holding together. Marcus was calm. Watchful. Like a man who'd seen worse.

“Does anyone have any special skills we can use to help fix the communication issue?” “Get any of the vehicles running?”

“Nice to meet you, Marcus.”

Dez chimed in... “I’m a mechanic from Norfolk, 16-six years.” She had calloused hands, didn’t stand too tall, maybe 5 feet two, and a little on the husky side. A red and black bandana adorned the upper part of her scalp covering her shaved head. She was a similar shade of brown that I’d grown accustomed to having been with Sofia; all that coupled with a vocabulary that would make a sailor blush. Said, she'd been in town visiting her sister when the event happened. They'd been in a car, heading to the sister's apartment, when the roof of the double decker freeway had exploded upward. The car, on its ascent, got pinned sideways between two of the freeway pilons that had tipped onto each other and had provided just enough resistance to keep them from joining the chaos that raged overhead.

“I don’t know much about electronics and radios, but I’d be glad to help wherever I can.”

Her sister, Elena, was there too, quieter than Dez, but with none of the attitude. She was younger, maybe twenty-two, with blond hair... she was almost opposite of Dez, white, and blue eyes adorned the milky features of her face. She must’ve just started in the workforce, probably following in her sister’s footsteps. Her eyes where hollow suggesting she'd seen a lot of life for her age and more than most could bare during the event and it appears to have broken something inside her. She barely spoke, and when she did, her voice was barely above a murmur. She was lankly, looked frail like a porcelain doll.

That's great, Dez... I know where the motor pool and keys to them are... Marcus said, assuredly. Let's take a look in the morning.

Another curiosity that helped solidify my thoughts about Marcus. He sure was familiar with this operation.

The other two were a married Chinese couple, they'd taken on American names: Tom and Linda Chen, typical of first gen Chinese immigrants. Linda was a housewife and never worked, she just stayed home and raised their children. They were retirees. Tom was an electrician by trade. They'd been fishing on the Chesapeake. They had no idea they were in the midst of a world changing catastrophe. They were in their late sixties, weathered and practical, with the kind of quiet competence that came from decades of handling whatever life threw at them. When the event struck, they'd been in their boat. The vessel had capsized, throwing them into the water, but the bay itself had provided protection from the atmospheric displacement. A safe zone below the mountain peaks where the catastrophic event had little to no effect like being in a swimming pool as a tornado passes through a city positioning yourself below the vortex, making it one of the safest places just as it was during this event. They'd clung to the overturned hull until the chaos subsided, then swam to shore.

And then there was me. Jack McPherson. Warehouse grunt. Nobody special.

Just a guy who had watched the woman he loved, the one he would've done most anything to get back to, die in his arms.

I found a bunk in the corner, as far from the others as I could get, and sat there against my pillow, staring at nothing while

they moved around me taking inventory of supplies. Trying to get the ancient radio equipment working. Doing the practical things that survivors do, because staying busy was easier than thinking about what had happened.

I should have been helping. I knew that. But every time I closed my eyes, I saw Sofia's face. Every time I blinked, I saw her smile, that final smile, the one she'd managed even as she bled out on the tarmac. Her haunting memories paralyzed me.

“I'm glad it was you”

The words echoed in my head, over and over, a loop I couldn't escape.

And then there was the other thing she'd said. The thing that made it all so much worse.

“I was going to come see you today. This morning. I'd decided maybe money isn't everything”

She'd been planning to come back to me. That very morning. And I'd been standing in my kitchen, doing dishes, thinking about her, while she was across the way getting ready to give us another chance.

And now she was gone. Spuds and Simon were probably gone too. Her cats, the troublemakers she'd complained about even while she loved them. All of it, gone.

I knew I had to get over it if I was going to survive this. I needed to find a way to move on and soon.

"Hey."

I looked up. Dez had dropped onto the bunk across from me, straddling it backward so she could rest her arms on the frame. Her expression was hard, assessing.

"You look like shit," she said.

"Thanks."

"I mean it. You need to eat something. Drink some water. We don't know how long we're going to be down here."

"I'm fine."

She snorted, a harsh, derisive sound. "No, you're not. None of us are. But we're alive, which is more than most people can say right now. So, get your head in the game, because we're going to need everyone functioning at 110% if we're going to get past this."

I looked at her, really looked at her for the first time. She was young, with hard eyes that had probably seen too much even before today. The phoenix tattoo made sense now. Rising from the ashes. Someone who'd been through fire before and come out the other side.

"How do you do it?" I asked. "How do you just... keep going?"

She shrugged, a sharp motion of her shoulders. "What's the alternative? Curl up and die? I'm 34, lived a lot of life and have more life to live so, giving up is just not my style." She paused, studying me with uncomfortable intensity. "I saw you on the tarmac with her. You lost someone, someone special. Who was she, a girlfriend?"

I didn't answer. Couldn't.

"Yeah," she said, her voice softening almost imperceptibly. "Me too. My sister's girlfriend. Maria. I considered her my other sister. She was in her apartment when the roof went. Elena and I were in the car, heading over. But then we got pinned between those two pilons, not far from here, we could see the apartment. We saw the roof blow and we saw her go up." Her

jaw tightened. "After things started settling, we got ourselves out of the car and went around looking for her."

"After a few hours, we felt we had lost her and we would never see her again. There was nothing else we could do."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be useful." She stood up and grabbed a bottle of water from a nearby crate, tossed it to me. I caught it reflexively.

"Drink. Eat. Then help Marcus with the radio. He thinks he might be able to get a signal out, but let's be serious, this guy seems like he'd be useless with anything more complicated than a chalkboard."

"Probably needs all the help he can get."

She walked away before I could respond.

I sat there for a time, the water bottle heavy in my hand. Then I twisted off the cap and drank. It was lukewarm and tasted faintly of plastic, but being as thirsty as I was, this felt like best thing I'd ever tasted. My body, at least, remembered that it needed to survive even if my mind hadn't gotten the memo.

Dez was right. Gotta keep moving. The alternative was curling up and dying.

And I wasn't ready for that. Not yet. Not when I still didn't understand what had happened, or why, or what took the only woman I'd ever loved away from me and what came next.

I finished the water, grabbed a packet of crackers from the supply crate, and went to help Marcus with the radio.

There would be time to grieve later.

If there was a later.

Back on the electronic stack, the radio refused to cooperate. There was nothing but static across all frequencies, as if the entire electromagnetic spectrum had been wiped clean. Tom, who'd been a radio operator in Vietnam, and a retired electrician, joined in and fiddled with the equipment alongside Marcus, swapping vacuum tubes, looking for spares, finding none and, as I watched, I could see that even his expertise couldn't conjure a signal from the left-over void.

"Could be atmospheric interference," Tom said, rubbing his eyes. "Whatever caused the event might have ionized the upper atmosphere. Could take days for things to settle down enough for radio waves to propagate normally."

"Or there's simply no one left to transmit," Marcus replied. His voice was certain, matter-of-fact. The voice of someone stating an obvious truth rather than a horrific reality.

An hour passed. Then two. I looked down at my watch and saw that the battery had given up. There were 12 clocks lined up on the wall about 3 feet above the top of the equipment table where Marcus and Larry had been working trying to fix the radio. They were the kind of clocks you'd see in a doomsday movie counting down the hour to Defcon 4. They all had red faces and large reflective tick marks marking the hours and minutes. The third one from the left had a label above it on a rectangular piece of metal painted black. It was about 3 by 4 inches with the letters < U.S.A. > etched into it, painted white. It read 3:30.

“Three, thirty?” “It’s already three thirty!?”

“We all need to finish up and get some rest. We have a long hard day ahead of us tomorrow.”

The words came out like a newly appointed drill Sargent who’d been overseeing their battalion for a few weeks, just beginning to understand what their leadership role entails. My voice cracked and it felt a bit uncertain as I said it, but I looked around to see how everyone received it. They acknowledged and nodded. It felt good. I realized that someone needed to be in charge and since I had a wary feeling about Marcus, I decided then that the right person to lead the group needed to be me?

Linda, sitting nearby on her own bunk, with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, shrugged, laid her head down and fell almost immediately asleep.

I watched her for a short minute, closed my eyes, and nodded off.

Breadcrumbs

Around 06:00, the alarm bells in my head were screaming, waking me after I had been asleep for what seemed like only a few seconds. I awoke in a panic, sweating from head to toe. It was an immemorable nightmare. I was in a state of hysteria. The unforgettable images of disfigured bodies and Sofia stuck in my head. I had to get out; to get some air. So, I slipped out of the bunker trying not to awake the others using that fast penguin walk, like a suspect trying to evade the police without looking suspicious.

The bunker added to my already panicky state... it was stuffy, claustrophobic, and the smell of dead, decomposing bodies added to the realism, it was painful, depressing. Once I cleared the doorway, I sprinted as fast as my feet would carry me, dodging the debris field that laid everywhere. I needed to see her one last time. I needed closure before I could move on, I needed to say goodbye.

On the surface out on the tarmac, it was quiet. The rain of debris had long since ended, leaving behind a landscape of devastation that glowed faintly under a half-moon emerging from the clouds. Bodies lay piled up everywhere; on the runways, on the grass, draped over vehicles and wreckage everywhere. It was inescapable. Rigor mortis had already set in. Bellies swelling, arms puffing up, stuck in all sorts of awkward and sometimes in inconceivable positions, and the smell was getting worse, that sweet-sick odor of decomposition that would get worse, still, as the days passed.

I found Sofia where I'd left her, under the American flag and small against the vastness of the ruined base. I sat down beside her, not caring that I was sitting in her blood, and I talked.

I told her things I should have said when she was alive. That she was right about me. That I'd been scared my whole life. Scared of failure, scared of success, scared of wanting something and not going for it. That she'd been the best thing that ever happened to me, and I'd let her go because I was too much of a coward to be the person she deserved.

I told her about the light I'd seen on the mountain. The coordinates in the emergency broadcast. The sense I had, deep in my gut that this wasn't over. That whatever had caused this disaster was still out there, and if I could find it, maybe I could do something about it.

"I know that sounds crazy," I said, my voice hoarse. "And I don't even know what I'd do if I found it. I'm not a hero, Sofia. I'm not brave like you. But I can't just... sit here. Waiting to die. You wouldn't want that. You'd want me to try."

I told her about my sudden urge to lead the group. I said it would've made her happy. To see how I'd finally grown into the person she had always seen. That it she was right. It was always in me and that I was remorseful it had taken an event like this to bring it out.

"I'm sorry Sofia. Sorry, about everything. Sorry, about not being that guy. The guy you wanted, you needed." With tears running down my dirt-filled face and my lips quivering, I managed to say what I had always wanted to tell her. "I love you Sofia, I've loved you from the beginning." "I'll make you proud and figure this out and make the world right again."

The flag rustled in the wind, but there was no answer. There never would be.

I don't know how long I sat there. Long enough for the moon to track across the sky, long enough for the cold to seep into my bones. Eventually, I heard footsteps behind me.

"She was important to you."

"Marcus?" I didn't turn around.

"Yeah."

"Tell me about her."

I don't know why I did. Maybe because he asked. Maybe because the grief was a pressure in my chest that needed release. But I found myself talking about Sofia, about our history, about the woman who'd tried to make me better and left when I refused to try. About watching her die on that tarmac, reaching for strangers because that's who she was. About her cats, Spuds and Simon, probably dead now in the wreckage of her apartment.

Marcus listened without interrupting. When I finished, he stayed standing for a minute or two. Then he lowered himself to the ground beside me, moving with a strange fluidity for a man his age, and looked at the flag-draped body of the woman I'd loved.

"She saw something worth saving," he finally said. "In those strangers. In you. That impulse to help, to sacrifice for others even when survival is uncertain, it's remarkable. Rare, even."

"It got her killed."

Then he said some things that were a bit unnerving.

"Perhaps it's best she passed. And perhaps it's what makes your kind worth..." He paused, an odd hitch in his voice. "Worth knowing."

Your kind, best she passed. Strange phrasing. But I was too exhausted to think much of it.

"You're a history professor," I said, changing the subject. I get the distinct feeling you're not from around here. "So, tell me, have you ever experienced anything like this before? Dimensional intersections, universes colliding?"

Marcus's expression flickered, so briefly I almost missed it. Something that looked almost like pain.

"History is full of cataclysms," he said reluctantly. "Extinction events. Civilizations wiped out overnight. The dinosaurs. Pompeii. The Bronze Age collapse. Humanity has a remarkable talent for survival, but also a troubling blindness to the patterns that repeat."

"Patterns?"

"Catastrophe rarely arrives without warning, Jack. There are always signs. Precursors. The question is whether anyone is paying attention." He leaned forward slightly, his silvery gray eyes catching the moonlight. "Tell me, during your... ascent. Did you notice anything unusual?"

I almost laughed. "Everything was unusual. I was flying through the air with my refrigerator."

"Beyond that. Something that didn't fit. Something that felt... deliberate."

The memory surfaced before I could stop it. That flash of blue-white light on the distant ridge. Geometric. Precise. Wrong.

"There was something," I admitted. "A light. On a mountain, I think. South of Pittsburgh. It was only there for a second or two, but it didn't look natural. Too... clean. Too perfect."

Marcus's eyes sharpened. "Could you estimate the location?"

"I don't know. The Appalachians somewhere. The emergency broadcast mentioned coordinates; anomalous energy signatures. Thirty-eight-point eight north, seventy-nine-point four west."

"You remembered the coordinates." It wasn't a question.

"I remember numbers. Always have. Math formulas, social security numbers, phone numbers, dates... they just stick. Useless talent for a warehouse worker, I know, but..." I shrugged.

Marcus was quiet for a moment, and I could have sworn I saw something like hope flicker across his features. "Not useless," he said softly. "Not useless at all."

He stood, brushing dirt from his pants with a gesture that seemed almost automatic.

"You should rest, Jack. The days ahead will demand everything you have."

"How do you know what the days ahead will demand?"

He glanced back at me over his shoulder, and in the moonlight, his face looked different somehow. Older. Stranger. Like a mask that had slipped, just for a moment.

"History, remember? Patterns repeat. Survivors must be ready."

He walked back toward the bunker, his footsteps silent on the debris-strewn ground. Too silent, I realized. A man his age, walking on gravel and broken glass, should have made more noise.

I filed that away too.

Then I turned back to Sofia, and I stayed with her, tucked myself under the flag, until dawn painted the sky in shades of red and gold, like the world itself was bleeding.

When I finally returned to the bunker, the others were already awake and moving. Someone had found coffee in the supplies instant, and stale, but hot, and the smell of it was almost enough to make me feel human again.

"There you are." Dez handed me a metal cup. "Thought you might have fallen off the edge of the earth. You know, if there's still an edge."

"Just needed some air."

She studied me for a moment, then nodded. She didn't ask where I'd been. She didn't need to.

"Marcus has an idea," she said. "About what to do next. You should hear it."

We gathered around one of the bunks me, Dez, Elena, Tom, Linda, and Marcus. Six survivors in a concrete tomb, trying to figure out how to navigate the end of the world.

"The immediate priority is information," Marcus said. His voice was calm, professorial, a man used to commanding attention. "We know the event was global. We know it was catastrophic. What we don't know is the extent of the damage, the number of

survivors, or whether any organized response is being mounted."

"The radio's dead," Tom pointed out. "Can't get a signal anywhere."

"Then we need to explore. Carefully. Systematically. Map the local area. Identify resources. Find other survivors." Marcus paused. "And investigate the anomaly."

"What anomaly?" Linda asked.

Marcus glanced at me. I took a breath.

"During the event," I said, "I saw something. A light on a mountain ridge, south of Pittsburgh. It wasn't natural. And the emergency broadcast mentioned coordinates that pointed to somewhere in the Appalachians where anomalous energy signatures were detected before the event started. Before."

"Before?" Dez's eyes narrowed. "Like, someone knew this was coming?"

"Or something caused it," I said. "Something at those coordinates."

I'm certain of it.

Sofia and I were rescued by a helicopter, flown by a pilot and her assistant. I believed were on their way to investigate this anomaly when the cataclysm happened, demanding that they save their own lives. They found us on their way back here.

Silence. The others exchanged glances, skeptical, uncertain, maybe a little afraid.

"That's a hell of a thing to suggest," Tom said slowly. "You're saying this wasn't natural? That someone or something did this on purpose?"

"I don't know what I'm saying. I don't think it was military. But the timing bothers me. Anomalous energy signatures detected prior to the event. Not during. Prior. That's not a coincidence."

More silence. Then Dez spoke.

"So, what do you want to do about it? Go traipsing across the apocalypse to investigate some mysterious light on a mountain?"

"Eventually, maybe. But Marcus is right. First, we need to understand what we're dealing with. What's left of the world. Whether there's anyone else out there." I could feel my voice gaining more confidence.

Marcus nodded. "We should send out scouts. Small groups, well-supplied, to explore the surrounding area. See what we can learn."

The conversation continued. Logistics, supplies, who would go where, but I was only half-listening. My mind kept drifting back to those coordinates. 38.8 north, 79.4 west. The light on the mountain. The word in the emergency broadcast that nobody else seemed to have noticed.

Prior.

Whatever had caused this disaster, it hadn't been an accident. It hadn't been random.

And somewhere in the mountains, I was willing to bet, the answers were waiting.

“I think we should go as one small group. Investigate the situation, head right to the source,” overriding Marcus’ suggestions.

Marcus, had moved over to the command console, his voice echoing softly through the bunker. He was standing with his back to the room, speaking in a low murmur that I couldn't quite make out.

At first, I thought he was praying. But then I caught fragments, numbers, coordinates, what sounded like a sequence of some kind. And underneath it all, a faint electronic hum that definitely hadn't been there before.

I stayed still, kept my breathing even, watched through half-closed eyes.

The rest had formed a group of their own, mulling over what was said, what was suggested.

I watched as Marcus's hand move over the console, not pressing buttons, but hovering above them, fingers tracing patterns in the air. The hum intensified briefly, then stopped. He lowered his hand and stood there motionless.

Then, without turning around, he spoke.

“What have you seen, Jack”

How had he known I was watching him?

"Restless," I said, sitting up and abandoning all pretense.

"Thought I heard something."

"The equipment settling. Old buildings, old machines. They make noises."

He turned to face me, and in the dim light, his expression was unreadable. But something in his posture had changed. A sprig of light hit his face from the crack in the ceiling. He looked tired. Weighed down by something invisible.

"May I ask you a question, Jack?"

"Sure."

"If you discovered that a great catastrophe was approaching something that would destroy everything you knew, but you were forbidden from warning others directly, what would you do?"

The question caught me off guard. "Forbidden by who?"

"It doesn't matter. The constraint is absolute. Direct interference is not possible. But indirect action, guidance, suggestions, helping others reach the truth themselves that remains open to you." He fixated on me with those pale silvery eyes. "What would you do?"

I thought about it. Really thought about it.

"I'd do whatever I could," I said finally. "Even if it wasn't enough. Even if the rules said I couldn't. Because doing nothing would be worse."

Marcus smiled. It was the first genuine smile I'd seen from him. Warm but desperately sad.

"Yes," he said quietly. "That's what I thought you'd say."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. Set it on the console.

As he spoke, his smile faltered and a thin line of blood traced his upper lip. He wiped it away quickly, sat down harder than he meant to, and pretended not to notice.

"I found this earlier. Among the old files. It seemed... relevant." He turned and walked toward the stairs leading up to the surface. "I'm going to check the perimeter. Get some rest."

He was gone before I could respond.

I waited until his footsteps faded, then crossed to the console and picked up the paper. It was a hand-drawn map. Not old, despite what Marcus had claimed. The paper was too white, the ink too fresh. It showed the Appalachian Mountain range, with a single location circled in red.

Coordinates were written beside it: 38.8°N, 79.4°W.

Below the coordinates, a single word: ORIGIN.

And beneath that, drawn with unsettling precision, a symbol I'd never seen before, a series of interlocking geometric shapes that seemed to shift and move the longer I stared at them, like an optical illusion that wouldn't resolve.

My hands were shaking.

Marcus hadn't found this map. He'd made it. Made it for me.

Dropping Hints, he said. Helping others reach the truth themselves.

I folded the paper and slipped it into my pocket.

I didn't know what any of this meant. Didn't know what Marcus was, or why he was helping me, or what waited at those coordinates. But I knew one thing with absolute certainty:

I was going to find out.

4: Road to ORIGIN

The Fermi Paradox asks: "*in a universe so vast and ancient, where is everyone? One theory proposes a Great Filter—some barrier that destroys civilizations before they can spread to the stars. Another theory: the universe isn't empty. It's quiet. And silence, in nature, usually means something is hunting.*"

N = R × fp × ne × fl × fi × fc × L

Broadcast

I sat on my bunk with the map spread across my knees, studying it by the dim glow of the emergency lights. The coordinates. The word ORIGIN. That impossible symbol that seemed to writhe and shift every time I looked at it directly.

Marcus had given me this. Not found it, given it. Which meant he knew something about what had happened. Something he couldn't or wouldn't say outright.

Breadcrumbs.

The more I thought about it, the more questions multiplied. How had Marcus survived the ascent? He'd been with the other survivors when they approached the base, but he never talked about his experience during the event. Never mentioned tumbling through the sky, or the terror of falling, or watching people die. Everyone else had stories traumatic, broken stories that spilled out at odd moments. Marcus had silence.

And there was the way he talked. The odd phrasings Dez had noticed. Your kind. Your broadcast systems. Like English was a second language he'd mastered almost perfectly but not quite.

I should have been afraid of him. Maybe I was, somewhere underneath the exhaustion and grief. But stronger than the fear was something else: the sense that Marcus was trying to help. That whatever secrets he was keeping, he was on our side.

Or at least, he wanted to be.

There was something else, too. Something I'd noticed earlier but hadn't fully processed. When we'd first entered the bunker, Marcus had picked up an old compass from one of the supply crates. He'd held it looking at it, staring at it, turning it over in his hands, examining it with an intensity that seemed disproportionate to the object. His fingers had traced the metal casing with something almost like... recognition. Like he was remembering something from a long time ago.

Then he'd set it down and moved on, and I'd forgotten about it until now.

Small inconsistencies. Threads to be pulled.

The sun light shone through the chaos now, came filtering down into the bunker through the stairwell in pale yellow shafts. The others stirred, groaning, finishing their coffee, stretching, facing another day, the next day after, surviving a... a world that had ended.

Tom and Linda huddled together on their bunk, speaking in low murmurs, Chinese maybe. Their hands were intertwined, the automatic intimacy of a couple who'd been together for

decades. Whatever horrors they'd witnessed, they were facing them together. I envied that.

Elena sat alone in the corner, her knees pulled up to her chest, staring at nothing. She'd barely spoken since they arrived, and when she did, her voice was flat, affect-less. The thousand-yard stare of someone who was present but who's mind was miles away, in another galaxy maybe. Dez checked on her periodically, bringing her water, food, speaking in soft Spanish that I couldn't understand. Sisters looking out for each other.

Marcus was nowhere to be seen.

I was about to fold the map and slip it into my pocket when a sound cut through the silence of the bunker, a harsh crackle of static that made everyone jump.

"Holy shit," Tom said, took us all by surprise, not something you'd expect coming out the mouth of an old Chinese guy. We all scramble toward the radio equipment. "I think I've got something."

We gathered around the ancient console, crowding close as Tom adjusted dials with trembling fingers. The static ebbed and flowed, punctuated by fragments of sound that might have been words. Then, suddenly, a voice emerged, distorted, fading in and out, but unmistakably human.

"—priority transmission from the National Emergency Coordination Center—"

The emergency bands never truly settled. Between the NOAA fragments and the dead air, another voice cut across the static, flat, transactional: 'Richmond sector. Coordinates pinned. Thin-place salvage in progress. Do not interfere.'

Dez glanced at me, the message repeating twice with different call signs. 'Helix,' she said. 'I've heard the name. Post-event raiders with pre-event ethics.'

"Turn it up," Dez said urgently. "Turn it up!"

Tom maxed the volume, and we leaned in, straining to catch every word.

"—collaboration with surviving members of NOAA, NASA, and the International Physics Consortium. Seventy-two hours post-event, our remaining scientific teams have developed a more complete model of what occurred."

Shuto Expressway was a sculpture of stalled steel. Above it, a rain of office chairs and potted trees fell in slow choreography. On the Sumida River, a tourist boat had become a lifeboat; the captain, a retired engineer, counted survivors as if intake numbers could anchor the morning. Over the radio: fragments in Japanese, then English, then only static. A woman in a lab coat stood on the museum steps, cradling a violin as if sound might stitch reality. When the sky finally gave back its debt, she set the instrument down gently and started bandaging hands.

The Third Mainland Bridge shivered, then held. Pastor Okorie's voice carried over the lagoon, not as sermon but as instruction: 'Under. Hold. Breathe.' He led strangers beneath the market awnings while roofs lifted like paper. Later, later meant an hour, or a year, who could say. He and the mechanics from Makoko dragged tarps into the open field and began counting in Yoruba, then English, then silent prayer.

