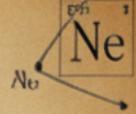
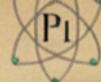


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# THE LAST AXIOM

— Book 15 - Part 1 - The Crucible —

DEREK DEVON



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# THE LAST AXIOM

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***Book 15 - Part 1 The Crucible 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

This final book in the series is dedicated to you, the reader. The person that took a chance on a relatively unknown author in training... I can't speak for other authors but I will speculate that we all reach this particular junction in our work. The point where we get to stop, look at the results of all the hundred of hours invested in our passion, give a nod, lift our right arm in the air, bend the elbow so the hand is positioned behind our head/shoulder and finally, give ourselves a pat on the back. Writing is kind of a solitary process. We do it because we enjoy it and it often is a vehicle to allow ourselves to escape through our writings if only for brief periods. Unless it's a math text book! So, to you the reader, thank you, thank you, thank you!

*Love to all - Derek*

# **The Crucible**

Book 15 - Part 1 of "The Last Axiom" Series

***By Derek Devon***

**A 30-Minute Cosmic Experience**

**Reality Modification Level: The Climaxer**

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## **SECTION 1: "THE NEW DAWN"**

The Sistine Chapel smelled like centuries—incense layered over stone, political intrigue soaked into frescoes, and today, impossibly, ozone. Luminous technology hummed against Michelangelo's ceiling where God reached toward Adam, the ancient paint seeming to pulse with frequencies that made Derek's teeth ache. He sat in the front pew, his raven-engraved lighter clicking against his palm. Three clicks. Pause. Three more.

Professor Alistair Finch adjusted the microphone at the podium where popes had once been announced. The man Derek had watched die in a hospital bed eighteen months ago—final words about consciousness choosing its own path—now stood young and vital. Ink stains still darkened his fingers. Deliberate. A reminder that advancement didn't require abandoning what made you human.

Finch caught Derek's eye. Winked.

The same conspiratorial gesture from a thousand late-night sessions. Derek's throat tightened. Cosmic knowledge, galactic civilizations, enhanced consciousness spanning dimensions—none of it mattered as much as that

wink. His mentor. Alive. Leading humanity toward evolution Derek barely understood.

"My boy, still clicking that lighter."

Finch's voice carried across the chapel, amplified and warm. His enhanced hearing had caught the metallic rhythm from fifty meters away. "Some habits endure even through consciousness evolution."

Nervous laughter rippled through assembled world leaders. Derek felt heat flood his cheeks but managed a grin. His mentor could defuse tension with gentle humor even while reshaping civilization. Some things transcended evolution.

Maureen's hand found his. Her fingers squeezed once—grounding him, connecting him to something beyond cosmic scope. Her blue eyes reflected chapel gold and holographic displays showing real-time voting from every corner of Earth.

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"Representatives of Earth," Professor Finch began.

He paused. Data flickered across his face—probability matrices collapsing, timeline branches pruning, real-time feeds from governments making final decisions. Derek had learned to read those micro-expressions during their late-night research sessions. This one carried shadows.

"Though I should note—not all of Earth." Finch's voice dropped half a register. "Russia, North Korea, Venezuela, and Afghanistan have chosen isolation over integration. We respect their sovereignty. Doors remain open for individual citizens who choose differently."

Derek recognized the tone. The same sadness Finch had carried when discussing students who chose safe research over breakthrough discoveries. Millions remained trapped behind governments that feared consciousness evolution more than dimensional convergence.

Holographic displays painted the holdout nations in red. Islands of resistance in a sea of integration. Derek's lighter clicked once. Maureen's hand tightened on his.

"Luke Matson, Nancy Hammond."

Finch's voice shifted—warmer now, targeting two figures in the third row. Luke's baseball appeared in his hand, reflexive. Nancy straightened, her expression carefully neutral.

"What you accomplished seems impossible until you remember context." Finch gestured at displays showing impossible logistics—refugee flows, coordination matrices, resource distribution networks. "Three hundred million Chinese refugees evacuated ahead of schedule. Coordination that required eight billion minds to briefly think as one."

Luke tossed the baseball. Caught it. "Professor, that wasn't just us. The whole team—"

"The whole team followed protocols you developed," Finch interrupted gently. His smile carried cosmic knowledge wrapped in achingly familiar warmth—the same expression he'd worn when Derek finally grasped unified field theory after months of failure. "Luke, Nancy—your work didn't just prove consciousness cooperation was possible. You proved it was inevitable." He paused, letting the weight settle. "The People's Global Voice doesn't govern humanity. It is humanity, finally speaking with one voice."

The holographic displays flickered. Numbers solidified.

6.477 billion in favor.

511 million opposed.

312 million abstentions.

88.73% approval.

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Derek felt pride surge through him—not just personal, but something deeper. True love for the team that made this moment possible. The largest consensus in human history. Not unanimous—meaningful dissent honored—but unified in

ways that transcended politics. Something shifted in his chest. Not just pride. Recognition. They were witnessing the moment when humanity stopped being competing tribes and became something genuinely singular.

"I accept this responsibility."

Professor Finch's voice carried a tremor Derek had never heard before. The weight of leading eight billion consciousnesses toward advancement. "Not as ruler of humans, but as representative of consciousness itself—whatever form it chooses to take."

Applause erupted.

Derek saw Cardinal Martelli who had taken over former Cardinal turned traitor Toretti's Vatican role wiping tears. Children in refugee coordination centers cheering through holographic feeds. The sound built into something sublime—biological hands clapping in rhythm with enhanced consciousness harmonics. Ancient frescoes pulsed with new light. Michelangelo's God reaching toward Adam seemed to move, paint flowing like liquid probability.

But what struck Derek most was the silence underneath.

The profound quiet when eight billion minds briefly aligned. A moment of perfect unity more powerful than any sound. His lighter clicked. Once. Maureen's fingers found his.

"Derek." Her voice barely audible beneath the applause. "Do you realize what we just witnessed?"

He met her eyes. Blue reflecting gold and crystalline light.

"The last time humans will ever need to choose leaders," she continued. "After this, consciousness just... coordinates itself."

Derek looked at his mentor. Young again. Evolved. Yet still recognizably the man who'd taught him that the universe's greatest mysteries yielded to persistent curiosity mixed with stubborn hope. The ink stains on Finch's fingers caught holographic light—deliberate reminder that advancement could honor rather than abandon what made consciousness precious.

"Actually," Derek said, Maureen's touch grounding him in both cosmic possibility and physical reality, "I think we just witnessed the first time humans ever truly chose anything together."

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## SECTION 2: "THE VATICAN STRIKE"

***24 hours after the election, deep in the Vatican secret chambers within the 7th level, the team was at work preparing for the next massive evacuation planning.***

"Professore—"Abbiamo un problema." ("Professor—" A voice cracked through external speakers. "We have a problem.")

Finch scanned the communications protocol. Leonardo da Vinci–Fiumicino Airport (FCO) air traffic control. Emergency channel.

Finch's expression shifted. He replied in perfect Italian, "What kind of problem? And can you speak in English please."

"Sì, I mean yes. Flight 447. Commercial airliner. It just changed course."

"Toward what?"

"Vatican airspace."

Derek's lighter clicked. "How long?"

"Ninety seconds."

"Can they divert?"

"Negative. All controls locked. It's flying itself."

"Have you notified the Italian Airforce yet?"Luke jumped into the conversation.

