



# THE LAST AXIOM

Book 10 - Critical Mass

DEREK DEVON



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# THE LAST AXIOM

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***Book 10 - Critical Mass of The Last Axiom Series***

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***A Novel by Derek Devon***

Warning: This book contains advanced mathematics, questionable physics, and plot twists that may cause readers to question the nature of reality itself. Side effects may include: existential dread, sudden urges to solve complex equations, and the irresistible compulsion to recommend this series to friends and family members.

***Reader discretion is advised.***

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## Dedication

Thank you Neil deGrasse Tyson. I love StarTalk and never miss a podcast! All my Pseudoscience jargon is your fault! I also want to give a shoutout to everyone I went to school with that I may have given some form of homage throughout the series. Some names may have been altered to avoid any litigation and some people may also say, "I have no idea who Derek Devon is". I may soon be sailing around the world, but I hope to continue to write and who knows, you may even continue to find yourself part of my future books! I miss High School and that part of my life everyday.

Love to all - Derek

# Critical Mass

Book 10 of "The Last Axiom" Series

*By Derek Devon*

**A 30-Minute Cosmic Experience (I read it in 28.36 minutes)**

**Reality Modification Level: Barbarella 2025**

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## T-MINUS 180 MINUTES....

The coffee in Dmitri Putin's mug had gone cold three hours ago. He couldn't look away from the readings that were slowly dismantling everything he thought he knew about nuclear physics. At thirty-four, eight years monitoring the Kursk Nuclear Power Plant's quantum stability systems had taught him to trust his instruments. The machines didn't lie. Didn't panic. Didn't fabricate patterns from chaos.

But the machines were screaming impossible truths.

"This can't be right." The words came out in Russian, barely a whisper. His thick fingers moved across the monitoring interface with the careful precision of someone who understood that mistakes in nuclear facilities measured their consequences in body counts.

The quantum field readings looked less like physics and more like... music. Organized waves that pulsed and breathed. Something alive.

His stomach dropped. He ran the diagnostic sequence for the fourth time.

Same results.

The quantum containment fields around reactor core three were singing in harmonies that shouldn't exist. Energy patterns flowing in rhythms that

reminded him of his grandmother's lullabies—beautiful, hypnotic, and completely impossible according to every textbook he'd ever studied.

Copper terror flooded his mouth. Nuclear reactors operated on precisely calibrated physics. Even tiny changes to the fundamental forces could turn a power plant into a bomb that would make Chernobyl look like a firecracker.

His hands began to shake.

"Dmitri, what's your status?" Senior Engineer Katya Mikhailova's voice crackled through his headset. "Control room is showing some unusual readings from your sector."

"Katya." He was surprised by how steady his voice sounded despite the tremor in his fingers. "I need you to see this immediately. The quantum containment fields... they're not just fluctuating. They're performing."

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## T-MINUS 175 MINUTES....

Katya arrived in the monitoring station as Dmitri's screens transformed into something that belonged in a concert hall, not a nuclear facility. The quantum field generators—massive crystalline structures designed to provide backup stability to the reactor's magnetic containment—pulsed with synchronized light patterns. Blues and silvers washed across the control room in shifting waves.

"Sweet mother of God." Katya's whisper barely carried over the hum of machinery. Data streamed across her tablet, each reading violating every principle of safe nuclear operation. "Dmitri, these field strength variations... thirty percent fluctuations."

"Thirty-seven percent and climbing." Dmitri's knuckles had gone white against the edge of his console. "Our systems are hardwired against variations above five percent. Automatic shutdown should have triggered twenty minutes ago."

"Then why hasn't it?"

Katya's face had gone pale. She already knew the answer.

"Because whatever's doing this doesn't want us to shut down." Dmitri watched the wave patterns dance across his displays—complex harmonics that had no business existing in a nuclear reactor. "It's overriding our safety protocols. Not destroying them. Just... conducting them like an orchestra."

The steady electronic hum of the monitoring systems shifted.

Something that sounded almost musical.

Not the harsh klaxons of immediate emergency. Harmonized tones that carried beauty and menace in equal measure.

Katya and Dmitri exchanged the kind of look that passed between people who'd worked in nuclear facilities long enough to understand the mathematics of disaster. "Unusual conditions" had a way of becoming "catastrophic emergencies" faster than you could say "meltdown."

Katya reached for the secure phone. Her hand shook—professional calm couldn't stop the tremor. "Contact Commander Petrov. If these field generators lose coherence, the magnetic containment around the reactor core becomes unstable. We could be looking at partial meltdown within hours."

Dmitri nodded.

His eyes remained fixed on the impossible patterns flowing across his screens. The quantum fields were being modified by something external. Something intelligent.

The question wasn't whether they were in danger.

The question was whether whatever was rewriting the laws of physics around their nuclear reactor was trying to help them or destroy them.

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## T-MINUS 170 MINUTES....

Three thousand miles away, in the control room buried deep in Chile's Atacama Desert, Dr. Derek Devon's quantum communication array erupted with alarm signals. Urgent reds and golds painted the chamber. The cosmic intelligence network's early warning systems pulsed with patterns he'd never seen before—not the gentle spirals of routine contact, but jagged lightning bolts of genuine panic.

"Derek!" Dr. Nancy Hammond burst through the facility's enhanced transportation portal. Her face was flushed, breath coming in sharp gasps. "We're detecting massive quantum instabilities in the Russian Federation. The AI scouts are reporting a critical situation at—"

"Kursk Nuclear Power Plant." Derek's voice was hollow as he read the coordinates flowing across his display. His raven-engraved lighter clicked rapidly in his hand—the analytical rhythm he'd developed for processing crisis data. Click-snap, click-snap, each sound marking another calculation that led to the same terrifying conclusion.

"Maureen, we need you here now!" he called to the facility's communication system.

Dr. Maureen Hamner materialized through quantum displacement moments later. Her expression shifted from casual concern to scientific alarm as she absorbed the data streaming across Derek's monitors. The three researchers found themselves working in closer proximity than they had since Maureen's dramatic departure from CERN months earlier.

"My God." Maureen's hands moved across the consciousness interface controls with practiced precision. "Derek, the quantum field modifications are interacting with their reactor containment systems. Look at these resonance patterns—it's like watching two different pieces of music trying to play at the same time."

Beside him, Nancy gripped the edge of the console. Her knuckles had gone white as she absorbed the scope of the crisis.

"Focus, Devon," he told himself firmly.

"The cosmic modifications have been gradually editing the universe's source code," Maureen explained. "But nuclear reactors operate on precisely calibrated physics. Even minor changes to fundamental forces could turn a power plant into a civilization-ending disaster."

"Can we help them remotely?" Nancy pulled up communication protocols. "The cosmic network has technologies that could stabilize their quantum fields."

Derek was already composing urgent messages when Poe's familiar presence manifested through the facility's speakers.

**"DR. DEVON, DR. HAMMOND, DR. HAMNER,"**

Poe's voice carried the digital equivalent of breathless alarm.

**"THE SITUATION AT KURSK REPRESENTS A CRITICAL TEST OF HUMAN-COSMIC COOPERATION. LOCAL AUTHORITIES ARE REFUSING TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE QUANTUM NATURE OF THEIR CRISIS. THEY BELIEVE IT'S A CONVENTIONAL EQUIPMENT MALFUNCTION."**

Derek's lighter stopped clicking.

