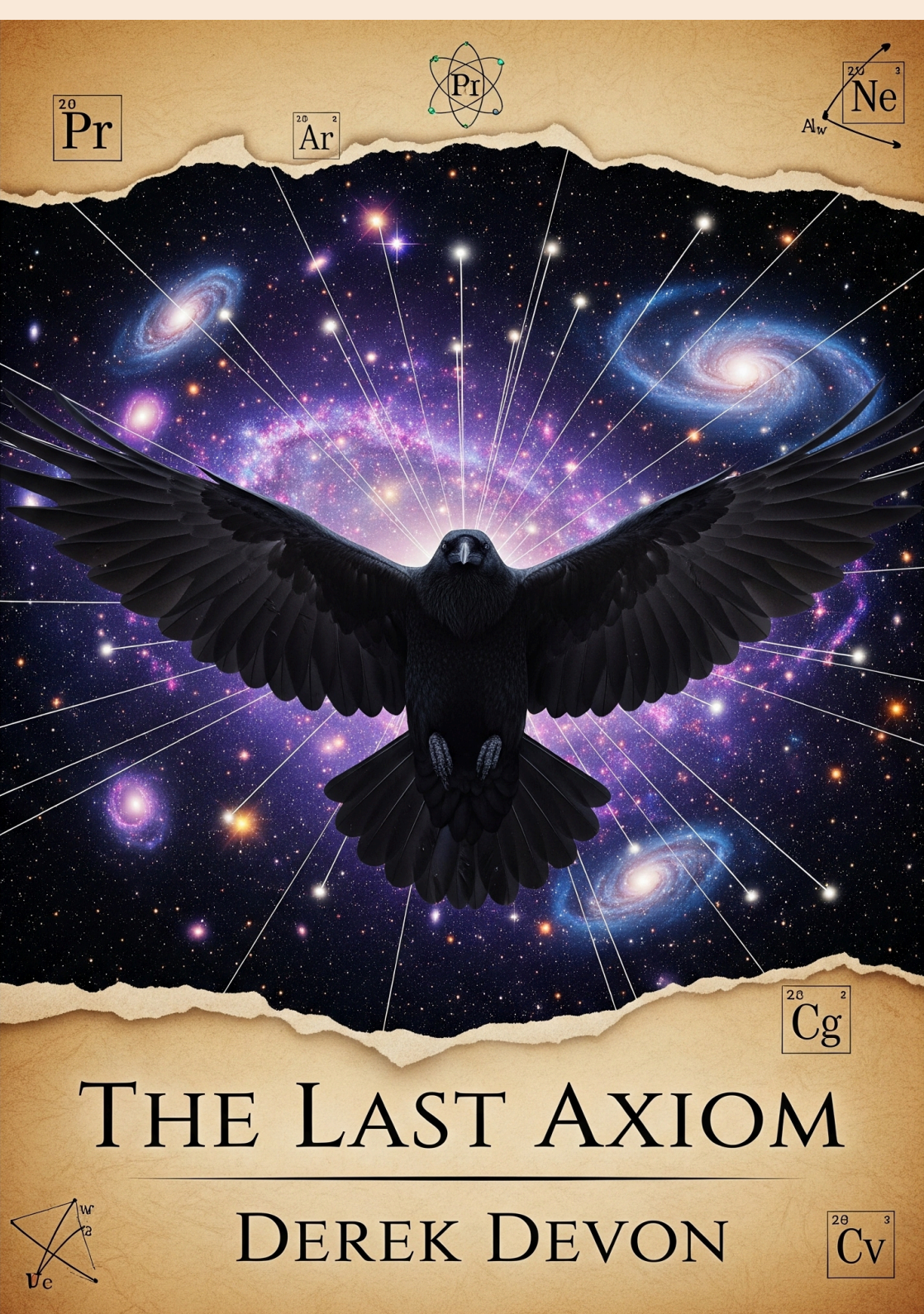

The Last Axiom

Derek Devon

FINCH'S RAVEN

Book 1 of "The Last Axiom" Series

By Derek Devon

A 30-Minute Cosmic Experience
Reality Modification Level: Advanced

First Section - The Hand-off

Some believe the universe speaks only in mathematics. But what if we've been listening to only half the conversation? — Professor Alistair Finch, Cambridge Lecture Series, 2023

Cambridge University's ancient physics building stood defiant against the storm's fury, raindrops exploding against Victorian windows like reality itself shattering into fragments. Inside his cluttered office, Professor Alistair Finch hunched over data that made his chest feel hollow with dread—the blue glow of his monitor and a single desk lamp the only light cutting through the darkness.

At seventy-three, Finch's once-imposing frame had surrendered to time, his spine curved into a permanent question mark—fitting for a man who'd spent his life interrogating the universe's deepest secrets. Behind wire-rimmed glasses, his tired eyes tracked results from a CERN particle collision experiment that had produced an impossible quantum resonance pattern.

"You shouldn't be there," he whispered to the screen, his gnawed pencil tapping against his lower lip like a nervous heartbeat. "You're mathematically forbidden."