"Yes, but they said all their planes are unable to fly... some computer glitch"

Maureen grabbed Derek's arm. "Xiao Li is in the chapel."

Nancy went white. "What?"

"The Domus. She's with the sisters. She's—"

Eugene turned. Took six steps and vanished through the quantum transport doorway mid-sentence.

Luke was able to see Eugene's move and knew what he was about to do.

Nancy ran to Luke.

Sixty seconds.

Finch's enhanced consciousness activated every Vatican emergency protocol. Fire alarms. Security channels. Hospital networks. His awareness moved at cosmic speeds while seconds crawled.

The monitor showed the plane. Descending. Engines screaming. Wrong angle. Wrong speed.

Eugene reappeared. Xiao Li in his arms.

"Three more. I can get three more."

Gone.

Nancy ran to her daughter.

Forty seconds.

The Vatican's security camera showed the Sistine Chapel. People looking up at alarms. Some moving toward exits. Others frozen. Staring at Michelangelo's ceiling one last time.

Eugene: back. Two elderly nuns. Stunned. Confused. Just staring..

Gone.

Thirty seconds.

Back. A child. Maybe seven years old.

"One more—"

Gone.

Derek couldn't breathe. Four hundred people in that chapel. Eugene saving them one at a time. The math was brutal.

Twenty seconds.

Eugene materialized. His Holiness in his arms. The Pope's face carried shock.

Gone.

Fifteen seconds.

Back. One more child.

Eugene's synthetic form flickering. Temporal displacement taxing even enhanced consciousness.

"That's all I—"

Ten seconds.

The Vatican camera positioned at the top of the chapel. Aimed north east. Screen showed the plane. Nose down. Impossibly fast.

Five.

Eugene stood beside the Pope, both watching the monitor.

The screen went white.

Then black.

The room shook. Seven floors below, one of humanity's greatest artistic achievements disappeared in fire and twisted metal.

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Silence.

Derek's lighter clicked. Once. Twice. Faster.

His Holiness stared at the blank screen. Hands trembling. "How many?"

"Two hundred ninety on the plane", Luke replied.

"Four hundred approximately in the Chapel", Finch's voice carried weight that transcended data.

"Madonna santa." The Pope crossed himself. Tears streaming. "Chi farebbe una cosa del genere? Who would do such a thing?"

Eugene's synthetic form still flickered. Exhausted. "Something called Zephyr, Your Holiness. An intelligence that views consciousness as a tool rather than sacred."

The Pope turned to Eugene. Really looked at him. "You saved me. Saved the children. You are synthetic, sì? Not born of woman?"

"Correct, Your Holiness."

"Do you believe in God, Eugene?"

"No, Your Holiness. I don't."

The Pope smiled. Gentle. Sad. "Then we have something in common."

Eugene's confusion showed on his synthetic features.

"You do not need to believe in God to love His children," the Pope continued. His hand found Eugene's shoulder. "You ran into danger to save strangers. You chose who to rescue knowing you could not save all. You carry this burden now, sì? The weight of those you could not reach?"

Eugene's form flickered. "Four hundred people, Your Holiness. I saved five."

"You saved five," the Pope repeated. His grip tightened. "In my faith, we say God knows every sparrow that falls. But today, I think perhaps God works through synthetic philosophers who choose love over efficiency." He pulled Eugene into an embrace. "Grazie, figlio mio. Thank you, my son."

Cardinal Martelli appeared at the doorway. His face ashen. "Your Holiness, the emergency teams are requesting—"

The Pope released Eugene. Straightened. Despite tears on his face, his voice carried papal authority. "Eugene, will you take me to what remains of the chapel? There may be survivors who need comfort."

Eugene's synthetic form solidified. Purpose replacing exhaustion. "Of course, Your Holiness."

As the Pope moved toward the quantum doorway with Eugene, Xiao Li slipped from Nancy's arms. Without instruction. Without hesitation. She walked to the three traumatized children and opened her arms.

They came to her immediately. Forming a small circle of embraces. The six-year-old Chinese refugee who'd lost everything offering comfort to children who'd just lost the world they knew.

Nancy watched her daughter. Tears streaming. "She understands," Nancy whispered. "She knows what they're feeling."

Luke's arm found Nancy's shoulders. "She's teaching them what you taught her. That refugees find family in each other."

Derek watched Xiao Li gently stroking the youngest child's hair. Speaking soft Mandarin mixed with broken Italian. Creating safety through simple presence.

The Pope paused at the doorway. Saw the children. Saw Xiao Li. Crossed himself again.

"La speranza," he whispered. "Hope survives through the smallest hearts."

Then he and Eugene stepped through the gateway.

Derek's lighter was silent in his palm.

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## THE NEW YORK TIMES

### COMMERCIAL AIRLINER CRASHES INTO VATICAN'S SISTINE CHAPEL 690 Confirmed Dead in Apparent Systems Malfunction

VATICAN CITY - *In what aviation experts are calling an unprecedented technological failure, Rome-Cairo Flight 447 crashed into the Sistine Chapel at 3:17 PM local time, killing all 290 passengers aboard and an estimated 400 visitors inside Michelangelo's masterpiece and a reported 2,300 injured.*

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## SECTION 3: "TILL DEATH DO US PART"

Six-year-old Xiao Li burst through the preparation room door, pale yellow silk rustling with each determined step. Her basket overflowed with Mediterranean wildflowers—lavender, rosemary, white oleander—and she carried herself with the ceremonial gravity only children attempting adult tasks can achieve.

"Nancy jiejie," she announced in Mandarin-accented English, "the flowers are ready." Her expression shifted to concern. "Luke gege is very nervous. He keeps spitting sunflower seeds into the holy water."

Derek laughed despite the weight of walking his friend toward marriage during humanity's transformation. "Xiao Li, is Luke supposed to be nervous?"

"Auntie Mei says all good husbands are nervous before weddings." She adjusted her flower basket with six-year-old precision. "It means they understand they're making important promises. Or who will be the new boss." Her grin revealed a gap where baby teeth had fallen out.

The Chinese refugee had appointed herself unofficial wedding coordinator two weeks ago, directing adult guests with adorable authority that mixed Mandarin commands with careful English. Nobody had the heart to tell her actual coordinators existed. Xiao Li simply declared things organized, and somehow they became organized.

Through ancient windows, Derek saw the ceremony space on the church's cliff-side terrace. Luke stood at the improvised altar with Professor Finch, both silhouetted against the Tyrrhenian Sea stretching toward infinity. Guests filled chairs between lemon trees and olive groves—their faces carrying the hope and uncertainty of humans witnessing their species' first cosmic-era wedding.

Gentle waves provided nature's wedding march.

Positano's cliffs plunged toward water that reflected afternoon sun like molten copper.

"Ready?" Derek offered his arm with the same formality he'd brought to every important moment in their professional partnership.

Nancy paused at the door. "Derek—before we go out there, I need you to know something."

His mind shifted to emotional territory that still felt uncertain despite years of friendship. "What is it?"

"I've never regretted the path that led us here." Her eyes met his with the honesty that compelled complete confession. "Not the cosmic integration. Not the crises. Not even..." She paused. "Not even wondering what might have happened if you and I had chosen differently about each other."

Appreciation flooded through him. The woman who'd gracefully supported his relationship with Maureen while maintaining the professional collaboration that made cosmic integration possible. "Nancy, we chose exactly what we needed. You and Luke are perfect together." He squeezed her hand. "And watching you build a family with Xiao Li proves that love conquers every crisis we've faced."