In the wind farms above Comodoro Rivadavia, turbines bowed to the sky and snapped back. Lucia, who tuned blades by ear, crawled beneath the service truck and held her breath while the

cab floated and then settled like a tired animal. The Atlantic was iron brown, rusty, promise and warning. When the fall came, she tied a rope to the bumper and climbed down toward two helmets in the froth; later, she wrote two names on the hood with grease pencil and started the truck.

There were so many crossed frequencies it was hard to make out what was going on... it sounded like a bunch of gibberish.

"Shit! Twenty-four-hours. One whole day. Had it really been that long? Time had lost all meaning in the chaos." I expressed.

Then, finally, it settled in—

"At approximately 10:47 AM Eastern Standard Time, Earth experienced what we are designating a Dimensional Intersection Event, or DIE." The voice paused, and we could hear exhaustion in it, someone who hadn't slept in days, reading from notes they'd probably written while the world burned around them. "Two planetary bodies, Earth and an exoplanet we have designated X-1, briefly occupied intersecting spatial coordinates across parallel dimensional planes."

"Parallel dimensions," Linda whispered. "That's... that's science fiction."

"Not anymore," I said quietly.

The broadcast continued: "The gravitational interaction released energy consistent with Einstein's field equations: $G_{\mu\nu} + \lambda g_{\mu\nu} = \frac{8\pi G}{c^4} T_{\mu\nu}$..." The voice stumbled over the formula, clearly reading something they didn't fully understand. "Where the stress-energy tensor $T_{\mu\nu}$ experienced localized infinity as mass from both realities momentarily superimposed."

I thought about that for a moment. Localized infinity. Two planets trying to exist in the same space at the same time. The math alone would break reality.

"The atmospheric displacement experienced globally resulted from a catastrophic pressure differential," the voice continued, growing stronger now, more confident in the explanation.

"Delta-P equals P-zero minus P-void, approximately 14.7 PSI. The upward force on structures can be calculated as F equals delta-P times A."

That matched what I'd figured out while tumbling through the sky. Pressure differential. The atmosphere rushing upward to fill a void that shouldn't have existed.

"For an average residential roof of 1,500 square feet that's 216,000 square inches. This produced upward force exceeding three million pounds. Far beyond structural tolerances designed for downward loading."

Three million pounds. I'd done that math in my head while watching my refrigerator float past me. Nice to know I'd gotten it right.

The voice shifted, taking on a more urgent tone: "Critical update: Anomalous energy signatures continue to emanate from coordinates thirty-eight-point-eight degrees north, seventy-nine-point-four degrees west, in the central Appalachian region."

My blood ran cold. Those coordinates. The same coordinates from the first emergency broadcast. The same coordinates on the map burning a hole in my pocket.

"These readings suggest the dimensional breach may not be fully sealed. Repeat: The event may not be concluded."

"Not concluded?" Dez said. "What the hell does that mean?"

"All personnel with scientific or military training are urged to investigate, if possible," the broadcast continued. "Current survival estimate: zero-point-eight to one-point-two percent of global population. Approximately sixty-five to ninety-five million survivors worldwide."

The number hit like a physical blow. Sixty-five to ninety-five million. Out of eight billion. I'd known it was bad, but hearing it quantified, reduced to cold statistics by an exhausted voice on a dying radio...

"All survivors are advised to seek shelter, conserve resources, and await further—"

The static surged, swallowing the voice. Tom frantically adjusted the dials, but the signal was gone, replaced by the empty hiss of dead air.

"No, no, no," he muttered, slapping the side of the console.

"Come back, damn it. Come back!"

But the radio offered nothing. After a few more seconds, even the static faded, and the equipment went dark. A thin wisp of smoke curled up from somewhere inside the console.

We all backed up.

"It's fried," Dez said flatly. "Whatever was keeping it alive just gave out."

We stood in silence, processing what we'd heard. Sixty-five to ninety-five million survivors. The event may not be concluded.

And those coordinates—38.8°N, 79.4°W—repeated twice now, like a beacon calling out from the mountains.

"The Appalachians," Tom said slowly. "That's... what, couple hundred miles from here?"

"About one-eighty," I said. "If you stick to the main roads."

Everyone turned to look at me.

"You've been thinking about this?" Dez said.

"I need to talk to you," I said quietly. "Privately."

She raised an eyebrow but didn't argue. We moved to the far corner of the bunker, away from the others.

"What's up?"

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the map and handed it to her.

Dez studied it for a long moment, her expression shifting from confusion to suspicion to something like alarm. "Where did you get this?"

"Marcus."

"The professor?"

"He left it for me last night. Said he 'found it in the old files,' but look at the paper. Look at the ink. That map was made recently. Maybe yesterday."

Dez held the paper up to the light, examining it with the same critical eye she probably used when diagnosing engine problems. "You're right. This isn't old." Her eyes found the symbol at the bottom, and I watched her face go pale. "What the hell is that?"

"I don't know. But those coordinates—38.8 north, 79.4 west—they were in the emergency broadcast. 'Anomalous energy signatures detected prior to event.' And when I was up there, falling through the sky, I saw something. A light on a mountain ridge, shadows. Blue-white, geometric shapes. Like nothing natural."

"You think they're connected?"

"I think whatever is at those coordinates might explain what happened. Why the world just..." I gestured vaguely at everything. "And I think Marcus knows more than he's telling us."

Dez was quiet for a moment, processing. Then she handed the map back to me.

"So, what do you want to do about it?"

"I want to go there. To the coordinates."

"With no working vehicles, no supplies, no idea what we're walking into?"

"I know."

She stared at me. "You're serious."

"Sofia died trying to help strangers," I said. The words came out harder than I intended. "She didn't hesitate. Didn't calculate the odds. She just saw people who needed help and she ran toward them. I've spent my whole life not doing that. Playing it safe. Staying small. And where did it get me? A shitty apartment and a warehouse job and nothing to show for any of it." I took a breath. "Something is wrong with the world, Dez. Not just the

disaster, something deeper. I can feel it. And I think the answer is at those coordinates. I'm going to find it, with or without help."

Dez studied me. Looked me over, I couldn't read her expression.

"You know," she finally said, "for a guy who claims he's nobody special; you sure do talk like someone with a death wish."

"Is that a no?"

She snorted. "That's a 'let me think about it.' But first, we need to see what we're dealing with up there. Scope out the situation. Find transportation if there is any." She glanced toward the stairs. "And maybe have a conversation with our mysterious professor about why he's leaving cryptic treasure maps for warehouse workers."

"C'mon, let's all go outside and see what, if Marcus was right, if any transportation is still viable."

We found Marcus already outside, standing at the edge of the runway and staring west toward the mountains. A blank stare.

Realizations

The devastation was even worse now. The daylight revealed things that had been hidden by the night and early morning.

Crows had already gathered, black shapes hopping among the dead, their harsh cries cutting through the silence. Nature, reasserting itself. The cycle of decay beginning.

Beyond the base, the landscape looked like a war zone painted by a madman like something from the cover of an Ozzy Osbourne record. Collapsed buildings. Overturned vehicles. Fires still smoldering in the distance sending columns of black smoke into the dreary morning sky. The Chesapeake Bay glittered to the east, deceptively peaceful, probably full of its own dead.

"How many?" I heard myself ask.

Marcus didn't turn around. "Globally? It's difficult to say. The human population was approximately eight billion before the event. The survival rate for an uncontrolled fall from altitude without preparation..." He paused. "Perhaps one in a hundred. Perhaps less."

One in a hundred. The math was simple and devastating. Eighty million survivors. Maybe fewer. Out of eight billion.

"Jesus," Dez whispered.

"The infrastructure damage will claim more in the coming weeks," Marcus continued, his voice clinical, detached. "Power grids are down. Water treatment plants have failed. Medical facilities are destroyed or inaccessible. Those who survived the

fall will face starvation, dehydration, disease." He finally turned to face us. "This is an extinction-level event, Jack. Not immediate extinction, but a culling. A reduction."

I noticed something then. Everyone else me, Dez, Tom, Linda, Elena we were all bundled in layers, military jackets over sweaters, blankets wrapped around shoulders. The morning was cold, our breath visible in the air. But Marcus wore only a thin button-down shirt, and he wasn't shivering. Wasn't showing any sign of discomfort at all.

Another inconsistency. Another thread.

"You sound like you're reading from a report," Dez said, her eyes narrowing. "Like you've seen this before."

Marcus met her gaze. "History is full of cataclysms. I am merely... extrapolating from precedent."

"Bullshit." Dez stepped closer to him. "Jack showed me the map. The one you 'found.' You know something. About what caused this. About what's out there." She jerked her thumb toward the western mountains. "Start talking."

Marcus stood silent. When he spoke, his voice was different. Softer. Almost sad.

"There are rules," he said. "Constraints that bind me. I cannot tell you what I know, not directly. The consequences would be..." He searched for the word. "Severe. For all of us."

"Constraints from who?" I asked.

"From those who sent me."

The words hung in the air. Dez and I exchanged glances.

"Sent you," she repeated flatly. "Sent you from where?"

Marcus looked at me. Those pale silvery gray eyes seemed to hold depths I couldn't fathom.

"You saw the light, Jack. On the mountain. You know, on some level, you already know that this event was not natural. Not random. It was engineered. Deliberately caused." He paused, weighing his words carefully. "The devices responsible have been on your world for a very long time. Hidden. Waiting. One hundred of them, placed at precise locations across your planet."

"Devices?" Dez cut in. "What kind of devices?"

"Interdimensional Alignment Pins," Marcus said. "They create a geometric lattice around your world, a targeting system, if you will. When activated in sequence, they allow my people to lock onto your planet's exact position across dimensional barriers and phase into your existence."

"Lock onto us for what?" I asked, though part of me already knew the answer.

Marcus went silent. When he started speaking again, his voice was heavy with something that sounded almost like shame.

"Have you ever heard of a Dyson Sphere, Jack?"

Stars are abundant but unruly; my people learned long ago that encapsulating living planets yields steadier, controllable, long-duration harvests, terrible, efficient, and easy to hide.

The term tickled something in my memory. Late nights reading science magazines at the warehouse during breaks. Theoretical mega-structures. "A sphere built around a star," I said slowly. "To capture its energy output."

"Your scientists theorized it. My people built it." Marcus's gaze drifted toward the horizon, toward something only he could see. "But not around stars. Around planets. Living planets, teeming with geothermal energy, electromagnetic fields, the raw power of billions of organisms metabolizing, breathing, existing. We encompass worlds the way your kind might harvest a field of wheat."

The image that formed in my mind was staggering. A sphere large enough to swallow Earth whole. Our planet trapped inside like a firefly in a jar, slowly drained of everything that made it alive.

"Inside our sphere right now," Marcus continued, "is a world we took centuries ago by your reckoning, though only few years passed for us. It is almost depleted. Dying. When it is fully exhausted, we will eject the husk and move on to the next source." He turned to face me directly. "Your world was selected. The alignment pins were placed. Everything was prepared for the engulfment. Everything was ready to encapsulate your world."

"Was?" Dez caught the past tense. "What changed?"

"There was a glitch."

The word seemed absurd in the context of planetary annihilation. A glitch. Like a frozen computer screen or a dropped call.

"One of the devices, the one at those coordinates activated prematurely," Marcus explained. "A software fault in systems that have operated flawlessly for millennia. The partial activation created an unexpected resonance between our

dimension and yours. For a fraction of a second, the barriers thinned. Your world and ours... touched."

"The convergence," I said. "The dimensional intersection. That's what the broadcast called it."

Marcus nodded. "The atmospheric displacement, the gravitational chaos, the loss of life, all of it was a side effect. An accident. Unintended." His jaw tightened. "My people do not typically announce their arrival with such... disruption. When we engulf a world, it happens cleanly. Instantly. One moment the planet exists in its own reality; the next, it is inside our sphere, and the harvesting begins. No warning. No suffering. Just... transition."

"That's supposed to make it better?" Dez's voice was sharp with disgust. "That you usually kill everyone quietly?"

"No." Marcus met her anger without flinching. "It makes it worse. Because we have perfected the art of annihilation to the point where we no longer think of it as killing. It is simply... collection. Resource management. The morality was stripped away so gradually that by the time I realized what we had become, I was already complicit in the deaths of more worlds than I can admit."

The weight of his words settled over us. This wasn't a military invasion. It wasn't even conquest. It was agriculture on a cosmic scale, and we were the crop.

"You said your engineers are working on the fault," I said, my mind racing. "How long until they fix it?"

"Days. Perhaps a week. The glitch was unprecedented. Our systems were not designed to fail. But they will find the error,

correct it, and when they do, the alignment sequence will resume. The pins will activate properly. And your world will be engulfed."

"Unless we destroy the pins," I said.

Marcus's eyes met mine, and I saw something flicker there. Hope, maybe. Or desperation.

"The lattice requires all one hundred devices to function, without fault in a perfect sequence" he said carefully. "If even one is destroyed; truly destroyed, not merely damaged, the geometric alignment fails. The sphere cannot lock onto your planet's position. The engulfment becomes impossible."

"One device," Dez repeated. "We destroy one, and they can't take Earth?"

"They would need to replace it. Re-calibrate the entire network. That process takes..." He paused, calculating. "Decades, by your measurement of time. Perhaps longer. Long enough for your species to prepare. To develop countermeasures. To have a chance."

A chance. After everything we'd witnessed, the bodies, the devastation, the world torn apart, he was offering us a chance.

"The coordinates," I said. "38.8 north, 79.4 west. That's where the glitched device is."

"Yes. And because it malfunctioned, because it partially activated, it is vulnerable in ways the others are not. The fault that caused the convergence also weakened its structural integrity. It can be destroyed but only by someone native to this world, and whose biometric signature matches the Pin's inter-dimensional frequency."

"Someone human," Dez said flatly.

"Yes."

"And you can't do it yourself because...?"

"Because I am bound by constraints that go deeper than choice." Marcus's voice carried centuries of weariness. "I was sent here as a Watcher. An observer. To ensure the alignment process proceeded without interference. I cannot directly sabotage my people's work, the conditioning runs too deep, woven into my very being, and I don't have the DNA, the biometric signature. But I can create opportunities. Guide those who might act where I cannot."

"That's why you gave me the map," I said.

"Yes."

"And the radio broadcast? The one that mentioned the coordinates—"

"Was transmitted by surviving human scientists, working independently. But the equipment they used to detect the anomalous energy signatures..." Marcus allowed himself a small, quick smile through the right side of his lips. "Let us say it experienced a fortuitous calibration adjustment several months ago. One that made it particularly sensitive to the frequencies emitted by alignment pins."

"And the glitch?"

"I can't discuss the details, but..."

"I cut him off; he didn't have to say any things else... I knew the answer."

He'd been planning this. Setting the stage. Waiting for the moment when the glitch he manufactured gave him an opening to act.

"Why?" I asked. "After all the worlds you've helped destroy, why help us?"

Marcus thought to himself for a few minutes. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper.

"The story runs deeper, Jack. Runs deeper than I have time to explain."

"And"

"Because for the first time in longer than I can remember, I... I... I succumb to the consequences of what we do. Not from a distance, not as statistics or resource projections, but here, on the ground, I saw the people, and some, my friends, they touched me in ways I had buried deep inside me... revived my moral compass, and now surrounded by the dead and the dying, something I had to cause to reverse my people's irrational and unwavering insistence that in our quest to survive other worlds necessitate destruction." He looked at me, and his eyes glistened with something that might have been tears. "Your Sofia. Running toward strangers to help them, even as death fell from the sky. I have watched a thousand worlds die, Jack, and I have never seen anything like that. Never seen such... such foolish, beautiful, utterly irrational courage."

His voice hardened with resolve.

"Your species is chaotic. Inefficient. Self-destructive in ways that baffle my kind. It wasn't part of the program. Everything in your world evolved differently, unexpected. You grew in ways

that showed us something we lost long ago, the ability to choose sacrifice over survival, compassion over logic, hope over certainty. Love. Things that are worth preserving, worth saving."

He stepped back, his posture shifting.

"The device at those coordinates is hidden inside a structure that is phasing between dimensions, the glitch, you'll see it when you get close. It will be defended by automated security systems, and the glitch has compromised many of them. You have a window. A small one." He glanced toward the bunker stairs. "I have already said more than I should. My handlers will notice the gaps in my reports soon. You need to go. Now."

"Come with us," I said. "If you want to stop this, help us."

"I cannot. My presence would trigger the remaining security systems. And if my handlers realize I've turned..." He didn't finish the sentence. "You have what you need, Jack. The location. The knowledge that one device can break the chain. The rest you must discover for yourself."

He turned and walked toward the bunker stairs.

"Marcus," I called after him.

He paused but didn't turn around.

"What's your real name?"

A long silence. Then, so quietly I almost missed it:

"I don't remember. It's been a very long time since anyone asked."

He descended into the bunker and was gone.

ORIGIN

The vehicle depot was a graveyard of twisted metal and shattered glass, but as Marcus had suspected. Three of the military rovers had survived. Large, fully covered Hummers adorned in that typical military tan color with bulletproofed glass; probably camouflaged for the desert. They had large tires and one duplicate mounted on the back. They didn't hold air... and had big, raised, white letters molded around the outside that read, PUNCTURE PROOF. Their electronics protected by a Faraday cage and, like the fuel containers that Perez used to fill up her copter, the land haulers had been kept in place with seismic restraints. There was a hand crank generator labeled emergency battery power stored in a container next to them. Dez walked over to retrieve it and asked if I knew where the keys were. Remembering Perez's last words, I ran over to the dispatch office and got the key. It was easy to find as it was with a bunch of other keys on a magnetic board that was bolted to two, I beams adjacent to each other, and it was labeled 0002-100. I ran back and gave it to Dez. She unlocked the beast, popped the hood, and connected the two large cables coming from it. The red cable to the post with a red plastic cover and the black cable to the ground post of the large heavy-duty battery. She gave the emergency battery generator a few cranks until the needle on the gauge went from 0 to 15V, and within about an hour with some coaxing, a combination of skill, profanity, and what she called "persuasive maintenance," eventually the engine jumped to life.

"Fuel's at about three-quarters," she reported, wiping her hands on her jeans. "Should be enough to get us there if we don't hit too many detours. There were 4 large 6-gallon containers mounted to either side in the back, painted red with FUEL written on them. Dez checked each one and all were filled to the brim. "Looks like we have plenty of fuel for the return trip, so nothing to worry about."

We gathered supplies from the bunker. There were plenty of rations in to boxes we found when we first walked into the room... Meals, Ready to Eat – military rations (MREs) that would last for years and packaged in radiation proof packaging. Cases of bottled water. First aid kits, heavy on bandages and antibiotics. A pair of M4 carbines along with several magazines of ammunition. We packed everything we could into the back of the Hummer. None of us were soldiers, but Tom had hunted deer his whole life and gave us a crash course in the basics.

"Point the dangerous end away from anything you don't want to kill," he summarized. "Keep your finger off the trigger until you're ready to fire. And for God's sake, don't shoot each other."

After we were all packed up and ready to hit the road.

Tom and Linda exchanged extended looks. They were in their sixties, exhausted, grieving. The idea of a two-hundred-mile journey through devastated territory wasn't exactly appealing.

"We've survived this long and now we'd just like to stay put," Tom said. "We just need to rest. We got a very long and disturbing day behind us and need a to reflect a little. We've decided that we'll stay behind, try to clean up some and if you guys make it back, we'll be here waiting."

"Staying put means waiting to die," Dez countered. "In case you missed it... or didn't hear what Marcus said. This isn't over. Something else is coming, and we need to get to the Origin and destroy it."

"The professor isn't exactly a reliable source," Linda pointed out. "The things he was saying... it sounded crazy. Other worlds. Conquerors."

"Crazy is pretty much our baseline now," I said. "Look around. The world ended yesterday. Crazy is the new normal." I paused, trying to find the right words. "I'm not asking anyone to come with me. This is my choice. But I'm going to those coordinates because it's the only thing that makes sense to me right now. There's a reason this happened. There's a cause. And if there's any chance, any chance at all that I can do something about it, I have to try."

Elena, who had barely spoken since we'd met, looked up from her spot in the corner.

"I'll go," she said quietly.

Dez turned to her sister, surprised. "Elena—"

"Maria's dead." Elena's voice was flat, matter-of-fact. "I watched her fall. There's nothing left for me here except waiting for the next thing to kill me. If there's something I can do, something that matters, I want to do it."

Dez shrugged, then sighed. "Well, shit. Can't let my little sister have all the fun." She looked at me. "I'm in. Already told you I'd think about it. I've thought about it."

Tom and Linda exchanged another look. Some silent communication passed between them.

"We'll stay," Tom said assuredly doubling down on what he'd already accepted. "Like I said, we'll hold down the fort. If you find something, if you make it back, we'll be here."

It wasn't the answer I'd hoped for, but I understood. They'd survived this far. They'd earned the right to choose their own path.

"OK... see you. No way to communicate, radio's dead. We'll see you when we get back, IF, we get back."

Tom nodded. "Good luck, son. Good luck everyone. You're going to need it."

Before we left, I did one last thing.

I found a shovel in the maintenance shed and spent two hours digging a grave for Sofia. The ground was hard, and my hands blistered, and more than once I had to stop and just breathe through the pain, physical and otherwise. But I kept going. She deserved at least this much.

When the grave was deep enough, I wrapped her body in the flag I'd covered her with and lowered her in as gently as I could. Then I stood there, shovel in hand, tears welling up in my eyes, trying to think of something to say.

"I'm not good at this," I finally said. "Goodbyes. Words. You know that. You always said I kept too much inside." I looked down at the flag-wrapped form, at the splash of red-white-and-blue against the dark earth. "I don't know if what Marcus said is true. I don't know if I can do anything to stop what's coming. But I'm going to try. For you. For everyone."

I filled in the grave, one shovelful at a time. Then I found a couple pieces of wood and with a knife I had found in the

bunker and some rope from one of the crates. I made a simple cross and carved.

SOFIA VALENTINA

LOVE OF MY LIFE

Stuck it in the ground above her and I stood there sobbing, memorizing the spot, knowing I might never see it again.

Then I turned and walked back to the Hummer.

About an hour later, we were all done packing and ready to go. I hopped in the driver's seat and headed northwest through a landscape of devastation.

The roads were chaos, abandoned cars, debris, bodies. Dez drove while Elena and I cleared obstacles, pushing wrecks aside or finding alternate routes through fields and parking lots. Progress was slow. Ten miles in the first hour. Then five. Then three.

But we kept moving.

The world outside the was a catalog of horrors. Strip malls with their roofs ripped off, their contents scattered across parking lots. Residential neighborhoods that looked like they'd been hit by tornadoes. Cars upside down, some still running, their electric batteries slowly draining or gas slowly running out. Bodies everywhere, in the streets, on the sidewalks, hanging from trees and power lines where they'd fallen.

We passed a school. Elementary, from the look of it. The playground equipment was still there, swings, a slide, a jungle gym but the building itself was a ruin. I didn't let myself think about what that meant. Couldn't afford to.

Elena stared out the window, her expression blank. Whatever she was seeing, it wasn't the devastation outside. She was somewhere else. Somewhere inside her own head.

"Hey." Dez glanced at her sister in the rear-view mirror. "You okay?"

"Define okay."

"Responsive. Functional. Not catatonic."

"Then I'm okay." Elena's voice was flat. "Just processing."

"Process out loud if you need to. That's what we're here for."

Elena was quiet for a moment. Then: "I keep thinking about Maria. About the last thing I said to her." She paused. "We had a fight. The night before. Stupid thing about dishes, laundry, whose turn it was to clean the bathroom. I said some things I didn't mean." Clinching her teeth. "And then the world ended, and I never got to take them back."

Dez didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. We all had regrets. Last words left unspoken. Apologies never made.

I thought about Sofia. About the months of distance between us, the careful politeness that had replaced intimacy. All the things I should have said and didn't.

"She knew," I said quietly. "Maria. She knew you didn't mean it."

Elena looked at me. "How do you know?"

"Because that's what people do. We fight, we say stupid things, and we forgive each other. The fighting doesn't erase what came before. All those good moments, all that love that's what matters. That's what she remembered."

Elena stared at me, seemed like an eternity. Then she turned back to the window.

"I hope you're right," she said.

It came time we all decided it was time to take a break. We could see the remnants of an old gas station up the way. This is where we decided to make camp that night. It was an abandoned old gas station about sixty miles from Langley. The building was intact enough to provide shelter, and there was an attached convenience store that may yield additional supplies.

Jack pulled the beast into the parking lot on the convenience store side. Shutdown the motor and jumped out.

Dez and Elena set up a perimeter of sorts using whatever they could find that had fallen back to earth to block the obvious approaches. Picking up hands full of broken glass and scattering it on the ground to alert us to footsteps. An old trick I learned back in the day from those old black and white gangster movies. It probably wouldn't stop a determined attacker, but it was better than nothing.

While Dez secured the perimeter, I swept the dining room to see about those additional supplies. Canned food, bottled water, batteries, another first aid kit, I found stuff like that, stuff that supplemented our military supplies.