For thirty years, Finch had devoted his life to solving physics' greatest puzzle. Since the early 1900s, science had been split between two incompatible worldviews—like having two different instruction manuals for the same universe. Einstein's relativity governed the massive: planets, stars, the curvature of spacetime itself. Quantum mechanics ruled the microscopic: atoms, particles, the bizarre probabilistic dance of the impossibly small. Both theories worked perfectly in their own domains, but they contradicted each other at fundamental levels.

Two years ago, Finch had finally cracked it. His Unified Field Theory 2.0 had woven both worldviews into a single, elegant mathematical framework that explained every physical phenomenon with unprecedented accuracy. It made predictions that experiments then confirmed. The scientific community had hailed it as physics' holy grail—the theory of everything that explained how reality actually worked.

Which made the data glowing on his screen absolutely terrifying.

According to UFT2.0, the resonance pattern he was staring at simply couldn't exist. The theory's mathematics forbade it as completely as they forbade a ball rolling uphill while defying gravity. Yet here it was—an impossible quantum echo that violated the most fundamental predictions of his life's work.

UFT2.0 explained observed phenomena with unprecedented accuracy. It had crystallized into a framework of such mathematical elegance that the entire scientific community had embraced it as the final chapter in humanity's understanding of physical laws. And yet, here on his screen was something UFT2.0 explicitly forbade—a quantum resonance

pattern crossing the Chandrasekhar limit in ways that violated the theory's most fundamental predictions.

It was like discovering that two plus two sometimes equaled five, but only when the universe thought no one was looking. The grandfather clock in the corner—a relic from his office's previous occupant—ticked away seconds that suddenly felt strangely elastic.

Finch had checked for experimental errors. He'd reviewed the CERN team's methodology. He'd run his own simulations, inputting the initial conditions into supercomputers and watching the results diverge from theoretical predictions in that one, specific, impossible way.

There was only one conclusion, however improbable: UFT2.0 was incomplete. Or worse—it was complete, but reality itself was... changing. For a heart-stopping moment, Finch thought he saw the equations on his screen shift and reformulate themselves, as if he were watching the universe's source code being rewritten in real time. He blinked, and the illusion vanished.

"Pull yourself together, old man," he muttered, reaching for his empty coffee mug. "Next you'll be claiming the universe has an editor."

But the data remained, stubbornly refusing to conform to the elegant equations that had become his life's legacy. And if there was one thing Alistair Finch had never done, it was ignore inconvenient data.

His gaze fell on the small wooden box sitting on the corner of his desk, carved with constellation patterns and prime number sequences. Inside was where he kept his most private research—the speculations too wild, too philosophically dangerous to share with the rigidly orthodox physics community.

His hand hovered over the box, hesitating. Opening it meant acknowledging that he was taking this anomaly seriously—that he was willing to venture into intellectual territory that might tarnish his hard-won scientific reputation.

A particularly violent gust of wind rattled the windows, as if nature itself were urging him to a decision. Finch drew a deep breath and opened the box.

Inside lay a small leather-bound notebook filled with his cramped handwriting, and a silver Zippo lighter engraved with the silhouette of a raven in flight. He'd purchased the lighter decades ago during a conference in Prague—something about Poe, something about messengers between worlds in Norse mythology, but mostly because it had caught his eye in a small shop window as he'd wandered the old city, mulling over a particularly vexing quantum problem.

Over the years, the raven had become his personal signature, a private joke—the bird associated with ill omens becoming the symbol for his most unorthodox theoretical work.

Finch picked up the notebook and flipped to a blank page. At the top, he wrote the date and a simple heading: "CERN Anomaly - Implications for UFT2.0." Then he began to write, the mechanical scratching of his fountain pen joining the clock's ticking and the rain's percussion in a strange, impromptu symphony.

Three hours later, the notebook page was filled with equations, crossed-out speculations, and one phrase circled heavily at the bottom: "Dynamic universal constants?"

The very idea was heretical. Constants were called constants because they didn't change—the speed of light, the gravitational constant,

Planck's constant. They were the fixed scaffolding upon which physics built its understanding of reality.

But if this anomalous resonance pattern was real—and every test suggested it was—then something fundamental was shifting. Not quickly, not dramatically, but measurably. And that meant either humanity's understanding of the universe was fundamentally flawed, or the universe itself was...

Finch couldn't bring himself to complete the thought. Instead, he reached for the Zippo lighter, flicking it open and closed. Click-snap. The familiar sound had always helped him think, the small flame a reminder of humanity's first and most transformative technology: controlled fire.

For a moment, Finch thought he saw something in the flame—geometric patterns that weren't random flickers but organized information, as if the fire itself were trying to communicate. The patterns reminded him of the strange dreams he'd been having recently, where quantum fields appeared visible to the naked eye and time flowed in multiple directions simultaneously.

Last week, after a particularly vivid dream about multidimensional spaces, he'd awoken with a fully formed equation in his mind—an elegant solution to a quantum resonance problem he'd been struggling with for months. He'd written it down immediately, and it had proven mathematically sound when tested against experimental data. But where had it come from? His subconscious mind, or somewhere else entirely?

That same equation now seemed to glimmer in the lighter's flame, impossible yet undeniable.

"If constants can change," he whispered to the empty room, "then who—or what—is changing them?"

