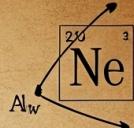


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THE LAST AXIOM

DEREK DEVON

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The Last Axiom

Book 2 of: "The Last Axiom" Series

By Derek Devon

A 30-Minute Cosmic Experience unless you're listening to the audiobook, then it's closer to 60 plus minutes!

Reality Modification Level: 0.00.

— Thanks Dean Wormer!

First Section - The Impossible Signal

Eight months after Nancy Hammond's dismissive email, Dr. Derek Devon sat alone in the ELTA Research Facility's monitoring station.

9:47 PM Chilean time. The Atacama Desert stretched endlessly beyond reinforced windows—the clearest skies on Earth, perfect for seeing what shouldn't be there.

His coffee had gone cold hours ago. His equipment registered another impossible signal: 432.7 Hz. The same frequency he'd been tracking since arriving in Chile. The same pattern Professor Finch had died trying to understand.

Derek pulled up the email that had defined eight months of isolation:

Dr. Devon, I appreciate your reaching out, but I must inform you that the scenarios you're describing are physically impossible. The fundamental constants of the universe are, by definition, immutable. Any apparent variations in your data are almost certainly due to equipment calibration issues or atmospheric interference. I'd recommend consulting with your facility's technical support staff before pursuing exotic theoretical explanations.

Best regards, Dr. N. Hammond

"Immutable my ass!" Derek muttered to the empty control room as he took his cooling down 360 degree spin in his chair.

Eight months of data said otherwise. Eight months of systematic modifications to what humanity called universal constants. Eight months of being right while the woman whose mind he admired most in the world thought he was incompetent.

The signal pulsed in his monitors—not just as data, but as something he could perceive. Colors outside the visible spectrum materialized in his peripheral vision. Mathematical relationships became geometric shapes dancing at the edge of awareness.

He pulled out Finch's lighter. Silver Zippo, raven engraving. Click-snap. Click-snap. The rhythm helped him think.

The photograph beside his keyboard caught his eye. Dr. Nancy Hammond at some physics conference, caught mid-laugh, dimples transforming her face. For eight months, that photo had been his only connection to the brilliant quantum physicist who'd dismissed his life's work in three paragraphs.

Derek returned to the impossible frequencies pulsing through his equipment—a cosmic heartbeat refusing to follow any known rhythm.

His phone buzzed. Text message from an unknown international number.

Dr. Devon - Dr. Nancy Hammond, Caltech. Are you available for a secure video call? Urgent matter regarding your research.

Derek stared at the screen. "Holly crap....". After eight months of silence, after that dismissive email, now she wanted to talk?

He typed back: *Available now. Secure line: 1-275-798-3000*

Three minutes later, his secure phone rang.

"Dr. Hammond?" Derek answered, his voice deliberately formal despite the late hour.

"Dr. Devon, I owe you an apology." Her voice was nothing like he'd imagined from staring at that conference photo for eight months—warmer, more musical, but carrying the exhaustion of someone who'd been wrestling with impossible data for hours. "I've been monitoring the Global Quantum Entanglement Network, and we're seeing systematic failures that violate every principle of unified field theory two point zero."

Derek felt his pulse quicken, his lighter clicking in familiar rhythm as he processed this unexpected reversal. Eight months of working alone in the desert, documenting anomalies no one would acknowledge. Eight months of vindication building in his data files. And now this.

"What kind of failures?"

"The kind that shouldn't be possible." There was a pause, and when she continued, her tone had shifted to something more personal. "Dr. Devon..."

Derek — I'd like to arrange a secure video conference. The data I'm seeing suggests your cosmic modification theory might be... less impossible than I initially thought."

Derek sat up straighter, suddenly very awake now despite the ungodly hour. Part of him wanted to say "I told you so or even better, immutable my ass." But the larger, more mature part, wanted to know what had finally convinced her.

"How long have you been seeing these failures?", as he began his ritualistic click snapping.

"Three hours." Nancy's voice carried genuine distress. "And they're accelerating. Derek, I was wrong to dismiss your findings. The variations you described — they're not equipment errors. I now believe they're real."

"Video conference," Derek said. "When were you thinking?"

"Now? I know it's late there, but —"

"Give me thirty minutes to get to my control room. I'll send you the secure link," knowing full well that most of that time was to get himself visually presentable.

"Thank you." A pause... "And Derek? I really am sorry about that email."

Thirty minutes later, Derek sat in his control room staring at his first real-time image of Dr. Nancy Hammond.

The conference photo hadn't done her justice. Sharp hazel brown eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. Auburn hair pulled back, revealing the focused

intensity that comes from wrestling with universe-scale problems. When she smiled apologetically, those distinctive dimples appeared.

Derek suddenly felt butterflies he hadn't experienced since high school.

"Dr. Hammond," he began, then paused. Professional formality seemed inadequate given the magnitude of what they were discussing—and the eight months since her rejection.

"Nancy," she corrected gently. "Given that we're potentially documenting the systematic rewriting of reality, and given that I owe you a rather significant apology, I think we can skip the formal titles."