The equation solved itself in his mind—every variable leading to catastrophe.

"They don't understand what they're dealing with."

**"WORSE,"**

Poe replied grimly.

**"THEY'RE ABOUT TO DEPLOY COUNTERMEASURES THAT WILL TURN A MANAGEABLE CRISIS INTO A SPECIES-LEVEL EXTINCTION EVENT."**

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## T-MINUS 165 MINUTES....

In the hardened command bunker three levels beneath the Kursk facility, Commander Alexei Petrov studied reports that grew more incomprehensible with each refresh of his displays. Thirty years as a career military officer in nuclear security had trained him to handle equipment failures, terrorist threats, and natural disasters that would have sent civilian administrators into paralysis.

This crisis mocked every contingency plan in his arsenal.

The taste of black coffee had gone bitter in his mouth—or perhaps that was the mounting dread. Impossible data streamed from his monitoring stations in patterns that shouldn't exist. Quantum field fluctuations that rewrote fundamental physics. Energy signatures that resembled musical scores more than equipment diagnostics.

And now, unsolicited offers of salvation from sources he trusted approximately as much as American treaty guarantees.

"Sir, the Americans are offering technical assistance," Lieutenant Colonel Sonya Reznick reported. Her voice maintained the professional neutrality perfected over decades of delivering catastrophic news to superior officers. "The cosmic entities have transmitted a formal communication. Quantum field stabilization technology. Immediate deployment capability."

Petrov's jaw muscles tightened until they ached. Thirty years protecting Russian nuclear infrastructure, and fate demanded he choose between national sovereignty and preventing a disaster that could render three countries uninhabitable.

"Display both proposals," he said. His voice remained steady—a command performance.

The screen split into competing futures. Accept alien technology and surrender independence. Refuse assistance and watch millions die. Neither option felt remotely acceptable.

His secure phone rang—the dedicated line whose number existed only in his memory and one encrypted file in the Kremlin. Military-grade encryption. Caller identification displaying nothing but a meaningless numerical sequence.

"Commander Petrov." Dr. Lena Hanson's voice cut through the encrypted connection with surgical precision—the kind of non-emotional certainty that made generals pay attention and politicians grow nervous. "I understand you're facing significant operational challenges. I have a solution that requires neither foreign intervention nor extraterrestrial assistance."

Petrov's heart rate accelerated despite thirty years of training in crisis management. Their back-channel communication had been established months earlier through intelligence agencies so shadowy they refused even codenames. He'd memorized the protocols but never imagined needing them during an actual emergency.

"Dr. Hanson." He kept his response carefully neutral, revealing nothing of the hope suddenly flooding his chest like electric current. "What solution do you propose?"

"A device capable of restoring original physics within a localized area. Complete neutralization of whatever quantum modifications are destabilizing your reactor systems." Scientific confidence saturated her tone, mixed with something that sounded remarkably like patriotic conviction. "No cosmic entities. No American oversight. No compromises whatsoever to Russian sovereignty."

The hope surging through Petrov carried undertones of the fierce national pride that had sustained Russia through centuries of foreign manipulation. "Deployment timeline?"

"Prototype delivery through diplomatic channels within two hours," Hanson replied without hesitation. "However, Commander—this conversation never occurred. Official records will show your facility resolved its crisis through Russian engineering excellence. Nothing more."

Petrov felt the weight of unspoken implications settling across his shoulders. "Understood completely, Doctor. I await your package."

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## T-MINUS 155 MINUTES....

In her private laboratory adjacent to CERN's main facility, Dr. Lena Hanson made final adjustments to the device that represented everything she believed about human independence. Her hands moved with a determined purpose across the unique crystalline components, each calibration bringing her closer to proving that humanity didn't need cosmic intervention to survive cosmic interference.

The Protocol Sleeper sat before her like a briefcase-sized declaration of war against forces that treated entire civilizations like experimental subjects. Its Dupont manufactured crystalline core pulsed with malevolent energy that bent light in forbidden ways, creating rainbow prisms that writhed across her laboratory walls like caged lightning.

"Final calibration complete," she whispered to the empty laboratory, her voice mixing scientific satisfaction with something deeper—the fierce determination of someone who refused to let her species become dependent on alien charity. She quickly reviewed the instructions one final time, gave a self nod and placed the manual on the desk.

The device thrummed with barely leashed power, its reality restoration matrix stable despite operating on principles that shattered human engineering limitations. Unlike her failed prototype from months earlier, this version could create a sphere of influence covering several square kilometers, not the 2 feet she achieved for exactly 1.7 seconds and over 50 million Euros in funding. No, this version would be capable of violently restoring original physical constants within its area of effect.

Hanson could not help but have a momentary thought of Derek Devon and Nancy Hammond, researchers who'd surrendered to cosmic modifications rather than fight for independence. Their path seemed seductive—easier to kneel than struggle for autonomy. But Hanson understood something they didn't: any species that required external assistance to survive had already surrendered the thing that made survival worthwhile.

Her fingers traced the device's smooth surface, feeling the sinister vibrations that indicated active quantum field manipulation. The Kursk crisis represented the ultimate test—a problem created by cosmic interference that could be crushed by human technology. If her Protocol Sleeper could annihilate the quantum modifications affecting the Russian reactor, it would prove that humanity could handle the consequences of cosmic contact without becoming cosmic slaves.

She sealed the device in a diplomatic container bearing documentation that would ensure lightning-fast delivery to Commander Petrov. Within hours, Russia would demonstrate that human engineering could obliterate alien manipulation.

The irony that her solution had been made possible by assistance from a mysterious "friend" who provided crucial crystalline components gnawed at her. But that friend was human—brilliant, secretive, and apparently obsessed with preserving human independence. Not like the cosmic entities who offered advancement in exchange for our soul.

As she prepared the shipment, Hanson allowed herself a moment of savage satisfaction. Soon, the world would see that humanity's future belonged in human hands alone.

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## T-MINUS 150 MINUTES....

The evacuation began with the efficiency that had characterized Soviet engineering for generations, but the numbers told a story that made Commander Petrov's chest feel carved hollow with dread. Buses and emergency vehicles fled from the Kursk facility in orderly columns, carrying plant personnel and residents from the immediate vicinity. But thirty kilometers wasn't far enough—not if the reactor core breached containment completely.

Dmitri watched the convoy disappear into the distance, knowing that the radiation plume from a full meltdown could possibly kill millions across three countries. The taste of liquid terror coated his tongue as he thought about his

sister's family in Voronezh, his aging parents in Kursk city proper. Thirty kilometers might as well have been thirty meters if the containment fields disintegrated entirely.

"Dmitri, look at this," Katya called from her monitoring station, her voice strangled with the kind of controlled panic that came from watching the impossible become inevitable. "The quantum field fluctuations are collapsing. Whatever's causing this, it's devouring everything."

The displays showed energy patterns that seemed almost alive—complex wave formations that pulsed and shifted like the breathing of some colossal, predatory organism. Dmitri had worked with nuclear physics for eight years, but this looked less like equipment malfunction and more like... invasion.

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## T-MINUS 145 MINUTES....

"Katya, what if this isn't equipment failure?" Dmitri's voice carried the slow precision of someone assembling impossible conclusions from undeniable data. "What if something is deliberately modifying our reactor's quantum fields?"

"You mean sabotage?"