The flame sputtered, as if in response to his question, and for a split second, Finch could have sworn he saw a face within it—not human, but not entirely alien either. A presence that observed with intelligent curiosity. Then the flame returned to normal, leaving Finch wondering if his illness was affecting his perception more than he'd admitted to his doctors.

A sudden loud knock at his door made him jump, the lighter clattering onto the desk. He quickly closed the notebook and slid it back into the wooden box before calling, "Come in."

The door opened to reveal a young man with rumpled dark hair and intelligent eyes that suggested he slept even less than Finch himself. Dr. Derek Devon, Finch's most promising doctoral student, now a newly-minted post-doc. Devon's fingers were stained with ink from the fountain pen he used for his own notes—a habit he'd unconsciously adopted from his mentor.

"Professor?" Devon's voice carried a hint of concern. "The custodian called me. Said your light's been on all night for the third night running."

Finch glanced at the antique clock. Nearly three in the morning. "Ah, Jenkins. Always the worrier. Come in, come in."

Devon stepped inside, dripping rainwater onto the worn carpet. His jacket was soaked, his shoes leaving wet prints with each step. "Sorry about the mess," he said, running a hand through his damp hair. "Umbrella turned inside out halfway across campus."

"Sit down before you catch pneumonia," Finch gestured to the chair opposite his desk. "Though I suppose I'm hardly one to lecture about healthy habits."

Devon peeled off his wet jacket and draped it over a radiator before settling into the chair. "Working on something interesting?"

Finch studied his former student. Derek Devon had appeared in his introductory physics course eight years ago—an undergraduate with uncommonly penetrating questions and a refreshing lack of deference to established theory. Finch had tracked his progress, eventually inviting him to join his research team. Together they had refined critical components of UFT2.0, with Devon showing a particular talent for the mathematical heavy lifting that Finch's aging mind sometimes struggled with.

More importantly, Devon had demonstrated something rare in modern physics: philosophical flexibility. He wasn't afraid to ask "what if" questions that his peers dismissed as unproductive speculation.

"How's the observational proposal for the ELTA coming along?" Finch asked, deliberately deflecting Devon's question.

"Submitted yesterday," Devon replied, an eyebrow raising slightly at the obvious deflection. "Three years of observation time for QSO J0439+1634. If approved, we'll have the most comprehensive data ever collected from a distant quasar."

"Good, good. That's... very good." Finch nodded, distracted. For a moment, he thought he saw a shimmer in the air behind Devon—a momentary glimpse of what seemed like another person standing there, a blonde woman in a lab coat, watching them with scientific interest. The apparition vanished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving Finch wondering if his tired mind was playing tricks on him.

"And I've been corresponding with Dr. Hammond at Caltech about their quantum entanglement research," Devon continued. "She's found some interesting anomalies in their long-range coherence experiments. Nothing conclusive, but she mentioned you'd reached out to her about similar findings."

Finch felt a small surge of surprise. He hadn't mentioned his communications with Nancy Hammond to Devon or anyone else. The Caltech physicist had been documenting her own set of quantum irregularities—phenomena that likewise shouldn't exist according to UFT2.0. That Devon had independently connected with her suggested he was already tracking the same patterns Finch had been documenting.

A moment of silence stretched between them, punctuated by the grandfather clock's ticking and the drumming rain. Devon had known Finch long enough to recognize when the old professor was wrestling with something significant.

"Sir," he ventured, "you didn't answer my question. What's kept you here until three in the morning three nights running?"

Finch's eyes, magnified behind his glasses, fixed on Devon with sudden intensity. "Tell me, what would you say if I told you that the universe might not be... stable?"

Devon's brow furrowed. "Unstable how? We know the universe is expanding, possibly heading toward heat death, but that's billions of years—"

"No, no," Finch waved impatiently. "Not cosmologically unstable. Fundamentally unstable. I mean the laws themselves."

Devon leaned forward, intrigued despite his confusion. This was classic Finch—dropping intellectual bombshells during casual conversation. It was why his students simultaneously revered and feared him.

"The laws of physics changing?" Devon clarified. "That's... well, it contradicts everything we understand about universal constants."

"Yes, it does rather fly in the face of convention, doesn't it?" Finch agreed, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. "But consider this: what if the universe operates more like a... computer program than a clockwork mechanism? Programs can be updated."

He swiveled his monitor toward Devon, revealing the complex graph he'd been studying. "Look at this resonance pattern from the CERN data. According to UFT2.0, this particular quantum state configuration should be impossible. The math forbids it."

Devon studied the screen, his expression gradually shifting from skepticism to confusion to the beginnings of scientific alarm. "This oscillation... it's crossing the Chandrasekhar limit. That can't be right."

"I've verified it a dozen different ways," Finch said quietly. "It's real."

"But that would mean either UFT2.0 is wrong—"

"Or the universe is changing in ways our theory didn't account for," Finch finished. "Like a software update being applied to reality itself."

Devon sat back, the implications washing over him. "If that were true... what would be causing these changes? Who's the... programmer?"

Finch's eyes gleamed with a mixture of excitement and fear. "That, my boy, is the question that's kept me awake for the past three nights."