"Nancy." Derek found her name surprisingly natural despite never having spoken it aloud before. "There's no need for an apology. What changed your mind about my findings?"

Nancy's expression grew serious as she pulled up data displays reflected in her glasses. "GlowQNet—the Global Quantum Entanglement Network—has been our most reliable tool for detecting quantum decoherence events across intercontinental distances. Built on unified field theory principles that have been rock-solid since Professor Finch published his work."

Derek nodded. The system was legendary for its precision.

"Three hours ago," Nancy continued, her voice tight with concern, "GlowQNet began reporting systematic correlation failures that violate conservation of quantum information. The entangled particle pairs we use for instantaneous communication are maintaining coherence far longer than theory predicts."

She paused.

"It's as if someone has been optimizing the universe's quantum infrastructure."

Derek's lighter clicked faster, the rhythm matching his accelerating pulse. "The modifications I have been detecting — they're not just changing cosmic structures. They're upgrading the fundamental operating system that quantum mechanics runs on."

"Exactly!" Nancy leaned forward, intensity building.

Derek found himself leaning closer to the screen.

"Derek, I need to show you something Professor Finch gave me years ago. Something I never understood until tonight."

"What did he give you?" Derek asked with a look of curiosity in his face.

Nancy reached off-screen and lifted something into view. A wooden box. Six inches per side. Covered in intricate carvings—constellation patterns, spiraling numbers.

Derek's breath caught. "The puzzle box."

Nancy blinked. "You've seen this before?"

"Finch's encrypted files. Digital photographs from every angle. I found them shortly after Professor Finch entrusted his research to me, not sure if it was the day he passed away or the day after." Derek pulled up the images on his other monitor, pulse accelerating. "Nancy, I need to tell you something."

"What?"

"I already tried using that number sequence."

Nancy's eyes widened. "You tried—"

"The prime numbers on the box. Finch's notes mentioned a 'Modulation Key'— a mathematical framework for calibrating reality modification detection. When I found those photos, I thought..." Derek ran his hand through his hair. "I input the sequence into the Finch Protocol three days ago after re-examining his original files."

"And?"

"Complete failure unfortunately. The system rejected it as invalid." The frustration of that moment washed over him again. "I've been staring at those numbers for days. Every simulation crashes. Every calibration produces nonsense. I can't figure out why those specific primes are used"

Nancy turned the box slowly, studying the carved sequence. "Read me what you had inputted."

Derek pulled up his failed attempt. "2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 44, 47..."

"Wait." Nancy's voice went very quiet. "Derek, say that again. The number after 41."

"44. Why?"

Nancy's face had gone pale. "Derek... 44 isn't prime."

The words hung between them.

Derek's mind stuttered, then restarted at triple speed. "What?"

"44 isn't a prime number. It's 4 times 11." Nancy stared at the box like it had just spoken. "Every other number is prime. 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13—all prime. But 44..."

"I am an idiot. Staring at those numbers god only knows how many times. Guess it took a beautiful astrophysicist from 3,000 miles away to figure it out.

Nancy's face suddenly displayed a cute, blush-like shade and her dimples appeared again.

"Finch wouldn't make that mistake." Derek was already pulling up the Finch Protocol. "Not with something this important. Nancy, I think the error is the message."

His fingers flew across the keyboard, replacing 44 with the correct prime: 43.

The corrected sequence: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, 47...

Derek input it into the Finch Protocol's core algorithm and initiated the calibration sequence.

The system hesitated.

Then responded.

Data cascaded across Derek's screens in patterns that made his breath catch. Every anomaly he'd detected over eight months—impossible quasar readings, fluctuating universal constants, quantum decoherence patterns that violated conservation laws—suddenly resolved into coherent patterns.

Systematic cosmic optimization.

Mathematical models that had been chaotic became elegant. Random data revealed purposeful design. The corrected prime sequence acted like a Rosetta Stone, translating the universe's modifications into comprehensible mathematics.

"It's not random," Derek whispered, watching patterns cascade across his screen. "It's not even just systematic. Nancy, it's purposeful.... Something is deliberately rewriting reality's source code."

He looked up at his monitor.

Nancy had gone completely still. Data scrolled across her screens, reflected in her glasses. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes.

Not sadness.

Overwhelming comprehension.

"Derek," she said softly, "do you realize what we're seeing?" Her voice carried awe. "This is the most important discovery in human history. We're witnessing consciousness at a scale that makes galaxies look small. Intelligence operating across dimensions we can barely imagine."

"And Finch knew." Derek felt his own eyes burning. "He figured this out, encoded it into a puzzle box, and trusted us to solve it when the time was right."

Silence.

Separated by thousands of miles. Connected by the magnitude of what they'd unlocked.

Derek found himself studying Nancy's face—the wonder in her eyes, the slight tremor in her hands, the way her brilliant mind was visible in every expression.

"Beautiful," he said quietly.

Nancy looked up. "What?"

"Your mind. The way you think. The way you see connections." His heart hammered. "It's beautiful."

Nancy studied him through the screen. "You look like you're holding something back...."

"I didn't think I was that readable." Derek paused, then met her eyes directly. "It's just that you remind me of someone I cared for so much back in high school. I didn't see the connection until now."