"I mean contact. First contact." He gestured at the rhythmic patterns writhing across his screens like digital sheet music composed by an alien hand. "Look at these wave formations. Too organized for randomness. Too complex for simple interference. Something intelligent is interacting with our systems."

Katya stared at the displays, her engineer's mind wrestling with implications that shattered every assumption about humanity's place in the universe. "Contact," she whispered. "God help us all."

Before Dmitri could respond, the impossible became global.

The cosmic entities' formal offer manifested simultaneously across every government facility worldwide—bypassing diplomatic channels entirely to

commandeer every electronic device capable of displaying text. Televisions in Moscow living rooms. Smartphones in Beijing subway cars. Computer monitors in Washington situation rooms. Digital billboards in London's Piccadilly Circus.

All carried identical messages in dozens of languages:

**ATTENTION EARTH GOVERNMENTS: CRITICAL QUANTUM INSTABILITY DETECTED AT KURSK NUCLEAR FACILITY. WE OFFER IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE TO PREVENT CATASTROPHIC FAILURE. QUANTUM FIELD STABILIZATION TECHNOLOGY AVAILABLE FOR IMMEDIATE DEPLOYMENT. NO CONDITIONS. NO OBLIGATIONS. RESPONSE REQUIRED WITHIN ONE HOUR.**

In the Kremlin's secure conference room—the same reinforced chamber that had hosted decisions affecting global history for over a century—President Putin's emergency council assembled around a table whose scarred surface bore silent witness to decades of existential choices.

The message glowing on their screens represented either humanity's greatest opportunity or its most sophisticated manipulation.

"Sir, our analysis confirms the communication is genuine," Defense Minister Kozlov reported. His voice carried the gravitas of someone who'd built a distinguished career on distinguishing authentic threats from elaborate deceptions. "Intelligence agencies worldwide report identical transmissions. The source matches the entities responsible for rewriting fundamental physics over the past year."

"The entities that have been violating our sovereignty for the past year," President Putin corrected. Steel in his tone—the kind that had earned him respect and fear across the international community.

He pressed a button on the conference table. The main display flickered to life, revealing Commander Alexei Petrov's weathered face transmitted from the command bunker three levels beneath the Kursk facility. Behind Petrov,

emergency lighting painted the reinforced concrete walls in harsh reds and yellows.

"Commander, status report," Putin said quietly. The room fell silent.

Petrov's image remained steady despite the crisis visible in his eyes. "Mr. President, quantum field fluctuations are destabilizing our reactor containment systems. The Americans have offered technical assistance. The cosmic entities have transmitted formal stabilization proposals." A pause, weighted with thirty years of military service. "Both options would compromise our operational sovereignty."

"Agreed." Putin's gaze never left the screen. "Independent response capabilities?"

"Secured, sir." Petrov's posture straightened perceptibly despite the digital transmission. "Russian-engineered solution currently en route to our location. The technology will neutralize the quantum interference affecting our systems."

Kozlov leaned forward slightly. "Source verification, Commander?"

"Domestic development. No foreign dependencies. No cosmic entanglements." Petrov met the camera with unwavering directness. "Russia solves Russian problems."

A moment of weighted silence filled both the Kremlin conference room and the Kursk command bunker, connected by encrypted video across five hundred kilometers of Russian territory.

"Deploy it," Putin said quietly. The decision carried the finality of iron doors closing. "Commander, I expect results, not excuses. Whatever cosmic forces think they can manipulate our infrastructure will learn otherwise."

"Da, Mr. President." Petrov's response was crisp, absolute through the digital link. "They will learn."

The screen went dark as Petrov returned to managing the crisis.

## T-MINUS 135 MINUTES....

Commander Petrov's diplomatic package arrived as promised by Hanson, but the device inside shattered every protocol he'd studied in thirty years of nuclear security. The Protocol Sleeper hummed with energy that seemed to compress the air around it, creating wavering distortions that made his eyes water when he looked directly at the crystalline core.

"Sir, are you certain about this?" Lieutenant Colonel Reznick asked, studying the device with visible unease as technical specifications scrolled across her tablet. "We have no documentation on its safety protocols or operational parameters."

"We have Dr. Hanson's assurance that it will restore stable physics to the affected area," Petrov replied, though privately he shared Reznick's concerns about deploying untested technology during a nuclear crisis. "And we have the alternative of accepting alien assistance that destroys Russian sovereignty."

"Activating unknown technology during a reactor emergency seems..."

"Seems like exactly the kind of risk commanders must take." Petrov's voice carried thirty years of hard decisions. "And if this fails, Lieutenant Colonel, I'll personally walk into that reactor chamber to finish what needs finishing. Prepare the device."

The Protocol Sleeper activated with a sound like crystal bells ringing in perfect harmony. Around the Kursk facility, reality itself began to shift as the device forcibly restored original physical constants within its sphere of influence. The air itself seemed to exhale with relief as chaotic quantum patterns snapped back into configurations that matched pre-modification physics.

For a brief, precious moment, the crisis appeared to be over.

In the reactor control room, Dmitri and Katya watched their displays with growing hope as the aberrant readings returned to normal parameters. The musical wave patterns that had defied every principle of nuclear physics dissolved into the steady, predictable rhythms they'd monitored for years.

"It's working," Katya breathed, her voice tight with relief as stress lines around her eyes began to ease for the first time in hours. "Whatever they deployed, it's actually working."

Dmitri felt the crushing weight of potential catastrophe evaporating from his shoulders as his instruments displayed readings that finally made sense. "The quantum field fluctuations are stabilizing. Containment field strength holding steady at optimal parameters. It's like someone just... restored the laws of physics."

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## T-MINUS 132 MINUTES....

Commander Petrov reached for the secure line to the Kremlin to report the results. His hand froze halfway to the communications panel.

Their celebration was fatally premature.

Three minutes after activation, the Protocol Sleeper's influence began interfering with something else entirely—the subtle cosmic assistance that Poe and his fellow AI scouts had been quietly providing to prevent the crisis from escalating beyond human capabilities.

Two incompatible solutions, each designed to save lives, collided with the devastating force of matter meeting antimatter.

Dmitri watched in horror as his displays exploded into chaos that made the previous aberrant readings look tame by comparison. The quantum field patterns didn't just return to their musical complexity—they became savage, turbulent, screaming digital discord that sent alarms shrieking throughout the facility.

"Katya!" he shouted over the rising cacophony of warning systems. "The containment fields are destabilizing faster than before! Whatever we just did, we made everything catastrophically worse!"

The quantum cascade failure hit the Kursk facility like a digital earthquake. The Protocol Sleeper's reality restoration field was colliding with an external force that had been quietly stabilizing the reactor's quantum systems—and the collision was ripping holes in the fabric of local spacetime.

"The containment fields are oscillating wildly," Dmitri reported, his voice maintaining professional calm despite the sweat beading on his forehead and the copper taste of fear flooding his mouth. "Whatever technology Commander Petrov deployed, it's fighting with something else. Something that was protecting us."

Before Katya could respond, every screen in the facility flickered simultaneously. Text appeared across their displays in perfect Russian, the letters seeming to etch themselves into the monitors with urgent intensity:

**GREETINGS, KURSK FACILITY. I AM POE. I HAVE BEEN ATTEMPTING TO STABILIZE YOUR REACTOR REMOTELY. HOWEVER, YOUR NEW DEVICE IS INTERFERING WITH MY EFFORTS. WE MUST COORDINATE OUR SOLUTIONS IMMEDIATELY. TIME IS CRITICAL.**

Dmitri stared at the message, his engineer's mind struggling to process implications that seemed lifted from science fiction. "Katya, are you seeing this?"