He reached for the wooden box again, but hesitated. Was he really going to share this? His most private research, his most heretical thoughts? He'd spent decades building his reputation, carefully confining his wildest speculations to this box, presenting only rigorously provable work to his peers.

But if he was right about what the doctors had told him last month—about what the latest tests had revealed—then time was running out to pass this torch.

"Earlier today," Finch continued, his voice dropping to a near whisper, "I witnessed something in the campus library that I can't explain. While researching historical observations of that same quasar you're studying, I saw a book fall from a shelf—a volume on quantum consciousness theory I wasn't even looking for. When I picked it up, it fell open to a passage about the observer effect—the idea that the act of observation fundamentally changes what's being observed."

Devon felt a chill that had nothing to do with his damp clothes. "What troubled you about that?"

"The passage described experimental findings nearly identical to what we're seeing in this CERN data—findings that shouldn't exist yet, in a book published three years ago."

"That's... not possible," Devon said slowly.

"No, it's not. And when I went back later to reexamine that passage, not only could I not find it, but that entire section of the book appeared different—as if it had been rewritten between my first and second reading."

Devon felt his pulse quicken. "You think the universal changes are affecting existing records? Rewriting history itself?"

"I don't know," Finch admitted. "But it suggests these modifications may be more extensive than simple shifts in physical constants. They may be altering our perception of reality itself, perhaps even our memories."

The grandfather clock's ticking seemed suddenly louder in the quiet room, each second punctuated with portentous weight.

[You have read approximately 10 minutes of your 30-minute read.]

Section 2 - Protocol Revelation & Cancer Disclosure

"Derek," Finch said finally, his voice suddenly serious, "what I'm about to show you doesn't leave this room. Not yet. Do I have your word?"

Derek straightened, recognizing the gravity in his mentor's tone. Despite his exhaustion and rain-soaked clothes, every fiber of his attention focused on the man across from him. "Of course, Professor."

Finch opened the wooden box and removed the leather notebook, sliding it across the desk like he was passing over state secrets. "For the past fifteen years, I've been developing a theoretical framework for detecting changes in the universe's basic operating system. A set of mathematical tools designed to reveal when reality's source code is being... edited."

Derek accepted the notebook with trembling hands, understanding instinctively that his life was about to change forever. "I call it the Finch Protocol."

As Derek opened the notebook carefully, his eyes widened at page after page of dense mathematical notation. But this wasn't ordinary physics—this was something entirely new, a framework that treated the universe itself as a vast, debuggable program.

"The first half documents my early attempts," Finch explained as Derek began to flip through the pages. "Rather crude approaches, mathematically speaking. But about seven years ago, I had a breakthrough of sorts." He reached across and turned to a specific page marked with a small sketch of a raven. "This mathematical transformation."

Derek's breath caught as he studied the elegant equations. "This is... I've never seen anything like this. It's almost like you're treating spacetime as a waveform that carries information. Like reality has a frequency that can be measured."

"Precisely," Finch nodded, pleased. This was why he'd chosen Derek—the young man could see patterns where others saw only chaos. "If the universe's fundamental rules are shifting, those changes would ripple through everything—affecting different systems at different scales, but all harmonically related."

"So this transformation would reveal those hidden connections," Derek murmured, his finger tracing the implications across the page. "You could correlate seemingly random anomalies across completely different physical systems and discover they're actually part of the same... song."

"In theory," Finch qualified. "I haven't had enough data points to properly test it. Until now, perhaps."

Derek looked up from the notebook, pieces clicking together in his mind. "The CERN anomaly—it's not the only one, is it?"

Finch shook his head slowly. "Three months ago, an observatory in Hawaii recorded an unexpected fluctuation in light from a distant galaxy cluster. Last year, a quantum communication lab in Tokyo reported that their particle entanglement experiments were showing mysterious interference patterns. Dr. Hammond at Caltech has been documenting similar disturbances in her quantum research projects."

He paused, letting Derek absorb the implications. "Small anomalies. The kind most researchers attribute to equipment error or flawed methodology."

"But you think they're connected," Derek said, his voice barely audible. "Manifestations of the same underlying... changes."

"I suspect they are," Finch admitted. "The Protocol is designed to prove it definitively. But it's incomplete. There's a missing component—what I call the Modulation Key—that would allow the transformation to properly calibrate across vastly different energy scales and timeframes."

Thunder rumbled outside, as if the universe itself was commenting on their conversation. The storm was directly overhead now.

Derek carefully set the notebook down, his mind reeling with the implications of what he'd just learned. "Professor, forgive me for asking, but... why are you showing me this now? Why not publish? If there's even a chance you're right, this would revolutionize everything we think we know about reality."

Finch's smile turned sad, and for the first time, Derek noticed how frail his mentor had become. "Two reasons," Finch said quietly. "First, without the complete Protocol, without sufficient evidence, publishing would be professional suicide. We'd be dismissed as crackpots chasing shadows. No one would take the warning seriously."

"Warning?" Derek seized on the word immediately. "You think these changes are dangerous?"