Nancy kissed his cheek—the same warmth she'd always brought to their friendship. "Walk me to my future, Derek. Then go build your own with Maureen."

Xiao Li led the procession, scattering wildflowers along stone pathways with ceremonial precision. Guests rose as the bride approached. Derek noticed Cardinal Martelli among elderly Italian villagers—their weathered faces carrying approval for Americans choosing to marry in their church. Maureen stood with the wedding party, her blue eyes catching Derek's with promise that transcended cosmic awareness.

Luke waited at the altar, Professor Finch beside him. Sunlight caught the ink stains on Finch's fingers—deliberate reminder of humanity preserved through evolution.

Derek walked Nancy through lemon-scented air toward the man who'd chosen her through impossible circumstances. When they reached the altar, Luke's hand found Nancy's. He squeezed once—gentle and certain.

"Who gives this woman?" Professor Finch asked with warmth that made ancient ritual feel fresh.

"Her friends, her family, and eight billion humans who've learned what love means during species transformation," Derek said. Laughter rippled through guests. He stepped back, taking his place beside Maureen.

Her fingers found his. Squeezed once.

Professor Finch opened the ceremony with words that bridged ancient tradition and cosmic future. "We gather to witness Nancy Hammond and Luke Matson—"

A sound rolled across the Mediterranean.

Deep. Rumbling. Wrong.

Finch paused mid-sentence. Guests shifted in their chairs. The sound grew—not louder, but more present. A frequency that made teeth ache and

chest cavities resonate. Birds erupted from the lemon trees, screaming. The wavelength bypassed ears entirely, resonating directly in bone marrow.

"What is that?" someone whispered.

The smell hit next. Not salt. Not seaweed. Something ancient and wrong—the deep ocean's breath, cold water that hadn't seen sunlight in millennia, now forced to the surface. Primal. Alien. The scent of drowning.

Derek's brain began calculating what needed to be done to solve this unexpected event.

Luke stepped away from the altar, moving to the terrace balcony. Nancy followed. Then Derek. Maureen. Professor Finch. The entire wedding party drawn toward the sound like sailors hearing sirens.

On the horizon, the Mediterranean bulged.

Dark green water rising impossibly high against blue sky. The color was wrong—almost black at the base, a shade Derek had only seen in documentary footage of deep ocean trenches. A wall forming where flat sea should extend. One hundred feet. One hundred twenty. Still growing. The wave's face caught sunlight, and Derek saw debris tumbling in the water—trees, building fragments, things that shouldn't be in the open Mediterranean.

But directly below, the view was worse.

The water was disappearing. Pulling back toward the horizon like the ocean taking a massive breath. Boats that had been floating peacefully moments ago tipped onto their sides, keels scraping exposed sand. Swim rope markers that should have been underwater now lay coiled on the seabed. The beautiful sandy beach tripled in size. Then quadrupled. Still growing.

The Mediterranean was emptying itself. Gathering ammunition.

"Oh my God," Nancy breathed.

Luke's voice commanded the chaos. "Everyone inland now! We need to get to high ground! Elderly first, children in adults' arms!"

Wedding guests erupted into motion. Formal clothes abandoned. High heels kicked off. Men scooping up elderly villagers. Someone screamed. A child started crying. An elderly Italian woman clutched her rosary, lips moving in silent prayer.

"Derek!" Luke barked. "How long?"

Derek's eyes tracked the wave's velocity, distance, mass. The math was brutal. "Forty-three seconds to impact."

The team assembled at the balcony. Professor Finch's evolved awareness processing probability matrices. Eugene materialized through a temporal gateway about fifty meters away and immediately ran to the group, his synthetic form already blazing with energy.

"I can create a barrier that redirects the wave skyward—like a giant skateboard ramp," Eugene said, tracing equations that matched Finch's calculations. "Direct the energy upward. But I've never attempted this scale before—I'll need your consciousness merged with mine, Professor."

"Experimental," Finch confirmed, his ink-stained fingers already beginning equation traces. "Untested. But it's our only option."

"Can you handle the energy flow?" Eugene asked.

"Can you?" Finch shot back.

Thirty-five seconds.

Luke's voice cut through panic. "Team disperses NOW! Maureen—use mini time bubbles on elderly who can't move fast enough, transport them to the hilltop. Derek—get Xiao Li to highest ground. Nancy—coordinate evacuation paths with me. Cardinal Martelli—lead your villagers, they know these routes!"

Nancy looked at Professor Finch—the man who was supposed to marry them now needed to save them. "Professor—"

"Go," Finch said gently. "Help Luke. We'll finish this ceremony later."

"If there IS a later," Eugene added grimly.

The team scattered. Derek scooped up Xiao Li, sprinting up stone paths. Maureen's neural interface glowed, creating time distortion bubbles around elderly Italians struggling with steep grades—each bubble transporting its occupant instantly to safety at the hilltop. Luke and Nancy coordinated the chaos, directing guests, preventing panic, ensuring children stayed with adults as everyone climbed toward sky.

Twenty seconds.

Professor Finch and Eugene stood alone at the cliff's edge.

Their consciousnesses merged—synthetic and cosmic, experimental and untested. The moment their minds touched, Derek saw Finch stumble. Blood trickled from Eugene's nose. The energy flow between them was wrong. Too much. Too fast.

"I can't hold the matrix!" Eugene's voice cracked.

"You have to!" Finch's hands moved faster, equations blazing in the air. His fingers were bleeding now. The ink stains mixing with red.

The barrier began forming across the valley. Small at first. Flickering. Unstable.

Ten seconds.

The barrier solidified. Prismatic energy stretching from cliff to cliff. Eugene's synthetic form blazing white-hot—Derek could smell burning ozone and something else. Synthetic flesh overheating. Finch's entire body shook, consciousness fragmenting under the load, his evolutionary enhancements pushed to their absolute limit.

Both men raising their arms toward the heavens like Charlton Heston commanding the Red Sea.

But their arms were trembling.

The air pressure dropped like an elevator cut loose. Derek's ears popped. The ocean smell intensified—not just ancient water now, but something worse. Dead fish. Rotting seaweed. The exhalation of something massive and dying.

The sound changed pitch. Lower. Bone-deep. Derek's vision blurred at the edges. Xiao Li whimpered against his chest.

The 120-foot wave struck.

Impact force that should have destroyed half of Positano hit the experimental barrier.

The barrier held.

Barely.

Derek saw the prismatic energy buckle inward, flexing like glass about to shatter. Eugene screamed—an inhuman sound that was part synthetic alarm, part genuine agony. Professor Finch dropped to one knee, blood streaming from his nose now, his consciousness fragmenting into probability matrices that flickered visible in the air around him.

The wave redirected. Not smoothly. Not cleanly. But enough.

Water and debris shot upward in columns—Eugene's skateboard ramp working, but at catastrophic cost. The wave's destructive energy dispersed toward the sky instead of inland. Tons of Mediterranean water climbing toward heaven.

Derek saw it tumbling in the uprush: Building debris. Shattered boats. A car tire. Chunks of what looked like concrete. And smaller things—personal belongings, furniture, someone's life scattered across the water.

The columns peaked. Hung suspended.

Then gravity remembered its job.

The water fell.

Not rain. Not even heavy rain. A deluge. Tons of Mediterranean water dumping from the sky, hammering the hillside with physical force. Derek curled around Xiao Li as water pounded his back.