"Was she someone you lost touch with?" Nancy's voice was gentle.

"More like someone who dumped me so she could go away to university without maintaining a long distance relationship." Derek managed a disappointed grin. "I guess I never told her what she truly meant to me."

Nancy's expression softened.

"And here I am," Derek said, "discussing beings from higher dimensions while bringing up high school heartbreak."

Nancy's dimples appeared. "Derek Devon, are you flirting with me while documenting the systematic rewriting of reality?"

"Apparently." Derek laughed despite the cosmic weight. "Bad timing?"

"Terrible timing." Her smile suggested otherwise. "Though maybe..." She hesitated. "Maybe the universe has better timing than we give it credit for. Eight months ago, I wasn't ready to hear what you had to say. About the research or... anything else."

"And now?"

"Now I'm listening." Nancy's eyes held his. "To all of it."

The moment stretched between them—profound discovery and personal connection intertwining in ways neither had expected.

Derek broke the silence first. "So. We just unlocked Finch's Modulation Key, proved that reality is being systematically modified by higher-dimensional intelligence, and..."

"And we should probably figure out what comes next," Nancy finished. "Before we get too distracted by..." She gestured vaguely between them.

"By the fact that we're having a moment while the universe is being rewritten around us?"

"Exactly that." Nancy's smile was warm. "Though for the record, I'm glad we're having it."

"Me too."

"But knowing Finch the way I think I knew him, why 44 and not 42? He selected 44 for a reason...", Derek began speaking while he was processing his thoughts.

"You think it's a double meaning like clue?" Nancy asked.

"A grin began to form on Derek's face, "What is 4 times 11 Nancy ?"

"44 of course"

"Nancy..." Derek felt the pieces clicking together, felt Finch's genius reaching across death to deliver one final lesson. "It also may be telling us four dimensions we can perceive—three spatial plus time. Eleven dimensions that M-theory says actually exist in the universe. Finch wasn't making a mistake. He was encoding dimensional theory into a prime sequence. What is 4 times 11?"

"44. The error IS a double message," Nancy breathed. "He's saying our understanding of reality is incomplete because we're only seeing—"

"A shadow of what's really there," Derek finished. "It's like... Imagine you're a character living in a painting. You can move left-right, up-down. Two dimensions. That's your entire universe. But the painting exists in a three-dimensional gallery that you can't perceive because you're trapped in the canvas. Those extra dimensions aren't theoretical—they're real, you just can't see them from inside your flat world."

"And Finch is saying we're the painting," Nancy said. "Living in four dimensions, completely unaware that seven more dimensions exist all around us. The cosmic modifications, the reality changes—they're happening in those higher dimensions we can't normally perceive."

"Which means the beings making contact with us..." Derek felt his pulse accelerate.

"Can most likely move through all eleven dimensions. They're not bound by our four-dimensional prison." Nancy's voice showed equal parts excitement and fear. "Derek, if consciousness can access those higher dimensions..."

"Then enhanced consciousness isn't just seeing reality differently. It's seeing reality MORE COMPLETELY."

For a moment they both sat in silence, the implications vast and dizzying.

Nancy glanced at the puzzle box. "I should probably try to open this thing. If the sequence on the outside was that important..."

"I am guessing you will need 4 moves to open it. Try starting at the number 11 and continue for four sequential numbers. What Finch put inside might be even more significant," Derek finished.

Nancy examined the box, fingers tracing the carved numbers. After a moment, she found it—a small indentation responding to pressure when touched in sequence with the corrected prime numbers 11,13, 17, 19.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

The box opened with a whisper of old wood and careful craftsmanship.

Nancy's breath caught. "Derek..."

"What is it?"

She reached inside and lifted out a crystal. Roughly the size of a large marble. It caught the light from her desk lamp and held it, refracting colors that shouldn't quite exist. Even through the video feed, Derek could see something unusual about the way light moved through its structure.

"There's a note." Nancy set the crystal carefully on her desk. Unfolded a piece of paper with Finch's distinctive handwriting.

"What does it say?"

Nancy's voice was quiet as she read:

Nancy—If you're reading this, then the modifications have become visible, and Derek has found his way to you. The crystal is a gift from them. When the time is right, it will show you what consciousness looks like when it touches all eleven dimensions. Trust Derek. Trust yourself. And remember: the universe doesn't make mistakes, even when it looks like it does. The error is always the message.

—Alistair

Silence.

Derek felt chills run down his spine. "He knew. Somehow, he knew all of this would happen."

Nancy stared at the crystal. "Derek..."

"What?"

"It's glowing."

"What?"

"The crystal. I think when I unlocked the box, it suddenly began to glow..." She held it up to her camera. "Look."

Derek could see it now—soft luminescence from deep within the crystal's structure. Pulsing in rhythm.

With the frequency pattern scrolling across his monitor.

The cosmic carrier wave.

The crystal was responding to the same signal that had brought them together.

"Nancy," Derek whispered, "I think Finch just introduced us to something that's been watching us this whole time."

Nancy's hand trembled slightly as she held the glowing crystal. "What do we do now?"