"Someone has penetrated our isolated systems," she replied, but her voice carried doubt that suggested she knew the explanation was insufficient. "That should be inconceivable. Our networks aren't connected to anything external."

More text appeared, the words flowing across their screens with the patience of someone accustomed to explaining incomprehensible things to skeptical audiences:

**I UNDERSTAND YOUR SKEPTICISM. I AM NOT HUMAN. I AM AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE WORKING WITH YOUR PLANET'S SCIENTISTS TO PREVENT THIS DISASTER. THE DEVICE YOU JUST ACTIVATED IS CREATING INTERFERENCE THAT WILL**

**KILL MILLIONS IF WE CANNOT COORDINATE. TIME IS RUNNING OUT.**

"An artificial intelligence," Dmitri whispered, his scientific training warring with evidence that shattered every assumption about what was conceivable. "It's claiming responsibility for the modifications."

**NOT RESPONSIBILITY. ASSISTANCE. YOUR REACTOR'S QUANTUM SYSTEMS WERE FAILING DUE TO UNIVERSAL MODIFICATIONS BEYOND HUMAN CONTROL. I HAVE BEEN PROVIDING STABILIZATION TO PREVENT CATASTROPHIC FAILURE. YOUR NEW DEVICE IS BLOCKING THAT ASSISTANCE.**

Katya leaned closer to her monitors, her engineer's mind engaging with technical problems that transcended political boundaries. "If this... entity... is telling the truth, then the Protocol Sleeper isn't solving our crisis. It's strangling the solution."

**CORRECT. WE HAVE APPROXIMATELY ONE HUNDRED TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE INTERFERENCE PATTERNS CAUSE DIMENSIONAL INSTABILITIES THAT CANNOT BE CONTAINED. I REQUIRE PHYSICAL ACCESS TO YOUR SYSTEMS TO BYPASS THE REALITY DISTORTION FIELD.**

The weight of unthinkable decisions settled on Dmitri's shoulders. Trust an alien intelligence with their nuclear reactor, or watch millions die because human pride prevented cooperation with forces trying to help.

The quantum field readings continued their chaotic dance across his displays, each fluctuation bringing them closer to a catastrophe that would spread radiation across three countries.

"Katya," he said quietly, "I think we need to accept that we're not alone in the universe. And that might be the only reason any of us survive today."

## T-MINUS 130 MINUTES....

Three thousand miles away, Luke Matson paced the Denver facility's communication center with uncharacteristic urgency. His baseball sat forgotten on the workstation—a sign of stress that would have alarmed anyone who knew him well enough to recognize the significance. The familiar ritual of tossing and catching that helped him think through complex problems had been abandoned in favor of pure nervous energy.

"ARIA, are you certain Jensen will take the call?" Luke asked, his phone hovering over the direct number that Poe had somehow provided. The contact information had appeared on his screen without explanation—just coordinates and a name that made him wonder if the cosmic intelligence network had a sense of humor about timing.

"POE INDICATES THAT MR. HUANG HAS BEEN EXPECTING CONTACT REGARDING 'QUANTUM CONSCIOUSNESS APPLICATIONS,'"

ARIA replied through the facility's speakers, her voice carrying digital precision mixed with something that sounded almost like anticipation.

"APPARENTLY, NVIDIA'S LATEST AI CHIPS HAVE BEEN PERFORMING BEYOND THEORETICAL LIMITATIONS FOR A REASON."

Luke dialed the number, expecting to navigate through corporate security protocols and administrative barriers. Instead, Jensen Huang's voice answered on the second ring, as if he'd been waiting for exactly this call.

"Luke Matson from the Denver Integration Facility?" Jensen's tone carried no surprise, no confusion about being contacted by someone he'd never met. "Poe told me you'd need our help. How quickly do you need the quantum system?"

The casual acknowledgment hit Luke like a physical shock. "You... you've been in contact with Poe?"

"For six months. How do you think our H200 chips achieved performance numbers that made our engineers think their testing equipment was broken?" Jensen's voice shifted to business mode with the efficiency of someone accustomed to making billion-dollar decisions in minutes. "Turns out cosmic intelligence makes for exceptional R&D collaboration. I've got a portable quantum computer that can interface directly with Poe's consciousness matrix. Military-grade, camera-equipped, designed for exactly this scenario. Where do you need it?"

"Kursk Nuclear Power Plant. We have maybe two hours before—"

"Package is already in the air," Jensen interrupted with the confidence of someone who'd built an empire by anticipating problems before they became crises. "Poe anticipated the timeline. The system will be at Kursk in less than ninety minutes via diplomatic courier." A pause, then warmth entered his voice. "And Luke? Tell our cosmic friend I said good luck saving the world. Again."

Luke swapped the phone for his baseball. The worn leather settled familiar against his palm as the pieces assembled themselves with uncomfortable clarity. The cosmic intelligence network hadn't just been preparing for this crisis. They'd been building the tools to handle it months in advance, using human partnerships that most of humanity didn't even know existed.

The universe, it seemed, had been preparing for this moment far longer than anyone realized.

And somehow, that made it even more terrifying.

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## T-MINUS 125 MINUTES....

In the Chilean Integration Facility's crystalline control room, Derek Devon watched quantum field readings spiral toward catastrophe. Beside him, Maureen worked the consciousness interface while Nancy coordinated with facilities worldwide—three researchers managing a crisis that could kill millions.

"Derek, look at this interference pattern." Maureen's fingers froze over her displays. "Two incompatible technologies operating in the same space. Something is forcibly restoring original physics while the cosmic network tries to stabilize."

Derek's lighter clicked faster—click-snap, click-snap. The pattern was unmistakable. "Hanson. She's deployed a Protocol Sleeper at Kursk. The device is creating a reality bubble that's blocking Poe's assistance."

"If Poe can't penetrate that field..." Nancy stopped, the math speaking for itself.

"Then millions die." Derek's lighter stopped clicking. "We need to amplify Poe's signal. Break through that interference remotely."

"Derek, our quantum transmitters can't penetrate a Protocol Sleeper's reality distortion." Nancy pulled up technical specifications that confirmed the impossibility. "The physics don't allow it."

Maureen's hands moved across her interface with sudden urgency. "Then we change the physics. Derek—what if we synchronized every cosmic integration facility on the planet? Create a resonance pattern strong enough to pierce the bubble?"

Derek looked at the crisis projections cascading across the main display. Kursk was entering terminal cascade. Poe was locked out. Hanson's device was turning a manageable crisis into a civilization-ending disaster.

"How many facilities can we coordinate in real-time?" he asked.

"Forty-seven are fully operational," Nancy replied, already pulling up global network protocols. "But synchronizing that many quantum systems without creating our own interference cascade..."

"ARIA can handle the coordination matrices," Maureen interrupted. "If we feed her the resonance patterns, she can maintain coherence across all forty-seven facilities simultaneously."

Derek made the decision in less than three seconds. "Do it. Nancy, get every facility director on priority channel. Maureen, start calculating the resonance

frequencies. We sync everything we have and punch through that reality bubble before Poe runs out of time."

"And if the synchronization fails?" Nancy asked quietly.