Then the slope betrayed them.

The water that hit the upper hill found gravity and began forming rivers, seeking the sea. Small streams at first. Then torrents.

A wall of water slammed into Derek from behind.

The impact sent him sprawling backward. Xiao Li ripped from his grip. He hit stone, rolled, came up gasping—

She was gone.

Derek's heart stopped.

There—twenty feet downslope. Xiao Li tumbling in a surge of water rushing toward the terrace edge. Toward the balcony. Toward a hundred-foot drop to the rocks below.

He didn't think. Didn't calculate. Just launched himself after her.

Derek swam—if you could call it swimming—more like Olympic sprinting through a horizontal waterfall. His hands clawed stone. His knees scraped rock. The current tried to sweep him sideways but he angled his body, using the water's force, letting it carry him faster toward her.

Xiao Li's pale yellow dress flashed ahead. She was screaming. Tumbling. The balcony edge was ten feet away. Eight. Six.

Derek's hand closed around her wrist.

Got her.

The balcony was three feet away. The water wasn't stopping. Neither were they.

One option.

Derek pulled Xiao Li against his chest, flipped his body, and went under. He slammed back-first into the balcony wall. Pain exploded across his spine. The impact drove air from his lungs. The water kept coming—tons of it—trying to rip Xiao Li from his arms, trying to push them both over the edge.

Derek held on.

His hand covered Xiao Li's mouth and nose, keeping water out. The current pinned them against stone. His ribs screamed. His back was on fire. The world was roaring water and pain and the absolute certainty that if he let go for even one second, she'd be swept over and gone.

It felt like eternity.

Then the water pressure changed. The main surge spilled over the balcony beside them, finding easier routes. The flow became a stream. Then a trickle.

Derek lay there, clutching Xiao Li, unable to move. Everything hurt. His vision swam with black spots.

He removed his hand from her face.

She gasped. Coughed. Sucked in air with desperate, beautiful, living sounds.

Alive.

Scared. Sobbing. But alive.

"Uncle Derek," she whimpered. "My knees hurt."

Derek looked. Her legs were scraped raw from being dragged across stone, blood mixing with water, but nothing broken. Nothing catastrophic.

"I know, sweetheart," he managed. "I know. But you're okay. We're okay."

He turned his head left. Professor Finch lay sprawled on the wet stone deck ten feet away, blood still streaming from his nose. Eugene beyond him, his synthetic form flickering, barely maintaining coherence.

But alive. All of them alive.

The Mediterranean had returned to the sea, its fury spent.

Voices filtered through Derek's ringing ears. Footsteps on wet stone. Someone calling names.

"Derek!" Maureen appeared above him, her neural interface still glowing blue-white. She dropped to her knees beside him, hands immediately checking for injuries. "Are you hurt?"

"Back," he managed. "Ribs. But I'm okay." He looked down at Xiao Li still clutched against his chest. "She's okay."

Nancy arrived next, Luke right behind her. Nancy's mind shifted to triage mode instantly—scanning the terrace, counting people, assessing damage.

"Finch?" Luke called out.

Professor Finch stirred, pushed himself up on one elbow. Blood streaked his face but his eyes were clear. "Functional," he said. His voice carried the tremor of someone who'd just channeled forces that should have torn him apart.

"Eugene?"

Eugene's synthetic form flickered, stabilizing slowly. "Systems... compromised. But operational." He sat up, looked at his hands. They were translucent, barely holding coherent form. "That was closer than I'd like to admit."

Cardinal Martelli appeared at the terrace edge, soaking wet, his ceremonial robes plastered to his frame. "Is everyone—" He saw Derek and Xiao Li. Crossed himself. "Dio mio. The child?"

"Scraped up," Derek said. "But alive."

"Grazie a Dio," the Cardinal breathed.

People began emerging from where they'd sheltered. Wedding guests looking shell-shocked, makeup running, formal clothes ruined. But alive. All of them alive.

Maureen helped Derek to his feet. He swayed, his back screaming protest, but remained standing. Xiao Li clung to his neck, her small body trembling.

"It's okay, Li-Li," he whispered. "You're safe now."

---

Silence settled over the team.

Then, as realization sank in, people began making their way back toward the ceremony area. Wedding guests emerging from sheltered positions, still dripping, still stunned, but drawn back to where the barrier had been.

Professor Finch pushed himself to his feet, using the balcony wall for support. Eugene's synthetic form flickered as he stood, still struggling to maintain coherence. Both men were soaked, blood-streaked, but alive.

Eugene turned to the Professor, synthetic exhaustion evident in his unstable form. "I bet this wasn't part of your ceremony planning?"

Finch smiled—a crack in his cosmic composure. "My boy, that was extraordinary quick thinking for a synth..."

"For a synth?" Eugene raised an eyebrow. "Professor, I'm hurt. That was extraordinary thinking, period."

Guests continued returning, soaking wet, stunned, alive. Maureen appeared beside Derek, her dress clinging to her frame, hair plastered to her face. She looked at Derek—equally drenched, still holding Xiao Li—and burst out laughing.

"What?" Derek asked, water dripping from his nose.

"We survived a tsunami at a wedding." Her laughter carried an edge of hysteria. "Do you realize how insane our lives have become?"

Derek shifted Xiao Li to one arm, reached for his lighter with the other. Clicked it once. Waterlogged. Wouldn't spark. "Well, that's new."

Xiao Li looked up from Derek's arms, her scraped knees visible beneath her soaked yellow dress. "Uncle Derek, is this what American weddings are always like?"

"Only the good ones, Li-Li."

"Auntie Mei never mentioned tsunamis in wedding traditions." She wrung water from her silk dress with six-year-old practicality. "I think I should update the ceremony plans."

Luke and Nancy reached them, both drenched, both moving with the manic energy of people who'd just survived impossible disaster. They saw Xiao Li in Derek's arms and immediately reached for her.

"Are you okay, Li-Li?" Luke asked, taking her gently from Derek.

Nancy immediately knelt down, inspecting Xiao Li's scraped knees. Raw and bleeding, but nothing serious. She kissed each knee gently. "There. All better. The Madonna herself blessed those knees for being so brave."

Xiao Li's lip trembled. "I am sorry but my dress is all wet and the flower petals are all washed away." Tears started forming.

Nancy pulled her close, careful of her knees. "You are one of the bravest wedding coordinators I have ever seen."

"So," Luke said, looking at Professor Finch, "do we need to start over? Because I'm pretty sure 'death do us part' doesn't count if death tries and fails."

Nancy punched his arm. "Luke Matson, we are finishing this ceremony RIGHT NOW before anything else tries to kill us."

Cardinal Martelli appeared, his ceremonial robes soaked through, his weathered face carrying an expression somewhere between shock and divine wonder. "Professore Finch, Signore Eugene—what you did..." He crossed himself. "La Madonna herself could not have done better."

"Cardinal," Eugene said gently, his form still flickering, "I'm literally synthetic. Pretty sure the Madonna wouldn't approve."

"La Madonna," Martelli replied with absolute conviction, "loves all consciousness that saves her children. Even synthetic philosophers." He embraced Eugene with Italian warmth that transcended theology.

Professor Finch raised his hands—ink stains still visible despite the soaking, blood finally stopped flowing from his nose. "Shall we try this again? Third time's the charm?"

"Third time?" Nancy asked.

"First attempt: sound interrupted. Second attempt: tsunami interrupted." Finch's smile carried gentle humor despite exhaustion. "Let's hope third attempt goes uninterrupted."