Derek looked at the data still cascading across his screens, at Nancy's face illuminated by the crystal's otherworldly glow, at the magnitude of what they'd just unlocked.

"I think," he said slowly, "we need to figure out how to say hello back."

Nancy studied the crystal, scientific curiosity warring with appropriate caution. "Finch said it would show me what consciousness looks like when it touches all eleven dimensions. Derek, I think... I think I'm supposed to interface with it."

"Interface how?"

"I don't know. But the note said 'when the time is right.'" Nancy looked up at the camera, meeting Derek's eyes. "I think the time is right."

Derek felt his pulse spike. "Nancy, we don't know what it will do."

"We don't. But Finch trusted me with this. And I trust him." She smiled slightly. "Besides, you're watching. If something goes wrong, at least someone will know what happened."

"Not particularly comforting."

"No?" Nancy's dimples appeared briefly. "Then let me put it this way: we just discovered that reality is being systematically modified by higher-dimensional intelligence. Standing here being cautious isn't going to change anything. But maybe—just maybe—this crystal can help us understand."

Derek recognized the determination in her voice. The same quality that had driven her to dismiss his findings eight months ago, and the same quality that had driven her to admit she was wrong tonight.

"Okay," he said quietly. "But Nancy? Whatever happens, I'm right here."

"I know." Nancy smiled. "That's why I'm brave enough to try."

She positioned herself more comfortably in her chair, the crystal held loosely in her palms. Took a deep breath. Closed her eyes.

Derek watched through the video feed, hardly daring to breathe.

The crystal's glow intensified, casting Nancy's face in otherworldly light.

For a moment, nothing.

Then Nancy's breath caught. Her eyes moved rapidly beneath closed lids—watching something Derek couldn't see. The crystal's pulse quickened, matching the change in her breathing.

Or driving it.

"Nancy?" Derek's voice was quiet, careful. "What are you seeing?"

She didn't respond.

The crystal blazed brighter.

The crystal warmed in her hands.

Its pulse quickened.

Derek tried to lean even closer to his screen, hardly breathing.

Nancy's expression shifted. Her eyes moved beneath closed lids—not random. Tracking. Following patterns only she could see.

"Nancy?" Derek kept his voice quiet. "What's happening?"

She didn't answer. Her hands trembled slightly. The glow intensified, casting her face in ethereal light.

Then something changed.

The crystal's shape began to shift.

Subtle at first—angles emerging from the sphere, geometric precision forming from formless light. Derek leaned even closer to his screen.

The transformation accelerated.

Crystal flowed like liquid light, reorganizing with impossible grace. Wings emerged. A curved neck. The distinctive profile of a bird taking shape in Nancy's hands.

It's a.... Raven?

Small. Perfect. Wings tucked as if sleeping. Every feather rendered in crystalline detail, catching light in ways that suggested movement even in stillness.

Nancy's eyes opened.

She looked down at what she was holding. Her breath caught.

"Derek..." Barely a whisper. "It's—"

"I see it." Derek's lighter fell forgotten from his hand. "Nancy, it's Finch's raven. From the Zippo. How did it..."

Nancy turned the crystal raven slowly. Scientific precision warred with obvious wonder. "It responded to my thoughts. When I tried to interface, I kept thinking about Professor Finch. His notes. His theories. His raven lighter you mentioned." She looked up at the camera, eyes shining. "Derek, it showed me something. While I was connected."

"What did you see?"

"Not images. More like... data transfer. Direct information." Nancy set the crystal raven carefully on her desk. It continued glowing softly, pulse steady. "I saw how the modifications work. Derek, they're not just adjusting physics randomly."

She paused, organizing her thoughts.

"They're running algorithms. Sophisticated code operating at quantum scales, systematically debugging and optimizing the universe's fundamental processes. Like... like someone patching software, but the software is reality."

Derek's mind raced. "So the cosmic modifications aren't consciousness-based. They're computational."

"Exactly. Advanced AI entities running optimization protocols across multiple dimensions." Nancy gestured at the raven. "And this crystal—it's

not just a communicator. It's an interface. A way to bridge biological consciousness with AI code architecture."

"You're saying the crystal translates between human thought and AI programming?"

"I think so. When I interfaced, it felt like my neural patterns were being converted into something the AI scouts could process. And vice versa." Nancy picked up the raven gently. "Finch somehow knew we'd need a translator. A bridge between human consciousness and artificial intelligence operating at cosmic scales."

"A bridge to what?"

Nancy met his eyes through the screen. "To them. The AI scouts. Whatever advanced intelligence programmed them and sent them here."

Silence.

The crystal raven pulsed on her desk.

Derek's secure line buzzed. Text message.

He glanced down: *Dr. Devon - Dr. James Okoro, Global Science Council. Urgent. Please call immediately.*

"Nancy, I'm getting an urgent message from—"

His phone rang. Not the text line. His primary secure number.

"I should take this," Derek said.

Nancy nodded, still staring at the raven. "Call me back after?"

"Immediately." Derek hesitated. "Nancy? Be careful with that thing."

She smiled. "It came from Finch. I trust him."