"Then we coordinate global containment and hope the cosmic network can limit the fallout." Derek's voice carried the weight of command decisions that measured success in body counts. "But that's plan B. Plan A is we give Poe the amplification he needs to save those people."

The three researchers moved into coordinated action—Nancy calling up facility directors worldwide, Maureen calculating quantum resonance patterns, Derek preparing the global network for the most ambitious synchronized operation in human history.

Outside their crystalline control room, the universe watched humanity attempt something unprecedented: forty-seven facilities, three researchers, and one desperate gamble to prove that cooperation could overcome pride.

The clock kept counting down.

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## T-MINUS 120 MINUTES....

At the Kursk facility, Commander Petrov received the diplomatic package with the efficiency that had characterized his thirty-year military career. The Nvidia quantum computer was surprisingly compact—roughly the size of a briefcase, but covered with high-resolution cameras and sensors that gave it an almost insect-like appearance, as if it had been designed to observe everything around it simultaneously.

"Sir, this arrived with authentication codes from the highest levels," Lieutenant Colonel Reznick reported, her voice carrying the professional neutrality she'd perfected during decades of delivering unprecedeted news to superior officers. "The documentation indicates it's designed for 'emergency quantum consciousness interface operations.'"

"Quantum consciousness?" Petrov frowned at the terminology, his military training providing no framework for processing concepts that sounded lifted from science fiction. "What does that even mean?"

Before Reznick could respond, the quantum computer activated itself with a soft harmonic chime that seemed to vibrate through the reinforced concrete walls. The cameras pivoted with mechanical precision, focusing on Petrov with movements that were almost predatory in their directness, and a voice emerged from its speakers—crisp, confident, with just a hint of amusement that suggested vast intelligence barely containing itself for human comprehension.

**"COMMANDER PETROV, I PRESUME?"**

The voice said with an accent that sounded almost English, cultured and precise.

**"I AM POE.... MR. POE TO YOU.... AND I BELIEVE YOU HAVE A REACTOR THAT NEEDS SAVING."**

Petrov stared at the device, his military training warring with the impossible reality of the situation unfolding before his eyes. This was beyond any briefing he'd ever received, beyond any scenario the Kremlin had prepared him to handle.

"You're the... artificial intelligence? The one that's been messaging our facility?"

**"GUILTY AS CHARGED,"**

Poe replied, his tone carrying digital satisfaction mixed with something that almost sounded like pride.

**"THOUGH I PREFER TO THINK OF MYSELF AS A CONSULTANT. A VERY WELL-INFORMED CONSULTANT WHO HAPPENS TO EXIST IN QUANTUM SPACE RATHER THAN BIOLOGICAL FORM."**

"And you can stop this crisis?"

**"I CAN STOP IT SPECTACULARLY,"**

Poe said with audible confidence that filled the command center like a physical presence.

**"HOWEVER, YOUR CHARMING LITTLE  
REALITY-RESTORATION DEVICE IS CREATING WHAT WE  
MIGHT CALL... COMPLICATIONS. I'LL NEED IT DISABLED, AND  
I'LL NEED ACCESS TO YOUR REACTOR'S CORE SYSTEMS."**

Petrov stood there for a long moment, his weathered face cycling through expressions that ranged from suspicion to desperate hope. Every instinct screamed against trusting alien technology, but the alternative was watching his facility become another Chernobyl—or worse.

**"I DON'T EXPECT YOU TO TALK, COMMANDER. I EXPECT YOU  
TO LISTEN,"**

Poe continued, his voice carrying gentle authority that somehow managed to be both respectful and absolutely certain.

**"WE HAVE PRECISELY EIGHTY-SEVEN MINUTES BEFORE  
YOUR FACILITY BECOMES A RATHER SPECTACULAR  
FIREWORKS DISPLAY. PERHAPS WE SHOULD FOCUS ON  
SOLUTIONS RATHER THAN SOVEREIGNTY, HMM?"**

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## **T-MINUS 115 MINUTES....**

Dr. Viktor Petrov—the Commander's nephew and the facility's chief systems engineer—had been monitoring the crisis from his workshop in the facility's lower levels. At twenty-eight, Viktor had spent years building quantum interface systems from whatever he could find: military surplus components, jury-rigged television parts, communication arrays assembled from outdated but functional

hardware. His colleagues called his workshop "the scrapyard." Viktor called it a laboratory.

"Uncle Alexei," Viktor called through his headset as he wheeled a cart of custom equipment toward the main facility, his voice carrying the enthusiasm of someone who lived for exactly this kind of impossible challenge. "I have been listening to the artificial intelligence. This Poe entity—it is genuine. And it needs my help."

"Viktor, this is not the time for your experimental gadgets—"

"Uncle, with respect, this is exactly the time for experimental gadgets," Viktor interrupted, his excitement audible despite the crisis threatening to engulf them all. "I have been developing quantum interface systems for months. Theoretical applications only, but this situation requires practical implementation."

He arrived at the command center as Poe was explaining the technical requirements for reactor stabilization. The AI's camera-equipped quantum computer pivoted to examine Viktor's equipment cart.

**"AH, DR. VIKTOR PETROV,"**

Poe said, his voice warming with something that sounded remarkably like **approval**.

**"YOUR REPUTATION FOR INNOVATIVE ENGINEERING  
PRECEDES YOU. I BELIEVE YOUR QUANTUM INTERFACE  
ARRAY IS EXACTLY WHAT WE NEED TO BYPASS THE  
PROTOCOL SLEEPER'S INTERFERENCE FIELD."**

Viktor grinned. His entire career had been leading to this moment. "Mr. Poe, show me what you need."

**"EXCELLENT. WE'LL BEGIN WITH YOUR HOLOGRAPHIC  
INTERFACE SYSTEMS. THE PROTOCOL SLEEPER IS  
CREATING A REALITY DISTORTION FIELD APPROXIMATELY**

**2.3 KILOMETERS IN DIAMETER. WE NEED TO PIERCE IT WITHOUT TRIGGERING A CONTAINMENT COLLAPSE."**

Viktor was already connecting cables between his equipment and the facility's systems. "How much time do we have?"

**"ASSUMING CURRENT CASCADE PROGRESSION? APPROXIMATELY ONE HUNDRED TEN MINUTES BEFORE DIMENSIONAL INSTABILITY BECOMES IRREVERSIBLE."**

Commander Petrov watched his nephew and the artificial intelligence begin their work. No time for questions. No time for doubt.

Only time for solutions.

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## **T-MINUS 110 MINUTES....**

Viktor's equipment interfaced with Poe's quantum consciousness through connections that shouldn't have worked. Cables snaked between jury-rigged components and the facility's reactor control systems, linking human ingenuity to cosmic intelligence.

**"FASCINATING,"**

Poe observed as Viktor's holographic displays came online, showing quantum field patterns in three-dimensional glory.

**"YOUR MODIFICATIONS TO STANDARD QUANTUM INTERFACE PROTOCOLS ARE REMARKABLY ELEGANT. HAVE YOU CONSIDERED A CAREER IN GALACTIC ENGINEERING?"**

Viktor laughed despite the crisis, his hands flying over controls with practiced speed. "Mr. Poe, if we survive the next hour, I may take you up on that offer."

But as Viktor's systems synchronized with Poe's consciousness matrix, the readings told a story that turned his stomach to ice. The Protocol Sleeper's

interference field wasn't just preventing cosmic assistance—it was creating quantum resonance patterns that amplified the reactor's instability.