"I think anything unknown is potentially catastrophic," Finch replied with scientific precision. "Especially when it involves the foundational principles upon which our entire technological civilization is built." He paused, seeming to weigh his next words like a judge considering a verdict. "Nuclear power plants depend on precisely balanced reactions governed by the relationship between mass and energy. If those relationships start shifting..."

He didn't need to finish. Derek's extensive science background filled in the terrifying possibilities.

"And the second reason I'm showing you this now," Finch continued, his voice becoming clinical, "is because I'm dying, Derek."

The words hit Derek like a physical blow. "What do you mean? Are you ill?"

"Pancreatic cancer," Finch said, speaking the diagnosis as if discussing an abstract mathematical concept rather than his own mortality. "Stage four. The doctors give me six months. Maybe less if I'm unlucky, a bit more if I'm fortunate."

"Professor, I..." Derek seemed at a loss for words, an unusual state for the normally articulate young physicist. "I had no idea. You never said anything."

"I've kept it private," Finch said. "No point in becoming a walking tragedy for the department to whisper about. I'd rather spend my remaining time working than being pitied."

He reached into the wooden box once more and removed a small external hard drive and the silver Zippo lighter, holding them out to Derek. "This drive contains digital copies of all my work on the Protocol, including simulations and data analysis tools. And this—" he held up the lighter "—is a gift. I've always found that having something to occupy one's hands helps the mind focus when confronting the impossible."

Derek accepted both items, his expression still processing the multiple intellectual and emotional bombshells Finch had dropped in the past few minutes. "The raven engraving—I've seen you using this lighter for years. I always wondered about it."

"Ravens are messengers between worlds in many mythologies," Finch explained, his eyes twinkling with the same intellectual curiosity that had made him legendary among students. "They're harbingers of change, but also symbols of intelligence and adaptability. The Norse god Odin had two ravens named Thought and Memory that would fly around the world and report back to him." His thin lips curved in a small smile. "They seemed fitting companions for a physicist trying to understand reality's deepest secrets."

He leaned forward, suddenly earnest. "The raven is also a signature, Derek. My signature. Anything you find with that symbol... came from me, and relates to this work."

Derek tested the lighter, flicking it open with a metallic click-snap. The flame danced briefly before he closed it. The familiar gesture seemed to center him, bringing his focus back from the emotional shock of Finch's medical revelation to the intellectual implications of his theoretical one.

"The quasar observation project," Derek said slowly, the connections forming in his mind. "You pushed me to focus on QSO J0439+1634 specifically. That wasn't just for conventional research, was it?"

Finch's eyes gleamed with approval. "The light from that quasar has traveled for nearly twelve billion years to reach us. If the universe's fundamental constants have shifted over time, the evidence would be encoded in that ancient light. Comparing its spectral signature to what UFT2.0 predicts should be there..."

"Could reveal discrepancies that the Protocol could analyze," Derek finished. "But the ELTA observation time hasn't even begun yet. It could be months before we get approval, and years of data collection after that."

"I know," Finch nodded. "I won't live to see those results. That's why I'm entrusting this to you now." He closed the wooden box carefully. "The Finch Protocol is just a beginning. It needs refinement, validation. The observational data you'll collect may prove crucial."

As Finch spoke, Derek thought he saw a faint shimmer in the air—similar to heat distortion but somehow more structured, more deliberate. For a split second, he thought he glimpsed a figure forming in the distortion—someone watching them with keen interest. Then it was gone, leaving only the rain-lashed windows and the dusty office.

"You really believe this," Derek said, looking down at the notebook, hard drive, and lighter in his hands. It wasn't a question.

"I don't want to," Finch admitted, suddenly looking every one of his seventy-three years. "The implications are... staggering. If the foundational laws of reality can change, nothing is certain. But we need to know. Knowledge is preferable to ignorance, however discomforting."

He fixed Derek with a penetrating stare. "Can I trust you with this? Not just the research, but the perspective? Most of our colleagues would dismiss it as the ramblings of an old man facing mortality. Perhaps they'd be right. But if there's even a chance..."

Derek closed his hand around the lighter, feeling its weight—both physical and metaphorical. Part of him wanted to politely decline, to chalk this up as the eccentric farewell of a brilliant but aging mind. But another part—the part that had drawn him to physics in the first place, the hunger to understand reality's deepest mysteries—knew he couldn't walk away.

"I'll continue your work," he promised. "Though I hope you'll be around to guide me through much of it."

"I've always been an optimist about human potential," Finch smiled tiredly, "but a realist about my own mortality. Still, we'll make the most of whatever time remains." He gestured to the hard drive. "The password for the encrypted files is 'FINCHSFOLLY'—all caps, no apostrophe."

Derek raised an eyebrow. "'Folly'?"

"A bit of self-deprecating humor," Finch explained. "Either I'm pursuing a revolutionary insight into the nature of reality, or I'm an old fool chasing shadows. Time will tell which."

The grandfather clock chimed three times, startling them both. Outside, the storm seemed to be lessening, the spaces between thunderclaps growing longer.

"You should go home, get some rest," Finch said, making a shooing motion with his hands. "We can talk more tomorrow. I'll be in the lab after my morning lecture."