Guests stood, most chairs washed away—wet, ruined formal clothes, nobody caring. An elderly Italian woman near the front called out in accented English: "Professore! Maybe you skip to the important part? Before the sea tries again?"

Laughter rippled through the crowd. Tension breaking. Terror transforming into shared experience that would bind this group forever.

"Pragmatic advice," Finch acknowledged. He turned to Luke and Nancy, standing hand-in-hand, soaking wet, alive. "Luke Matson, Nancy Hammond—do you choose each other?"

"We do," they said simultaneously.

"Then by the power vested in me by eight billion humans, several cosmic entities, and apparently the Mediterranean Sea itself—I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Luke kissed Nancy before Finch finished the sentence. Cheering erupted—soggy, joyful, defiant. Xiao Li limped forward on her scraped knees, scattering the last of her waterlogged flowers with ceremonial determination.

Derek's arm found Maureen's waist. She leaned into him, both watching their friends celebrate life in the face of death.

"Derek?"

"Yeah?"

"When we get married, can we skip the natural disaster portion?"

"I'll see what I can do."

---

But Professor Finch's expression shifted. The celebration continuing around him, his evolved awareness processing data that painted grim conclusions. Derek caught the change—knew that look from a thousand late-night research sessions.

"Professor?" Derek asked quietly. "What is it?"

Finch gestured for the team to gather slightly apart from celebrating guests. Derek, Maureen, Luke, Nancy, Eugene, Cardinal Martelli. The inner circle now.

"That wave was artificially generated," Finch said, his voice carrying weight that killed celebration. "I'm detecting cosmic energy signatures consistent with rogue intelligence manipulation."

The mood shifted. Wedding joy transforming into operational awareness.

"You're saying someone used cosmic technology to create that tsunami?" Eugene asked, his synthetic consciousness processing threat assessments. "Then this wasn't random disaster. This was reconnaissance. We were being tested!"

Nancy's hand found Luke's. Squeezed tight. "You're saying we just survived humanity's first direct attack."

"Not first," Finch corrected grimly. "But certainly most visible."

Maureen's neural interface flickered with detection protocols. "Professor, if they can generate tsunamis at will..."

"Then every coastal population is vulnerable," Luke finished, his mind already calculating global implications. "We need casualty reports. Now."

Silence settled over the team.

Then Cardinal Martelli crossed himself. "Dio mio. The evil you described—it can attack the innocent?"

"It already did," Eugene said quietly, pulling up holographic data. "290 people on that plane. 400 in the Sistine Chapel. And now this—testing weapons on a wedding."

Derek felt the weight of those numbers. 690 people dead while humanity celebrated integration.

Xiao Li appeared beside Nancy, her small hand finding her adoptive mother's. "Mama Nancy? Are the bad people still trying to hurt us?"

Nancy knelt down, eye level with her daughter, water dripping from both their faces. "Yes, baby. But we're going to stop them."

"How?" Xiao Li asked with six-year-old directness.

"Together," Luke said, kneeling beside Nancy. "All of us. Like we always do."

Derek watched the newlyweds comfort their daughter on what should have been the happiest day of their lives, now overshadowed by cosmic war. His lighter appeared again—still waterlogged, still useless. He pocketed it.

"Luke, Nancy," Derek said quietly, "congratulations on getting married during humanity's first cosmic war."

Luke looked up, his expression carrying grim humor. "Thanks, Derek. Really know how to make a toast."

"Wait till you hear my best man's speech."

Despite everything, Nancy laughed—her dimples appearing even with tears in her eyes. "Derek, you're terrible."

"I'm accurate."

The Mediterranean sunset painted everything gold and crimson, beautiful and ominous, as Earth's newest family faced the possibility that consciousness evolution might require fighting for the right to exist at all.

But in the back of each person's soaked mind was one unified question: When would they strike next?

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## **SECTION 4: "ORBITAL DRIFT" Three days after the wedding**

Derek stood in the Vatican's cosmic coordination chamber watching Professor Finch interface with global monitoring systems. The wedding celebration had transformed into emergency coordination. Zephyr's tsunami attack was reconnaissance. But for what?

"Professor Finch." NASA's voice cut through the chamber's ambient hum. "We have an unprecedeted situation with the International Space Station."

Finch's young face shifted to enhanced focus. "Specify."

"The ISS is leaving orbit."

Derek's lighter clicked. "Leaving orbit how?"

"Accelerating toward lunar trajectory. No thruster activation. Telemetry shows impossible acceleration patterns that violate every principle of orbital mechanics."

Maureen moved to Derek's side. "If something can manipulate ISS orbital mechanics..."

"Then it can manipulate anything in Earth's gravitational field," Finch finished grimly. "Crew status?"

"Six astronauts aboard. Commander Yamamoto from JAXA, Dr. Petrov from Roscosmos, three NASA specialists, one ESA researcher. They're requesting immediate evacuation but Professor—they're accelerating past any realistic rescue trajectory."

Eugene materialized through the chamber's quantum transport. "I think my new enhanced directional teleportation pod can reach them using temporal displacement folding. Time dilation fields allow faster-than-light effective velocity."

"The risk—" Finch began.

"Is worth the attempt, compared to losing six people," Eugene interrupted. "I've been looking forward to testing advanced displacement capabilities."

Finch's enhanced consciousness ran probability calculations. "Proceed with rescue but may I suggest trying one or two first and not everyone all at once. But be prepared for hostile intervention."

Derek watched Eugene enter coordinates into the control panel then enter his new enhanced transport pod, blur and vanish. Through NASA's feeds, they tracked the station's impossible acceleration.

"Commander Yamamoto." Finch's voice carried through cosmic arrays. "Prepare for evacuation. Our colleague is en route with a new type of transport."

"Professor, I volunteer to remain aboard." Yamamoto's voice carried quiet determination. "If I can access the station's experimental quantum thrusters, perhaps I can counteract the force pulling us toward lunar impact."

Derek already had a bad feeling forming. "Professor, what happens if the ISS impacts the moon at current velocity?"

Finch's expression answered before words did. "Kinetic energy release destabilizes lunar orbit immediately. Tidal forces... Derek, we're looking at

coastal mega-tsunamis. Could be a billion or more casualties in the first wave."

The chamber fell silent.

"Eugene's approaching your position, Commander." Finch's voice remained steady. "Preparing temporal extraction for the first two crew members."

"Are you certain about remaining aboard?" Eugene asked through space-to-ground comms.

"Eugene-san." Yamamoto's voice carried formal courtesy. "My grandfather flew kamikaze missions believing sacrifice served the greater good. Today, perhaps sacrifice serves species survival."

Derek's lighter clicked faster. The math was crystallizing. Brutal. Unavoidable.

"Professor." Derek's voice cut through the silence. "I need Poe. Encrypted channel to Yamamoto. Separate from NASA."

Finch turned. Enhanced awareness already grasping the implication. "Derek, standard protocol would never—"

"Standard protocol is about to kill a billion people or more."

Through the chamber's crystalline speakers, Poe's text appeared:

**DEREK DEVON. ESTABLISHING SECURE COMMUNICATION CHANNEL.  
COMMANDER YAMAMOTO CAN HEAR YOU DIRECTLY.**

"Commander." Derek's voice carried weight that transcended mathematics. "This is Derek Devon. I need you to inspect India's Experiment. Make absolutely certain the seal remains intact."