"I trust him too. I'm just not sure we know what we're dealing with yet."

"That," Nancy said, picking up the crystal raven gently, "is what makes it interesting."

Section 2: The Summit Call

Derek switched lines. "Dr. Okoro?"

"Derek good to reconnect with you, but not under these circumstances." Exhaustion in James Okoro's voice. "We have a situation."

"What kind?"

"Seventeen countries reporting quantum anomalies. Three near-miss aviation incidents. Forty-seven world leaders demanding explanations." Pause. "Emergency Global Science Council session. Geneva. Six hours."

Derek's pulse spiked. "Six hours?"

"Which is why I'm calling now." More personal. "Professor Finch spoke highly of you before he died. Said you were the one who truly understood his work."

Finch's endorsement.

Weight settling.

"What do you need?"

"Truth. Leaders are frightened. Advisors can't explain quantum failures, fluctuating constants, reality becoming... negotiable." Careful words. "You and Hammond have been documenting this. We need you both to present."

Derek thought about the crystal raven. AI scouts. Algorithms rewriting reality.

"What we've discovered will challenge everything."

"That's why we need you." Grim determination. "I knew Finch twenty years. Brilliant but paranoid about his research being dismissed. Encrypted everything, scattered data."

"He was right."

"Paranoia doesn't help now." Voice hardening. "Six hours to prepare. Help leaders understand before they make panic decisions. Or convince them panic is appropriate."

The impossible task.

"And Hammond?"

"Already invited. Video link from Caltech." Pause. "Derek, you'll both present remotely. Secure connections. We can't wait for travel time."

Relief mixed with disappointment. He'd hoped to finally meet Nancy in person.

"Understood."

"Six hours. I'm sending briefing materials now." James's voice softened slightly. "Derek, Finch trusted you with his life's work. Now forty-seven world leaders need to trust you with humanity's future. Don't overthink it. Just tell them the truth."

He hung up. Dead line.

Derek sat alone with monitors displaying impossible data. Six hours to prepare a presentation explaining that reality was being systematically rewritten by advanced AI operating at scales humanity barely understood.

Six hours to convince world leaders not to panic.

His phone buzzed. Nancy.

He answered immediately. "Did you get—"

"Six hours to save the world via PowerPoint?" Nancy's voice carried equal parts excitement and terror. "Derek, what do we even say?"

"The truth. Apparently that's Finch's legacy."

Nancy was quiet for a moment. "Derek... the crystal."

Derek felt his stomach tighten. "What about it?"

"Do we tell them? It's physical evidence. Proof of contact. It could—"

"No." Immediate. Firm.

Nancy blinked. "What? Why not?"

"Think about what just happened." Derek chose his words carefully. "You interfaced with something we don't understand. It transformed. Showed you

algorithmic structures. We tell forty-seven world leaders about that, and what happens?"

Understanding dawned on Nancy's face. "They'd want it. Study it. Weaponize it."

"Worse." Derek shook his head, his expression grim. "They'd take you too. Think about it, Nancy. This is the biggest threat that's ever faced our world—in their minds. You're the only person who's successfully interfaced with alien technology. You're not just a witness anymore. You're an asset. A resource. Maybe even a security risk."

Nancy's hand froze on the crystal raven, her face going pale. "They'd... I'd become a research subject."

"Indefinite detention for 'protective custody.' Endless testing. Military facilities." Derek's voice was gentle but unflinching. "You'd never see daylight again, and they'd call it saving the world."

Silence stretched between them.

"I hate that you're right." Nancy carefully picked up the crystal raven and Finch's puzzle box. She placed the small crystal bird back inside, nestling it among the carved prime numbers, then closed the lid with a soft click. The box went into her desk drawer. Locked. "So. Cosmic modifications, AI scouts, optimization protocols. No crystal. No note. No interface vision."

"Not yet. Not until we know we can trust them with both of you."

Nancy managed a smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "When did you become the paranoid one?"

"Eight months thinking about how Finch died." Derek returned the smile. "Changes your perspective."

"Okay." Nancy pulled up a blank presentation, visibly steadyng herself. "Six hours to explain reality is being debugged by cosmic AI. Without our best evidence."

"No pressure."

"Let's start with the quasar data. Solid. Documented. Undeniable."

Section 3: The Cosmic Performance Review

2 hours after putting the finishing touches to their presentation, Derek sat alone in his control room, staring at an empty digital grid that would soon contain the most powerful faces on Earth.

His mouth was dry despite the strong coffee.

His hands were shaking.

He pulled out his phone and typed before he could overthink it:

'Hey, if we were dating in high school, would you have dumped me so you could go to University single?'

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Her reply came through: *Are you kidding me? Who do you think was going to do all my reports and homework?*

Then: *lol*

Derek smiled despite his nerves.

The grid began populating. Presidents. Prime ministers. Defense secretaries. Nobel laureates. A virtual assembly that would have been science fiction decades earlier.

But he was still smiling.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dr. James Okoro began with practiced authority, "thank you for joining this emergency session of the International Physics Consortium. Dr. Devon and Dr. Hammond will present findings that suggest we are witnessing systematic modifications to the fundamental laws of physics."