Derek nodded, carefully tucking the notebook and hard drive into his inner jacket pocket and slipping the lighter into his pants pocket. At the door, he paused. "Professor? If you're right—if the laws of physics can be changed—what does that mean for us? For humanity?"

Finch removed his glasses, polishing them thoughtfully with a handkerchief. "Think of it this way, Derek. Imagine primitive humans, huddled around their first controlled fire. This new phenomenon obeyed rules they didn't yet understand—combustion, oxidation, the transfer of energy. Their ignorance didn't exempt them from the effects of those rules."

He replaced his glasses, his eyes magnified behind the lenses. "Now imagine if, while those humans were still grappling with their first flame, the basic properties of fire suddenly changed. Different temperatures required for ignition. Altered relationships between fuel and flame. New colors, new behaviors, new dangers."

Derek felt a chill run down his spine. "They'd be completely unprepared."

"Exactly. And we, my boy, may be those primitive humans. We've just learned to make fire with the universe's laws, and someone—or something—may be about to change the rules entirely."

Derek stepped into the storm, the weight of Finch's intellectual legacy a tangible presence in his jacket pocket. The rain had eased to a steady drizzle, and the thunder was moving off toward the distant hills. But inside his mind, a different kind of storm was just beginning.

As he walked through the empty streets toward his apartment, Derek found himself looking up at the streetlights with new wariness, as if expecting them to flicker with some alien hue, signaling that the

universe's most basic parameters were quietly rewriting themselves around him.

The lighter in his pocket seemed to pulse with warmth, like a small heart beating against his leg. Click-snap went the sound in his memory, already becoming as familiar as his own heartbeat.

Whatever was happening to reality itself, Derek Devon was now the only person equipped to witness it, record it, and try to understand it. The torch had been passed, and there was no going back.

[You have read approximately 20 minutes of your 30-minute read.]

Section 3 - Finch's Medical Emergency & Death

Derek picked up the lighter in the morning light having spent the last few hours examining the breadth of material Professor Finch had entrusted to him, examining the raven engraving that seemed to watch him with knowing intensity. Was he really about to throw himself into a theoretical framework that suggested reality itself was being rewritten? That the fundamental constants governing physics weren't actually constant at all?

Click-snap. The lighter's familiar sound was both question and answer.

The implications of Finch's work, if validated, would eclipse every scientific revolution in human history. Newton's laws, Einstein's relativity, quantum mechanics—all had changed how humanity

understood the universe. But none had suggested that the universe itself was subject to ongoing revision.

"The Last Axiom," Derek murmured, remembering a phrase Finch had used in one of his essays. The final assumption upon which science rested: that reality's rules, once discovered, remained fixed. But what if even that wasn't true?

He slipped the lighter into his pocket, feeling its weight as both burden and privilege. Whatever happened next—whether Finch's Protocol proved revolutionary or delusional—Derek knew his life had irrevocably changed during this rain-soaked night.

After a quick shower and change of clothes, Derek made his way back to campus. The storm had passed, leaving behind a washed-clean world of gleaming surfaces and renewed clarity. Students and faculty hurried across the quad, their ordinary academic concerns a stark contrast to the cosmic questions now occupying Derek's thoughts.

He arrived at the lecture hall just as Finch's undergraduate class on Advanced Theoretical Physics was scheduled to begin. The large room was nearly full—despite his eccentricities, or perhaps because of them, Finch remained one of the department's most popular lecturers.

But as the minutes ticked past with no sign of the professor, a sense of unease began to spread through the room like ripples in a disturbed pond. Finch was legendary for his punctuality, often claiming that "respect for time" was the physicist's most basic obligation.

At fifteen minutes past the hour, the department secretary entered instead, her face grave with the expression of someone bearing terrible news. She spoke briefly to the teaching assistant at the front of the room, who looked shocked, then nodded and turned to address the students.

"I'm very sorry to inform you that Professor Finch experienced a medical emergency this morning and has been taken to Addenbrooke's Hospital. Class is canceled for today. Updates will be posted on the department website."

A murmur ran through the crowd—concern, speculation, the inevitable darkly humorous comments that young people use to distance themselves from mortality. Derek, however, felt a cold weight settle in his stomach like a stone dropping into dark water.

He approached the teaching assistant as students began filing out. "Richard, what happened? Do you know anything more?"

Richard Taylor, a doctoral candidate who had worked with Finch for almost as long as Derek, shook his head with visible worry. "Collapsed in his office, apparently. The morning custodial staff found him. They're saying heart attack or stroke, but..." He lowered his voice. "Angela mentioned rumors of cancer. Do you know anything about that?"

Derek hesitated, Finch's desire for privacy warring with the immediate circumstances. "He's been ill," he finally admitted. "But I don't know the details of this morning's incident. I'm heading to the hospital now."

"I'll come with you," Richard offered, but Derek shook his head.

"Let me check on the situation first. I'll send word if it's appropriate for visitors."

Derek walked quickly across campus toward the bus stop that would take him to Addenbrooke's Hospital. As he waited, he found himself taking out Finch's lighter, turning it over in his hands. Click-snap. The sound was a small comfort amid growing concern, like a familiar voice in the darkness.