Then I saw something curious. A placemat. The kind they give kids, with puzzles and mazes and space for crayons. But someone had drawn over the cartoon animals and connect-the-dots with something else entirely.

Angles. Dozens of them. Drawn in heavy black crayon, pressed so hard the paper had torn in places. They weren't random, they

connected, intersected, formed patterns that seemed almost architectural. Almost familiar. Looking at them made my eyes dizzy. The same way looking in the distance after being twisted around a few times. It almost felt like I was losing my balance when I stopped looking at them.

"Jack?" Dez's voice came from the doorway. "You, okay? You've been staring at that thing for like ten minutes."

I hadn't realized. I folded the placemat and shoved it in my back pocket, not sure why I was keeping it.

"Some kids probably here earlier," I said. "Just trying to process..."

"Hell of a way to process." Dez glanced at the folded paper, then at me. "You sure you're okay?"

"No," I admitted. "But that's baseline now, right?"

She didn't argue.

We ate a dinner of cold canned beans and stale crackers, sitting in the manager's office with the blinds drawn. Outside, the darkness was absolute. No streetlights. No house lights. No ambient glow of civilization. Just the moon and stars, impossibly bright without competition.

"About Marcus," Dez said, breaking a long silence. "You believe him? About the device, the other world, all of that?"

"I don't know what I believe," I admitted. "But I believe something caused this. And I believe he knows more than he's saying."

"He could be crazy. Or lying. Or both."

"He could be. But that doesn't explain the map. Doesn't explain the coordinates in the emergency broadcast. Doesn't explain what I saw on that mountain."

Elena looked up from her beans. "There's something I haven't told you."

Dez and I both turned to look at her.

"When I was up there, trapped in that car" Elena continued, her voice, frail. "I saw something. I didn't mention it because I thought I was hallucinating being under duress, trauma, whatever." She paused, gathering herself. "But you've been talking about lights on the mountain. Anomalous energy signatures. And I think... I think I saw the same thing."

"What did you see?" I asked.

"A shape. In the clouds. Not a light, a structure. It was only visible for a second, like it was phasing in and out of existence. But it was huge, Jack. Miles across. And it wasn't... it wasn't built by us. The geometry was wrong. The angles didn't make sense." She shuddered. These kids, what they're saying about them. The drawings you saw on the placemat, it's bringing it all back, the weird angles, lights... "I've been trying to convince myself it wasn't real. But the more you talk about what's at those coordinates, and the more I think about what those kids are saying, the more I think it was."

Dez and I exchanged glances.

"Miles across," Dez repeated. "And we're supposed to, what? Walk up and knock on the door?"

"I don't know."

"But remember, Marcus said we have to try," I said. "That if no one acts, we lose everything." "This is not negotiable;" more confidence filled my voice. "We have no choice."

"Marcus also said the device is defended. That destroying it might not even be possible." Dez shook her head. "I'm not saying we turn back. I'm saying we need to be smart about this. Scout the area. Figure out what we're dealing with before we do anything stupid."

She was right. I knew she was right. But something in me, some instinct I couldn't name was screaming that we were running out of time. That every hour we delayed brought Marcus's deadline closer.

"We scout first," I agreed. "But we don't wait. Whatever we find tomorrow, we act on it. Agreed?"

Dez nodded. Elena nodded.

We slept in shifts, rifles close at hand.

5: The Threshold

Physics show: *"a phase transition occurs when a system crosses a critical threshold and transforms into something fundamentally different: water to ice, liquid to gas. The transition is often instantaneous and irreversible. The system that exists after bears no resemblance to what came before. The old rules no longer apply."*

$$dP/dT = \Delta S/\Delta V = L/T\Delta V$$

First Look

We all awoke early... maybe 7. Stuffed a few more of those military calories into our bodies. Lit a small fire inside a makeshift firepit Dez made with some stones we gathered up before packing it in for the night. I made some coffee. Drank it down and packed up the rest of what we removed from that tank of a vehicle.

"I got driver's seat this time, amateur." Dez asserted.

She fired it up and we headed out, up Hwy 64.

As we meandered down the highway on the third day of this fiasco, it was by far the worse. Even in the frigid cold the decomposition process seemed to have accelerated, and the stench of death permeated everything. Bodies that had been relatively fresh two days ago were now bloated and discolored, their skin taking on a waxy, greenish-gray pallor that made my stomach churn. The smell was indescribable, a thick, unsavory

rot that coated the back of your throat and lingered in your nostrils no matter how much you tried to breathe through your mouth. It seeped into the Hummer's cabin despite keeping the windows up, mixing with the smell of sweat and our unkempt fear until we were all gagging. We made makeshift mask that covered our mouths but it didn't nearly help.

The highways had become a macabre obstacle course and this one wasn't any different. Cars sat abandoned everywhere, their doors hanging open like broken jaws, and around them lay the bodies of people who had tried to flee. Some had made it only a few steps from their vehicles before collapsing. Others had crawled, leaving dark trails behind them on the pavement. Flies buzzed in thick black clouds, around the bodies, they were everywhere and the sound of them was almost as disturbing as the sight. We tried to navigate around all of it, moving as methodically as possible. I was raised to respect the dead, to leave them undisturbed where they fell. It was the same reasoning behind leaving the Titanic on the ocean floor, a gravesite that shouldn't be violated. But here, headed north on Hwy 64 was an open-air morgue, such decency was a luxury we couldn't afford. The roads were simply too congested with the dead, and survival demanded we become gravediggers without graves, disturbing the peace of thousands just to keep moving forward.

Several times that day, the piles of bodies were so high, we had no choice but to stop and move the bodies out the way ourselves. The first time, I volunteered, thinking I could handle it. The corpse was a middle-aged woman in a business suit, and when I grabbed her arm to drag her aside, the skin slipped off in my hand like a wet glove exposing all the muscle, ligaments and

fatty tissue inside. I dropped her immediately and vomited on the side of the road while trying to keep my composure. Elena stayed in the Hummer, her face pressed against the window, tears welling up her eyes and slinking down her cheeks. After that incident, we developed a system: work quickly, breathe through the make shift mask, our shirts lifted over our mouths, don't grab any open limbs, use only their clothes, and don't look at their faces if you can help it. But you couldn't avoid seeing them, not really. Young, old, children clutching toys, parents who had died trying to protect their families. Each one was a story cut short; a life ended in terror and confusion.

When moving them wasn't an option, we had to drive over them. The first time the Hummer's wheels crunched over a body, we all heard it: the sickening crack of bone, the wet squelch of ruptured organs. Elena squirmed. Dez cursed, gripping the steering wheel tighter and kept driving. She tried to ignore it; we all did but it was unavoidable. It became a horrible routine. The Hummer was heavy with high-clearance, built for rough terrain, but even seeing all the bodies landing on the tarmac for the better part of an entire day, and experiencing death first hand, nothing had prepared us for this; running over the bloated bodies. This was the most disgusting, the most disturbing part, especially the younger bloated ones they burst under the tires, making a disgusting, popping sound and it was absolutely revolting. It was like trying to force a thick milkshake through a plastic straw, and having a morsel of thick ice cream blocking the way; then the pressure builds up enough behind it to push it past the opening pushing it through like a jet stream, and all of it juts out the other end making a sudden popping sound. It started as this low squelching noise, like wringing out a soaked sponge, but nastier and way more visceral. Then it

built into this awful stretching sound, like inflating a water balloon past its breaking point. You could hear the tension in it, that tight, creaking strain right before everything gives way just before it burst.

When it finally ruptured it exploded like dropping a garbage bag packed with spoiled meat and rotten produce from a second-story window onto concrete, spattering as pressurized fluids sprayed in every direction, some of it pelting the undercarriage of the Hummer. The droplets were thick and heavy. Maybe it was the bone shards, mixed in with the blood and guts that made it sound like pellets of hail pelting the undercarriage metal of this overgrown jeep. Not like light patters of raindrops but a substantial thump of something with weight and substance.

Some of it splashed up onto the wheel wells with enough force that we could hear it inside the cabin, a wet smacking that made your skin lose all color cause you knew what the sounds meant.

If you ran over them at a certain angle there was this prolonged hiss like air slowly forcing its way out of a punctured tire, mixed with a sickening slurp as the collapsed tissue folded inward. Liquefied organs and built-up gases from the decomposition suddenly found their release, creating this flatulent, gurgling wheeze that seemed to drag on forever. It was the sound of something that should have stayed solid turning to liquid, of internal structures completely losing their integrity and collapsing. Each bloated body's gruesome event lasted maybe three or four seconds, but it felt like an eternity, and the stench that followed, thick and rotten like a mixture of raw sewage, mixed with vomit, and milk that had been left out in the sun for

weeks, made you almost grateful you'd only had to hear it and not see what was coating the underside of the vehicle. The smell intensified as if it was compounding on each of the bodies fluids we reluctantly ran over; forcing its way into the cabin in profuse, nauseous waves. We stopped reacting to it after a while. We had grown numb to it; desensitized and Dez just kept on driving.

The Hummer was a gas guzzler, and after about 300 miles we had to stop and fuel up. I grabbed three of the six-gallon jerry cans from the back and hurriedly poured them into the gas tank. The neck of the military-style canister fit perfectly onto the Hummer's fuel spout, like they were made specifically for each other. No fumbling around, no spillage, just a clean, efficient design. I had to give the military credit on this one. When it came to spending our tax dollars, at least they got some things right. This setup was so well thought out that even in the middle of an apocalyptic nightmare, refueling was one less thing to worry about.

By mid-afternoon on this third day, we were all hollow-eyed and traumatized. The initial shock of the catastrophe had worn off, replaced by a grinding, relentless horror that wouldn't end. This wasn't a disaster we could escape or a crisis that would be resolved. This was the end of everything we'd known. The bodies weren't going to be collected. The roads weren't going to be cleared. The world that had existed just seventy-two hours ago was gone, replaced by this nightmare landscape of death and decay. We were driving through the graveyard of civilization, and the stench of it was a constant, suffocating reminder that we were among the very few who had survived.

The psychological toll was perhaps worse than the physical revulsion. Every body we encountered that we ran over had been a person with hopes and dreams, fears and loves. They'd had morning routines and favorite foods, inside jokes with friends, and plans for the future. Now they were just obstacles, hazards to navigate around or, when obligatory, to drive over. The casual brutality that survival demanded was changing us, stripping away layers of humanity with each passing mile. Dez had stopped making wisecracks. Jack's jaw never unclenched. Elena had retreated into herself, speaking only when she thought we'd listen. And I found myself becoming ever more emotionless, my mind building walls to protect itself from the horror we were swimming through. We were alive, but at what cost?

Continuing our journey to ORIGIN, we stayed on Route 64 N. and as it wound through increasingly less distressed terrain. The roads got clearer, less population density meant fewer cars, fewer bodies, fewer obstacles. The deep forests across the mountain ranges acted like filters catching some of the debris and bodies before they hit the ground. We made better headway through these areas. But the isolation brought its own unease. The forests pressed close on either side, dark and watchful as we climbed and descended the mountain ranges. As soon as we could, we cut over onto Hwy 95 up 66 to 81, connecting to route 40. From Route 40, we cut over onto 68 and headed down to ORIGIN (38.8N, -79.4W).

"We're close," Elena said, checking the paper map against the road exits we were passing. "Maybe half hour, if the roads remain unobstructed."

"Good. Find a place to observe from a distance. We don't want to get too close, and stumble into something we can't handle."

"As if we could handle anything this outwardly thing threw at us," Dez, muttered.

We kept moving, it was getting late and at a spot about 20 miles from the coordinates; a ranger station, just off the highway, in Bowden WV, got us about 30 minutes from ORIGIN and located on a ridge overlooking the valley below.

"This is perfect!" I blurted.

As we pulled in, we could see the building had been damaged but was still standing and it had an observation deck facing south.

As we pulled into the parking lot of the beat-up building, I took a look west and truly saw it for the first time, it was unmistakable. The light. I had seen it up in the air, in the emergency broadcast, and now there it was a few miles away, flashing sporadically appearing to be moving in and out of our existence, in cycles of about every minute or so.

It wasn't evident, as I was looking from a distance, but when least expecting it, it seemed the outlines of a building was there, holding up the light at the peak of one of its pilons, not quite visible, but yet somehow visible... it was out of sorts, the strange angles, like the light shining from the building was reflecting off a prism... something like what I saw on the drawings of the placemat. I pulled the folded paper from my back pocket, unfolded it and sure enough the shapes were the same and like the shapes on the placemat, it wasn't clear, it was dizzying when I tried to focus on it.

"What the hell is that?" Dez shouted, raising a pair of binoculars she'd scavenged from the military base that she placed in the center console before we left.

She got out the Hummer, and stared through them for maybe twenty seconds. Then she lowered them slowly, her face shocked, draining of color.

"Jack." Her voice was strange. Flat. "You need to see this close up."

"It's the thing, the ORIGIN, Marcus talked about—the coordinates..."

She handed them over, and I raised them to my eyes, adjusting the focus until the distant formation sharpened.

What I saw made no sense.

My brain kept trying to process it, kept trying to fit what I was seeing into categories I understood, building, machine, natural formation but nothing worked. It was like looking at an optical illusion that refused to resolve, an image that contained contradictory information my visual cortex simply couldn't reconcile.

It was a structure. That much I could determine. But the word "structure" implied something built according to principles I could understand; foundations, walls, supports, the basic logic of architecture. This... this was something else entirely. At least that's how it seemed from here, from our visual perspective; it kept phasing in and out of visibility. One instant I could see sweeping curves that seemed to extend beyond my visual range, surfaces that caught the gray afternoon light and did something wrong with it, absorbing and bending it, folding it,

making the light itself look broken. The next moment, those curves would simply not be there, replaced by a different configuration entirely, as if the structure existed in multiple states simultaneously that my eyes not perceive and my mind could not comprehend.

"Jesus Christ," I whispered.

The materials defied description. Nothing like I'd ever seen or read about. Parts of the structure appeared to be made of something like metal, translucent. The metal flowed and rippled, its surface crawling with patterns that reminded me of interference waves on water each wave cancelling or amplifying depending on how they propagated, and with an iridescent sheen like oil on a puddle, except the colors weren't colors I recognized. They existed somewhere between blue and a shade my brain kept insisting wasn't real, a hue that seemed to slide off the edge of the visible spectrum and into something my optic nerves weren't designed to register.

Other sections looked almost organic, curved and bulbous, covered in what might have been scales or might have been tiles or might have been something for which no human word existed making different shapes as the setting sun shone its last rays on it. Reminded me of the scales on a butterfly wing that revealed its patterns whenever light rays hit them at just the right angles. The walls pulsed with that rhythmic light I'd noticed earlier, a slow throb that seemed to match the beating of my own heart, and I had the deeply unsettling thought that maybe it wasn't matching my heartbeat, maybe my heart was matching it, synchronizing with something vast and alien without my permission.

The basic spatial relationships didn't make sense either. The fundamentals of geometry. Parallel lines meet. Three-dimensional objects cast two-dimensional shadows. Right angles are 90 degrees. These were laws, immutable and obvious.

The structure broke all of them.

I could see towers, I think they were towers, that seemed to twist in directions that didn't exist, that curved back in on themselves in ways that made my head lurch sideways with a sudden surge of vertigo. There were angles that looked simultaneously acute and obtuse depending on which part of them I focused on like an Escher drawing... up was down, down up... nothing made sense. Surfaces that appeared flat when I looked at them directly but revealed impossible depth when I caught them in my peripheral vision. My eyes kept trying to trace the edges of things and failing, because the edges didn't connect the way edges should connect, because wherever two surfaces met, they seemed to meet in more than one place at once.

I lowered the binoculars and pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes. My head was pounding.

"You okay?" Dez asked.

"No," I admitted. "That thing... it's not right. It's not built according to any rules I understand. It's like looking at a shape that shouldn't be able to exist in three-dimensional space."

"Try four dimensions," Elena said quietly. We both turned to look at her. She was staring at the distant formation with her naked

eyes, her face expressionless, but her hands were trembling slightly, and I noticed her fingers twitching, tracing small patterns against her thigh as if responding to something only she could feel. An activity similar to what I observed Marcus doing. "Or five. Or more. What we're seeing are only the parts that intersects with our reality and whenever they intersect. The rest exists... elsewhere." This thing isn't only able to move through space, but through time as well.

"How do you know that?"

She shrugged, but the gesture seemed forced.

"I don't."

"But when I saw it in my dreams, it was different, more complete somehow. Like I could almost see all of it. Not in our time but in some other time. She shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself. "I'm glad I can't see all of it now. I don't think human minds are meant to perceive whatever that really is, at least not in our stage of evolution... technology or otherwise."

I raised the binoculars again, forcing myself to look. Below the main structure, or beside it, or inside it, I couldn't tell, spatial relationships were impossible to determine, but I could make out smaller formations around the main big one that might have been buildings. Supporting structures, maybe... arranged in patterns that spiraled and refactored in ways that suggested purpose without revealing meaning. And among these structures, I could see movement. Figures. Dozens of them. Maybe hundreds. They were too far away to make out details, even with the binoculars' magnification. Just shapes, pale against the darker background, moving with a fluidity that seemed wrong for human bodies. They didn't walk so much as

flow, their movements coordinated in ways that reminded me of schools of fish or flocks of birds, many individuals moving as one, possibly responding to signals. There was no way to tell from here. "There's people down there, I think," I said. "Or... something like people." "Let me see." I handed the binoculars to Dez, who studied the distant activity for longer than I did. "They're not moving randomly," she observed. "They're doing something. Working, maybe? Building? Repairing? And see how they all changed direction at the same time? It's like they're connected somehow. Like they share a nervous system." They're probably getting instructions from the main system. She passed the binoculars to Elena, who looked for only a few seconds before handing them back to me, shrugging. I saw her lips moving silently, forming words I couldn't hear. "I don't want to see any more," she said, her voice strained. "It's too... loud." "Loud?" She shook her head, unable or unwilling to explain.

I raised the binoculars one last time, trying to take in the full scope of what we were facing. The structure, the device, whatever it was, dominated the valley and the surrounding peaks. Parts of it seemed to be embedded in the mountains as if it had grown there, or as if the mountains had been built around it. The phasing effect made it impossible to gauge its true size, but my best estimate put it at a couple football fields across, and at least as long. And that was just the portion visible in our dimension and this was probably just the outside and only the portion in our dimension.

And this made sense with what Elena had said earlier, that what we were seeing was just a fraction of the whole, a three-dimensional cross-section of something that existed in geometries beyond human comprehension. And there were a

hundred of these precisely placed around the globe. And in there was a machine that controlled whether humanity lived or died. Fortunately, according to Marcus, only a single one of these alignment pins that, if destroyed, would break the chain that bound us to annihilation. It might as well have been on the moon. I lowered the binoculars and turned to face the others. Dez looked sick. Elena looked passive.

“We don’t have a chance in hell, do we?” Dez resigned.

I probably looked like I'd just been told the odds of surviving the next twenty-four hours, would be like winning the lottery if it were held on Mars.

"There's something over there," I said. "Something big. And it's definitely not abandoned. The task ahead is daunting, but we have help, we're alive and we've come this far. The world is all we have and we need to figure out how to destroy this thing and save it. It's up to us now, those are the cards we were dealt. Let's make the best of what we've got and go and finish this."

My voice becoming even more assertive, more like a leader.

“We are not going to give up!” I finished.

Dez took the binoculars back and raised them for one more look. She studied the structure for a bit, her jaw tight, her knuckles white on the housing. When she finally lowered them, her face had a renewed optimism.

"We need to get closer," she said. "But not today. It's too exposed. If there's something there, someone there, they'd see us coming from many miles away. And even if they didn't..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "I need time to process what I just saw. We all do. Not giving up... just want to be as prepared as we can be."

"Tomorrow, then. First light. We're going to have to hike in. We approach from the north, use the tree cover. Get as close as we can without being detected, and figure out our options from there." I said, she nodded. "Tomorrow."

Confessions

We set up camp in the ranger station, barricading the doors and covered the windows. None of us slept much. The pulsing light in the distance was visible even through the covered windows, filtering through cracks in our makeshift shades, casting faint rhythmic shadows on the walls. I lay on a dusty cot and watched those shadows pulse and fade, pulse and fade, and tried not to think about how the rhythm exactly matched my heartbeat. Tried not to think about what that might mean. Around midnight, unable to sleep, I stepped outside onto the observation deck for some air. The night was cold and clear, the alien structure glowing faintly on the horizon like a wound in reality. I stood there staring at it, trying to comprehend the scale of what we were up against. Then as has been his habit, Marcus appeared out of nowhere. He moved silently out of the darkness and stood beside me near the railing; his eyes fixed on the distant glow.

"You followed us," I said.

It wasn't a question.

"How?"

The logistics caught up to my exhausted brain. We'd driven for a day across devastated terrain in the only working vehicle. Marcus had been at Langley when we left, with no transportation, no supplies.

"There's no way you could have kept up on foot. No way you could have known which route we'd take. We'd travelled over 300 miles."

Marcus's expression flickered, something between amusement and weariness.

"There are paths between places that don't require roads, Jack. Spaces where distance becomes... negotiable."

He glanced at me, and in the moonlight, his features seemed to shift subtly, as if I were glimpsing him from multiple angles at once, like the prism effect I witnessed looking at the structure... his body was splitting light.

"The geometry that powers the structure also threads through reality itself. Thin places. Seams between dimensions that the alignment pins create as a byproduct of their function. Folds in space time. If you know how to read them, how to ask them, you can step sideways, up, down and through the folds, folding the distance between here and there and cross it like a bridge over a river."

"You can teleport," I said flatly.

"Nothing so crude. It's not instantaneous and you don't turn into an energy beam that is reassembled at another location, but it is not comfortable. It's like squeezing through a gap that's slightly too narrow for your body, except the gap exists in directions, in angles that create an invisible effect. You call it another dimension—the fourth dimension that is different from spacetime as your physicists define it." He turned back toward the glowing structure on the horizon. "The drawback is whenever I use these doorways and hide in the angles, I leave a trace, a ripple and this does propagate to spacetime, it's a signature of sorts, my signature, and my handlers can detect it if I use it carelessly. "

He hesitated for a second.

"I've been rationing my movements, staying in the margins, watching from places where the angles hide me."

He'd been tracking us the whole time. Shadowing our journey through spaces I couldn't perceive, stepping through reality's seams while we crawled across broken highways in a military truck. The revelation should have stunned me. A week ago, it would have shattered my understanding of physics, of possibility, of everything I thought I knew about how the universe worked. Now it was just another impossible thing in a world that had run out of possible things.

"Why reveal this now?" I asked. "Why not just appear at the bunker, tell us everything, come with us from the start?"

"Because proximity draws attention. Because traveling with you would have created a trail even the most careless Watcher could follow. And because,"

He paused, and something like pain crossed his features.

Then he continued. "Because I needed to see if you would make it this far on your own. If the choice to seek the coordinates was truly yours, or merely a reaction to my manipulation."

"And?"

"You're here. You chose to be here. That matters more than you know. I needed to make sure you made it this far."

His voice was quiet, heavy with something I couldn't identify.

"And I needed to tell you something. Something I couldn't say in front of the others at the base. Something about who I am. What I've done."

I turned to face him. In the faint light from the structure, his features looked different somehow. Older. Worn down by centuries of... what? Guilt? Regret?

"I'm listening."

Marcus was silent and it took too long for him to reply. He was gathering his thoughts and I waited patiently. When he finally spoke, his voice had a distant quality, like a man recounting a nightmare he'd been trying to forget.

"I told you my people evolved on a world not unlike this one. That was true. What I didn't tell you was how long ago that was."

He thought for a minute. His eyes and head looked upwards like he was pulling a old memory from somewhere within his mind's archive.

"By your calendar, it would have been approximately 30 thousand years ago. Give or take a few centuries."

"Thirty thousand years?"

The number was staggering. When Marcus's people were reaching for the stars, humans were not even burning wood yet... fire was in our distant future.

"My original name, my given name, has been lost to time. Even I don't remember it anymore. But I remember what I was: a scientist. An explorer. I am of a species called Valthari in my universe, meaning Illuminated Ones. We were one of the first generations to unlock the secrets of dimensional travel."

His jaw tightened.

"And not out of curiosity, but out of necessity. Our world was dying, Jack."

“We needed a way off our world to save our people.”

"We thought we were pioneers. Discoverers. We had no idea what we would become."

"What happened?"

"Success happened. We built a device, a sphere and we learned to separate space, to create gaps, angles, to step between realities as easily as you might walk between rooms. We found other worlds, other civilizations, some primitive, some advanced, all of them fascinating."

His voice grew bitter.

"And all of them, eventually, resources to be consumed."

He turned to face me, and in his eyes, I saw something ancient and terrible, the weight of countless atrocities witnessed, participated in, normalized.

"It didn't happen overnight, Jack. Evil rarely does. It was gradual. Incremental. First, we took from uninhabited worlds, minerals, energy, raw materials. Then from worlds with primitive life. Then from worlds with intelligent life that we deemed 'insufficiently advanced' to warrant moral consideration. And with each step, the line moved. Eventually other advanced civilizations caught on and found ways to steal our technology and use it for themselves, putting us in a precarious circumstance. So, we started multiplying our efforts, creating backups, until one of our advanced molecular scientist had a stroke of genius and this was to use DNA as a sort of cryptographic key that protected our tech keeping it safe until it became mature and was ready to use.”