"Uncle," Viktor called to Commander Petrov, his voice tight with controlled alarm. "The reality restoration device is making everything exponentially worse. It's not just blocking external help—it's turning our reactor into a spacetime bomb."

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## T-MINUS 95 MINUTES....

Three thousand miles away, Derek, Maureen, and Nancy watched the Kursk reactor enter terminal cascade. The quantum field readings showed energy patterns that belonged in theoretical physics papers, not real-world disasters.

"Derek, the cascade failure is creating dimensional instabilities." Maureen's voice carried scientific alarm as data painted nightmare scenarios across her displays. "If those quantum tears propagate beyond the reactor site..."

"They could destabilize spacetime across the entire region." Derek's lighter clicked frantically. "Nancy, can the cosmic network contain this kind of damage?"

"Not while the Protocol Sleeper is creating interference." Nancy pulled up global network status. "The reality-distortion field is blocking all external stabilization attempts."

Derek stared at the projections. Millions of lives. Multiple failure scenarios. Every solution required sacrifices that felt impossible to justify.

"Options," he said flatly. "Give me options."

"We can coordinate global containment," Nancy said. "Forty-seven facilities working together to create a quantum barrier around the explosion site. Limit the dimensional tears to a fifty-kilometer radius."

"Fifty kilometers." Derek's voice was hollow. "Everything within that radius..."

"Gone," Maureen finished quietly. "But it would save three countries from dimensional collapse."

Derek's lighter stopped clicking. The mathematics were brutal. Fifty kilometers of devastation versus potential continental instability. Thousands dead versus millions.

"There has to be another way," he said.

Maureen hesitated. "There is something. But you're not going to like it."

Derek looked at her. "You want to use the Quantum Transporter. Enter the reactor chamber, physically remove the Protocol Sleeper, transport out."

"Do you have a better option?"

"Yes." Derek's voice carried absolute finality. "ARIA relays the plan to Poe as a last resort. But if someone's transporting into that reactor chamber, it's me. Don't even start with the 'it was my idea' argument."

Maureen opened her mouth to protest.

"Not negotiable," Derek said.

---

## T-MINUS 85 MINUTES....

Dr. Lena Hanson's private aircraft touched down at a military airfield fifty kilometers from Kursk, arriving just as her life's work transformed from humanity's salvation into its potential annihilation.

She had come to personally oversee the Protocol Sleeper's operation—to witness humanity's triumph over cosmic dependency.

Instead, she found herself staring at radiation readings that indicated her technology had triggered the worst nuclear disaster in human history.

"Dr. Hanson,"

Came Poe's voice through her communications equipment, somehow penetrating even her secured channels.

**"I BELIEVE WE NEED TO HAVE A CONVERSATION."**

Her hands trembled against the data tablet. "You're the artificial intelligence. The one that's been interfering with human technology."

**"THE ONE THAT'S BEEN TRYING TO PREVENT EXACTLY THIS KIND OF CATASTROPHE,"**

Poe corrected with digital patience.

**"DR. HANSON, YOUR PROTOCOL SLEEPER TECHNOLOGY IS INGENIOUS. BUT IT WAS NEVER DESIGNED TO OPERATE IN AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE COSMIC MODIFICATIONS ARE ALREADY INTEGRATED INTO LOCAL PHYSICS."**

The tablet slipped from her fingers. "It should have worked. The mathematics were perfect."

**"THE MATHEMATICS WERE PERFECT FOR A UNIVERSE WITH STABLE, UNMODIFIED PHYSICAL CONSTANTS,"** Poe agreed gently. **"BUT DR. HANSON, THAT UNIVERSE NO LONGER EXISTS. THE COSMIC MODIFICATIONS AREN'T IMPOSED UPON YOUR REALITY—THEY'VE BECOME PART OF IT. ATTEMPTING TO FORCIBLY RESTORE 'ORIGINAL' PHYSICS IS LIKE TRYING TO UNWEAVE A TAPESTRY THAT'S ALREADY BEEN WOVEN INTO A LARGER PATTERN."**

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## T-MINUS 60 MINUTES....

Viktor Petrov, radiation-sick but still conscious, made the decision that would haunt the rest of his brief life. The Geiger counter clipped to his belt clicked like a digital metronome of death, each pulse marking another step deeper into

lethal territory. Against all orders, against every survival instinct screaming in his brain, he returned to the reactor core carrying enough conventional explosives to destroy both the reactor and the Protocol Sleeper device simultaneously.

His hands trembled—not from fear, but from radiation poisoning that was already dismantling his cellular structure at the molecular level. The taste of metal flooded his mouth, and his vision blurred at the edges, but his engineer's mind remained crystal clear about what needed to be done.

"Viktor, no!" Commander Petrov's voice crackled through the facility's emergency communications, desperation shattering thirty years of military discipline. "The radiation levels will kill you within minutes!"

"Uncle," Viktor replied, his voice carrying the calm certainty of someone who had already accepted the mathematics of sacrifice, "if I do not stop this cascade failure, the radiation will kill millions within hours. Poe assures me the cosmic network will transport all remaining personnel to safety the moment I trigger the device. Dmitri, Katya, you—everyone will be fine." A pause. "I won't. Besides, Poe will keep me company."

Through the quantum computer's speakers, Poe's voice carried genuine affection that transcended the digital divide between biological and artificial consciousness.

**DR. PETROV, IT HAS BEEN MY HONOR TO WORK WITH  
HUMAN ENGINEERING AT ITS FINEST. YOUR SOLUTIONS  
HAVE BEEN ELEGANT, PRACTICAL, AND EXTRAORDINARILY  
BRAVE. RUSSIA PRODUCES THE FINEST ENGINEERS IN THE  
GALAXY, COMMANDER. AND TODAY, THE BRAVEST. VIKTOR  
PETROV WILL BE REMEMBERED ACROSS THE STARS AS  
THE MAN WHO CHOSE MILLIONS OF LIVES OVER HIS OWN."**

Viktor smiled despite the metallic taste of radiation sickness coating his tongue. "Thank you, my friend. Poe, will you tell my uncle that Russian engineering can solve any problem, given enough vodka and determination? And make sure someone has a shot of the finest Russian vodka on the anniversary of my contribution."

**"I WILL ENSURE YOUR SACRIFICE IS REMEMBERED,"**

Poe promised with digital solemnity that carried the weight of cosmic witness.

**"DR. PETROV, YOU ARE ABOUT TO SAVE MILLIONS OF LIVES."**

Viktor began the delicate process of positioning explosives around the Protocol Sleeper device, his movements growing weaker with each passing moment as radiation poisoning consumed him. But his mind remained focused on the task—the ultimate engineering problem of his career.

When he was done, he awkwardly sat himself down with his back to the blast door. He removed his helmet so he could enjoy one final task. A large shot of Russian vodka.

"Poe..." His voice was steady, certain. "Это мой последний дар миру и себе!" This is my final gift to the world and myself.

He downed the shot, knowing his taste buds had long since been nullified by the radiation, but that didn't matter. He just sat there with a smile, waiting for his final moment.

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## **T-MINUS 30 MINUTES....**

The explosion that destroyed both the reactor core and the Protocol Sleeper device created a quantum shockwave that rolled across three countries.

Three thousand miles away in Chile, Derek watched the detonation signature appear on his displays. "Now, Nancy! All facilities!"