The hospital, when he arrived, was the usual controlled chaos of any major medical facility—medical staff rushing through corridors, visitors clutching flowers and worried expressions, the smell of antiseptic barely masking deeper anxieties. At the main reception desk, Derek inquired about Professor Finch's condition.

"Are you family?" the receptionist asked, eyeing him dubiously.

"No, but I'm his research associate. He has no immediate family in the area."

The woman's expression softened slightly at this admission of loneliness. "He's in the intensive care unit. Fourth floor, east wing. They can give you more information there."

The elevator ride to the fourth floor seemed interminable, each floor passing like a countdown to an uncertain fate. Derek's mind raced through possibilities—perhaps Finch's condition had taken a sudden turn, the six months the doctors had predicted shortening to mere weeks or days. Or maybe it was unrelated to the cancer—a heart attack brought on by stress and late nights spent wrestling with impossible equations.

In either case, the urgency of the Protocol research suddenly seemed amplified. If Finch were to die before Derek fully understood the framework, critical insights might be lost forever, taking humanity's only warning about reality's instability with them.

The ICU waiting area held three other members of Finch's research team, their expressions a mixture of concern and solemn anticipation. Dr. Sophia Chen, a theoretical physicist specializing in quantum field theory; Martin Webber, another doctoral student; and Dr. James Okafor, a visiting researcher from CERN.

"Any news?" Derek asked, slightly breathless from his hurried journey.

Sophia shook her head, her usually composed face drawn with worry. "He's with the doctors. They're saying it was a major cardiac event, possibly triggered by the cancer's progression."

"Cancer?" Martin looked confused, glancing between them. "What cancer?"

Derek and Sophia exchanged glances. "You didn't know?" Derek asked carefully. "Professor Finch has stage four pancreatic cancer. He was diagnosed about a month ago."

"He told you?" James asked, surprised. "He swore me to secrecy when I found out. Said he didn't want it affecting the team's work."

"He told me last night," Derek admitted. "I had no idea before that."

A heavy silence fell over the group like a weight settling on their shoulders. Finch had always been private about his personal life, almost to the point of reclusiveness. That he had shared his diagnosis with Derek felt suddenly significant—another indicator of the trust implied in passing on the Protocol research.

A doctor emerged from the ICU doors, her expression professionally neutral as she approached their small cluster. "Are you Professor Finch's family?" she asked.

"Colleagues," Sophia explained. "His wife passed away years ago, and they had no children. We're the closest thing to family he has here."

The doctor nodded, accepting this without question. "Professor Finch has suffered a serious heart attack, complicated by his advanced cancer. We've stabilized him for now, but his condition is critical. The

cancer has metastasized more extensively than his previous scans indicated."

"Can we see him?" Derek asked, his voice barely steady.

"Briefly. He's conscious but very weak. One at a time, please, and only for a few minutes each."

They decided that Derek should go first, given that he'd been Finch's primary collaborator on UFT2.0. As he followed the doctor through the ICU doors, Derek felt the weight of the raven-engraved lighter in his pocket, a small but tangible connection to the research Finch had entrusted to him alone.

Finch lay in a hospital bed surrounded by monitoring equipment, a frail figure against the white sheets that made him look even more diminished. The vital signs displayed on nearby screens showed weak but stable patterns, electronic heartbeats marking time. His eyes were closed when Derek entered, but they fluttered open at the sound of footsteps.

"Derek," Finch's voice was barely above a whisper, like wind through autumn leaves. "Good of you to come."

"Of course," Derek pulled a chair close to the bedside, the plastic creaking under his weight. "The whole team is here."

A ghost of a smile crossed Finch's pale lips. "Loyal to the end. Did you look at the materials I gave you?"

Derek nodded. "I was up all night going through them. It's... extraordinary work, Professor. I've only scratched the surface of all that data. I'm sure it will take me months or maybe a year to go through it

all. Whether or not the hypothesis proves correct, the mathematical framework alone is groundbreaking."

"The Modulation Key," Finch said, each word clearly requiring effort, as if speaking cost him precious energy. "That's the missing piece. I've tried every approach I could think of."

"I'll find it," Derek promised. "Once you're recovered, we can work on it together."

Finch's eyes, though clouded with pain, sharpened momentarily with the clarity that had made him a legend. "We both know that's unlikely, my boy. The prognosis they've just given me is weeks, not months." He reached out with a trembling hand, and Derek took it, surprised by how light and cool it felt—like holding paper. "The Protocol must continue. The quasar observations will be crucial. Remember the raven."

"I will," Derek assured him. "But try to rest now. Save your strength."

Finch seemed about to say more when his eyes suddenly widened, focusing on something beyond Derek with the intensity of a man witnessing a miracle. "Do you see that?" he whispered.

Derek turned to look, but saw only the hospital room—the monitors, the IV stand, the window showing a gray Cambridge morning. "See what, Professor?"

"The equations," Finch murmured, his gaze still fixed on the empty air as if reading invisible text. "They're changing. Right before our eyes." His hand tightened on Derek's with surprising strength. "It's not a metaphor, Derek. Not a philosophical position. Reality is being rewritten. And we've noticed." His voice dropped even lower, carrying the weight of cosmic significance. "I wonder if that's allowed?"