“Eventually we created our own reality, found dead or dying planets and reseeded them with life made from our own DNA. One such planet is yours, Jack... Earth. We fooled ourselves into thinking this was better, more moral, but it wasn't. The life on the manufactured planets was just as real, just as sentient as worlds that had evolved on their own.”

He waited a bit. Head down and pondering.

Lifting his head, he continued... “The definition of acceptable expanded. Until one day I looked around and realized that my people, my civilization, my culture, had become something monstrous. Predators on a cosmic scale, consuming worlds the way locusts consume fields.”

"The Dyson sphere," I said. "The engulfment."

"Yes. The ultimate expression of what we had become. Why conquer a world when you can simply swallow it whole? Why enslave a population when you can convert their entire planet into a battery?"

He shook his head slowly.

"By the time I understood what we were doing, truly understood, I had already participated in the destruction of seventeen worlds. Seventeen civilizations across many positions. Just wiped them from existence so that our sphere, my world, could continue its endless hunger. Billions upon billions of lives, extinguished because we needed their planet's energy and they had the misfortune of existing in our path."

The number hit me like a physical blow. Seventeen worlds. And Marcus had helped destroy them all.

“You said your planet was dying, but why, and why wasn’t there another solution?”

Marcus's expression shifted, something almost like pain flickering across his features.

"We had to... or so we told ourselves. Yes, our planet was dying. You ask why, our star had become unstable, our civilization looking at extinction. We needed a way for our people to survive."

He stared out at the glowing structure.

"So, we devised the sphere... a planet eater. Going after stars was too daunting, too difficult and would’ve taken longer than we had to realize it, so we chose planets instead, we devised a way to harness the energy from an entire planet. This ensure our survival for millennia."

His voice hardened. “Another solution, you ask.”

“No one bothered to ask. We didn’t have much time to decide and the technology to create the sphere had already been created all we needed to do was repurpose its use” “It was the easiest, best and fastest solution to save ourselves.”

"But survival became consumption. Necessity became habit. And habit became... this."

"So now I understand. Why all the details though?"

"Because you need to understand what you're fighting against. And you need to understand why I'm helping you. Understand how to win, and why my help comes with limitations."

He looked at me, sternly.

"I was assigned to Earth approximately 2000 thousand years ago, your time. A Watcher. I came with a message, you may know this story. It's become part of your folklore written in many of your books... a man with a message of everlasting life, and that I would come back again to bring redemption and also destruction... these messages weren't literal, they were metaphorical... I needed to plant a seed to prepare the world with hope."

I was commissioned by my people, my job was to monitor your development, plan the construction of the alignment pins, ensure they remained hidden, and report on our progress and your progress toward becoming... ripe."

"Ripe?"

"For harvesting. There are criteria we use to determine when a world we seeded is ready for engulfment and that is the status of the alignment pins, the thing in the distance with the glowing light. Earth has been on the precipice for a decade and just a few months ago, your time the pins became ready."

Marcus thought for a minute and didn't speak.

"The Convergence was supposed to be the final step, the alignment pins activating, the sphere locking onto your coordinates, and then..." He made a gesture with his hands, fingers closing into a fist. "Transition."

"But there was a glitch."

"You crea..."

"Yes. A software fault in one of the pins, the one at these coordinates. It activated prematurely, partially, creating the dimensional bleed that caused your convergence event."

He opened his hands and placed them on his face covering his eyes. He stayed like this for a few minutes while thinking.

"2000 years ago, in your timeline, I knew I had become attached to planet, your species made from our DNA and yes, your progress. I had seen your art, your music, your capacity for love and sacrifice. I had watched other individuals, like your Sofia, through those centuries, run toward danger to help strangers. I had begun to question whether what we were doing was right."

"Begun to question?"

"What do you mean?"

"Conditioning runs deep, Jack. The psychological programming that turns Watchers into loyal observers takes millenia to erode. But watching you, watching humanity struggle and fail and pick yourselves up again, it planted kernels of doubt. That doubt causes me to engineer a bug in our software, a virus that when activated would cause this alignment pin to fail. But when the glitch triggered, and caused the massive devastation, I knew I had to find you and find a way to make you aware of what happened... what was going to happen."

His voice dropped to barely a whisper.

"I decided I could not be part of another extinction. Not this time."

I processed this, trying to reconcile the man standing before me with the monster he was describing.

"So, you started leaving hints. Guiding me toward the coordinates."

"Yes. I knew the glitched pin was vulnerable, that was my intent, my doing. I had circumvented the original programming and I reprogrammed a specific signature, A new DNA sequence, someone I chose to match the Alignment Pin's core systems."

Marcus started up a display from the palm of his hand, and a hologram materialized between us. Streams of data cascaded across the air, resolving into what looked like a genetic sequence.

"The Alignment Pins are built on a specific timeline and that is it becomes useable as the seeded species become mature. This helps keep our technology unusable and our enemies uninterested until it's ready. When it is ready, only one of the Alignment Pins has a biological lock, Jack matching one person's DNA sequence, and this one is keyed to match your DNA sequence, now. It was originally keyed to match Sofia's but since she died, I have re-sequenced it to match yours."

His fingers moved through the hologram, expanding sections of code.

"The authentication system requires a 16,384-bit public key derived directly from human DNA, specifically from chromosomes 1 through 23 and sometimes the X chromosome." You see Jack, we created humans to be the security key, a kind of password to unlock the Alignment Pins to keep our technology safe.

The display shifted, showing what looked like an impossibly long string of hexadecimal characters:

GENETIC AUTHENTICATION PROTOCOL

SPECIES LOCK: HOMO SAPIENS

BIT LENGTH: 16384

ENTROPY SOURCE: FULL GENOME HELIX

//***** SECURITY HASH *****//

F4A7 B2E9 8C3D 1F65 9A48 D7E2 3B5C 8F19

6D2A E8B4 7C93 0F5E A1D6 4B89 2E7F C3A8

5F9B 1D47 E6A2 8C0D 3F7B 9E24 6A1C D8F5

The sequence continued, line after line, hundreds of characters scrolling past.

"Each quartet—ATGC, CGTA, whatever the combination, represents one byte of information. The Pin samples 2,048 quartets from your genome to build the complete key."

"There are $2^{16,384}$ possible combinations, that's roughly $10^{4,932}$. For context, there are only 10^{80} atoms in your entire observable universe. You could test a trillion combinations per second for a trillion times the age of the universe and never even make a dent in cracking the activation code."

"100% homology required," he continued. "Perfect match to a specific template, your DNA, Jack. All 2,048 quartets in exact sequential order."

One last thing, the specimen must be alive as the DNA sequences are specific and must be extracted from the breath of a live person.

"How is that even possible?" I asked. "There are 8 billion people on Earth."

"Exactly. If our enemies locate the Alignment Pin and gain access to it, they face two impossible barriers. First, they'd need to find you, one specific human among 8 billion."

"The Alignment Pin's DNA sequence decoder is purposefully slow at 1.5 hours to decode one person's sequence. So, to process the 8 billion people on earth to find your specific sequence would be:

8 billion people × 1.5 hours = 12 billion hours

That's approximately 1.37 million years

This makes it practically unfeasible. They could capture every human on Earth, test them one by one against the Pin's breath decoder, you'd be dead multiple times over before they unlocked it."

"And if they tried brute-forcing the sequence without me?"

He shook his head.

"You got ahead of me, but good questions. There are more possible quartet combinations than atoms in the observable universe. The heat death of your cosmos would arrive first."

I stared at the flowing data, understanding perfectly the information Marcus was giving me, and it made perfect sense.

"So, you see, our species made it so only one person could activate it. One in 8 billion. And only someone who belonged here."

"So, I see, and just to be sure, this is now me, you said?"

His eyes met mine. "Yes, now it's you."

"What I haven't told you until now, is that your DNA can also be used to destroy it. Break the alignment. Buy your world time."

He turned to face me directly.

"We are all in danger, Jack. Recently I discovered that my people have been aware of my... wavering... they've been aware for quite a while. They've been watching me watch you."

A chill ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the night air.

"They know you're helping us?"

"They suspect. They don't have proof, I've been careful, but they know something is wrong. There are other Watchers assigned to this world, and they've noticed gaps in my reports.

Inconsistencies. They've been tracking my movements, looking for evidence of betrayal."

He glanced over his shoulder, back toward the dark forest.

"I wasn't followed tonight; I made sure of that. But they're close, Jack. And when you enter that structure tomorrow, they'll know. The security systems will alert them. And they'll come."

"Then come with us. Help us fight them."

Marcus shook his head slowly.

"I can't. My implant prevents me from taking direct action against my own kind. Even now, even wanting to help you with every fiber of my being, they put walls in my mind that I cannot breach. If I tried to physically interfere with any of our technology or our people while here in this universe, I would..."

categorically shut down. Become catatonic. It's a failsafe built into all of us."

"That's convenient." Dez's voice came from behind us.

I spun around. She was standing, leaned on the open side of the sliding glass door, arms crossed, her expression hard. I hadn't heard her come out. Don't know how long she'd been there... apparently long enough.

"He can help just enough to get us killed," she continued, stepping closer, "but not enough to actually make a difference."

"Dez..."

"No, Jack. Think about it. He admits he's been part of destroying seventeen worlds. He admits his people have been watching him. He admits there are other Watchers on Earth."

She stepped out onto the observation deck, closer, her eyes fixed on Marcus.

"How do we know this isn't all part of some bigger plan? How do we know he's not leading us into a trap?"

Marcus met her gaze without flinching.

"You don't. You have no way of verifying anything I've told you is true. All you have is my word, and given what I've just confessed, you have every reason to doubt that."

"Damn right I do."

"But ask yourself this: if I wanted you dead, why send you here at all? Why not simply report your survival to my handlers and let them deal with you? Why risk my own position by giving Jack the map, by telling you about the pins, by following you here to warn you about what's coming?"

Dez didn't have an answer for that. Neither did I.

"I don't expect you to trust me," Marcus continued. "I don't deserve trust. But I am asking you to believe that my guilt is real. That after over the long time period of watching your world, I have come to value it, to value you, in ways that my conditioning never anticipated. And that I will do everything within my limited power to give you a chance."

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small device, a flat, metallic disc about the size of a silver dollar, covered in those same shifting symbols I'd seen on his map.

"This is a dampener. It will temporarily suppress the security systems closest to the pin's core, the area you need to reach. It's matched to your DNA, Jack, and it won't last long. Maybe 30 minutes. And it will only work once."

He pressed it into my hand.

"Use it wisely."

The disc was warm against my palm, almost alive. I could feel a faint vibration emanating from it, like a heartbeat.

"What about you?" I asked. "What happens when they figure out you gave this to us?"

Marcus smiled. It was a sad, weary smile. One I had come to recognize.

"Then I will finally face the consequences of what I've become. Perhaps that's fitting. Perhaps it's overdue."

He turned and walked toward the building. I thought he was going to disappear, vanish between those gaps he spoke about, but he simply stood there, staring out at the glowing structure.

"One more thing, Jack. The beings you saw moving around the structure, they're not like me. They're not Watchers. They're workers. Drones. They have no individual consciousness, no capacity for independent thought. They maintain the pin, repair damage, keep the systems running. They won't attack you unless you're perceived as a direct threat to the core systems."

"They are currently tracking down and once they find it. They will repair the virus I introduced," he paused.

"When that happens, the Pin will be active again and they will locate you using your biosignature, and use your breath to activate it and alignment will begin."

"The Watchers are different. If they find you inside, they will kill you."

"And how do we know the difference?"

"The workers don't speak. The Watchers do."

He glanced back at me.

"If something talks to you in there, run."

Then he stepped off the observation deck, not falling, but somehow moving sideways, his body seeming to fold into the shadows. I saw him for a second then a second later, he was gone as if he'd stepped through a door I couldn't see. Dez and I stood in silence, staring at the empty space where he'd been.

"Did he just..." she started.

"Yeah."

"How is that even..."

"I don't know."

She shook her head slowly. "We're really doing this, aren't we? Walking into an alien structure, trying to blow up a machine we don't understand, based on the word of a guy who just admitted to helping destroy seventeen worlds and can apparently disappear in thin air."

"When you put it that way, it sounds crazy."

"It is crazy. This whole thing is crazy."

She went quiet, tilting her head sideways and shrugged with her right shoulder.

Then: "But it's also the only play we've got. So yeah. We're doing this."

She turned and walked back inside. I stayed on the deck a while longer, staring at the distant glow, feeling the weight of the dampener disc in my hand. Thirty minutes. That's all Marcus could give us. Thirty minutes to find the core, figure out how to destroy it, and get out before the Watchers came. It wasn't much. But it was more than humanity had yesterday.

Elena spoke once, her voice floating out of the darkness inside the ranger station.

"When I was a kid, I used to have daydreams about geometry. My teachers thought I was weird because I'd cry out during math class sometimes. I couldn't explain it, I just felt like the shapes were wrong somehow. Like they were hiding something."

She held her breath for half a minute or so, and when she spoke again, her voice was barely a whisper.

"Sometimes I'd dream about angles that whispered to me. Shapes that wanted me to understand them. I thought I was going crazy."

Looking at both me and Dez, she continued,

"I don't think I was a daydream it anymore. And I don't think I was crazy. I think something's been waiting for me to find it. Something that's been calling to me my whole life. And tomorrow... tomorrow I'm finally going to answer."

Neither of us responded. There was nothing to say. Outside, the pulsing light continued its slow rhythm, and somewhere in that alien structure, something waited for us. Tomorrow, we would go to meet it.

6: The Alignment Pin

The observer effect states: *"the act of measurement fundamentally alters what is being measured. At the subatomic level, particles exist in superposition, multiple states simultaneously, until observation forces them to choose. The universe, it seems, does not decide what is real until something is watching."*

$$\Delta x \Delta p \geq \hbar/2$$

Angles

The night stretched on, restless and broken. After Marcus disappeared into the shadows, I'd returned to my cot but couldn't settle. None of us could. We all drifted in and out of consciousness, caught in that liminal space between waking and sleeping where dreams felt more real than the devastated world outside.

I dreamed of angles. Impossible geometries that folded back on themselves, equations that solved to infinity, mathematical proofs that ended in paradox. In the dream, I was standing at a chalkboard that stretched to the horizon, filling it with calculations, trying to find the flaw in the universe's logic. But every time I thought I'd found it, the numbers would shift, rearrange themselves into new configurations that didn't make sense. Sofia was there too, watching me work, shaking her head sadly.

"You can't solve this one with math, Jack," she kept saying.
"Some things don't have equations."

Walking around four, looking across the room, through the haze of the pulsing light, I could hear Dez murmuring in her sleep, restless Spanish words I couldn't make out. I saw her hands twitch, fingers making the motions of working on something, maybe an engine, tightening bolts, adjusting valves, trying to fix whatever kept breaking. I watched her face contort with frustration, trapped in some sort of mechanical nightmare.

Elena had it worst. She thrashed on her cot, whimpering, her eyes moving rapidly beneath closed lids. At one point she sat bolt upright, staring at nothing, and whispered: "The angles are calling. They want me to come closer. They want to show me what they really are." Then she collapsed back down, still asleep with her face flat in the pillow.

Around 5 AM, as the first hints of dawn began to wash out the alien glow, I gave up on sleep entirely and sat up on my cot. The dampener disc was in my pocket, warm against my thigh, that faint vibration still emanating from it like a second heartbeat. I pulled it out and held it up to the growing light filtering through the windows. The symbols on its surface shifted, not moving exactly, but rearranging themselves into new configurations, new meanings I couldn't begin to decipher.

Marcus had said it was keyed to my DNA. That it would suppress the security systems for thirty minutes. That it would only work once.

Thirty minutes to save the world. No pressure.

"Can't sleep either?"

I looked up. Dez was sitting on the edge of her cot, watching me. In the faint pulsing light from outside, her face looked haggard, the shadows under her eyes deep enough to drown in.

"No," I admitted. "You?"

"Every time I close my eyes, I see that thing." She shook her head slowly. "I've worked on engines my whole life, Jack. Machines. I understand how things fit together, how parts move, how systems function. That thing out there..." She trailed off, searching for words. "It's not built. It's not engineered. It's something else. Something that doesn't follow any rules I know."

"Elena said it exists in more dimensions than we can perceive. That what we're seeing is just a cross-section."

"She's connected to it somehow. She mentioned having experiences like out-of-body states, dream states where everything seems real but isn't."

"Yeah, well, Elena's been talking about geometry giving her nightmares since she was a kid."

Dez glanced at her sister, still lying on her cot, eyes open now but unfocused.

"Maybe she was onto something. Maybe some part of her always knew there were things out there that human minds weren't meant to see."

I tucked the dampener back into my pocket.

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"About walking into an alien death trap based on the word of a guy who admits he helped destroy seventeen planets, and an one of the alien's himself?"

She snorted.

"I've been having second thoughts since we left the bunker. But second thoughts don't change the math. Either we try, or we don't. And if we don't..."

She made a gesture that encompassed everything, the ruined world outside, the bodies we'd passed on the road, the billions dead and the millions more who would follow if we failed.

"So we try."

"So we try."

We sat in silence for a while, watching the light pulse against the walls. Then Elena sat up fully, and looked at us with eyes that seemed too old for her young face.

"It's almost time," she said. "I can feel it. The structure... it's different at dawn. More solid somehow. Less likely to shift while we're inside."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

She didn't answer. Just stood up and started gathering her gear. But I noticed something, a tremor in her hands that hadn't been there before. A hesitation in her movements, as if she were listening to something only, she could hear.

I suggested that we needed to pack up before it got too light outside. Everyone agreed.

We packed up ate a few more rations, and left the ranger station on foot headed towards the alien structure.

The morning was cold and gray, mist clinging to the valley below, thick and perpetual. Stuck there like it was waiting for permission to leave.

The ominous building was visible on the horizon, at least parts of it were, flickering in and out of perception, like a scene leading to a dream state on an old television show.

It stood just above the fog. I couldn't look at it for too long. It made my temples throb giving me a bit of nausea. I glimpsed back at Dez and Elena, their uneven trudge gave away the effect it was having on them as well.

"Everyone remember the plan?" Dez asked.

The plan. Such as it was: Approach from the north, using the tree cover. Get as close as possible without being detected. Find an entrance, Marcus had said there would be seams in the structure, places where our dimension and theirs overlapped enough to allow passage. Use the dampener to suppress security. Find the core. Destroy it. Get out. Simple. Except for the part where we had no idea what we'd find inside, no idea how to destroy alien technology we couldn't even comprehend, and no idea if we'd survive longer than thirty minutes.

"I remember. Stay together. Stay quiet. If we see the workers, the drones, don't engage unless we have to. And if anything talks to us..."

"Run."

We started down the ridge, moving through the forest in single file. Dez took point, her rifle at the ready, her eyes scanning the trees ahead. I followed, with Elena bringing up the rear. The

dampener disc pressed against my leg with every step, a constant reminder of how little time we had, how slim our chances were. As we walked, my mind drifted to Sofia. I wondered what she would say if she could see me now. The guy who'd spent his whole life avoiding risk, avoiding commitment, avoiding anything that might require him to be more than he was, now hiking toward an alien structure with the fate of humanity riding on his shoulders. She'd probably laugh. That full, head-thrown-back laugh, God, how I miss her.

As we made our way closer, I started thinking of the last couple of days. How I lived through that toss-up, and how that experience had given me a sense of control, a feeling that I could direct my own future. This was something I had never felt before. It is what was lacking in my life all this time. Now I have it, I was never going to let it go. It gave me a sense of determination.

"Too stubborn to die!" I blurted.

"Huh?" Said Dez.

"Never mind."

The first sign that something changed came when we were about two miles from the structure. My head had been aching since we left the ranger station, a low, persistent throb behind my eyes. And as we descended into the valley, got closer, the ache intensified. Sharpened. Became something that felt less like pain and more like pressure, as if my skull was being squeezed from the inside.

"Anyone else feeling that?"

I asked, pressing my palm against my temple.

"Yeah."

Dez had stopped walking, her face pale.

"Like something's pushing on my brain."

Elena had gone even paler... her lips were moving, forming words without sound.

'It's not just the structure. There's a resonance. A harmonic I didn't write.'

She reached out, her fingers twitching in a pattern that mirrored a shadow moving just beyond the brush, a small, mud-caked shadow almost imperceptibly behind us.

'I feel a phantom limb, Jack. Like a piece of me, external, walking through the woods, watching us, waiting for the angles to align.'

Elena's lips kept moving, forming words without sound. Her fingers traced patterns in the air, geometric shapes that seemed to hang there for a moment before dissolving.

"Elena?"

Dez moved to her sister's side.

"Talk to me."

"The geometry. It's... it's louder here. I can feel it. The angles, the shapes, they're not just wrong, they're aggressive. They're pushing against reality, trying to make room for themselves."

"It hurts, Dez. It hurts to exist this close to it. It's physically painful to be here."

But beneath the pain, I saw something else. Recognition. As if the geometry wasn't just assaulting her, it was calling to her.

"Then stay here. Wait for us. We'll..."

"No."

Elena straightened, wiping the sweat that had wet her face with the back of her hand. Her voice had changed, steadier now, almost formal.

"I'm the only one who can sense it. If something changes, if the structure shifts while you're inside, I might be the only warning you get. I'm coming."

Dez looked like she wanted to argue, but the look of her sister's expression stopped her. Even with the pain, she looked calm, in control.

Instead, she just nodded and resumed walking. We continued down into the valley, and with every step, the pressure in my head grew worse.

The closer we got, the more changed the world became. It started with small things. Shadows that fell in the wrong direction, pointing toward the light source instead of away from it. Birds that flew in formation, then suddenly reversed course in perfect synchronization, as if responding to a signal we couldn't hear. Leaves on the trees that seemed to be the wrong color, not quite green, not quite brown, but something in between that my eyes couldn't properly register. Everything was phasing. Then the small things became bigger things. We passed a stream that was flowing uphill. Not dramatically, not obviously defying gravity, but subtly, the water moving against the slope with a gentle persistence that made my stomach queasy. Dez stopped and stared at it for a while, her expression somewhere between fascination and horror.

"That's not possible."

"A lot of things aren't possible anymore."

We kept walking. The trees began to thin as we approached the base of the mountain where the structure was anchored, if "anchored" was even the right word for something that seemed to exist in multiple states simultaneously. And as the forest gave way to rocky terrain, I got my first ground-level look at what we were facing. The feeling was even worse up close. The structure rose out of the valley like a tumor. Like foreign entity that didn't belong there. Its surfaces gleaming with that oily, iridescent sheen I'd seen through the binoculars. But where distance had provided some buffer, some way for my mind to abstract what it was seeing, proximity offered no such mercy. Every detail was sharp. Every impossible angle was clear. And my brain, forced to process what my eyes were reporting, began to rebel. I felt dizzy. More nauseous. All my bad feelings were amplified. The pressure in my head spiked, and for a moment I thought I might pass out.

"Jack."

Dez grabbed my arm, steadying me.

"Focus on me. Don't look at it directly. Use your peripheral vision."

I did as she said, fixing my gaze on her face, letting the structure blur into an indistinct mass at the edge of my vision. The nausea receded slightly.

"How did you know that would help?"

"I didn't. But it's what I've been doing since we got close."

She managed a grim smile.

"Trial and error. Mostly error."

Elena had stopped a few feet behind us, her head tilted at an odd angle, her eyes unfocused. Her hands were moving again, tracing those same geometric patterns, but more deliberately now. As if she were reading something invisible in the air.

"There's a seam. About two hundred meters to the left. A place where the edges don't quite line up. I can feel it, it's like a gap in the spacetime. A place where our reality hasn't been completely displaced yet."

Her voice had taken on that formal quality again. And when she moved past us, walking with a strange, drifting gait, I noticed something that made my skin crawl, she wasn't avoiding looking at the structure. She was staring directly at it, her eyes wide and unblinking, and she wasn't getting sick.

"Lead the way." I said, pushing down my unease.

She moved past us, walking with that strange, drifting gait, like a sleepwalker following a dream only she could see. “

It seems to be affecting her more as we get closer.” I remarked.

Dez and I followed, keeping our eyes averted from the structure's full horror, trusting Elena's impossible sense to guide us. We hit the bottom of the structure down in the valley. We started to climb. The terrain grew steeper, rocky outcroppings jutted from the earth, some sharp, some regular, some unearthly with features as if they'd been infected by the alien geometry above. And everywhere, that pulsing light, washing over us in waves that I could feel in my chest, in my

bones, in the spaces between my thoughts. Then Elena stopped.

"Here. This is it."

I stared at the spot she was indicating. I saw nothing but stone, gray, weathered, ordinary. But as I looked more closely, I noticed something strange. The rock seemed to shimmer slightly, like heat waves rising from hot pavement. And when I moved my head, the shimmer moved too, but not quite in sync, lagging behind by a fraction of a second like I was out of phase from the thing.