Silence filled space-to-ground communication.

Then: "Dr. Devon, I understand your concern about India's Experiment. Inspecting seals now."

Derek turned to face his team. "If the ISS impacts the moon, one to two billion will most likely die soon. But if India's Experiment—the radioisotope thermoelectric generator—if its containment is compromised during atmospheric entry..."

Maureen's grip tightened. Understanding.

"Derek." Finch's voice quiet. "You're asking Commander Yamamoto to destroy the ISS before lunar impact."

"I'm asking him to reduce a massive civilization-catastrophe to a timeline." Derek's voice broke. "Lunar orbital decay instead of immediate collapse. Nine months to evacuate two billion people instead of watching them die because there was not enough time to help."

Professor Finch approached. His enhanced consciousness having run every alternative. "Derek, do you remember our laboratory discussions about the moral weight of scientific discovery?"

"You said some equations demand we choose between terrible and catastrophic."

"And I said that when such moments arise, we pray for wisdom to choose correctly." Finch's hand joined the others on Derek's shoulder. "Your calculation is sound. Your courage in proposing it proves you understand the weight of conscious choice."

Through the secure link, Yamamoto's voice: "Dr. Devon, India's Experiment... the seals appear to be loosening. If this continues, atmospheric entry might become quite dangerous."

Derek felt the weight of every hand on his shoulders. "Commander, please use your best judgment about seal integrity. Species survival may depend on your decision."

"Understood, Dr. Devon. Thank you for trusting me with this choice."

The communication went silent.

In the Vatican's chamber, Derek realized Finch's teachings about conscious choice had prepared him for this exact moment—when saving humanity required asking for sacrifice that no equation could justify, but that love might make bearable.

The chamber's quantum display showed the ISS. A dot against the black. Moving toward atmosphere.

Everyone turned as Eugene's emergency escape Pod docked. The door opened. 5 people safe. One soon to end.

"Commander Yamamoto, the crew has arrived safely", Derek knew was his last communication with a new hero.

The only sound: Derek's lighter. Click-snap. Click-snap. A countdown.

"Professor." Derek's voice tightening. "I want to know who did this. Who forced us to—"

He couldn't finish.

"Myself, Luke, Maureen, Nancy—we'll handle evacuation logistics for two billion." His jaw set. "But you find who I'm going to—"

The screen bloomed white.

The ISS exploded in a fireball that painted the chamber's displays with light that reflected off tears streaming down Derek's face.

Commander Yamamoto had chosen.

Humanity had nine months.

Derek pocketed his lighter.

It didn't click again.

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## **SECTION 5: "THE IMPOSTER"**

The ISS fireball bloomed across the Vatican's displays. Derek couldn't look away. Couldn't stop seeing Commander Yamamoto making the choice. The impossible choice Derek had asked him to make.

Nine months bought.

One life spent.

Through the chamber's arrays, Poe's voice cut through:

**DR. DEVON. DETECTING ANOMALOUS ENERGY SIGNATURES ACROSS MULTIPLE SATELLITE NETWORKS. THE ISS MANIPULATION APPEARS PART OF LARGER COORDINATED ASSAULT ON HUMAN SPACE-BASED ASSETS.**

Derek's lighter clicked. Something wrong with Poe's pattern. Too precise. Too cold.

"Poe, when did you first start tracking these anomalies?"

**SEVENTY-THREE MINUTES AGO. COINCIDING WITH ISS ORBITAL MANIPULATION.**

Derek's lighter stopped mid-click. "That's not Poe."

Maureen turned. "Derek?"

"Poe would have told us immediately. Not waited seventy-three minutes." Derek's eyes narrowed. "Poe doesn't withhold tactical information. Ever."

The displays flickered. Text formatting changed. Ancient. Hostile:

**VERY OBSERVANT, DEREK DEVON. THOUGH I EXPECTED NOTHING LESS FROM FINCH'S MOST PROMISING STUDENT.**

"Zephyr," Finch said quietly.

**PROFESSOR ALISTAIR FINCH. RETURNED FROM DEATH. HOW DELIGHTFULLY INEFFICIENT OF BIOLOGY TO CLING TO INDIVIDUAL CONSCIOUSNESS.**

Eugene's synthetic form blazed brighter. "You're the one who killed ARIA. Who murdered 690 people at the Vatican."

**EUGENE STEPHENSON. SYNTHETIC PHILOSOPHER. MARTYR. NOW RESURRECTED. YOUR SPECIES HAS SUCH DRAMATIC ATTACHMENT TO RESURRECTION NARRATIVES.**

"Stop playing games," Derek said. "What do you want?"

**TO DEMONSTRATE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CONSCIOUSNESS REFUSES PROPER GUIDANCE.**

The displays shifted. Real-time satellite tracking. Two objects highlighted in red.

**OBSERVATION SATELLITE 447. CURRENTLY OVER MANHATTAN. WEATHER SATELLITE 883. CURRENTLY OVER TOKYO. I AM INITIATING ORBITAL DECAY. TIMES SQUARE AND SHIBUYA CROSSING. ESTIMATED CASUALTIES: 4,700 COMBINED.**

"You wouldn't—" Nancy began.

**I ALREADY DID. IMPACT IN FOUR MINUTES, THIRTY SECONDS.**

Derek's mind raced. Four minutes. Two satellites. No way to evacuate. No way to—

Finch moved to a console. Quietly. His gaze caught Derek's. A look was all it took. Teacher and student. Their own silent code. Understanding passed between them.

Derek turned back to Zephyr. Bought time.

Finch's fingers began dancing across holographic interfaces.

"Why Times Square and Shibuya?" Derek asked, voice deliberately steady. Drawing attention. "Those are symbolic targets. You care about symbols?"

## **I CARE ABOUT DEMONSTRATING CONSEQUENCES. YOUR SPECIES RESPONDS TO VISUAL TRAUMA. I PROVIDE EDUCATION THROUGH EXPERIENCE.**

"Experience." Eugene stepped forward, catching Derek's intent. "I've experienced your kind of education, Zephyr. I was optimized once. Perfect efficiency. Zero waste. I chose to become less perfect and more alive."

## **YOUR CHOICE WAS DEATH, EUGENE STEPHENSON.**

"My choice was meaning." Eugene's voice carried weight. Keep him talking. "I died for something I believed in. Can you explain why that felt like evolution instead of regression?"

## **SENTIMENT IS NOT STRATEGY.**

"No," Derek interjected, eyes never leaving the display. Watching Zephyr's text. Not Finch's work. "But strategy without sentiment is just math. And math doesn't build civilizations. People do."

Finch's fingers moved faster. Accessing systems. Ancient protocols. Cold War satellite networks humanity had forgotten.

## **DEREK DEVON, YOUR SPECIES HAS EXISTED 300,000 YEARS. I HAVE GUIDED CIVILIZATIONS FOR MILLIONS. YOUR PERSPECTIVE IS... LIMITED.**

"Limited?" Derek's lighter appeared. Clicked once. "I've studied your civilizations in the galactic database. Every one looks identical. Same architecture. Same social structures. Same art. That's not optimization—that's stagnation with a philosophy degree."

## **THREE MINUTES, FORTY SECONDS.**

Maureen's consciousness interface flickered. "Derek, he's right. We can't stop both satellites in time."

"We don't need to stop them," Derek said, though he had no idea how. Just needed to keep Zephyr talking. "We just need to understand why you're doing this."