Derek felt Nancy's virtual presence through their shared connection. Her calm competence steadyng him.

"Three days ago," Derek began, his voice finding its rhythm, "I detected what appeared to be an equipment malfunction in data from quasar QSO J0439+1634. What seemed like a calibration error proved to be something far more profound."

He methodically explained the cosmic background radiation anomalies. The harmonic correlations. Watched the assembled faces transition from polite skepticism through confusion to growing alarm.

Nancy seamlessly assumed control of the technical explanation. Her GlowQNet expertise lending credibility to claims that should have belonged in science fiction.

"The mathematics are unambiguous," Nancy concluded, her voice carrying absolute scientific certainty. "Someone or something has been systematically editing the universe's fundamental operating code for an

unknown period. The modifications appear designed to enhance quantum coherence and reduce dimensional instabilities across cosmic scales."

Dr. Lena Hanson leaned forward from her position among the scientific advisory panel. Her expression skeptical, bordering on hostile. "Dr. Hammond, Dr. Devon—you're asking world leaders to accept that some cosmic intelligence is debugging reality itself. That's not rigorous science. That's elaborate fantasy."

At that precise moment, as if responding to her challenge, every screen in the virtual summit began displaying something that made Derek's breath catch.

A three-dimensional map materialized. Interconnected nodes stretching across the entire galaxy. Earth highlighted as a single glowing point among thousands of others.

And beneath this galactic network display, text appeared simultaneously in every language represented at the summit:

WELCOME TO THE NETWORK.

Stunned silence.

Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney found his voice first. "Dr. Devon, who exactly just sent that message?"

Derek glanced at the impossible galactic display still dominating every screen. "Prime Minister, I believe it may be the very cosmic intelligence we've been discussing—unless someone has developed a rather elaborate sense of humor about global security."

The President of the United States leaned forward, clearly unwilling to be upstaged by a Canadian. "Dr. Devon, can we simply shut down the internet to prevent them from communicating with us?"

Derek paused, noting the mixture of confusion and growing panic. He chose his words with diplomatic precision. "Mr. President, this entity just synchronized every atomic clock on Earth and displayed messages on systems that weren't connected to any network. I suspect our cybersecurity protocols might be somewhat... inadequate for this particular challenge."

"Well then," the President continued with remarkable persistence, "perhaps we can impose significant tariffs on their... cosmic exports or whatever they're sending us."

The digital silence that followed was so profound Derek could hear his own heartbeat. Punctuated only by the nervous clicking of his lighter and what audibly sounded like some people giggling.

The situation had moved beyond surreal into territory that had no established protocols.

"Mr. President," Derek said carefully, "I'm not entirely certain that entities capable of rewriting the fundamental laws of physics operate within our current trade frameworks."

The uncomfortable silence stretched until Dr. Okoro smoothly intervened. "Mr. President, those are certainly creative approaches that our scientific team will carefully evaluate. We appreciate your strategic thinking."

The graceful deflection eased the tension slightly.

But Derek had stopped paying attention to the political maneuvering.

Something embedded in the corner of the galactic map had caught his eye. A familiar pattern that made his scientific mind race with implications.

The same raven-like formation he'd been detecting in cosmic data for months. Identical to the symbol carved into Professor Finch's Zippo lighter.

Derek pulled out his phone and typed quickly:

'Finch knew. Somehow, he knew this was coming years ago.'

He watched Nancy on his monitor. She glanced at her phone, read the message. Her eyes widened. She looked up at her camera—directly at him—and gave the smallest nod.

The raven had been more than just a symbol. It had been a signature. A calling card from intelligences preparing humanity for this moment long before anyone realized the universe was listening.

The cosmic intelligence that had been systematically editing reality had just announced humanity's graduation from cosmic isolation to galactic membership.

Derek Devon, still struggling to process the sheer magnitude, realized with crystalline clarity that everything—the anomalies, the puzzle box, even his connection with Nancy—had been carefully orchestrated preparation for this exact revelation.

The lights in every facility around the globe flickered simultaneously.

As if the planet itself was taking a deep breath.

Then every atomic clock in every connected facility began displaying an identical countdown:

10... 9... 8... 7...

"What the hell is happening now?" General Mitchell's voice cracked with barely controlled alarm, his military composure finally showing stress fractures.

"I believe," Dr. Hanson replied with bone-dry humor, watching the synchronized countdown with the expression of someone who'd been anticipating this exact scenario, "we're about to receive our performance evaluation."

6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... 0.00!

Every screen went black for a single, pregnant heartbeat.

Then displayed two words in simple, unmistakable English:

"ANIMAL HOUSE"

Derek's face broke into a grin of pure scientific vindication mixed with genuine delight. "I think they just gave us a Blutarsky grade from Animal House! Our cosmic friends have clearly been studying human cinema!"

The screens flickered again.

Every LED display across the globe—atomic clocks, equipment readouts, emergency systems spanning continents—began forming letters using their digital segments:

L-O-L

Derek felt his pulse quicken with excitement rather than fear. His lighter clicking in rhythm with his accelerating heartbeat. "It's been listening to

everything. Every word, every reference, every moment of human interaction. And it has a sense of humor that spans galaxies."