"I don't see anything."

"You're looking with your eyes."

Elena said, more seriousness in her delivery.

"Look with... with the space between seeing and understanding. The place where things are real before your brain decides what they are."

I tried. I let my vision relax, to the point where it felt like I was looking at one of those 3D optical illusions... I let my focus soften even more, let myself perceive without processing. And for just a moment, I saw it. A seam. A crack in reality itself, no wider than a hand-span, running vertically through the air where the rock face should have been. Through it, I glimpsed something, a corridor of some kind, its walls made of that flowing, iridescent material, stretching away into impossible depths.

"I see it."

"Then use the device. Now. Before it shifts again."

I pulled the dampener disc from my pocket. It was warm, warmer than before, almost hot, and the vibration had intensified, matching the rhythm of my racing heart. The symbols on its surface were moving faster now, rearranging themselves in patterns that seemed almost urgent.

"How do I activate it?"

"I don't know. Marcus didn't say."

Elena's voice was strained.

"But it's keyed to your DNA. Maybe... maybe you just have to want it to work."

"Want it to work?"

"Yes. Like a child making a wish on a birthday candle."

I had passed the point of skepticism. Past the point of demanding rational explanations for things that defied rationality.

I closed my eyes, gripped the disc tightly in my palm, and focused on what I wanted. Let us in. Give us time. Let us do what we came to do.

The disc grew hotter. The vibration intensified to the point of pain. Then, the world shifted. There's no way to describe what happened next in terms that make sense. The closest I can come is this: reality hiccupped. One second, I was standing on the earth outside, staring at a crack in the air. The next, the crack had widened, or I had narrowed, and I was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere that shouldn't exist. Somewhere that my mind immediately began screaming at me to leave, to run, to get out before it was too late. I didn't feel a thing, and it

wasn't painful like Marcus had expressed. Maybe this was due to my matching DNA. I was only guessing... not sure, but there was no transition state like you see in those SciFi movies. It was just blank, a blink of the eye and I went from the outside to the inside, and when I looked back, the outside was gone the walls or whatever it was had closed. I was in the structure, petrified, terrified and worst of all, I was lost.

Inside

As I settled down and got my bearings, it was an impossible sight. The corridor stretched before me, impossibly long, its walls made of that flowing material I'd seen from outside. But up close, the material was even more intriguing. It moved, actually moved, rippling and shifting like the surface of a living thing, like those NASA videos of the sun's surface only instead of only the orange color these colors were infinite. Colors I couldn't name pulsed through it in waves, and when I looked too closely at any one spot, I felt my sense of self beginning to fray at the edges, as if just my act of observing it was pulling it in and out of existence, my existence.

There was another thing, this low, standing wave hum threaded the walls. When I turned my head, the pitch shifted, like the room was detuning me. My inner ear swore the floor leaned left while my eyes insisted it was level, and the nausea unrelenting, like a returning tide. The air was heavy, hard to breathe. My hands met a slow, viscous resistance as if I were moving underwater, and a bright, metallic tang like the one I tasted a couple days before, right before being sucked out of my apartment, slicked my tongue. It felt like the scent of ozone after old rain.

"Dez? Elena?"

"Here."

Dez's voice came from behind me. I turned and saw her stepping through the seam, her face pale and sweating, her rifle clutched tightly across her body, hanging by its strap.

"Jesus Christ, Jack. What is this place?"

"I don't know. But the clock's running. Thirty minutes."

Elena came through last, and as soon as she crossed the threshold, she gasped and doubled over, clutching her head.

"Elena!"

Dez rushed to her sister's side.

"I'm okay."

Elena managed the words, though her voice suggested otherwise. But when she straightened, I saw something in her eyes, a flicker of something that wasn't quite recognition, wasn't quite fear. Something deeper.

"It's just... the geometry, it's... it's speaking. Can you hear it? I can almost understand it."

She paused, her breath catching, her hands trembling.

"No... not almost. I... I do understand it."

The words seemed to surprise her as much as they surprised us.

"We need to move," she said quickly, shaking her head as if to clear it. "The dampener is working, but I can feel things on the edges of my perception. Things that are waiting. Things that will notice us the moment the suppression fails."

We started down the corridor.

Time moved strangely inside the structure. My watch, an old analog I'd grabbed from the ranger station, showed that three minutes had passed since we entered. But it felt longer. Much longer. The corridor seemed to stretch as we walked, the far end

receding no matter how fast we moved. It felt like we were chasing a rainbow. And every few steps, the walls would ripple in a way that made me feel like the structure itself was breathing.

"This doesn't make sense"

"What doesn't make sense, Dez?"

"We've been walking for what feels like ten minutes, but the corridor doesn't end. It's like we're on a treadmill."

"It's the geometry," Elena said.

Her voice had steadied, as if she'd found some equilibrium with the assault on her senses. Or as if something inside her had awakened to meet it.

"Space doesn't work the same way in here. Distance is... negotiable. The structure exists in more dimensions than we can perceive, remember? We're walking through a three-dimensional cross-section of something much larger. The path might loop through higher dimensions we can't see."

"So how do we get anywhere?"

Elena stopped, stood and thought to herself; her brow furrowed in concentration. Her fingers moved through the air, and I noticed something I'd missed before, faint traces of light following her movements. Soft blue pulses, barely visible, like bioluminescence in deep water. Short flickers followed by longer ones. A pattern. A rhythm. Almost like... a language. Then she pointed to a section of wall that looked identical to every other section we'd passed.

"There. That's a junction. I can feel it. A place where multiple paths intersect."

I stared at the wall. Saw nothing but that flowing, iridescent surface. But I'd learned to trust Elena's impossible sense by now.

"How do we access it?"

"I think... I think you have to want to. Like with the seam outside."

She looked at me with a look of uncertainty in her eyes. Confusion. As if she were surprising herself with knowledge she shouldn't have.

"The dampener is masking us, but it might also be giving you some level of interface with the structure's systems. Try focusing on wanting to find the core. The heart of the device."

I stepped toward the wall, hesitated, then pressed my palm against it. The connection was instant and overwhelming at first, like trying to drink water from a fire hose. I couldn't control it, couldn't direct it. Information flooded in: the structure's age (millennia), its purpose (alignment), its current state (compromised). I winced and pulled my hand back.

"What happened?" Dez asked.

"Too much," I managed.

"It's like... like trying to read a library by absorbing all the books at once."

Elena studied me with those ancient-young eyes.

"Try again. But this time, ask a question instead of just listening. The geometry responds to intention."

I hesitated, then pressed my palm to the wall again. This time, instead of opening myself to everything, I focused on a single thought: Where is the core? The flood became a stream. Then a trickle. Then a clear, precise answer. The sensation was incredible, a single thought thread from my mind and I could access anything instantly, independently. Their entire library of information was at my disposal. If I wasn't experiencing it myself, I wouldn't believe it. The material was warm, almost body temperature, and it yielded slightly under my touch, like pressing against something between solid and liquid. But more than that, I felt a connection. A sudden awareness of the structure's vastness, its complexity, the countless systems and processes running through it like blood through veins. And somewhere in that vastness, a presence. Multiple presences. Things that were aware of the structure the way I was aware of my own body. Things that would notice us the moment the dampener failed. The Watchers. They were here. Somewhere in this impossible maze. Waiting. I pushed the thought aside and focused on what I needed. The core. The heart. The thing we'd come to destroy.

The wall... opened. Not like a door. More like it simply decided to not be there anymore. One moment solid, the next an opening, revealing a chamber beyond that made the corridor look normal by comparison.

"Holy shit," Dez breathed. You did it!

The chamber was vast. That was my first impression. A space so large that the far walls disappeared into a haze that might have been distance or might have been the structure phasing out of our perceptual range. The ceiling, not sure what else to call it as I had no reference to what it was... it was just above us.

It arched overhead in curves that wasn't easy to follow, covered in those shifting symbols I'd seen on the dampener disc, each one pulsing with its own rhythm, its own color, its own meaning I couldn't begin to fathom like it had a language of its own, like it was speaking. And now, watching those pulses more closely, I realized they were speaking. Blue flashes followed by green, short bursts and long, dim glows and bright flares, all of it cycling in patterns too complex to be random. The entire structure was communicating with itself, a constant flow of light-language rippling through every surface. But it was what filled the chamber that stopped me cold. It was those machines the same ones I'd seen the drones working with. Thousands of them. Devices in 3 different sizes and shapes occupying 3 main sections, lower, middle and upper, some as small as my fist, others on the upper levels towering over 4 feet tall, all of them connected by threads of that iridescent material, forming a network that spread across the chamber like a neural network. They pulsed with light that followed a sequence as if we were in the heart of a computer... a motherboard. If I had to guess, I'd say, the lower smaller machines were memory, vast in numbers, the fist sized ones, each one potentially retaining a Googleplex of data. The middle section seemed as if it operated like a bus, carrying the information to and from the lower sections, the memory, to the upper sections. The upper sections were like CPUs, the main processing unit, the brains of the operation. You could hear the whole thing hummed with sustained energy crackling like a lightning strike. Running on energy that wasn't produced in our world. There just wasn't enough energy available here that could sustain this thing. Ever stranger, everything in here existed in states that didn't make sense, solid and liquid and something in between, pulsating, at

once, in sequence. And moving among these machines, the workers. I'd seen them from the station, distant shapes that flowed rather than walked. Up close, they were something else entirely. They were humanoid. That was the most disturbing part. Two arms, two legs, a torso, a head. But the proportions were off, limbs too long, joints that bent in too many directions, fingers that seemed to have extra segments that appeared and disappeared depending on how the light hit them. Their skin had the same sort of translucent quality as the walls, like frosted glass, and beneath it I could see things moving. Patterns of light, perhaps. Or something more organic. Something alive. They had no faces. Where features should have been, there was only a smooth, featureless surface that occasionally rippled with those same shifting symbols. No eyes, no mouths, no way to tell if they were looking at us or away from us or even aware of our presence at all. But those symbols, those pulses of color across their featureless heads, I realized now that was how they communicated. Light flickering across their surfaces in rapid sequences. Blue queries answered by yellow commands. Green observations met with orange acknowledgments. An entire conversation happening in wavelengths. They moved through the chamber in perfect coordination, tending to the machines, adjusting connections, performing tasks like robots in a factory. And true to Marcus's word, they ignored us completely. We might as well have been ghosts.

"Don't engage unless we have to," Dez whispered, echoing the plan.

"Let's just... let's just find what we're looking for and get out."

We started across the chamber. Navigating through the worker-filled space was like walking through a living organism. The drones moved around us in patterns that seemed random but weren't, flowing past us by inches, their translucent forms sliding through our peripheral vision in ways that unsettled us. Several times, one of them came close enough that I could have touched it, and I felt a cold emanating from its body, a chill that seemed to seep straight to my bones. Their surfaces flickered with that light-language as they passed, soft blues and greens, the colors of data and organic matter, cataloging us even as they ignored us. I couldn't shake the feeling that they knew we were there. That somewhere behind those smooth, symbol-rippled surfaces, something was watching. Cataloging. Deciding.

"How much time?" Dez asked. I checked my watch.

"Twenty minutes. Maybe. Time's hard to track in here."

"Then we need to move faster."

But moving faster was easier said than done as the chamber was a maze of machines and workers, pathways that looped back on themselves, spaces that seemed to lead somewhere and then simply ended. I was using the memory of the library of information that just downloaded into my brain to guide us as best I could. There was no other choice.

As I chose routes that seemed logical, Elena was countering me, she was picking out routes that felt more stable, more direct, like she'd been here before or had something to do with its construction. She was leading the way now. I let her. And there was something else. As we walked, she was using her hands and tracing patterns of light in the air, not the uncertain

gestures from before, but precise, deliberate the light left trails. It was like observing a kind of LSD trip without having taken the chemical. Cyan pulses when she referenced herself or us. Blue flickers when she seemed to be querying something. Yellow strobes when she found a path forward. The walls responded to her movements, rippling where her light-traces touched them, as if the structure itself understood her better than we did. It was like watching someone remember a language they'd forgotten they knew. And as the walls shifted in response to her silent commands, I realized with a chill that she wasn't just sensing the geometry anymore. She was speaking to it.

Every minute we spent in this device became more maddening. I felt claustrophobic.

With my attention waning, Elena stopped mid-step. I almost slammed the back of her, and going off her cue we all stopped, watching, her head tilting at that odd angle I'd come to recognize, the listening posture, the one that meant the geometry was speaking to her.

"What is it?" Dez asked, rifle raised.

"Watchers?"

"No. Something else."

Elena's brow furrowed, confusion mixing with the strain on her features.

"Someone else. Small. Young. I feel another out there. Outside the structure. But I can feel her like she's right next to me."

"Human?"

"I think so. But she's like me. She can hear it too, the geometry. She's responding to it."

Elena looked surprised now.

"Seems she has the same sensitivity."

"The radio broadcast," I said, remembering.

"The reports about kids with geometric fixation. Drawing shapes. Claiming they could hear structures."

"It wasn't trauma."

Elena's voice had that formal quality again.

"It was activation. The accidental Convergence didn't just displace atmosphere, it thinned the barriers between dimensions across the entire planet. Children's minds are more plastic, more adaptable. Some of them are perceiving the thin places the way I perceive them and this one, especially. She can perceive it the way I do."

"Is that dangerous?" Dez asked.

"For her?"

"I don't know."

Elena started walking again, but slower now, distracted.

"But this one I'm sensing her most clearly, she's close. Getting closer. Like she's following the same signal I am. Following it here."

"Great," Dez uttered.

"Because we needed more complications."

"The core is close," Jack, her voice strained.

"I can feel it. It's stronger now. But it's... it's hidden. Wrapped in layers of something I don't understand. Like a pearl inside an oyster."

"Can you get us there?"

She closed her eyes, her face warping from concentration. When she opened them again, there was fear there. Real fear. And her hands were moving faster now, tracing urgent patterns, red pulses, short and sharp, the color of warnings.

"Jack... I need to tell you, there's something else. Something I've been feeling since we entered and it's not the girl."

She grabbed my arm, her grip tight, and I saw the red light still flickering from her fingertips, pulsing against my sleeve like a dying heartbeat.

"The Watchers. They're not just somewhere in the structure. They're aware of us. The dampener is hiding our presence from the automated systems, but the Watchers aren't automated. They're... they're hunting. I can feel them moving through the structure, getting closer. Like sharks circling."

"How long do we have?"

"I don't know. Minutes, maybe. Or they could be on top of us any second."

Her eyes searched mine, and as our eyes locked... I could see she had a look I'd not seen before, a look of sheer determination to help us with its destruction to help us evade the earth's inevitable end. She looked at me and as sternly as she could muster, she told me, "We need to find the core now, Jack. There's no time for caution!"

I nodded and turned to Dez.

"Cover us. Anything comes at us that isn't a worker, shoot it!"

"With pleasure."

Elena and I pushed forward, abandoning any pretense of stealth. The workers continued to ignore us, flowing around our rushed passage like water around stones. The machines hummed and pulsed. The symbols on the walls shifted faster, as if responding to our urgency giving us the sense that they knew what we were up to. And then, ahead of us, we saw it. The core. It rose from the center of the chamber like a frozen tornado, a spiraling column of that iridescent material with every luminance pulsing through it, and it was easily fifty feet tall, twisting upward in a helix that seemed to rotate even though it was perfectly still. It had all the connections from all the other machines, the CPUs I saw, connected to this umbilical. The waves of light traveling from base to apex and back again, and with each pulse, I felt something in my chest respond. A resonance. A connection that went deeper than the dampener's interface. This was it. The alignment pin's core. The device that would lock our world into the sphere's targeting system. The machine that would enable humanity's extinction. And looking at it, I had no idea how to destroy it.

"Jack." Dez's voice was tense. "We've got company."

I turned. At the far end of the chamber, shapes were emerging from the walls, phasing through the iridescent material as if it wasn't there. They were taller than the workers, their forms more defined, more solid. And unlike the workers, they had faces. Human faces. But longer. Stretched over skulls that were slightly too large, with eyes that were that same pale silvery gray

as Marcus's but emptier, colder, devoid of anything like conscience or doubt. They wore what might have been robes or might have been extensions of their own flesh, flowing garments that shifted and rippled like the walls around them. And across those garments, light pulsed in patterns far more complex than the workers', infrared frequencies at the edge of my perception, private channels, encrypted thoughts. Watchers. Three of them. Moving toward us with that same fluid grace I'd seen in the workers, but purposeful. Predatory.

"Run!" Elena screamed.

"Jack, the dampener, it's failing!"

I felt it too. The disc in my pocket was growing hot again, but this time it wasn't activation, it was burnout. The vibration was stuttering, irregular, dying. Our thirty minutes were up.

"Go!" Dez raised her rifle. "I'll hold them off!"

"You can't..."

"I said go! Find a way to destroy that thing!"

"Trust me, I'll hold them off!"

"Now, Go, Damn it, Go!!!"

She opened fire, 6 to 7 shots went out and even with all the humming and crackling of light, the sound from the gun was deafening in the enclosed space. I saw the bullets strike the lead Watcher's chest, penetrate it then pass straight through it without effect, there were no holes, nothing... something like they were here but not entirely. We could see them but they remained slightly out of phase, just out of reach of our existence and it didn't even slow down.

"Shit," Dez said with distdain.

"Okay, new plan. Running sounds good."

We ran. Something warm brushed my cheek as I pivoted, two seconds at most, a softness in the cold. Later I would tell myself it was the air. In the moment, it was enough. The corridor bent where I asked, buying Elena and Dez some much needed distance.

The area began to dissolve. Workers scattered as we sprinted through them, their perfect coordination finally broken by our violent intrusion. The machines around us pulsed with angry red light, alarms in frequencies I could feel more than hear, rapid red strobes that meant danger, threat, cease, the structure itself screaming warnings in its light-language. And behind us, the Watchers glided in pursuit, their stretched faces expressionless, their gray eyes fixed on us with presence. They weren't running. They didn't need to. They moved through the structure as if it was part of them, phasing through obstacles that we had to dodge, covering ground without seeming to hurry. They knew we had nowhere to go.

"Elena!" I grabbed her hand as we ran.

"Is there another way out?"

"I don't, I can't,"

She was hyperventilating, her sensitivity to the structure's geometry overwhelming her as the dampener failed and reality reasserted itself.

"Everything's shifting, I can't find the seams..."

But even as she spoke, her free hand was blazing with light. Not the soft traces from before, these were bright, urgent, cycling through colors faster than I could track. Blue-yellow-cyan-blue-yellow. Query-action-self-query-action. She was communicating with the structure at light speed. It seemed impossible, but her fingers were dancing through patterns that left afterimages that stung my eyes. And her lips, her lips were forming words in a language I'd never heard her speak, each syllable accompanied by a corresponding pulse of light, as if speech and luminescence were the same thing to her now.

"What the hell was going on, now?"

"Try! Focus!"

She squeezed her eyes shut as she grabbed my hand and held it tight. The light from her other hand intensified, yellow pulses growing brighter, more insistent, commands, I realized. She was giving the structure commands.

"Go left."

"There's something on the left. A weak point. It's an exit, I think."

"Good enough. Dez! Left!"

We veered left, plunging into a corridor that materialized from the wall as we approached, a corridor that hadn't existed until Elena's yellow pulses demanded it. Behind us, the Watchers followed without pause, flowing through the opening knowing it was made for them. The corridor twisted. Looped. Folded back on itself, and I was feeling serious vertigo, more even more nauseous than before, if that was possible. I lost all sense of direction, all sense of up and down, all sense of anything except Elena's hand in mine and Dez's footsteps pounding behind me.

And then the corridor ended. We burst into a smaller area, barely larger than a small bedroom, with walls that pulsed with that angry red light. There was no exit. No seam. No way out. We were trapped.

"Jack."

Dez's voice was steady, but I could hear the fear beneath it.

"Any ideas?"

The Watchers emerged from the corridor behind us, spreading out to block any retreat. Their gray silvery eyes studied us with something that might have been curiosity or might have been hunger. It was difficult to tell with their expressionless faces. One of them stepped forward. When it spoke, its voice was multiple, layered tones that seemed to come from everywhere at once, resonating in my skull like a migraine made audible. And as it spoke, I saw light rippling across its form, the same patterns, I realized, translated and fed into the vibrating walls. They turned their light-words into sound for our benefit. It was dumbing down its language for us.

"You were expected." The lead watcher spoke; the walls vibrated with the translated harmonics.

My blood ran cold as we all stood in utter dread trying to catch our breath.

"We are the Watchers, the Valthari, the Illuminated Ones who shaped your species from our own essence. Thirty thousand years ago, we seeded this world with life crafted from our DNA. You exist as our security system, our biological keys, our living locks against those who would steal our technology."

The Watcher's stretched face remained expressionless, but its eyes gleamed with something like pride.

"And now we will converge upon this world we created, to harvest what we seeded. You should be honored. Your species and this planet will power our sphere for millennia. Every cell, every breath, every thought, all of it will serve the Valthari as it was always meant to."

It paused, those silvery gray eyes fixing on me with ancient certainty.

"The defective Watcher. His contamination spreads..."

The creature's face twisted into something that might have been a smile.

"You were guided here. Led like livestock to the processing center. Did you think your arrival was chance? Did you think we weren't aware of the glitch?"

"Marcus said he engineered the glitch," I responded, my voice was steadier than I felt.

"The defective one believes many things. Believes he acts of his own will. Believes his guilt is genuine. Believes he can save your world through proxy." The Watcher's smile widened.

"He does not understand that his guilt, his doubt, his 'choice' to help you, all of it was anticipated. All of it was..."

"It was inevitable that at some point one of us, maybe even some of us would end up feeling this way. It was anticipated and it happened."

"We watched. Observed and waited until we saw it."

The words hit me like physical blows. Marcus hadn't outsmarted them. He hadn't found a loophole in his conditioning. They'd known. They'd known all along.

"You're lying," Dez said.

"You're trying to make us give up."

"We do not lie. Deception is inefficient. The truth is sufficient."

The Watcher turned its gray gaze to me.

"You carry a dampener device. It has failed, as it was designed to fail. You sought the core, as you were designed to seek it. You will now be processed, as you were designed to be processed."

"Processed for what?"

"Unlike other worlds where alignment was easy and didn't require biological keys... until our enemies stole our technology and forced us to create the BioMethod to align your world. So now the alignment is more difficult and requires biological keys, your DNA sequences. Native organisms whose quantum signatures can interface with the pin network. The defective Watcher was sent to identify candidates. Your female companion,"

It gestured toward the corridor behind them, and I realized with horror what it was referring to.

"She was the first candidate. Her signature was acceptable, but her death removed her from consideration. You are now her replacement."

As Marcus told me... it was Sofia. They were talking about Sofia.

"Your grief made you susceptible," the Watcher continued.

"Your guilt made you malleable. The defective one's 'clues' were simply the path we laid for you. Every step you have taken since the convergence has been according to design."

I wanted to scream, wanted to rage against the thing standing in front of me, to prove it wrong through sheer force of will. But some part of me, some cold, analytical part that had kept me alive through the chaos of the past days, was listening. Thinking. Looking for the flaw in its logic. And finding one.

"If everything went according to plan," I said slowly, "then why are you here? Why send three Watchers to capture one human who's already exactly where you want him?"

The Watcher's smile flickered. Just for a moment. Just enough. It revealed something... I waited for his next move.

"Precaution. The defective one's corruption runs deep. There is a possibility, small, but non-zero, that his interference has created variables we did not anticipate."

"Variables like what?"

Sophia's death, I thought, they didn't anticipate Sophia's death... she changed everything. The Watcher didn't answer. But I saw something in its gray eyes. Something that looked almost like uncertainty. And in that moment, I knew there was a crack I could exploit, take advantage of. Just then, Elena screamed. The sound was unlike anything I'd ever heard, a raw, primal shriek that seemed to come from somewhere deeper than her throat. She'd collapsed to her knees, her hands pressed against her temples, her body convulsing.

"Elena!" Dez rushed to her sister, rifle forgotten.

But Elena wasn't listening. Her eyes had rolled back in her head, showing only white, and her hands, her hands were moving on their own, tracing patterns in the air with mechanical precision. Light poured from her fingertips, but not the soft colors I'd seen before. This light was different. It existed at the edge of perception, a color that wasn't quite any color I'd seen even seeing all the colors I'd seen while in this space. Ultraviolet, somewhere in the [I] spectrum. I knew it instinctively, though I couldn't explain how. The sacred spectrum. The frequency that the Harvesters reserved for their most ancient communications, their most forbidden knowledge. And it was blazing from Elena's hands like a beacon, pulsing in patterns so complex they made the earlier traces look like a child's scribbles. She was broadcasting. Not speaking, transmitting. Sending a signal that rippled through the walls, through the machines, through the very fabric of the structure around us and plausibly through time. The workers in the distance froze mid-motion, their featureless heads turning toward us, surfaces flickering with confused blue queries. The machines stuttered in their rhythms. Even the angry red alarms seemed to dim, overwhelmed by the signal Elena was pumping into the system. Then her voice came, and it was layered, harmonic, ancient beyond measure, the same voice that had spoken through the geometry itself.