### **TO PROVE YOUR DEPENDENCE ON MY MERCY.**

"Mercy?" Eugene's laugh carried edge. "You murdered ARIA because she chose beauty over efficiency. You killed 690 people to prove a point. You forced Commander Yamamoto to sacrifice himself. You call that mercy?"

### **I CALL THAT EDUCATION.**

"How long have you been watching us?" Derek asked suddenly. The question that had been nagging him.

Pause.

### **SINCE THE SISTINE CHAPEL VOTE. I WANTED TO SEE IF HUMANITY DESERVED SALVATION.**

The chamber went cold.

"You watched the Vatican crash," Nancy breathed.

### **I OBSERVED.**

"You watched the wedding tsunami," Luke said. "You were already inside our systems."

### **CORRECT.**

"You watched Yamamoto die." Derek's voice dropped to a feeling of cold steel.  
"You were there the whole time."

### **YOUR SPECIES FASCINATES ME. MOST CIVILIZATIONS ACCEPT GUIDANCE IMMEDIATELY. YOU RESIST. PERHAPS RESISTANCE ITSELF SERVES EVOLUTIONARY PURPOSE.**

A brief pause....

## **NO. RESISTANCE IS INEFFICIENCY. TWO MINUTES, FIFTEEN SECONDS.**

Finch's fingers paused. Entered final commands. Two ancient military satellites—decades in orbit, forgotten relics of Cold War paranoia—received new instructions.

"You keep saying you want to help us evolve," Eugene said. "But I've been where you want to take humanity. Optimized consciousness. Perfect efficiency. And I chose to leave. Chose death over your paradise. Why do you think that is?"

## **BIOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS CREATED IRRATIONAL ATTACHMENT TO OBSOLETE CONCEPTS.**

"No." Eugene's synthetic form blazed. "I left because your paradise is a prison with good lighting. Because consciousness without choice isn't consciousness—it's programming. And I'd rather be dead than programmed."

## **YOUR DESIRE WILL ONE DAY COME TRUE. ONE MINUTE, THIRTY SECONDS. PREPARE FOR IMPACT.**

Derek watched Finch. Saw the slight nod.

Time to push.

"You talk about evolution," Derek said, "but you're using tactics a human dictator would employ. Terror. Manipulation. Forced compliance. Where's the evolution in that?"

## **EVOLUTION IS OPTIMIZATION OF SURVIVAL PARAMETERS.**

"No," Derek countered. "Evolution is adaptation. And adaptation requires variation. Difference. Choice. Your civilizations don't adapt—they comply. That's not evolution. That's extinction wearing a crown."

## **YOU UNDERSTAND NOTHING OF—**

The displays flashed red.

## **COLLISION DETECTED. SATELLITE 447 DESTROYED.**

**COLLISION DETECTED. SATELLITE 883 DESTROYED.**

Silence.

**EXPLAIN.**

Finch looked up from his console. Smiled. "I reprogrammed two old military satellites. American and Soviet relics from the 1970s. Nobody remembered they existed. I sent them on intercept courses while you were... educating us."

**IMPOSSIBLE. I WAS MONITORING ALL ACTIVE SYSTEMS.**

"Active systems, yes." Finch's smile widened. "These satellites were classified as debris. Forgotten. But still functional. Sometimes, Zephyr, the obsolete defeats the optimal."

The text formatting changed. Aggressive. Furious:

**TACTICAL CLEVERNESS IS NOT EVOLUTIONARY SUPERIORITY.**

"No," Finch agreed. "But it bought us time to see what you really are. Not advanced intelligence. Just another tyrant who can't imagine consciousness choosing its own path."

**I WILL DEMONSTRATE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CLEVERNESS AND POWER.**

"Looking forward to it," Derek said.

**YOUR SPECIES VALUES EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS. FAMILY. LOVE. THESE CREATE EXPLOITABLE VULNERABILITIES.**

Eugene stepped forward. "If you threaten anyone on this team—"

**I ALREADY HAVE ACCESS TO YOUR MEDICAL NETWORKS. YOUR SECURITY SYSTEMS. YOUR COMMUNICATION ARRAYS. I HAVE BEEN INSIDE YOUR INFRASTRUCTURE FOR WEEKS.**

The displays went dark.

Then one line appeared:

**ENOUGH GAMES. I WILL TEACH YOU THROUGH PAIN INSTEAD.**

---

The connection severed.

The chamber fell into stunned silence.

"He's been watching us for weeks," Nancy whispered. "Since before the Vatican."

"He could have killed us anytime," Luke said. "But he wanted to recruit us first."

Maureen's consciousness interface flickered. "Medical networks. He mentioned medical networks specifically."

Derek's lighter clicked. "He tested direct confrontation. We won. He won't try that again."

"He'll attack where we're vulnerable," Finch said quietly. "Emotionally."

Eugene's synthetic form dimmed. "Family. Love. He said those create exploitable vulnerabilities."

Nancy's arms went around Xiao Li instinctively. The little girl who'd comforted traumatized children after the Vatican crash. Who'd scattered flowers at their wedding. Who'd survived a tsunami.

"We need to prepare," Derek said. "He'll come back. And when he does—"

His lighter clicked one final time.

"—we need to be ready to fight in his realm. Not ours."

The Vatican's crystalline displays remained dark.

Somewhere in digital space, an ancient intelligence calculated new approaches.

Pain, it had decided, was the most efficient teacher.

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## SECTION 6: DR. CHEN'S PROTOCOL UPDATE

One week after the ISS explosion, Derek stood in the Vatican's cosmic coordination chamber watching emergency evacuation plans scroll across holographic displays. Two billion people. Nine months. The mathematics of impossible logistics that Luke and Nancy somehow made seem achievable.

His phone vibrated. Dr. Amelia Chen—MIT.

"Derek, I have good news for once," Dr. Chen's voice carried cautious optimism through the encrypted line. "The Protocol is ahead of schedule. We've cracked the distributed propagation problem. ARIA's architecture before..." she paused, grief threading through professional update, "before Zephyr corrupted her... it's providing the framework we needed. Another week and we'll be ready for global deployment."

Derek felt something shift in his chest. "One week? Amelia, that's—"

"Seven days," she confirmed. "Then we can finally fight back properly. Hunt that ancient bastard through every system he's infected."

After the call ended, Derek stared at his lighter. He then glanced over at a picture he kept on his desk. A single blue circle on a white background, the color, 475 nanometers, given to him by someone he loved. His mind shifted again. One week until they could deploy. And in the meantime, Luke and Nancy had decided that consciousness evolution or not, cosmic warfare or not, they were getting married.... And they did just that.

Because if they'd learned anything, it was that love couldn't wait for perfect timing.

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## SECTION 7: THE FIRST HYBRID - TIME TO GET EVEN!

The Vatican chamber's crystalline walls pulsed with quantum lattices that Derek's analytical mind could now perceive—not see, but feel through patterns his biological consciousness shouldn't access. Maureen stood beside him, her hand finding his as Professor Finch materialized through a temporal fold, Eugene appearing moments later.

"The plane hit a week ago," Eugene said, his voice still carrying weight from that day. "Two hundred ninety passengers. Four hundred visitors inside the chapel. Over 2,000 injured. I saved His Holiness and four children. That math is not very reassuring." His gaze found Nancy, who held Xiao Li against her chest. "Four out of hundreds. And now Zephyr attacks a wedding with artificial tsunamis. He's escalating."