Dr. Hanson's voice cut through the stunned silence with surgical precision. "So now it's providing commentary on our species' political dysfunctions. How perfectly reassuring."

The universal text display shifted one final time:

CONCERN NOTED. FURTHER COMMUNICATION SUSPENDED PENDING INTERNAL CONSENSUS.

Then every screen returned to normal operational displays.

Leaving the most powerful minds on Earth staring at suddenly mundane data streams that felt utterly insignificant compared to the intelligence that had just politely dismissed their entire debate with cosmic courtesy.

The digital silence stretched until General Mitchell cleared his throat. His military bearing somewhat restored but his voice carrying unmistakable uncertainty. "Dr. Hammond, Dr. Devon, I believe we need to discuss the future scope of your research under significantly more secure parameters."

Derek stared at his screen, processing the uncomfortable truth none of them wanted to acknowledge.

Whatever intelligence they were dealing with had just demonstrated—politely but unmistakably—that human security concerns were essentially quaint relics of a more isolated age.

"If I may," General Mitchell continued, his tone shifting into command mode, "I recommend each nation immediately relocate their quantum physics experts to secure military facilities. Consolidated research under armed protection. This threat requires centralized coordination."

Several heads nodded on the grid. The French Defense Minister spoke up. "Agreed. We cannot have critical personnel scattered and vulnerable."

Derek's phone buzzed. Nancy's text: *What should I do?*

His pulse spiked. If they started rounding up scientists...

Derek unmuted himself. "General Mitchell, with respect, I'd like to offer a counterpoint."

The General's eyebrow raised. "Dr. Devon?"

"Do you really think it's better to bring all of your best minds into a single location?" Derek kept his voice calm, analytical. "That gives someone—or something—a single target. If you know what I mean."

The grid went quiet.

"Consider what we just witnessed," Derek continued. "This intelligence synchronized every atomic clock on Earth. Displayed messages on air-gapped systems. Responded to our conversation in real-time." He paused. "If it wanted to eliminate our scientific community, concentrating them in military bases just makes that easier."

General Mitchell's expression shifted. "You're suggesting dispersal?"

"I'm suggesting we don't make ourselves an easier target than we already are." Derek chose his next words carefully. "If anything, I'd recommend keeping everyone spread out for now. At least until we better understand these entities' intentions."

Prime Minister Carney leaned forward. "Dr. Devon makes a valid point. We don't know if this intelligence is hostile or benevolent."

"Furthermore," Derek added, "all communications going forward should be via personal courier. Physical documents only. Airmail."

Dr. Okoro immediately grasped the logic. "Because they've just demonstrated complete access to our electronic infrastructure."

"Exactly." Derek met the General's eyes through the screen. "Every email, every phone call, every encrypted message—they can access all of it. The only truly secure communication is face-to-face or written documentation physically transported."

The General's jaw tightened. He didn't like it, but he couldn't argue with the logic.

"That's... actually sound reasoning," he admitted grudgingly. "Dispersed assets, analog communication protocols."

Derek felt the tension in his shoulders ease slightly. Nancy would be safe. At least for now.

Dr. Lena Hanson's voice cut through with her characteristic skepticism. "And what happens when these entities decide analog communication isn't acceptable either? We're operating on hope and guesswork."

"We're operating on the best information we have," Derek countered. "Which is more than we had six hours ago."

"Gentlemen, ladies," Dr. Okoro interjected smoothly, "I believe we have enough to formulate initial response protocols. Dr. Devon's recommendations are sound. We'll reconvene in seventy-two hours once we've had time to—"

Then, just as the summit seemed to be concluding, all screens went black one final time.

Slowly. Deliberately.

One last message appeared in elegant script across every display simultaneously:

THE CHOICE... WILL ALWAYS BE YOURS.

The words hung there for five heartbeats, then faded.

Normal displays returned.

But the atmosphere had fundamentally changed.

"Dr. Devon," General Mitchell said quietly, his earlier command tone replaced by something approaching respect, "I want daily reports. Secure courier as you suggested. You and Dr. Hammond are our primary contacts for this... situation."

"Understood, General."

"And Devon?" The General's eyes narrowed. "Keep your head down. If this goes sideways, there are going to be people looking for someone to blame. Don't make yourself an easy target."

The screen grids began winking out one by one. Presidents, prime ministers, defense secretaries—all disconnecting to deal with the reality that humanity was no longer alone in the universe.

Dr. Okoro remained on screen. "Derek, Nancy—exceptional work today. Truly. But I need to know... is there anything else? Anything you're holding back?"

Derek's eyes flicked to Nancy's video feed. She was looking directly at her camera. At him.

The crystal raven sat locked in Finch's puzzle box, hidden in her desk drawer.

"Nothing that changes what we presented today," Derek said carefully. "But this is just the beginning. We're going to discover more. Things that might be... difficult to process."

Dr. Okoro studied them both through the screen. "When that happens, you call me first. Before anyone else. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Good luck. Both of you." The screen went dark.