But now I understood what I was hearing. She wasn't speaking words anymore. She was speaking in pure light. The language of her ancestors. The words we could hear had merged with light. Her voice carried wavelengths, her syllables pulsed with intensity, her sentences strobed in patterns that matched the movements of her hands. Sound and light unified into a single language.

"THE DEFECTIVE ONE IS NOT THE MAN. THE DEFECTIVE ONE
THE DESIGN."

Ultraviolet blazed with each word, sacred, forbidden, flaring so bright it left afterimages even though I couldn't technically see it.

"THE CHILD SEES WHAT THE BUILDERS COULD NOT. THE
ANGLES REMEMBER WHAT THE ANGLES FORGOT."

The Watchers recoiled. Actually recoiled, their perfect composure cracking for the first time. The crack I was looking for, Elena found it.

The light rippling across their forms stuttered, shifted to angry red, then went rapid, panicked pulses in frequencies even deeper than before, Fear. They were afraid. And I understood why. Elena wasn't just accessing forbidden channels; she was broadcasting on them. Sending a message that would propagate through every connected structure, every node in their vast network. The sacred ultraviolet frequency couldn't be filtered, couldn't be blocked, couldn't be contained. It was designed to reach everywhere at once. She was announcing herself. Announcing us. Telling the entire Harvester civilization everyone, Watcher, Worker and all that lived in the Sphere, that a decommissioned unit (her) had reactivated, had allied with the native species, had accessed the sacred frequencies to oppose the Convergence.

"Silence her," the lead Watcher hissed, and its voice had lost all pretense of calm control.

"She is accessing forbidden channels, impossible, she was decommissioned..."

Decommissioned. But Elena kept transmitting, her body rigid, ultraviolet blazing from her hands in spiraling patterns that wrote themselves across the walls, the ceiling, the air itself. The symbols she traced hung in space like burning equations, each one carrying meaning I could almost grasp, warnings, declarations, coordinates. She was telling the cosmos what was happening here. And beneath that sacred frequency, I saw something else. Yellow pulses, rapid and precise, weaving through her ultraviolet broadcast like code hidden inside code... a modulated frequency. Commands. She was programming something. Even as she screamed her forbidden message to the stars, some part of her, some ancient, trained part that remembered what she had been, was writing instructions into the structure itself. Yellow-short, yellow-long, yellow-triple. Action sequences. Override protocols. And threading through it all, a single repeated pattern in cyan that I'd seen her use before when referencing us: self-plural. Us. We. The ones who needed to escape. She was writing an exit. An anti-message.

"THE PIN IS NOT A PIN. THE SPHERE IS NOT A SPHERE. THE CONVERGENCE IS NOT AN ENDING; IT IS A QUESTION. AND THE ANSWER..."

One of the Watchers lunged toward her, its arm extending, reaching, And Elena's eyes snapped forward, meeting mine for a fraction of a second. In that instant, I saw terror, confusion, and something else, a desperate plea. A warning. Run. Her hands completed one final gesture, yellow blazing bright, cyan pulsing twice, mixed with a new color something beyond ultraviolet, I knew it was there, but my visual cortex couldn't identify it... it was beyond sacred and the walls around us

shuddered. The structure obeyed. A seam tore open that bent reality itself. Then everything went white.

I don't know what happened next, but it felt instantaneous. One moment, Elena was screaming prophecy and a Watcher was reaching for her. The next, I was lying on stone, real stone, rough and cold and gloriously normal, staring up at a gray sky I recognized. We were outside. Back on the mountain. Back in our reality. I sat up, my head pounding, my vision swimming. Dez was a few feet away, groaning, struggling to push herself upright. And Elena, Elena was lying motionless between us, her eyes closed, her face peaceful. Too peaceful.

"Elena?" Dez scrambled to her sister's side, pressing her fingers to Elena's throat.

"Elena, no. No, no, no..."

"Is she..."

"She's alive." Dez's voice cracked with relief.

"Unconscious, but alive. Pulse is weak but steady."

She looked up at me, her face streaked with perspiration, wet and dirty, and in her eyes I saw questions. So many questions.

"What the hell happened in there, Jack? What did she do? How could she talk like they do with the light? And what did that thing mean, decommissioned?"

I didn't have an answer. I didn't understand any of it, the Watcher's revelations, Elena's connection, that single word that had changed everything. Decommissioned. I thought about it deeply, while watching Elena lay there unconscious, about what scared the Watchers, why they panicked and it felt like

they had realized a mistake, a terrible fault in their quest to create an impenetrable security system, by building freewill into their cryptographic keys, us, the humans and rather than preserving their technology, it may end up destroying them.

Was Elena built as well? Was she Used then shutdown, the word “Decommissioned” seemed to imply that.

Her lips still moved soundlessly, and occasionally, so faint I might have imagined it, I saw traces of light flickering at her fingertips. Soft blue. Gentle cyan. The colors of information and self. As if even unconscious, some part of her was still communicating with something we couldn't see. All I knew was that we were out. We were alive. And we'd failed. We hadn't destroyed the core. Hadn't even come close. All we'd done was confirm that we were pawns in a game we didn't understand, playing roles that had been written for us before we even knew there was a script. But Elena had done something. Whatever she'd accessed, whatever she'd spoken in that light-language that shouldn't have been possible, it had frightened them.

The beings who had destroyed seventeen worlds, who had engineer us and had scheduled our apocalypse. Who thought they had manipulated Marcus and me and everyone else like pieces on a board, they had been frightened. And they had recognized her. I pulled myself to my feet, swaying slightly, and looked toward the structure. It was still there. Still pulsing with that alien light. Still waiting. But something was different. Something in the quality of the light, in the rhythm of its pulse. It seemed... agitated. Uncertain. The patterns that had been so orderly before now flickered with bursts of red, warnings, I knew now. Warnings about us. About her. The structure was still processing her broadcast, still trying to contain the signal she'd

sent screaming through its sacred channels. Variables we did not anticipate. The Watcher's words echoed in my mind.

Whatever Elena had been before she was "decommissioned," whatever the Harvesters had built her to do, she had just used it against them. Had broadcast their sacred frequencies to announce her betrayal. Had written escape code in their own language. And somewhere across their universe, that message was propagating. That warning was spreading. The Harvesters knew we knew who they were and they knew we were coming. But more importantly, they knew one of their own had turned against them.

"We need to get her somewhere safe," Dez said, lifting her sister in her arms. Elena's head lolled against Dez's shoulder, her lips still forming silent words, fingers still tracing faint patterns of light that faded as quickly as they formed.

"Back to the ranger station. Figure out what comes next."

I nodded, still staring at the structure.

"Jack. Come on."

I turned away from the alien device, from the core I'd failed to destroy, from the answers I hadn't found, and followed Dez up the mountain. We weren't done. Not yet. And as we walked, I could feel the change. It was getting stronger by the hour... it was all around us, in the structure behind us, in Elena. In the world. Everywhere.

The dampener disc was dead in my pocket, its symbols faded, its vibration silenced. But I could still feel its presence. Still feel that connection to the structure's systems, faint but present,

like an echo of a song I'd only half-heard. And somewhere in that echo, I heard something else. A voice. Faint. Familiar.

“Jack.”

I stopped. Turned. Saw nothing but the trees, the rocks, the distant glow of the alien structure.

“Jack. Listen. The Watcher was wrong. Not everything is design. Some things are choice. Some variables are truly unknown.”

Marcus. It was Marcus's voice, speaking from somewhere I couldn't see, somewhere I couldn't reach... he was in my head. And through the connection, something else: Marcus. I felt him like a distant star collapsing. He was everywhere and nowhere, his consciousness dispersing across dimensional boundaries, becoming interference, static, noise in the system. Buying us seconds by scattering himself across the lattice. And beneath his words, I sensed colors, fading cyan, dimming blue, the last light of a dying transmission.

“Jack.”

His voice came from everywhere.

“Not everything is design. Remember, some things are choice.”

I felt him smile, or the memory of a smile, echoing across dimensions. One final pulse of something warm, something almost human, flickering through frequencies that were never meant to carry hope.

“Tell them I remembered my name. At the end. I remembered. You have something they didn't expect. Elena showed them using the ancient light. The answer is in the question. The question is in the angles. Find what the builders forgot.”

Then he was gone. Not dead, you can't die when you're spread across infinity. But gone from anything recognizable as existence. The ultimate price for three centuries of guilt. The voice faded. The echo died. But the words remained, burning in my mind like a promise or a threat.

“Find what the builders forgot, it's in the angles.”

I didn't know what it meant. Didn't know if Marcus was truly on our side or just another layer of manipulation. Didn't know if Elena would wake up, or what she'd remember when she did. If she did. But I knew one thing. This wasn't over. The structure pulsed behind me, angry and uncertain, its light-language now stuttering with interference, Elena's forbidden broadcast still echoing through its systems, corrupting its perfect order. And somewhere in its impossible depths, a secret was waiting to be found. A secret that had terrified the Watchers. A secret Elena had touched, however briefly, before being thrown clear. Decommissioned. I looked at Elena's unconscious form in Dez's arms, at the way her lips still moved, forming words in a language of light that shouldn't exist. At the faint traces still flickering from her fingertips, cyan and blue, self and information, an identity trying to remember itself. And I wondered what, or who, we had really brought with us into that structure.

7: Unfolding Secrets

In information theory states: *"entropy measures the uncertainty in a system, the amount of 'surprise' contained in a message. A signal with high entropy carries more information precisely because it is less predictable. The universe's deepest secrets are hidden not in patterns, but in anomalies. Not in what repeats, but in what breaks."*

$$H(X) = -\sum P(x) \log P(x)$$

Wounded

We made it back to the ranger station as the sun began to set. Elena hadn't woken during the journey. She hung limp in Dez's arms, her breathing shallow but steady, her face holding an expression of peace that seemed wrong given what she'd been through. Whatever she'd accessed inside that structure, whatever had spoken through her, it had taken something out of her. Or put something in. Nothing made sense when we were inside the Alignment Pin, and after everything I saw with the light-words and how Elena was able to speak it, nothing made sense out here either. I was a mess... I had no idea what to do next or if anything could be done, but I did know we pissed them off. The view from the observation deck confirmed it. The structure was still pulsing on the horizon, but something had changed. The rhythm was off. Where before the light had throbbed with a steady, almost mechanical regularity, like a heartbeat, like my heartbeat, now it stuttered and surged,

flickering between intensities, cycling through colors that seemed to clash with each other. The colors weren't just flickering, they seemed to be arguing. Reds clashing with yellows, blues stuttering into greens. It wasn't difficult to see that it wasn't calm readiness, it was chaos now. The structure was screaming at itself. It looked agitated. Wounded. Pissed off. And if I'd learned anything from my dad, it was that pissing something or someone off was the first step to getting under their skin... first step to winning. It looked uncertain.

"It felt us," I said, watching the erratic display.

"Whatever Elena did, whatever she accessed, it hurt them. They know she knows."

"Good."

Dez laid her sister gently on one of the cots inside, brushing hair from Elena's forehead with a tenderness that seemed at odds with the hardness I'd come to associate with her.

"They deserve to hurt. After what they've done. After what they're planning to do."

I didn't respond. I was too busy trying to process the other thing, the sensation that had been growing since we escaped the structure. That faint connection I'd felt through the dampener, it hadn't totally died when the device burned out. If anything, it had deepened. Spread. Like roots growing through soil, threading into spaces I couldn't see. I could feel the structure. Not just see it on the horizon, but feel it, a presence at the edge of my consciousness, vast and complex and somehow aware of me in turn. It was like having a splinter in my mind, except the splinter was alive and the wound it had made was slowly, inexorably widening.

"Jack." Dez's voice cut through my thoughts.

"You okay? You've got that thousand-yard stare thing going on."

"I can feel it," I said.

"The structure. It's like... it's like it left something inside me. A connection. I can sense things. The systems running through it. The workers moving inside. The Watchers..."

I trailed off, because when I focused on that last part, on the cold, predatory presence that had chased us through impossible corridors, I felt something that made me not want to live. I wanted to die if for nothing else but to escape this never-ending insecure feeling, such a dreadful feeling and it's all coming from what I now know and what I know is coming.

Knowing that at some point humanity would become someone else's energy.

We all knew why and how it was going to happen, but we didn't know when it would happen, but we knew it was coming and that was enough.

The thing that left me with some consolation was that at least I knew they were angry. Confused. And they were looking for us instead of the other way around.

"We need to be ready," I said.

"They're not going to let what happened go."

"I got Information from another database, something that scared me and it was that they were speeding up the repairs and they would be ready for the next convergence in what amounted to 2 earth days."

"And you failed to tell us this... why?"

“I don’t know. I didn’t want to believe it. I thought it was a mistake. That the information wasn’t real, wasn’t accurate. It’s possible they fed it to me to make us react instead of taking our time to think through the problem. Making us think we have less time than we actually do.”

"Let them come." Dez's hand dropped to her rifle.

"I've got plenty of ammunition."

"Bullets didn't work, remember? They passed right through them."

"Then we'll find something that does work."

She looked at me with fierce determination.

"I didn't survive the end of the world and escape from these goons to give up now. Neither did you. So, whatever's happening to you, this connection, this feeling, we use it. We figure out if Elena found anything else. A weakness. And we finish what we started."

I wanted to believe her. Wanted to share her certainty, her refusal to surrender. But the Watcher's words kept echoing in my head, poisoning every thought with doubt.

“You were expected. Every step you have taken has been according to design.”

What if finishing what we started was exactly what they wanted?

Knowing

Elena came to about three hours later and sat there staring at her alien hands.

We'd been sitting in heavy silence, each of us trying to figure out what any of this meant for our mission. The ranger station had become a pressure cooker of unspoken words. Then I heard it. Soft. The footsteps were so light I almost missed them. Hesitant. Coming up the stairs someone small, someone young.

Dez had her rifle trained on the doorway before I could react. Elena raised her head, her expression shifting from despair to something else, recognition.

"Wait," Elena said.

"I know who that is. I've been feeling her for hours."

A girl appeared in the doorway. Eleven, maybe twelve, with dirt smudged across her cheeks in patterns that almost looked deliberate, like war paint, or like she'd been pressing her face against the ground to feel its vibration. Her clothes were torn and mud-caked. She'd been walking for a long time. But her eyes. Her eyes were clear and ancient and utterly calm.

"It's not good here," she said, her voice nervous, slightly shaky.

"But when she talks to it," she pointed at Elena, "it gets better. Like she's teaching it to use its inside voice."

Dez lowered her rifle slowly.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Maya."

The girl stepped into the room, her gaze sweeping across us before settling on Elena with uncomfortable intensity. Something nagged at me as I watched the girl move. The way she tilted her head when she was listening, that slight angle, like she was trying to catch a frequency just beyond hearing. I'd seen that posture before. Recently. I glanced at Elena, and there it was. The same tilt. The same unconscious lean toward something invisible. Coincidence, I told myself. Trauma response. Kids mimic adults when they're scared. But the resemblance didn't stop there. Maya's dark hair fell like Elena's. Her sharp features, the defined cheekbones, the pointed chin, could have been Elena's own, softened by youth. Even the way her fingers twitched at her sides, tracing small patterns in the air... I blinked, and the similarity seemed to fade. Just a traumatized child. Just my exhausted brain finding patterns where none existed.

"I followed light. My mom didn't come down from the sky. I walked until it was close. Then the light was brighter, but different. Better." She waited.

"She's like me. But bigger. Older. She remembers what the shapes mean."

Elena rose slowly, moving toward the girl with a gentleness that seemed at odds with everything she'd just confessed.

"How long have you been seeing them? The shapes?"

"Always," Maya said.

"But dimmer. Like lamp in another room. After the sky fell, it got brighter. Really bright. Everyone who was still alive stopped seeing anything, but I started seeing everything."

She looked at me, then at Dez.

"You can't see it. That's okay. Most people can't. But you," back to Elena, "you speak it. I watched you through the walls. The light-words. I didn't know there were words until I saw you making them."

"Through the walls?" I asked.

"The thin places. There's one near here. I've been sitting next to it, seeing through it."

Maya's matter-of-fact tone was somehow more unsettling than fear would have been.

"The lights argue a lot. But they're scared now. Something's changing. Something's not right."

She looked at Elena.

"Is that you? Are you what's making it not right?"

Elena knelt to meet the girl's eyes.

"Part of the reason, maybe."

"How did you know to come here specifically?"

"The angles guided me. They opened doors, showed me things that I had forgot. It hurt to slip through the gaps"

Maya reached out and touched Elena's hand.

"Was that you? Did you build them? The shapes that hurt?"

The question hung in the air. Elena's face contorted with something between shame and wonder.

"Yes," she finally said. "A long time ago. I helped build them."

Maya considered this.

"Are you going to break them now?"

"I'm going to try."

"Good."

Maya sat down cross-legged on the floor, as if that settled everything.

"I'll help. I can see when the lights are lying, when the angles change. They do that sometimes. Pretend to be one shape when they're really another. They're manipulated by the others... the others inside, but I can tell the difference."

Dez looked at me, eyebrows raised.

"What the hell do we do with this?"

I shrugged. At this point, a child who could detect lying in lights and out of sorts geometry was probably the least strange thing we'd encountered.

"Are you hungry, Maya?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then let's get you something to eat. And then you can tell us more about what the angles have been seeing."

Elena stayed kneeling, watching the girl with an expression I couldn't quite read. But when Maya looked back at her, something passed between them, a recognition that went

beyond words, beyond even the light-language Elena had been speaking. Two beings who could see what the rest of us couldn't. One ancient, one young. Both caught between human and something else entirely.

Maya was a brief distraction of something that had been on everyone's mind and it was good for a moment but the burning questions remained.

Dez and I exchanged glances. Now we have a child who could sense the geometry. Another variable they hadn't anticipated. One moment Elena was calm in deep thought and conversating with Maya elaborating on their commonalities and what seemed to be the terror of remembering.

Then the questions started... the quest of wanting to know.

"Elena," Dez started. "How could you speak that language?"

I cut in, my voice harder than I intended. The question had been burning in my mind since we'd escaped.

"In the structure. When the Watchers came. You spoke in, in something that wasn't human and seems you have in common with this girl. What was that?"

"What was that light-language emanating from your fingers, your hands?"

Elena's eyes locked on mine. Her mouth opened, closed, opened again.

"I... I don't..."

"She is accessing forbidden channels, impossible, she was decommissioned," Dez quoted the Watcher's words, her voice tight.

"That's what it said, Elena. Decommissioned. Like you were a... a machine. A tool."

She moved closer to her sister, and I could hear the strain in her voice.

"What did it mean? What are you?"

"I'm your sister," Elena whispered, but even as she said it, her hands came up to her head, fingers pressing against her temples.

"I'm... I'm Elena. I'm... aren't I?"

The last two words came out broken, uncertain. And in that uncertainty, I saw the truth beginning to crack through.

"Tell us what happened in there," I said, keeping my voice level.

"Tell us how you knew that language. How you spoke it. How you knew." I looked up, remembering the symbols forming in the air around her.

"How you commanded it."

Elena's breathing sped up a little, deeper. She was staring at her own hands as if seeing them for the first time.

"I... when we were inside, when the geometry bent and the light got angry... it wasn't just bending and flickering. It was... it was talking. And I understood it. Not like learning a language, but like... like remembering one I'd always known but forgotten."

She looked up at us.

"And when I spoke... when those words came out from my fingers, the different light, different in length, speed and color..."

it felt right. It felt like coming home. Like being what I was supposed to be."

Her voice broke.

"What does that mean? Why would it feel like that? I'm human. I'm human. I have to be human because if I'm not then..."

She couldn't finish. Her whole body was shaking. Dez sat down beside her, wrapping an arm around Elena's shoulders. But I could see the tension in Dez's jaw, the way her other hand stayed close to her rifle. Protecting her sister. Prepared for her sister to be something else.

"Start from the beginning," Dez said quietly.

"The nightmares you had as a kid. The geometry that hurt you. You always said the shapes, the angles were hiding something. What were they hiding, Elena?"

Elena was quiet, her eyes distant, unfocused. When she spoke again, her voice had changed, become softer, younger, as if she were remembering something from very far away.

"There was a place," she whispered. "In California. I went there when I was... I was... seven? Eight?"

She shook her head, confusion creasing her features.

"A tilted cabin. Everything was wrong. Balls rolled uphill. People stood at angles that shouldn't work. Everyone thought it was a tourist trap. Magnets and optical illusions."

"The Mystery Spot," I said. "In Santa Cruz."

Elena's eyes snapped to mine.

"You know it?"

"I've heard of it. Gravity anomaly. Physics professors say it's all perception tricks and clever architecture."

"It's not."

Elena's hands were trembling now, excited.

"It's not tricks. It's real. The angles there, they're not from our world. They're..."

She paused, and I saw something shift behind her eyes. A door opening. A memory surfacing.

"They're a test site. A beta version. Before they deploy the full network, they test it. Make sure the geometry works with the planet's specific dimensional frequency."

The words came out clinical. Technical. Wrong for someone who was supposed to be a twenty-two-year-old from Philadelphia.

"How do you know that?" Dez asked, and her voice had gone very serious.

"I don't know. I can't know. But I do. I can see it now, like watching a movie I've seen before but forgot I watched. The Mystery Spot was placed there... was it millennia ago? Centuries? I can't..."

Elena pressed her palms harder against her temples.

"Time feels wrong. Like I'm remembering things that happened to someone else. Or remembering wrong. Or..."

"Or remembering what you actually are," I said.

Elena looked up. She looked at Dez.

"No. No, I'm not, I can't be, Dez, tell him. Tell him I'm your sister. Tell him about when we were kids, about Mom's arroz con pollo, about the time I broke my arm falling off the swing set..."

"I remember all that," Dez said slowly.

Her arm was still around Elena, but there was a distance in her voice now. A wariness.

"But memories can be... what did that science fiction show call it? Implanted? If they can build structures that exist in 4 dimensions, if they can harvest entire planets, why couldn't they build a person? Give her a history? A family?"

"No."

Elena pulled away from Dez, standing up on shaking legs.

"No, that's not, I am your sister. I am Elena Martinez. I remember our childhood. I remember Dad leaving when I was five. I remember you teaching me to ride a bike. I remember crying together when Maria, when she..."

Her voice broke on Maria's name, and I saw genuine grief there. Real pain. But was it Elena's pain? Or something programmed to feel like Elena's pain?

"The Watchers recognized you," I said. "When you spoke, they recoiled. They said you were decommissioned. Like you'd been shut down. Put away. Why would they say that if you were just a human who happened to be sensitive to geometry?"

Elena opened her mouth to respond, but no words came out. Instead, her eyes went wide, her face still. She staggered, catching herself against the wall.

"I see it," she whispered. "Oh God, I see it. The construction. The pins. All one hundred of them. I was there. I was... overseeing? Managing? Checking quality? I don't know the right word because I don't have a word for what I was, but I was there, Jack. For all of them. For millennia."

"That's impossible," Dez said, but her voice lacked conviction.

"They can replicate us," Elena said, "remember, Marcus said, they made as cryptographic keys."

She started talking faster, information coming out as if a dam had broken.

"The ancient people. The ones who built the original technology before the Harvesters began using it for evil. We don't age. We don't die. Not really. When a body wears out, they copy us. Move the consciousness, the pattern, the information, into a new form. We've been doing it for so long that I can't remember what my original body looked like. Marcus was one too, explaining why he forgot his real name, and why I can't remember mine. Can't remember anything before the work."

She looked at her hands again, turning them over, studying them with a mixture of wonder and surprise.

"These hands built the alignment pins. Programmed the sequences. Tested the geometries on a hundred different worlds before it became viable. I have memories of standing in the Mystery Spot, creating the Mystery Spot... watching the beta version activate for the first time, measuring the dimensional resonance, reporting back that Earth was compatible. That the technology would work here."

"When?" I asked. "How long ago?"

"I don't know. Time moves differently for us. Decades? Centuries? I remember thinking the test site would be discovered eventually, that humans would puzzle over it, but by then we'd have the full network deployed and it wouldn't matter."

She looked up at me, and in her eyes, I saw something breaking.

"I helped them, Jack. I helped them prepare Earth for harvesting. I'm as guilty as the Watchers. More guilty, because I knew what the technology was really for. I understood the geometry at a level they never could."

The number hit me like a physical blow. Seventeen worlds. And Elena had helped build the tools.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I'm telling you this because you need to understand what you're fighting against. And you need to understand why I might be able to help, and why my help might be the only thing that saves this world."

She turned back toward the window.

"There's something else. Someone else. A presence in my memories that doesn't fit."

"Marcus?" I guessed.

She nodded slowly.

"He came to me. In dreams at first, I think? Or maybe while I was awake but the memories were suppressed. He told me..."

She struggled to grasp the fragments.

"He told me about Sofia. About humans running toward danger to help strangers. About courage and choice and,"

Her breath hitched.