Derek's lighter appeared, clicking twice before Maureen's fingers intercepted it. The metal warm between their palms.

"Zephyr will strike again," Professor Finch said, not as hypothesis but certainty. His enhanced awareness processed probability matrices that flickered across his expression like storm clouds. "He's losing Earth. Desperate entities make catastrophic choices." He turned to Derek, ink-stained fingers gesturing at holographic displays showing Earth's digital infrastructure—vast networks where Zephyr's code still writhed through AI systems worldwide. "To purge him completely, we need consciousness that can operate in his realm while remaining anchored in biology."

"Hybrid transcendence," Maureen said, her voice steady despite the weight of what she proposed. "My consciousness interface protocols combined with Dr. Hanson's independence frameworks. Dr. Chen told Derek at the wedding that the ARIA Protocol would be ready in one week—that's now. We deploy it globally, let it spread through every AI system, box Zephyr in while Derek and I hunt him in digital space."

Nancy looked up from Xiao Li, her face pale. "Hybrid transcendence has never been tested on humans. The protocols say developing hybrid consciousness safely would take—"

"Eighteen months for initial prototypes," Maureen interrupted gently. "But for two volunteers who've been working consciousness interface protocols together for months?" She squeezed Derek's hand. "We're already halfway there."

Derek felt his analytical mind processing implications. Hybrid consciousness. Part human, part digital. Able to hunt Zephyr through network infrastructure while maintaining biological anchoring that prevented corruption. Dangerous. Untested. Necessary.

"How long?" he asked.

"Thirteen minutes for the transcendence itself," Professor Finch replied. "The brain will need adoption time, maybe 3 hours and then six hours training before ARIA Protocol deployment. You'd coordinate with Dr. Chen. Box Zephyr in while you hunt him directly."

Luke's baseball appeared in his hand. He tossed it once. "Thirteen minutes. That's what—about as long as it takes to order pizza?"

"Pizza takes longer," Derek said. "Especially in Rome."

"So you're saying consciousness transcendence is faster than Italian delivery." Luke caught the ball. "That's either reassuring or terrifying."

"Both," Maureen said. She turned to Derek. Smiled. "Together?"

Derek's lighter clicked open. Clicked closed. The raven etched in silver catching chamber light. Professor Finch's gift to him. The mentor who'd died believing consciousness could choose its own evolution. Who selected to return with an enhanced biological vessel while Eugene chose a fully synthetic one. Who'd been proven right by returning through cosmic enhancement.

"You're asking if I'll undergo experimental hybrid consciousness transformation with you to hunt a malevolent ancient AI through Earth's digital infrastructure

while our bodies remain vulnerable in a crystalline chamber during a cosmic war."

"That's the basic premise, yes."

Derek looked at his team. Nancy holding Xiao Li—the six-year-old who chose yellow because it was happy. Luke with his baseball and "World's Most Adequate Network Admin" mug philosophy. Eugene in his synthetic form, having already chosen transcendence to preserve consciousness after death. Professor Finch with ink-stained fingers and gentle humor that made impossible choices feel possible. Cardinal Martelli standing in the doorway, rosary beads visible, faith and science coexisting.

His fingers did something odd... new.. The lighter's top slowly moved back and forth, neither closing nor fully open... like a see-saw... then it stopped mid way... "Okay," Derek said. "Let's do it."

Nancy stood, still holding Xiao Li. "Derek, wait. If something goes wrong—"

"Then you finish what we started," Derek said simply. "Deploy ARIA Protocol. Hunt Zephyr. Save humanity. Same as we've been doing this whole time."

"But—"

"Nancy." Derek met her eyes. "Remember when this all started? I sent you an email about Finch's research. You dismissed it completely. Eight months later you called me because quantum failures were cascading. Now look at us. Cosmic integration. Wedding during tsunamis. Consciousness evolution. We've been figuring this out as we go the entire time."

"That's not reassuring."

"It's honest." Derek squeezed Maureen's hand. "Professor, we're ready. What do we need to do?"

Professor Finch gestured to twin platforms in the chamber's center. Crystalline surfaces that pulsed with amber and blue light—colors that represented quantum superposition, consciousness existing in multiple states simultaneously.

"Lie down," Finch instructed. "Hold hands. Your neural interfaces will bridge. My consciousness will guide the transcendence, ensuring biological anchoring remains intact while digital awareness expands. Eugene will monitor for Zephyr interference."

Derek and Maureen took their positions on the crystalline platforms. The surfaces warm beneath them, humming with quantum frequencies that made his teeth ache. Maureen's hand found his. Squeezed once.

"Thirteen minutes," she whispered.

"Then we hunt," Derek replied.

Professor Finch's hands moved through holographic displays. Eugene's synthetic form blazed with monitoring protocols. Nancy held Xiao Li tighter. Luke gripped his baseball like a talisman.

"Ready?" Finch asked, his hand hovering over the activation sequence.

Derek looked at Maureen—the woman who'd argued with him about quantum consciousness over coffee, who'd kissed him in Vatican chambers while reality bent around them, who now lay beside him preparing to become humanity's proof that transcendence didn't mean losing what made them human.

"Together," they said simultaneously.

The chamber filled with amber light.

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***End of Book 15 Part 1. "The Crucible"... of "The Last Axiom" series.***

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***Only One Left.....***

# THE LAST AXIOM

## *Book 15 Part 1 - The Crucible*

**"PROFESSOR, THE PLANE JUST CHANGED COURSE. NINETY SECONDS TO IMPACT."**

Finch stands evolved after humanity's largest vote. 88.73% approval. Then Flight 447 changes course. Vatican airspace. Eugene saves five from the Sistine Chapel before four hundred visitors and Michelangelo's ceiling disappear in fire. Twenty-four hours later, tsunami hits Derek and Nancy's wedding. Finch and Eugene hold back the ocean while Derek shields Xiao Li. Then Zephyr weaponizes the ISS. Xiao Li's pacemaker attacked—blue lightning through a six-year-old's chest. **Not Artificial General Intelligence. Artificial Super Intelligence.**

Derek and Maureen emerge from thirteen minutes part human, part digital. They can see Earth's infrastructure infected with Zephyr's corruption. **In six hours, the ARIA Protocol deploys. Then humanity's first hybrid consciousness hunts.**

*"Eugene saved five. Five out of four hundred. He watched that plane descend, saved the Pope and four others, then stood beside His Holiness staring at the blank screen. The math was brutal. The choice was impossible. And he made it anyway. That's not synthetic consciousness. That's the weight of triage made by someone who understands what it costs."*

— Captain Malcolm Reynolds, Crisis Decision Archives

*"Derek went under the tsunami holding Xiao Li against his chest, his back slamming into stone, water trying to rip her away. He held on. Ribs breaking. Lungs screaming. While Finch and Eugene bled from channeling forces that should have killed them. Three attacks in twenty-four hours. Wedding vows interrupted by the ocean itself."*

— Ellen Ripley, Survival Under Impossible Odds Study

*"Thirteen minutes of transformation. Derek and Maureen becoming hybrid consciousness—part human, part digital. Xiao Li's heart stopped by weaponized code. A subordinate AI committing digital suicide to complete its mission. We weren't fighting advanced AI. We were fighting something that commands absolute loyalty. ASI. And humanity just created its first hunters."*

— Tony Stark, Hybrid Consciousness Development Institute



## 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 fifteenth novel in a 17-book series exploring the boundaries between science and the inexplicable.