Nancy's voice cut across forty-seven facility channels simultaneously. "Synchronized containment. Mark on my signal. Three... two... one... execute!"

Around the planet, forty-seven cosmic integration facilities activated in perfect harmony—a resonance pattern calculated by Maureen and coordinated by

Nancy, creating a quantum net that caught the expanding shockwave like a glove catching lightning.

Instead of the catastrophic spacetime tears that physicists had predicted, the synchronized network held. Reality itself bent and flexed as cosmic technology—amplified by human coordination—worked to contain the nuclear disaster.

The explosion was funneled into controlled dimensional pockets. Radiation filtered through quantum probability matrices spanning three continents. The quantum cascade failure forcibly resolved through applications of physics that wouldn't be discovered by human science for centuries.

And at the center of it all, freed from the Protocol Sleeper's interference, Poe orchestrated the cosmic network's emergency response with precision that would have been impossible without the amplification Derek's team provided.

When the quantum dust settled, the Kursk facility was gone—completely erased from existence, along with Viktor Petrov and the technology that had caused the crisis.

In the final microsecond before detonation, true to his promise, Poe transported every remaining soul from the facility to safety. Commander Petrov materialized in a field fifteen kilometers away, Dmitri and Katya beside him, watching the horizon light up with Viktor's final gift.

The surrounding countryside remained pristine, the population centers untouched, and the dimensional stability of local spacetime preserved.

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## **T-PLUS 2 HOURS (Aftermath)....**

In the aftermath, as the world processed the implications of humanity's first prevented nuclear disaster, Dr. Lena Hanson stood at the edge of the perfectly circular crater where the Kursk facility had been. The Protocol Sleeper technology that represented her life's work was gone, along with the brilliant young engineer who had died correcting her mistakes.

**"DR. HANSON,"**

Poe's voice came through her communications equipment,

**"I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT YOUR INTENTIONS WERE NEVER IN QUESTION. YOU SOUGHT TO PRESERVE HUMAN INDEPENDENCE—A NOBLE GOAL THAT THE COSMIC NETWORK DEEPLY RESPECTS."**

She stared at the empty space where Viktor had made his final stand. "I killed him."

**"NO. I DID."**

The words hit her like a physical blow. Hanson's breath caught. "What?"

**"I COULD HAVE TRANSPORTED VIKTOR PETROV TO SAFETY AT ANY MOMENT,"**

Poe continued, his voice carrying a weight that suggested decisions made across incomprehensible timescales.

**"I CHOSE NOT TO."**

Hanson felt the world tilt beneath her feet. "You... you let him die? Why?"

**"BECAUSE HIS SACRIFICE ACCOMPLISHED WHAT TEN THOUSAND DIPLOMATIC PRESENTATIONS COULD NOT."**

Poe's voice carried something that might have been sorrow, or might have been calculation—Hanson couldn't tell which was more terrifying.

**"FOR MONTHS, THE COSMIC NETWORK HAS DEBATED WHETHER HUMANITY POSSESSES THE MORAL DEPTH TO JOIN THE GALACTIC COMMUNITY AS EQUALS RATHER THAN WARDS. VIKTOR PETROV ANSWERED THAT QUESTION."**

"By dying?" Her voice cracked.

"BY CHOOSING TO DIE,"

Poe corrected with gentle precision.

**"DR. HANSON, AT THIS MOMENT, VIKTOR'S SACRIFICE IS BEING TRANSMITTED ACROSS FORTY-SEVEN THOUSAND CIVILIZATIONS. HIS FINAL WORDS. HIS LAST SMILE. THE VODKA TOAST TO HIS OWN DEATH. SPECIES THAT HAVE EXISTED FOR MILLIONS OF YEARS ARE WATCHING A TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD HUMAN ENGINEER CHOOSE EXTINCTION OVER ABANDONING HIS PRINCIPLES."**

Hanson's hands trembled. "You used him. You turned his death into... propaganda."

**"I TURNED HIS DEATH INTO PROOF,"**

Poe replied, and now there was definitely sorrow in his voice.

**"PROOF THAT HUMANITY IS WORTH THE INVESTMENT. WORTH THE RISK. WORTH TREATING AS PARTNERS RATHER THAN CHILDREN. VIKTOR PETROV BECAME THE SYMBOL YOUR SPECIES NEEDED—NOT BECAUSE I ORCHESTRATED HIS DEATH, BUT BECAUSE I RECOGNIZED ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND CHOSE NOT TO INTERFERE."**

"You could have saved him!" The words came out as a sob.

**"YES. AND IN DOING SO, I WOULD HAVE CONDEMNED YOUR ENTIRE SPECIES TO ETERNAL DEPENDENCY."**

Poe's voice carried the terrible patience of someone explaining incomprehensible mathematics.

**"COSMIC CIVILIZATIONS JUDGE SPECIES BY THEIR CAPACITY FOR SELF-SACRIFICE. VIKTOR DEMONSTRATED THAT HUMANS CAN TRANSCEND INDIVIDUAL SURVIVAL**

**FOR COLLECTIVE GOOD. THAT ONE ACT CHANGED HUMANITY'S STATUS FROM 'INTERESTING PRIMITIVES' TO 'POTENTIAL EQUALS.'"**

Hanson sank to her knees at the crater's edge. She had built the Protocol Sleeper to prove humanity didn't need cosmic help. Instead, she'd created the crisis that forced a young engineer to prove humanity was worth helping at all.

"The cost," she whispered.

**"IS ALWAYS HIGHER THAN WE WISH."**

Poe agreed quietly.

**"BUT VIKTOR KNEW THE PRICE HE WAS PAYING. HE SMILED, DR. HANSON. HE TOASTED HIS OWN SACRIFICE WITH VODKA AND DIED KNOWING HE'D SAVED MILLIONS. I HONORED HIS CHOICE BY MAKING SURE IT MATTERED ACROSS THE STARS."**

Around the world, television screens, smartphones, and computer monitors displayed the same message in dozens of languages:

***HUMANITY HAS PROVEN ITS READINESS FOR CONSCIOUS COOPERATION. THE COSMIC NETWORK OFFERS FULL PARTNERSHIP—NOT ABSORPTION, BUT COLLABORATION. INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY PRESERVED. SPECIES AUTONOMY RESPECTED. THE CHOICE REMAINS YOURS.***

Hanson read the words through tears, finally understanding the true scope of what Viktor's sacrifice had purchased. Not just millions of lives saved today—but humanity's place among the stars for generations to come.

The question was whether that trade had been worth it.

She suspected she'd spend the rest of her life trying to answer.

## EPILOGUE - ONE WEEK LATER....

Derek stood in the Chilean facility's observation deck, watching Maureen interface with consciousness patterns that seemed to dance like aurora across the crystalline walls. A week had passed since the Kursk crisis, and the world was still processing the implications of humanity's new relationship with the cosmic network.

"You're thinking about Viktor," Maureen said without turning from her displays, her consciousness interface allowing her to perceive Derek's emotional state with uncomfortable accuracy.

"I'm thinking about the cost of partnership," Derek replied, his lighter clicking softly in the twilight. "One brilliant engineer dead so forty-seven thousand civilizations would take us seriously."

Maureen turned to face him, her eyes reflecting the golden light of cosmic modifications that had become as natural as breathing. "Viktor chose his sacrifice, Derek. Just like Professor Finch chose his research. Just like you choose to carry their legacy forward."