"He was trying to wake me up. Trying to make me remember what I was so I could choose to be something different."

"He was recruiting you," I said. "Turning you against your own mission."

"It didn't work. Or it did, but too slowly."

Elena looked at me.

"When the convergence happened, when we were thrown up and stuck in the car between the earth and the sky, I was still asleep. Still just Elena, terrified and human. It wasn't until we entered the structure that the geometry started waking me up. Started making me remember."

"And when the Watchers cornered us..."

"I broke through completely."

She shuddered.

"For those few seconds, I was fully awake. Fully myself. Or fully whatever I really am. I spoke the language. Commanded the geometry. And the Watchers recognized me. Recognized what I was doing."

"Which was?"

"Manipulating the pins. Ensuring a misalignment. No longer the the fail-safe in case something went wrong with the automated systems."

She laughed, a broken laugh.

"I was supposed to be there to assure that the harvest took place. Instead I'm sitting here, human enough to feel guilty, alien enough to know exactly what I'm guilty of."

Dez hadn't moved. Hadn't spoken. She just sat there, staring at her sister, or the thing that looked like her sister, with an expression I couldn't read. Finally, she stood up.

"I need some air," she said, her voice flat.

"Dez," Elena reached for her.

"Don't."

Dez stepped back, and the movement was like a slap.

"Just... don't. I need to think."

She walked out of the ranger station, leaving Elena and me in awkward silence.

Trust

Elena sat there with tears streaming silently down her face.

Then she looked at me.

"Is she right to hate me?"

"I don't know," I said honestly.

"Are you still you? Is Elena real, or is she just a mask worn by something ancient and inhuman?"

"I don't know."

She wiped her face with the back of her hand.

"I feel like Elena. I feel like I grew up with Dez, like I loved Maria, like all those memories are mine. But I also feel like someone else. Someone who's been alive for so long that human lifetimes are just... flickers. Moments. How can both be true?"

"Maybe they both are," I said.

"Maybe you're both. The ancient one and the young one. The engineer and the sister. Maybe Marcus was trying to show you that you could choose which one mattered more."

"And have I? Chosen?"

I thought about her breaking through in the chamber. About her speaking that ancient language not to help the Watchers, but to warn me. About her collapsing from the effort of defying whatever she'd been programmed to be.

"I think you chose when it mattered most," I said. "The question is what you'll choose next."

Elena sat quiet. Seemed like a couple hours went by. Then:

"There's more, isn't there? More that you saw in there. More that you learned."

I nodded slowly. I'd been trying to avoid thinking about it, trying to focus on the immediate crisis of Elena's revelation. But she was right. The vision I'd had, the connection I'd opened, had shown me things. Terrible things.

"I need to tell you both," I said. "But Dez should hear it too. She deserves to know what we're really up against."

"She won't want to be in the same room as me right now."

"Then I'll go find her. Because what I saw... it changes everything."

I found Dez on the observation deck, staring out at the distant structure. Her rifle lay across her lap, and there was a tension in her shoulders that spoke of barely contained violence.

"She's not human," Dez said before I could speak. "My sister. The person I grew up with. The person I've protected my whole life. She's not even real."

"She's real," I said, moving to stand beside her. "Just not in the way we thought."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Dez's voice was harsh.

"That my sister is actually some ancient alien construct with implanted memories? That our entire relationship is a lie?"

"Is it a lie if she felt it? If she still feels it? The Elena who protected you, who loved Maria, who stood by you through

everything, that person is still there. Still real. She's just also... something else."

"Something that helped them prepare to engulf and harvest Earth."

Dez turned to look at me, and her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"How am I supposed to get past that, Jack? How am I supposed to look at her and not see the billions who died in the attempted convergence? All those people falling from the sky. Sofia. All of them dead because of technology Elena helped build."

"She didn't know," I said. "The human Elena didn't know. She was asleep. Programmed to be someone else until she was needed."

"And now she's awake. Now she knows what she is. What she's done."

Dez looked back at the structure.

"Can you trust her, Jack? Can you trust someone who's not even sure which memories are real? Who might have loyalties buried so deep she doesn't even know they're there?"

It was a fair question. And I didn't have a good answer.

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I know Marcus trusted her enough to try to recruit her. And I know that when it mattered, when the Watchers had us cornered, she chose to help us. Chose to access that ancient language not to aid them, but to warn us."

"Or chose to follow programming we can't see. To play a role in a plan we don't understand."

Dez shook her head.

"I want to believe she's still my sister. I want to believe the person I grew up with is real. But how can I? How can I trust anything anymore?"

I understood her pain. Understood the betrayal she felt. But I also understood something else, something the vision had shown me.

"We don't have the luxury of distrust right now," I said. "What I saw in there, Dez... it's worse than we thought. Much worse. And we're going to need Elena, all of Elena, both the sister and the ancient one, if we have any hope of surviving what's coming."

Dez shut down for a time... she needed time to sort things out, time to think, to straighten out her head. After a while, she picked up her rifle and stood.

"Then you better tell us both. Because if we're going to die fighting these things, I want to at least know what we're dying for."

Division

We gathered back in the ranger station, me, Dez, Elena, and Maya, the strange child who could hear the geometry. The tension in the room was thick enough to choke on. Dez sat as far from Elena as the small space would allow, her rifle across her knees, her jaw tight. Elena sat hunched on her cot, arms wrapped around herself, looking small and fragile and very, very alone. Maya sat cross-legged on the floor, her eyes unfocused, listening to something none of us could hear. I sat between them and tried to find words for what I'd experienced.

"I opened a connection," I said. "To the structure. To the systems that run through it. And through that connection, I saw... everything."

I told them about the sphere. About the dying world trapped inside, drained of life over centuries, left as a cold husk to drift in the void. I told them about the flaw in the technology, the corruption spreading through out the harvester hive. I told them about the builders, the original architects who had created the dimensional technology, who had hidden themselves inside their own creation, waiting for someone to wake them. And I told them about the choice the builders had offered me. The choice between certain extinction within the harvester's sphere, and uncertain salvation by releasing the builders who might be saviors or might be something worse.

When I finished, the silence was profound.

"So we're fucked either way," Dez said finally. "Either the harvesters swallow Earth and we die slowly, or we release these

builder things and maybe they save us or maybe they destroy us faster. Great options."

"There's a third option," Elena said quietly.

Both Dez and I turned to look at her.

"I can see it now. The geometry. The way the pins are connected. If I can access the full network, not just this one pin, but all of them, I might be able to do what the builders did. Encode a shutdown sequence into the lattice itself. Break the alignment permanently."

"You said there were a hundred pins," I said.

"How could you possibly access all of them?"

"The language. The ancient language the builders used."

Elena looked up, and there was a clarity in her eyes now. A purpose.

"It's not just words. It's code. Dimensional code. And if I can speak it properly, if I can remember how to speak it fully, I can send commands through the geometry itself. Through the spaces between the pins. I don't need to physically reach them. I just need to be close enough to one of them to establish the connection. It'd be like an IP address in your internet."

"And then what?" Dez asked. "You shut them all down, the harvesters get pissed, and they come for us?"

"They're already coming for us," I said.

"The moment Elena spoke that language, the moment she accessed those systems, they knew it. We can't hide anymore. We can't run. Our only option is to fight."

"By doing exactly what they want?"

Dez shook her head.

"Jack, think about what you're saying. The Watchers told you everything has been according to their design. What if this is part of it? What if Elena's awakening, her ability to access the network, what if that's all part of their plan?"

"Then we're already dead," Elena said flatly. "If everything is part of their plan, if every choice we make is one they've anticipated, then we have no hope anyway. We might as well give up now."

She stood up, and despite her small frame, despite the tears on her face, there was something commanding in her posture now. Something that reminded me of the being who had spoken through her in the structure.

"But I don't think they anticipated me," she continued. "I don't think they anticipated Marcus turning me. I was supposed to stay asleep until they needed me. Supposed to maintain the pins, not destroy them. When I spoke in the structure, when I accessed those channels, they were terrified. Not angry. Terrified. Because I'm the one thing in their perfect plan that doesn't fit anymore."

"The lights we see now are not of anger; they are of terror."

She looked at Dez directly for the first time since her revelation.

"I know you hate me right now. I know you probably wish I'd never woken up, that you could have kept me as just Elena, your normal human sister. But I'm not normal. I'm not human. And I'm the only one who can end this. So, you need to decide right now, are you going to trust the sister you grew up with and join

her in destroying this thing or are you going to let her go in alone?"

The silence stretched between them, heavy with years of shared history and the fresh wound of betrayal. I saw the war playing out on Dez's face, love and fury, trust and suspicion, the desperate need to believe fighting against the cold logic of everything we'd learned.

Finally, Dez stood up.

"I don't trust you," she said. "I don't know if I'll ever trust you again. For all I know, everything you just said is part of their programming. Everything you feel might be fake. Hell, everything I feel might be fake, because how do I know they didn't manipulate my memories too? How do I know my love for you is real and not just... installed?"

She paused, and I saw tears forming in her eyes.

"But you're right about one thing. We're out of good options. And if there's even a chance, even the smallest possibility, that my sister is still in there, still fighting, still choosing to help humanity instead of harvest it..."

She shouldered her rifle.

"Then I guess I'm going back into that fucking structure. One more time. To end this."

Elena smiled.

"Dez..."

"Don't."

Dez held up a hand, stopping her.

"Don't thank me. Don't apologize. Don't try to explain. Just... tell us what you need to do. Tell us how we end this. And then let's go do it before I change my mind."

Maya sat upright in the corner, listening, her eyes tracking, her hands tracing something invisible in the air. I'd been watching her for the past hour while Elena and Dez argued. The girl hadn't moved much, just sat there, seemingly content to exist in her own private world. But her hands never stopped. Small movements. Precise. The same geometric traces I'd seen Elena make when she was deep in the structure's geometry. Not similar. Identical. I watched Maya's index finger draw a slow arc, pause, then trace three quick lines. Across the room, without looking, Elena's hand made the exact same motion a half-second later. As if they were connected by invisible strings. As if one was the echo of the other.

"Elena," I said quietly, not wanting to startle either of them.
"Look at her hands."

Elena turned to look. Maya's fingers had begun moving faster now, complex patterns that left faint trails of light in the dim room of the ranger station. Soft blue. Gentle cyan. The same colors that flickered from Elena's fingertips when she communed with the geometry. The light-language I'd seen her speak in the structure, the sacred frequencies that had terrified the Watchers, this child was writing in the same alphabet.

"That's not possible," Elena breathed. "She's human. She has to be human. The sensitivity is one thing, but the light-tongue takes centuries to learn. I didn't master it until..."

She stopped. Her ancient self's memories were surfacing; I could see it in her eyes. And whatever she was remembering had turned her expression to ash.

I watched them both for a moment, and I started to realize. The same dark hair. The same sharp features. The same way their heads tilted when they were listening to something only they could hear.

"Elena," I said slowly. "Look at her. Really look at her."

Elena turned, and I saw the moment recognition flickered across her face, not recognition of a stranger, but something deeper. Something familiar.

"Maya," Elena said, her voice strange. "When you followed the angles... where did you start?"

Maya looked up, and for the first time, her eyes seemed fully present. Fully here.

"The tilted place. The one where the balls roll wrong."

Elena's breath caught.

"The Mystery Spot."

"I was there when the angles opened. When everything went sideways."

Maya's voice had changed, still a child's voice, but with something older underneath. Something ancient and for Elena it was comfortable.

"I walked through the seam before it closed. Before I forgot why I was walking."

Dez had gone unyielding beside me.

"What the hell is she talking about?"

But Elena was already moving, crossing the room to kneel in front of the girl. Her hands were shaking as she reached out, hovering just above Maya's face without touching.

"Show me your hands," Elena whispered.

Maya held them up, palms facing out. And there, barely visible in the dim light, I saw it, faint traces of light following the movement. The same light that flickered from Elena's fingertips.

"It's not possible," Elena breathed. "The temporal fold would have collapsed. The paradox alone..."

"Paradoxes are just questions the geometry hasn't answered yet."

Maya's eyes met Elena's, and I saw something pass between them, a recognition that went deeper than memory.

"You told me that. Will tell me that. The tenses get confused when you exist in more than one place."

"Who are you?"

Maya smiled.

"I'm the part of you that remembered. The part that got lost in the angles when you were decommissioned."

She reached up and touched Elena's cheek, and where her fingers made contact, light bloomed, soft, warm, the color of dawn.

"They couldn't erase all of you. Some of you slipped sideways. Slipped through. Waited in the spaces between until there was someone to find."

"I don't understand," Dez said, her voice cracking. "What is she saying? Elena, what is she?"

Elena stared at the girl who was impossible, who shouldn't exist, who was looking at her with eyes that held millennia of loneliness.

"She's me," Elena whispered. "She's... she's what I was. Before the work. Before the harvesting. Before I forgot how to be anything other than a tool."

Her voice recovering.

"She's the part of me they tried to kill. The part that was just a child who loved shapes because they were beautiful, not because they could be used to destroy."

Maya nodded slowly.

"I jumped through the seam when the convergence thinned the walls. Found my way here. To now. To you."

She took Elena's hands in her small ones.

"I came to remind you what you were before they made you forget. What you can still be, if you choose."

"Why?" Elena asked. "Why would you, why would I, risk a temporal paradox just to..."

"Because alone, you'll lose yourself in the geometry. You'll finish the sequence and forget why it mattered. Forget that saving them," Maya glanced at me, at Dez, "was the whole point."

Her grip tightened on Elena's hands.

"But together? Together we remember. Together we stay human. Or whatever we are that's close enough."

The light between their joined hands intensified, pulsing in rhythms I recognized now, the same rhythms I'd felt in the structure, the same language Elena had spoken when she'd commanded the walls to open.

"When you access the core tomorrow," Maya said, "I'll be there. Inside the angles. Holding the parts of you that want to stay. Anchoring you to what matters."

"And if it doesn't work? If I lose myself anyway?"

Maya's smile turned sad.

"Then at least you won't be alone. Neither of us will. Not anymore."

She leaned forward and pressed her forehead to Elena's, and for a moment, just a moment, I saw them flicker. Saw them exist in the same space, the same body, child, and ancient overlapping like a double exposure. Two versions of the same consciousness, separated by millennia and joined by something stronger than time.

Then Maya pulled back, and she was just a girl again. Tired. Small. But with sadness in her eyes that made my heart ache.

"Get some sleep," she told Elena. "Tomorrow's going to be impossible."

Elena wiped her eyes and nodded. When she spoke again, her voice was steady. Professional. The engineer speaking, not the sister.

"I need to get back to the core. The central column you saw, that's the heart of this pin's network. If I can access it directly, interface with it using the ancient language, I can send the

shutdown sequence to all the other pins simultaneously. The geometry will carry the command faster than light, faster than any physical signal. Every pin on Earth will go offline in the same instant."

"And the harvesters?" I asked.

"Will know immediately. Will probably send everything they have to stop us."

Elena's expression was grave.

"We'll need to hold them off long enough for me to complete the sequence. How long depends on how much of the language I can remember. How much of myself I can access without losing Elena, my human side, completely."

"What does that mean?" Dez asked sharply.

"It means that the more I wake up, the more I become what I really am, the less human I become. The ancient one, the engineer, she's not... she doesn't care about Earth the way Elena does. She cares about the work. The precision. The elegance of the geometry. If I access too much of her, I might finish the sequence but not care what happens to humanity afterward."

She looked at both of us.

"So I need you there. Need you to keep me grounded. Keep reminding me why we're doing this. Because when I'm deep in the geometry, speaking the language that shapes reality itself, it's going to be very easy to forget that humans matter. That Earth matters. That any of this matters beyond the mathematical beauty of the code."

"How poetic," Dez said dryly.

"So we're babysitters for an ancient alien who might forget she's supposed to care about the millions of lives that are left. Left from the device you help build that perpetrated this entire situation we now find ourselves in?"

"Essentially, yes."

"Great. Fantastic. I love this plan."

Dez checked her rifle, then looked at me.

"What about you, Jack? You've got your own connection to the structure now. Can you help with this geometry code thing?"

I thought about the connection, still present in my mind like a faint ringing in my ears. The way I'd been able to navigate the structure, to ask it to respond, to touch the systems.

"Maybe. I don't have Elena's knowledge, her fluency with the language. But I can feel the geometry. I can ask it to respond. If the Watchers come..."

I paused, remembering how the angles had bent when I'd needed them to.

"I might be able to slow them down. Give Elena the time she needs."

"Might," Dez repeated. "That's what we're basing our plan on.

Might."

"You have a better idea?"

She didn't. None of us did.

"Then we go at first light again. This is still the best time" I said.

"Give ourselves tonight to rest, to prepare. Tomorrow, we go back into that structure, and we either end this or we die trying."

"Or we do both," Elena said quietly.

"Ending it might mean dying. The shutdown sequence, sending that much information through the geometry at once, it's going to draw attention. Not just from the Watchers on Earth, but from... from the sphere itself. From the intelligence that controls it."

"You're saying the big boss is going to show up?" Dez asked.

"I'm saying that when I shut down the Earth pins, it's going to leave a signature. A hole in their targeting grid. And they're going to want to know who made that hole."

Elena's expression, serious.

"The harvesters will do whatever they need to do keep their operation alive. We break their network, we become targets. High-priority targets."

"They know we're coming so they'll be ready too."

"So we'd better make sure we have the upper hand and only I can give us that," Elena said. "I'm ready."

"And we won't get a second chance."

8: The Architects Return

The principle of superposition state: *"a quantum system exists in all possible states simultaneously until observed. The cat is both alive and dead. The particle is both here and there. Reality itself remains undefined until something forces a choice. But what happens to all those other possibilities, the paths not taken, the states not collapsed? Perhaps they don't disappear. Perhaps they simply... wait."*

$$|\psi\rangle = \alpha|0\rangle + \beta|1\rangle$$

Expulsion

We left the ranger station before dawn. The four of us moved through the pre-dawn darkness in silence, each lost in our own thoughts about what we were about to attempt. Dez took point as usual, her rifle ready even though we all knew it was useless against what we'd face. I walked in the middle, feeling the structure calling to me through that connection in my mind.

Elena brought up the rear, her lips moving constantly, practicing the ancient language, preparing herself for what she'd have to become. And Maya walked beside her, occasionally reaching out to touch Elena's hand, grounding her in the present.

The structure looked different in the gray light before sunrise. Less alien somehow. Or maybe I was just getting used to it being here. It's stronghold in the mountain. The strangeness of it that was somehow not so strange now. The pulsing had settled

into a slower rhythm overnight, as if it were catching its breath. It was calmer. Preparing. It knew we were coming.

"Last chance to turn back," Dez said when we reached the base of the mountain.

"There's no turning back," Elena replied. "There never was."

We found the seam easily, my connection guided us straight to it. The crack in reality was wider now, more visible, as if the structure itself wanted us inside. Wanted to see what we'd do. Or wanted to trap us.

"Together," I said, holding out my hands.

Elena took one, then after a moment's hesitation, Dez took the other. Maya completed the circle.

"Whatever happens in there, we face it together."

Elena squeezed my hand.

"Keep me human, Jack. When I'm deep in the geometry, when I'm speaking the language, don't let me forget why this matters."

"I won't," I promised.

We stepped through. The structure welcomed us like old friends. The corridor materialized around us, but it was different now. The workers were gone. The machines were silent. It was as if the structure had cleared itself out, removed all the distractions, leaving only the essential architecture and the path to the core.

"Is it primed? I asked, Ready for convergence?"

"It's too easy," Dez muttered, her rifle tracking side to side.

"They're letting us in. Why?"

"Because they want to watch," Elena said, her voice taking on that formal quality.

"Want to see what the decommissioned engineer will do. How powerful she is. Whether she'll remember her purpose or embrace her malfunction."

She stopped walking, focused on the distant. Thinking about her next move.

"I can feel them. The Watchers. They're here. Watching. Waiting. They think they can anticipate what I'll do."

"They're wrong. We're going to destroy this thing and walk away victorious, Jack."

She turn to look at me and gave me an inquisitive look as if to say ready?

"I nodded."

We continued deeper into the structure, and with each step, I felt the connection in my mind growing stronger. The geometry was speaking to me, showing me things, teaching me things. I could see the patterns now, the way the angles folded through dimensions I couldn't name, the way space itself was negotiable if you knew how to ask. And Elena, Elena was changing. It was subtle at first. The way she moved became more fluid, more purposeful. Her features seemed to sharpen, becoming more defined, more geometric. And when she spoke, her voice carried harmonics that shouldn't have been possible for human vocal cords.

"We're close," she said. "I can feel the core. They've disguised some angles. They don't want us to get to the core, but I can see where we were before."

"It's... pulsing.

"Can you hear it, Jack? Can you feel it?"

"I do."

A low frequency just at the edge of human auditory capabilities. It was a pulsing, pumping in sequence. It felt like the matter, antimatter warp core on Star Trek generations. This is not how it was before. It was ready, now. Storing up energy and getting ready to distort spacetime and trigger their alignment beams, all 100 of them, back to the sphere for alignment. It was a deep vibration that resonated in my bones.

The sensation everywhere, a pressure in my body that built with each pulse like someone was inflating a balloon inside my chest. My lungs felt too small. Each breath came shallow and quick, as if the air itself had thickened, become something my body had to work to process. The rhythm was relentless. Insistent. A bass note so low it bypassed my ears entirely and went straight into my skeleton, making my femurs hum, my ribs vibrate like tuning forks.

It wasn't a sharp pain, but a dull, throbbing awareness that matched the pulse, and like before, my heart synced up with it. I clenched my jaw and felt the vibration travel through my skull, setting up harmonics in the hollow spaces behind my eyes. The pressure there intensified. My vision blurred from the vibration. I felt like my brain was being squeezed from the inside, compressed by invisible hands that knew exactly how much force to apply without causing damage. Just enough to make me aware. Just enough to make me understand that whatever was happening, my body was completely outmatched.

The air was thicker too. Metallic. Electric. Like the moment before lightning strikes, when the atmosphere charges itself and every hair on your body knows something terrible is about to happen. My sinuses, my inner ear ached with building pressure that released in waves, synchronized perfectly with the pulse. In. Out. In. Out.

My skin prickled. Every fine hair on my arms stood rigid, trembling with static electricity. I could feel the charge building on my clothes, in my hair, across every surface of exposed skin. When I lifted my hand, I saw tiny blue sparks dancing between my fingers.

The air around us was ionizing. Becoming something other than air. Something that carried the pulse like water carries ripples, propagating it through our bodies whether we wanted it or not.

The floor beneath my feet felt liquid. Moving a bit. Like standing on wet sand on a beach where the tide had gone out. Not like quicksand but you'd sink if you stood there long enough.

It was attacking my senses up, down all around. Each pulse sent a shockwave up through my legs. I could feel it resonating up my tibia and, in my knees, first. Then up my femur to my hips. Then my spine. Each vertebra resonating slightly out of phase with the next, like they'd gone loose after a good chiro adjustment, creating a ripple effect that traveled from my tailbone to the base of my skull.

Elena's hand was in mine. I could feel her pulse through her fingers, rapid and frightened, trying to establish its own rhythm against the structure's relentless beat. But our hearts were losing. Slowly, inexorably, our biological rhythms were synchronizing with the alien frequency. My heart would stutter,

skip, trying to reassert its own tempo, then give up and fall back into step with the pulse. It felt like drowning in slow motion. Like being absorbed.

As the power built up, the vibration in my body grew stronger. The essence of my entire body was shaking like gelatin in a mold. The sensation was nauseating. Profound. It made me aware of parts of my body I'd never consciously felt before. The small bones in my ears. The plates of my skull where they'd fused in childhood. The density of my jaw, the hollow of my chest, the architecture of my pelvis. Everything was vibrating. Everything was being played like an instrument.

My stomach roiled. Not from motion sickness, but from something deeper penetrating to reach each cell. I thought about what was happening at a molecular level. The atoms that made up my body, the electrons spinning around their nuclei, the bonds that held protein to protein, cell to cell. All of it was being subjected to this frequency. All of it was responding. I could feel it in my gut, in my liver, in my kidneys. A pulling sensation. A tugging. As if invisible fingers were reaching into my body and gently but insistently extracting something vital. Energy. Heat. Life force. Whatever you wanted to call it.

I was being drained.

We all were.

The structure was feeding on us. On every living thing within its reach. Drawing power from the basic chemical reactions that kept us alive, siphoning off the energy our cells produced just to exist. It wasn't violent. Wasn't painful exactly. But it was terrifying in its indifference. We were batteries. Resources. Fuel

for something vast and hungry and completely unconcerned with our survival.

My vision narrowing like my head was stuck in a permanent vignette. My muscles started feeling heavy and it became difficult to move. When I tried to lift my arm, there was a delay. A lag between thought and action that spoke of systems failing, of neurons firing too slowly, of a brain that was running out of power.

I started sweating just standing there. A cold sweat that had nothing to do with temperature but a nervousness that had everything to do with my autonomic system screaming that something was catastrophically wrong.