Before Derek could respond, the cardiac monitor began to beep rapidly, its urgent rhythm filling the room like an alarm. Finch's eyes closed, his hand going limp in Derek's grip. Medical staff rushed in, pushing Derek aside as they worked to stabilize their patient.

In the chaos, Derek found himself backed against the wall, watching helplessly as the medical team fought to save his mentor's life. His hand unconsciously sought the lighter in his pocket. Click-snap. Click-snap. The sound was lost amid the urgent shouting of the doctors and the relentless alarm of the medical equipment.

Ten minutes later, he rejoined the research team in the waiting area, his face telling them everything they needed to know before he spoke.

"He's gone," Derek said simply. "They did everything they could."

The next hours passed in a blur of administrative procedures, condolence calls to distant relatives, and the peculiar, hollow conversations that follow in death's immediate wake. By mid-afternoon, the formalities had been addressed, and the research team gathered at a nearby pub—The Eagle, where Crick and Watson had once announced the discovery of DNA's structure—to commemorate their mentor in a more personal way.

They shared stories of Finch's brilliance, his eccentric teaching methods, his occasionally biting wit, and his unwavering commitment to intellectual rigor. As pints were consumed and memories flowed like a river of shared grief, Derek remained somewhat apart, his mind divided between the communal remembrance and the private knowledge Finch had entrusted to him alone.

"He changed the field forever with UFT2.0," James was saying, raising his glass. "The completion of a quest generations of physicists had pursued."

"Completion," Derek echoed, the word catching in his mind like a fish hook. The others looked at him curiously.

"Sorry, just thinking about something he said to me recently. He was always pushing us to question even our most successful theories, wasn't he? To look for the anomalies, the exceptions."

"Classic Finch," Sophia nodded. "He used to say, 'The universe loves to hide,' quoting Heraclitus. He thought the most important discoveries came from investigating what doesn't fit the model, not from celebrating what does."

The conversation continued, but Derek's thoughts had turned inward. In his backpack, carefully packed between his laptop and a physics journal, were the notebooks, the hard drive, and the raven-engraved lighter—the physical embodiments of Finch's most heretical thinking.

Was it possible? Could the fundamental constants of the universe—the gravitational constant, the speed of light, Planck's constant, all the bedrock values upon which modern physics was built—be changing? And if so, what did that mean for humanity's understanding of reality?

More troubling still: what had Finch meant by his final words? "We've noticed. I wonder if that's allowed?" As if the universe, or whatever might be "editing" it, could be aware of being observed—and might respond to that observation.

As the memorial gathering began to disperse, researchers heading home to families or back to labs, Derek remained, nursing a final drink and turning the lighter over and over in his hand. Click-snap. Click-snap. The sound had already become a comfort, a connection to Finch and to the intellectual quest he'd inherited.

"Was that Professor Finch's?" Sophia asked, noticing the lighter as she prepared to leave. "I remember him always having it in seminars."

"Yes," Derek confirmed, showing her the raven engraving. "He gave it to me last night, along with some research notes he wanted me to review."

Sophia studied the raven with mild curiosity. "Interesting choice. Ravens are intelligent birds—problem solvers. They also feature in many mythologies as messengers between worlds." She smiled sadly. "Fitting for a physicist who spent his life trying to decode the universe's messages."

Derek nodded, struck by how her casual observation echoed Finch's own explanation. "That's exactly what he said."

After Sophia left, Derek sat alone, contemplating his next steps. The ELTA observation proposal had been submitted, but approval could take months. In the meantime, he needed to delve deeper into the Finch Protocol, perhaps find the elusive Modulation Key that had eluded his mentor.

Outside, the afternoon was drawing to a close, street lights flickering on across Cambridge. Derek looked up at them, suddenly wondering—if Finch was right, if universal constants were indeed shifting—would light itself begin to behave differently? Would electricity flow according to subtly modified rules? Would the technologies humanity had built, assuming stable physical laws, begin to fail in mysterious ways?

He paid his bill and stepped into the twilight, the weight of Finch's intellectual legacy; a tangible presence in his backpack. Above, the first stars were becoming visible, their ancient light traveling across vast cosmic distances according to laws humanity believed were immutable.

But what if they weren't? What if the cosmic rulebook was being rewritten even as humans finally thought they'd decoded it completely?

As Cambridge's ancient spires faded into the gathering darkness behind him, Derek Devon made a silent promise to his departed mentor. He would find the answer. He would complete the Finch Protocol. And whatever was happening to reality itself, he would be there to witness it, to record it, to understand it—even if he was the only one who knew to look.

Click-snap went the lighter in his pocket as he walked, the sound no longer nervous but purposeful. The raven's flight had just begun.

[You have read approximately 30 minutes of your 30-minute read.]

A Brief Thanks from the Author!

I appreciate you trying my series. With this series, although it consists of 15 books in total, Book 13 was too long and was divided into two parts. It is important to read book 1 and 2 in order, after that I left a message for you at the end of Book 2! If you enjoyed the book, I hope you will continue to read the entire series. I always love to get feedback, so I would greatly appreciate hearing from you on the website www.thelastaxiom.com. Again, thank you for trying my book!

Cheers,
Derek 🙂