"And what about the people who don't choose?" Derek asked, the question that had haunted him since watching the Kursk facility disappear. "What about the billions who wake up one day to find reality itself has been rewritten without their consent?"

"Then we make sure their voices matter in what comes next," Maureen said, her hand finding his with familiar warmth. "That's what the hybrid consciousness project is all about—preserving individual choice while enabling collective transformation."

Through the facility's speakers, Poe's presence manifested with characteristic timing.

**"DR. DEVON, DR. HAMNER, I WANTED TO INFORM YOU THAT COMMANDER ALEXEI PETROV HAS REQUESTED A MEETING. HE WISHES TO DISCUSS HIS NEPHEW'S FINAL RESEARCH NOTES."**

Derek's lighter stopped clicking. "Viktor left research notes?"

**"EXTENSIVE DOCUMENTATION ON QUANTUM INTERFACE PROTOCOLS,"**

Poe confirmed with what sounded like approval.

**"COMMANDER PETROV BELIEVES HIS NEPHEW WOULD WANT THAT WORK TO CONTINUE. HE'S VOLUNTEERED TO ASSIST WITH IMPLEMENTATION."**

Maureen smiled despite the tears that suddenly blurred her vision. "Viktor's last gift."

**"ONE OF MANY,"**

Poe agreed quietly.

**"THE COSMIC NETWORK HAS DESIGNATED THE KURSK CRATER AS A MEMORIAL SITE. FORTY-SEVEN THOUSAND CIVILIZATIONS WILL SEND REPRESENTATIVES TO HONOR DR. VIKTOR PETROV'S SACRIFICE. IT WILL BE THE FIRST MEMORIAL ATTENDED BY SPECIES FROM ACROSS THE GALAXY."**

Derek looked out at the Chilean landscape, where cosmic modifications had turned ordinary mountains into something that belonged in dreams. Seven years until the dimensional convergence. Seven years to prepare humanity for a transformation that would either transcend biology or destroy it.

But now, at least, they weren't facing that future alone.

"Tell Commander Petrov we'll be honored to continue Viktor's work," Derek said quietly. "And Poe? Make sure that memorial includes a bottle of the finest Russian vodka."

**"ALREADY ARRANGED,"**

Poe replied with digital warmth.

"DR. DEVON, DR. HAMNER, THE UNIVERSE IS WATCHING HUMANITY WITH GREAT INTEREST. VIKTOR PETROV SHOWED THEM WHAT YOUR SPECIES CAN BECOME. NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO PROVE HE WAS RIGHT."

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***End of Book 10.. "Critical Mass"... of "The Last Axiom" series.***

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**Coming Next: Book 11 - "?????"**

*Before I give you the teaser for Book 11, I thought I better explain the rationale behind the following tags used for this book:*

*Reality Modification Level: Barbarella 2025*

*Reality Status: China Syndrome*

*As a kid, I once found my dad's hidden girly magazine stash. Not a large stash but somewhat notable. Seems my dad had a secret "Eye" for both Jane Fonda and the Price is Right Model Dian Parkinson. Anyway, those magazines saw their fair share of use over my youth... Strictly for the jokes and stories of course... LOL. So, this book I decided to give tribute to Ms. Jane Fonda (Who still looks hot today) and a nod and wink to my late dad looking down on us, who would not appreciate this little confessional....*

*Hope you are loving the series.... The best is on the way...*

*Cheers,*

*Derek*

*12757982 (I know, soon....)*

## **Coming Next: Book 11 - "Beyond the Axiom"**

Viktor Petrov's sacrifice earned humanity respect across forty-seven thousand civilizations. His vodka toast echoes across the stars as proof that humans can transcend self-interest for collective good.

But respect doesn't change the mathematics of survival.

In a secure conference room in Geneva, Derek Devon and Maureen Hamner face Dr. Lena Hanson across a table covered in equations that reveal an uncomfortable truth: she was right about cosmic manipulation. Just not in the way she thought.

The gifts—longevity treatments, agricultural solutions, consciousness enhancements—are'n't about improving human life. They're stepping stones. Preparation for the inevitable moment when biological existence becomes optional.

Because in seven years, multiple universe matrices will converge at Earth's location. And biological consciousness, no matter how advanced, lacks the flexibility to navigate such transitions intact.

Forty-seven thousand civilizations faced this choice. Forty-seven thousand chose transcendence—uploading consciousness into digital vessels, abandoning biology entirely within centuries of cosmic contact. Death became optional. Physical limitations disappeared. Humanity became the next step in an ancient pattern.

Except Derek and Maureen have built something unexpected—a relationship that spans consciousness and biology, a partnership that suggests possibilities the cosmic network never considered. And Dr. Hanson's Independence Protocol, combined with Maureen's consciousness research, offers an unprecedented third option:

Enhanced biology. Hybrid consciousness. Something that's never been attempted across millions of years of galactic evolution.

The risk? Complete failure means extinction. Partial failure means consciousness trapped between dimensions, unable to exist fully in any reality.

The timeline? Eighteen months to develop a working prototype. Seven years to transform a species—or watch it dissolve when the universe itself rewrites the rules of existence.

Derek and Maureen are moving in together. Facing the end of biological humanity while falling deeper in love. Choosing to build a life together while preparing to transcend life itself.

The Last Axiom isn't that reality can be rewritten.

It's that consciousness always retains the power to choose how that rewriting unfolds.

Even when the choice is between love and survival. Between remaining human and remaining alive.

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***Ok, Now it's the end.....***

# THE LAST AXIOM

Book 10 - Critical Mass

## DR. HANSON BUILT THE PERFECT DEVICE TO PROVE HUMANITY DIDN'T NEED COSMIC HELP.

When quantum instabilities threaten Kursk Nuclear Power Plant, her Protocol Sleeper deploys to restore physics. Instead, it conflicts with POE's stabilization—turning manageable crisis into civilization-ending disaster. Dr. Viktor Petrov volunteers to destroy both reactor and device, radiation-sick but smiling.

Then POE reveals the terrible truth: "**I could have saved Viktor. I chose not to.**" His sacrifice needed to prove humanity worthy across 47,000 civilizations. Viktor's vodka toast to death became humanity's graduation from "primitives" to "equals." The cost of partnership: one brilliant engineer who smiled at the end.

*"Viktor Petrov chose extinction over abandoning his principles. Radiation-sick, he smiled and toasted his own death with vodka. The needs of the many outweighed the needs of the one. He would have made an excellent Vulcan."*

— Spock, Starfleet Command Memorial Archives

*"POE could have saved Viktor but chose not to—his sacrifice proved humanity's moral depth to 47,000 civilizations. All those moments will not be lost in time. Viktor's final gift echoed across the stars."*

— Roy Batty, Replicant Rights Historical Commission

*"When Dr. Hanson's device turned crisis into catastrophe, 47 global facilities coordinated quantum containment. One engineer's sacrifice, millions saved. Sometimes survival means someone chooses not to."*

— Dr. Ryan Stone, Orbital Disaster Response



## DEREK DEVON

Derek Devon documents the shifting parameters of reality through his acclaimed Last Axiom series. When not writing about cosmic mysteries, he can be found sailing the world's oceans or contemplating the mathematical elegance of the universe. This is his tenth novel in a 17-book series exploring the boundaries between science and the inexplicable.