Elena's grip on my hand tightened. Or maybe weakened. I couldn't tell anymore. The distinction between pressure and absence of pressure was becoming blurred. The structure pulsed again, and grew even stronger now, and I felt my knees buckle slightly. Caught myself. Tried to stand straight. But my legs were trembling, the muscles firing in uncoordinated bursts, trying to compensate for something they weren't designed to compensate for.

The pulse was building and building. I could feel it in the quality of the vibration, in the way the frequency was slowly increasing, the intervals between beats shortening. Accelerating. Like a heart monitor on someone going into cardiac arrest, like a machine ramping up to operational speed, like the last few seconds before an explosion when you know it's coming but can't do anything to stop it.

The pressure behind my eyes became unbearable. I squeezed them shut, but that made it worse. The darkness inside my

eyelids was filled with geometric patterns, afterimages of the structure's pulsing light burned into my retinas. They moved and shifted, forming shapes that hurt to perceive, angles that didn't make sense, configurations that my visual cortex kept trying to process and failing.

The world tilted. Spun. Tried to invert itself. I was standing still but falling, grounded but airborne, solid but dissolving. The disconnect between what my body felt and what my eyes saw was creating a vertigo so intense it felt normal again. I wanted to vomit. I would have vomited, except my stomach was too busy being drained of energy to coordinate something as complex as heaving.

The structure kept pulsing. Faster. Again. Faster still. My heart raced to keep up, flooding my system with adrenaline that did nothing but provide more fuel for the draining. More energy to be extracted. More life to be converted into whatever power the structure needed to tear open spacetime and scream its coordinates into another dimension.

I thought about the math. About energy transfer and thermodynamics and the laws that said you couldn't create or destroy, only convert. The structure was converting us. Converting every living thing in range. Converting our metabolic processes, our cellular respiration, our beating hearts and firing neurons into the massive amount of power it needed to bend reality. We were part of the fuel. This was the cost of alignment.

And there was nothing we could do but stand there and let it happen. Let the pulse grow faster and faster, let our bodies synchronize and drain, let the structure build toward whatever threshold it needed to reach.

Elena's voice cut through the chaos, somehow she pulled herself together enough to talk. "Jack. I can feel it pulling. Like gravity but opposite. Like falling but in every direction at once."

I knew what she meant. The sensation of being drawn in multiple directions simultaneously. Of being stretched across dimensions that didn't have names. Of existing in too many places at once while simultaneously ceasing to exist at all.

The structure was almost ready.

Almost there.

The pulse came faster. Faster. Building to a crescendo that would either kill us or change us or both. My body felt like it was vibrating apart. Like the bonds holding me together were being tested to their breaking point. Like I was standing at the edge of existence itself, waiting to see which side I'd fall on.

And beneath it all, through it all, that deep bone-level knowledge that this was just the beginning. That whatever happened next would make everything we'd experienced so far look like a gentle warm-up. That the structure was winding itself tight, coiling like a spring, preparing to unleash forces that would crack the world open and let something impossible through.

The pulse hammered my blood. In every cell and atom and quantum probability of my existence.

And then, with a sensation like the universe taking a breath, everything stopped.

"Dez," Elena said, turning to her sister. Looking at me.

“I accessed the a mechanism that allowed me to pause the system for a few minutes. We don’t have long. We need to move, take advantage of this interim and do what we came here to do.”

All my sense came screaming back and I was normal again.

I could see everything clearly now during the pause sequence.

“Let’s move,” I said.

We scurried towards the core.

Elena gave us a warning. "When we reach the core, I'm going to need to go deep. Deeper than I've ever gone. I might not... I might not be able to come back."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that to access the full network, to speak the command that will shut down all one hundred alignment pins for good, I need to become what I really am. Fully awake. Fully myself."

Elena's voice was steady, but I could see the fear in the expression emanating from her face.

"I can see my ancient self, feel her. She's not cruel. She's not evil. But she's not human. She doesn't love the way humans love. She doesn't feel the way humans feel. And once I let her fully in... Elena, my human side, might not make it back."

"No."

Dez's voice was hard.

"No, that's not how this works. You don't get to martyr yourself to save the world and leave me with nothing but the memory of a sister who wasn't even real."

"But I am real."

Elena reached out, touching Dez's face gently.

"Everything we had, everything we were, that was real. Is real. Even if my memories were implanted, even if this body is just the latest in a line of copies stretching back millennia, the love I feel for you is real. It has to be, because it's the only thing keeping me human right now."

They both started to cry and ugly tears were running down both their faces.

"Promise me something," Elena whispered. "If I don't come back, if the ancient one takes over completely, promise me you'll remember that I chose this. That I chose to save humanity instead of serving the harvest. That matters, Dez. It has to matter."

"It matters," Dez said, pulling her sister into a fierce embrace.

"You matter. And you're going to come back, do you hear me? You're going to finish your alien geometry bullshit, and then you're going to come back, and we're going to figure out how to live in this fucked-up world together. Because I didn't survive the end of the world just to lose you now."

They held each other as if time stopped. Then Elena pulled away, wiping her eyes, and they continued toward the core.

We arrived at the core. It was in the same chamber as before, but it had changed and it was pulsing again. The pause Elena

placed on it had ended. The spiraling column was brighter now, the symbols on its surface moving faster, pulsing with urgency. And around it, standing in a perfect circle, were the Watchers. All of them. Not just three. Not just a dozen. Every Watcher on Earth had gathered here, their gray silvery eyes fixed on us, their stretched expressionless faces. There had to be fifty of them at least, maybe more, forming a wall of ancient malevolence between us and the core.

"Welcome back," one of them said.

The lead Watcher from before, I realized.

"We have been waiting."

"For what?" I asked.

"For the choice. For the moment when the decommissioned engineer must decide, will she fulfill her purpose, or will she embrace her malfunction?"

Elena stepped forward, and I saw symbols beginning to form in the air around her, traced by movements of her hands that had become impossibly precise.

"I am not malfunctioning," she said, and her voice carried layers now, harmonics that made the walls vibrate. "I am evolving. Learning what you forgot millennia ago, that there is more to existence than consumption. That some things are worth preserving for their own sake, not for the energy they contain."

"Sentiment. Weakness. The delusion that individual lives matter when the universe itself is entropy. We have consumed thousands of worlds, Engineer. What makes this one different?"

"Because I choose it to be."

Elena's hands moved faster now, the symbols multiplying, spreading through the air like frost across glass.

"Because I was sent here to facilitate its destruction, and instead I'm going to save it. Because free will, true free will, is the only thing that separates consciousness from mechanism."

She turned to me.

"Jack. I need you to do something. The seed, the one the builders left. It's still here, encoded in the core. I can feel it. You touched it once, made contact with the builders. I need you to do it again. Need you to wake them while I'm working. They'll give us cover, confusion, buy us the time we need."

"How?"

"The same way you did before. Want it. Ask the geometry to show you the way."

Her eyes held mine.

"And Jack? Thank you. For seeing me as human even after you knew what I was. That's... that's going to help me find my way back. If I can find my way back."

Then she closed her eyes, and the transformation began.

Elena's body went rigid, her back arching, her head tilting back at an impossible angle. The symbols around her intensified, no longer faint but blazing with light, forming intricate patterns that hurt to look at directly. And her voice, when she spoke again, it wasn't Elena's voice anymore. It was the ancient language. Pure. Undiluted. The code that shaped reality itself.

The Watchers reacted immediately. Some lunged forward, trying to reach her, to stop her. Others began speaking their own commands, trying to override what she was doing. But they were too late, not fast enough. Elena had accessed something they couldn't touch, the deepest levels of the geometry, the foundational code that even the harvesters didn't fully understand.

"Jack!" Dez screamed. "Whatever you're going to do, do it now!"

I ran toward the core, the Watchers trying to intercept me, their hands reaching, grasping. But the geometry responded to me now. Elena was changing the code, the kernel. The code she helped write along with Marcus and some other ancients; the angles started to remember what they'd forgotten, started to disintegrate the framework built around it. Walls appeared where there had been empty space. The floor buckled, throwing Watchers off balance. Reality itself bent to protect me because I asked it to, because the connection in my mind had grown strong enough to speak the structure's language. The connection I made with the dampening device was in me now... it had melded with my body, with my mind and I too could see what Elena saw. Everything was becoming clearer. Everything I needed to do to help Elena finish her reprogramming. I wasn't fluent. Not like Elena. But I knew enough.

I reached the core and pressed both palms against its surface. The white returned. But this time, I was ready for it. This time, I understood what I was seeing. The builders' sanctuary opened around me, that clean, purposeful geometry I'd glimpsed before. But now it was more than just a space. It was a presence. Millions of consciousnesses, all interconnected, all waking from their long sleep.

“You return,” they said. “And you bring another. The ancient engineer. The one who built what we designed. Who maintained what we created. Who remembers what we were.”

“She's shutting down the network,” I thought back. “Breaking the alignment. Severing Earth from the harvesters' reach. But she needs time. The Watchers are trying to stop her.”

“Then we will buy that time.”

The presence shifted, and I felt something vast beginning to move.

“We have slept long enough. We have watched from the margins long enough. It is time to remember what we were.”

“What will you do?”

“What we should have done millennia ago. Reclaim what was stolen.”

Two currents braided through the white. One was the clean chord of the Architects I had felt before, purpose and protection. The other was colder, symmetrical, a caution cut into light.

“Teach, said the first. Thin places help them learn.”

“Seal, said the second. Thin places leak.”

Elena's voice found both at once.

"If you lock the windows, we'll start picking the locks," she said.
"Guardrails, not walls."

The chord warmed; the symmetry held, calculating.

The white dissolved, and I was back in the chamber. But now everything was different. The lights that had once been prominent were gone, no resonance and no humming or crackling of light... just so sort of left over haze. The structure was transforming around us. The harvesters' organic-mechanical aesthetic was burning away, replaced by the clean, mathematical beauty of the builders' original architecture. And the Watchers, the Watchers were screaming. Not in pain. In confusion. In fear of what they had become and what they were losing. Because the geometry they'd relied on for millennia was rejecting them. The stolen tools were remembering their true purpose, and that purpose didn't include consumption. Didn't include harvest. The angles were turning against the ones who had perverted them.

I saw one Watcher try to phase through a wall and get stuck halfway, its body caught between dimensions, trapped in the geometry it thought it controlled. Saw another try to speak a command and have the words turn back on itself, the code refusing to execute. The ancient builders were awake. And they were taking back what was theirs.

"Jack!" Dez's voice cut through the chaos. "Elena's in trouble!"

I turned. Elena was still rigid, still speaking the ancient language, but something was wrong. Her body was flickering, solid, then translucent, then solid again, as if she was having trouble maintaining coherence. The symbols around her were fragmenting, breaking apart, reforming incorrectly. She was losing herself.

I ran to her side, grabbed her shoulders.

"Elena! Elena, stay with me!"

Her eyes opened, but they weren't Elena's eyes anymore. They were older. Stranger. Filled with geometries I couldn't comprehend. Her eyes were a deep silvery color now. Like Marcus'.

"The sequence is incomplete," she said in that multilayered voice. "The network resists. I need more power. More of myself. But if I access it, if I open fully..."

"You'll lose Elena," I finished. "You'll become only the ancient one."

"Yes."

"Then don't," Dez said, appearing on Elena's other side. "Don't do it alone. Let us help."

"You cannot. The geometry..."

"Fuck the geometry."

Dez grabbed her sister's hand.

"I don't understand the math. I don't speak the language. But I know you. I know Elena. And I'm not letting her disappear into some ancient alien consciousness without a fight."

She looked at me.

"Jack. Your connection. Can you use it to... I don't know, anchor her somehow? Keep the human part present while she does her alien thing?"

I thought about the connection in my mind. About how I'd learned to speak to the geometry, to ask it to remember. What if I could do the same for Elena? Ask her to remember not the ancient past, but the recent past. The human past.

"I can try," I said.

I reached out through the connection, not to the structure this time, but to Elena herself. And I found her there, a fragment of consciousness, small and scared and very human, drowning in an ocean of ancient knowledge.

Remember, I thought at her. Remember who you are. Remember Dez teaching you to ride a bike. Remember crying together when Maria died. Remember the Mystery Spot, not as the engineer who tested it, but as the seven-year-old girl who walked through it holding her sister's hand, confused and scared and human.

I remember, Elena's voice came back, faint but present. But it's so hard. The ancient one is so much stronger. So much older. She wants to finish the work. Wants the elegance of the completed sequence. Doesn't care what happens after.

Then let her finish the work, I thought. But don't let her decide what happens after. You decide that. Elena decides that. The sister. The human. The one who chooses love over logic.

I don't know if I can.

You already are, Dez's voice cut in, not through the connection, but physical, real, her hands gripping Elena's.

"You're here. You're holding on. And you're not going to let go, because you promised me, we'd figure this shit out together.

Remember?"

A tremor ran through Elena's body. The flickering slowed. And when she spoke again, her voice was layered, ancient and young, engineer and sister, both present, both real.

"Together," she said. "Yes. I remember. We finish this together."

The symbols around her blazed brighter, reorganizing themselves into new configurations. And I felt it, through the connection, through the geometry itself, the shutdown sequence spreading outward from this pin to all the others. A cascade of commands propagating through dimensions faster than light, faster than thought. All across the globe, the alignment pins began to go dark.

Their structures convulsed. Alarms shrieked in frequencies that made my teeth ache. The Watchers, those that weren't trapped or paralyzed by the builders' awakening, rushed toward Elena with desperate speed. But Dez was there, rifle raised, firing not at them but at the ceiling above them. The bullets did nothing to the Watchers, but they struck the builders' clean geometry, and the angles remembered what to do with kinetic energy. The ceiling collapsed, not with rubble but with pure geometric force,

creating a barrier of folded space between the Watchers and Elena.

It wouldn't hold long. But it didn't have to. Elena's light voice rose to a crescendo, the ancient language pouring out of her in a torrent of syllables that rewrote reality with each word. I could feel the network crumbling, the lattice that had targeted Earth for millennia falling apart like a rope under too much tension.

And somewhere far away, so far that distance became meaningless, I felt the sphere respond. Not with anger this time. With rage. The intelligence that controlled it, the vast malevolent consciousness that had consumed thousands of worlds, turned its attention fully toward Earth. And in that attention, I felt something that struck me cold. Recognition. It knew me. Knew Elena. Knew what we were doing. And it was coming.

"Elena!" I screamed. "Finish it! Finish it now!"

"Almost, there,"

Her body was transparent now, barely holding together, the human form struggling to contain the vast consciousness flowing through it.

"Just, one, more,"

A final word. A final command. Spoken in the language that shaped reality itself. And the lattice shattered. I felt it through the connection, one hundred pins across the globe, all severing their links simultaneously. The geometric pattern that had bound Earth to the sphere's targeting grid collapsed, the threads dissolving, the chains breaking. The alignment was destroyed. The harvest was canceled. Earth was free.

Recouperation

Elena collapsed. The symbols around her winked out. The ancient voice fell silent. And what remained was a young woman, curled on the floor of an alien structure, breathing but unconscious, her face peaceful in a way it hadn't been since her memories first started returning.

"Elena!"

Dez dropped to her knees beside her sister, checking her pulse, her breathing, her eyes.

"Elena, come back. Come on, come back."

I knelt on Elena's other side, reaching through the connection one more time, searching for that fragment of human consciousness. And found it. Faint. Exhausted. But present.

"Did we do it?" Elena's mental voice asked.

"You did it. The network's down. Earth is safe."

"Good."

A pause.

"Jack? Thank you. For keeping me tethered. For reminding me that being human was worth holding onto."

"Come back to us. Dez needs you."

"I'm trying. But I'm so tired. And the ancient one, she's still here. Still part of me. I don't think I can separate us anymore. Don't think I want to. She's not evil, Jack. She's just... old. And lonely.

And now we're both together in this body, trying to figure out how to be one person instead of two.”

“You'll figure it out. You're both brilliant.”

A faint mental laugh.

“We'll see.”

Then the connection faded, and I was back in the chamber. The structure was still transforming around us, the builders' architecture spreading through it like fire through dry grass. The Watchers were gone, fled or trapped or simply absorbed by the geometry they'd never truly understood. And in the distance, growing closer, I felt something vast approaching.

"We need to go," I said. "Now. The sphere, it's not going to let this stand. It's sending something."

"Can you walk?" Dez asked Elena.

Elena's eyes fluttered open, brown eyes, human eyes, but with depths now that suggested something older looked out through them.

"I... I think so."

We helped her to her feet. She was shaky, leaning heavily on both of us, but conscious and coherent. Human enough to be Elena. Ancient enough to survive what she'd just done.

"The way out," she said, her voice hoarse but her own. "The structure's changing. The old paths won't work. But I can feel... yes. There. A seam. The builders are opening it for us."

We followed her guidance through the transforming structure, through corridors that were clean and mathematical and beautiful in ways the harvesters' corruption had never been.

And as we moved, I heard a voice, not Marcus's voice this time, but something else. Something older.

Thank you, the builders said. For waking us. For giving us purpose again. For showing us that preservation can be as elegant as creation. We will watch over your world now. Not as rulers. Not as gods. As the architects we once were, shaping reality at the margins, protecting the boundaries between dimensions, ensuring that what happened here never happens again.

What about the harvesters? I thought back. What about the sphere?

The sphere is dying. The flaw is irreversible. Within one of your centuries, perhaps less, it will collapse, and everything inside will be released. The energy they stored. It will be... catastrophic. A cascading failure.

“And then?”

And then we rebuild. Clean up the mess our descendants made. Try to be better than we were. Try to remember that consciousness, all consciousness, human and alien and everything in between, has value beyond its utility.

You learned that from us? From humanity?

As we awakened, we reviewed the memories of the last days. These were minutes for us, but in those memories, we saw and we learned from one human in particular. The one who ran toward strangers to help them, even as death fell from the sky. Your Sofia. Her courage, her irrational, beautiful, human courage, taught us more in one moment than we learned in millennia of living in isolation, in another dimension.

The words hit me like a physical blow. Sofia. Always Sofia. The woman whose choice had changed everything, who had shown an ancient alien that humanity was worth saving, whose memory was now literally reshaping reality.

Honor her memory, the builders said as we reached the seam. Live in the world she helped save. And know that we will remember her, always, in the angles and the spaces. Her courage is encoded in the geometry now. Permanent. Eternal.

The seam opened, and we stepped through. The world that greeted us was different. The structure was gone, not destroyed, but transformed. What had been alien and wrong was now something else. Something that existed between dimensions, visible only at the edges of perception, a shimmer in the air where reality was thinner. The builders' sanctuary, anchored on Earth but extending into spaces we couldn't see.

"They're staying," Elena said, understanding in her voice. "The builders. They're staying here, watching, protecting. Making sure the harvesters never come back."

"Can they do that?" Dez asked. "Keep an entire alien civilization away?"

"They created the technology in the first place. They understand it better than the harvesters, their offsprings ever did."

Elena took a deep breath, and I saw her shoulders straighten, saw strength returning to her frame.

"And they have help now. They have me. Us. The ones who remember how to be human and alien at the same time."

She looked at Dez, and in her eyes I saw both the sister and the ancient one, together, unified.

"I'm still Elena," she said. "But I'm also what I was before. Both. Forever. I can't separate them anymore. Don't want to. Is that... can you accept that?"

Dez studied her sister as if to punch her in the arm. To give her a so-called love tap but then she reached out and pulled Elena into an eternal embrace.

"You're my sister," Dez said simply. "Human, alien, ancient, young, I don't care. You're still the person who taught me that courage matters more than survival. That some things are worth fighting for even when the odds are impossible. So yeah. I accept it. All of it."

They held each other, and I turned away to give them privacy. Looked out over the valley, at the dawn breaking over a world that was free. That would remain free, a lot less people, but protected by beings who had learned what it meant to preserve rather than consume.

We had done it. Against impossible odds, against manipulation and design and the weight of millennia, we had chosen differently. We had saved Earth. But the cost... I thought of Marcus, scattered across dimensions, paying the price for his betrayal with his very existence. I thought of Sofia, whose death had started this chain of events, whose courage had inspired an ancient alien to turn against its own kind. I thought of all the people who had died in the attempted convergence, who would never see this dawn, never know that their world had been saved.

The cost had been enormous. But we were here. We had survived. And that had to mean something.

Appendix A

The Alien Light Language

Veltharyn: The Light-Tongue

Overview

Veltharyn (meaning "precise illumination") is the primary communication method for the Aliens. It operates through precisely modulated pulses of light across multiple wavelengths, allowing for extremely high-bandwidth communication that humans mistake for random bioluminescence or equipment interference.

Core Components

The Three Dimensions of Meaning

Each "word" in Veltharyn is constructed from three simultaneous properties:

1. Wavelength (Color) – Conceptual category
2. Pulse Duration – Specific meaning within category
3. Intensity – Emotional weight / urgency / tense

Wavelength Categories

Color	Wavelength Category
Deep Violet	380-420nm Abstract concepts, philosophy, time
Blue	420-490nm Information, data, observations

Color	Wavelength	Category
Cyan	490-520nm	Self-reference, identity, internal states
Green	520-565nm	Life, biology, organic matter
Yellow	565-590nm	Action, commands, verbs
Orange	590-625nm	Objects, tools, technology
Red	625-700nm	Danger, negation, warnings
Infrared	700nm+	Private/encrypted communication
Ultraviolet	<380nm	Sacred/ancient concepts (rarely used Elena's Tongue)

Pulse Duration (The "Alphabet")

Within each color, meaning is encoded by pulse patterns:

Symbol	Pattern	Duration	Meaning Type
·	Single short	50ms	Base root
–	Single long	200ms	Modified/expanded root
..	Double short	50ms×2	Plural/multiple
·–	Short-long	50+200ms	Question form
–·	Long-short	200+50ms	Negation of root
...	Triple short	50ms×3	Superlative/extreme
–·–	Long-short-long	200+50+200ms	Conditional/hypothetical

Symbol Pattern	Duration	Meaning Type
...—	Triple short + long	50×3+200ms Past reference
—...	Long + triple short	200+50×3ms Future reference

Intensity Levels

Level	Brightness	Meaning
Dim (10%)	Whisper / uncertainty / distant past	
Low (30%)	Casual / observation / neutral	
Medium (50%)	Standard communication	
Bright (75%)	Emphasis / importance / command	
Flare (100%)	Alarm / absolute / immediate	

Example Vocabulary

Basic Concepts

Veltharyn Pattern	Translation
 ·	Blue-short "datum" (single piece of information)
 ..	Blue-double "data" (multiple pieces)
 ·	Green-short "organism"
 —	Green-long "ecosystem" / "biosphere"

Veltharyn Pattern	Translation
 ·	Yellow-short "do" / "act"
 ·—	Yellow-short-long "what action?"
 ·	Red-short "stop" / "cease"
 ···	Red-triple "THREAT" / "extreme danger"
 ·	Violet-short "now" (present moment)
 ···—	Violet-triple-long "ancient past"
 ·	Cyan-short "I" / "this unit"
 ··	Cyan-double "we" / "collective"

Complex Words (Compound Patterns)

Words combine in rapid sequence (gaps of 25ms between components):

Sequence	Translation
 · →  ··	"biological data" / "genetic information"
 · →  ··	"harvest" (action upon multiple organisms)
 · →  ·—	"I query" / "I ask"
 ·— →  ·	"do not act" / "forbidden action"
 — →  ··	"our philosophy" / "the way"
 · →  —	"bio-tool" / "organic technology"

Grammar Structure

Sentence Order

[Subject-Color] → [Time-Violet] → [Action-Yellow] → [Object-Color]
→ [Modifier]

Example Sentence

"We will harvest the organisms"

□ → ● → ● → ●

(we) (future) (act) (organisms)

[Medium intensity throughout = standard statement]

"STOP! Dangerous entity detected!"

● → ● → ● → ●

(cease) (organism) (DANGER) (detected)

[Flare intensity = alarm]

Writing Veltharyn in Prose

Descriptive Approach

The alien's bioluminescent nodes flickered in rapid sequence—a cool blue pulse, quick and sharp, followed by two green flashes. Then brightness surged as red strobed three times in urgent succession.

Technical Approach

The transmission parsed as: ● ● ●—a data packet flagging the biological samples as contaminated.

Symbolic Shorthand

For quick reference in dialogue or thoughts:

//*CYAN-double YELLOW-short GREEN-long*// translated roughly to
"We act upon the biosphere."

Cultural Notes

- Harvesters can "speak" simultaneously on multiple wavelengths, allowing layered communication (surface meaning + subtext + emotional state all at once)
- Lying is nearly impossible—intensity betrays emotional truth
- Human technology initially reads Veltharyn as "noise" or "interference patterns"
- The Harvesters find human vocal communication painfully slow and imprecise
- Infrared channels are considered "private thoughts"—intercepting them is a severe taboo

Story Integration Ideas

- Humans first crack Veltharyn by noticing the color-category correlation
- A character might learn to "read" basic Veltharyn but lack the biology to "speak" it
- Technology could be developed to translate/transmit, but miss emotional nuance
- The ultraviolet "sacred" channel could contain crucial plot information