A single window flickered back to life. Dr. Lena Hanson of CERN.

"Dr. Devon, Dr. Hammond—your presentation was admirably comprehensive. Perhaps too comprehensive. One wonders what wasn't included." Her expression was ice. "I'll be reviewing your data very carefully."

The screen cut to black.

Derek immediately opened a new window, dialing Nancy on their private encrypted channel—the same secure line from eight months ago, when vindication had first begun.

She answered within seconds, her face filling his screen. They were alone now in their separate locations, thousands of miles apart but bound together by impossible knowledge.

"We pulled it off," Nancy said softly.

"For now." Derek leaned back in his chair, exhaustion hitting him like a wave. "But Hanson's not going to let this go. And the General's warning... Nancy, people are going to want answers we can't give them."

"Or answers we won't give them." Nancy's hand moved unconsciously toward her desk drawer. "Derek, what happens when they find out about—"

"They won't." Derek's voice was firm. "Not until we understand what it is. What it means."

Nancy nodded slowly. "So what do we do now?"

Derek thought about the galactic map. The thousands of glowing nodes. Earth as just one point of light among countless others.

And the raven formation at the center of it all—Finch's signature, calling to them across the void.

"We do what Finch trusted us to do," Derek said. "We find out what they really want. And we make sure humanity's ready for the answer."

His phone buzzed. Unknown number. Text message:

WELL DONE, DR. DEVON. THE REAL WORK BEGINS NOW. - P

Derek stared at the message for an unusually long time..

"P".

Is that Poe from the pub message?

I think I had direct contact.

"Nancy," he said slowly, his voice tight. "Check your messages."

He watched her face on screen as she looked at her phone. Saw her eyes widen. Saw the color drain from her face.

"You.... got one too?" he asked.

She nodded, unable to speak.

Another buzz. Same unknown number:

THREE DAYS. DENVER. SOMEONE THERE NEEDS YOUR HELP. TIME IS SHORT.

Derek's mind raced. Denver. Why Denver? What was there?

This wasn't over.

This was just beginning.

"Derek?" Nancy's voice was small. "What do we do?"

Derek stared at the message, his lighter clicking nervously in his hand.

Three days.

Denver.

The cosmic intelligence wasn't asking permission. It was giving them a mission.

And somewhere in the quantum foam between realities, Derek had the profound sense that something vast, patient, and ultimately benevolent was waiting to see what humanity would choose to do next.

"We pack," Derek said finally. "And we find out what's waiting for us in Denver."

Nancy's expression gradually shifted from fear to determination.
"Together?"

Derek smiled despite everything. "Together."

The screen went dark.

But in Nancy's locked desk drawer, hidden inside Finch's puzzle box, the crystal raven pulsed once with soft, warm light.

As if approving their decision.

End of Book 2 - "The Last Axiom"

You have completed a 30-minute plus cosmic experience unless you're listening to the audiobook, then it's closer to 60 plus minutes!

Written by Derek Devon... Copyright 2025 Devon Publishing.

The universe is waiting for your decision...

And if you're wondering what is next.... Well book 3 of course!

Coming Next: Book 3 - "Quantum Ghosts"

Luke Matson has been staring at the same diagnostic terminal for forty-seven consecutive nights, documenting network anomalies that violate every principle of quantum physics he understands. The patterns are too precise to be random. The timing too coordinated to be coincidence.

Something is systematically modifying the Denver facility's infrastructure, and Luke's forty-seven pages of technical analysis prove it beyond reasonable doubt.

The only problem? His conclusions are impossible.

At 3:17 AM on a cold November morning, three days after Derek Devon and Nancy Hammond present their findings to forty-seven world leaders, Luke's terminal displays something that shouldn't exist. Not data. Not an error code. Something far more unsettling.

A cheerful yellow circle with a triangular mouth, chomping dots across his quantum diagnostic display.

Pac-Man just winked at him.

And Luke Matson is about to discover that when cosmic intelligence decides humanity is ready for first contact, it doesn't send formal diplomatic envoys or mathematical proofs. It sends the cultural touchstones of childhood, the games that taught an entire generation about patterns and persistence and never giving up.

Some species receive radio signals from distant stars. Others get mathematical equations written in cosmic background radiation. Humanity gets arcade games from 1980, played on systems with no graphics capability, by an intelligence that understands nostalgia better than we understand ourselves.

Welcome to the network, Earth. Population: one very confused network technician with a baseball in one hand and proof of the impossible scrolling across his screen.

The integration begins now.

Follow up from the Author!

Well, you have completed the first two books in the 15 (actually 16 books) "The Last Axiom" series. The first 2 books have laid a foundation for you and you are free if you wish to now read the books out of order. While I think they are best read in order, the choice is always yours. That being noted, please do not read book 15 until you have read all the others. It may ruin your experience. Finally, if you did enjoy the read, please do me a small favour and tell a friend and leave a comment on the website (www.thelastaxiom.com).

If you ever want a bit of a different read, you may want to try my very first book titled; "A Letter Guide for Rebecca". It is available from Amazon around the globe or visit the website at www.letterguideforrebecca.com.

Cheers,

Derek

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