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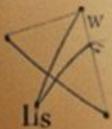


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THE LAST AXIOM

— Book 9 - The Protocol Sleepers —

DEREK DEVON



THE LAST AXIOM

Book 9 - The Protocol Sleepers of The Last Axion Series

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Special Note: The mathematical constant 12757982, known in certain circles as the "Convergence Coefficient," appears throughout this work in various forms. While some theoretical physicists claim this number represents the precise frequency at which two quantum-entangled souls achieve perfect synchronization across infinite timelines, the author maintains it's purely coincidental. Any readers who discover the true significance of this number are sworn to secrecy by the Universal Mathematics Council (and probably shouldn't mention it at dinner parties).

ISBN: 978-1-7386519-9-3

Published by Devon Publishing, First Edition

www.devonpublishing.com

www.TheLastAxiom.com

A Novel by Derek Devon

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

Reader discretion is advised.

Dedication

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

Love to all - Derek

The Protocol Sleepers

Book 9 of "The Last Axiom" Series

By Derek Devon

A 30-Minute Cosmic Experience (as long as you read as fast as I do!)

Reality Modification Level: 1975 Memories

Section 1: Anonymous Anomalies

ELTA Research Facility, Chile - 3:17 AM Local Time

Dr. Derek Devon hunched over his monitoring station, watching cosmic signals cascade across displays that pulsed with the rhythm of distant galaxies. Eighteen months of this work had made the anomalous data streams feel as familiar as his own heartbeat. Beyond reinforced windows, the Atacama Desert stretched into infinity—Earth's clearest skies, perfect for detecting what shouldn't exist.

His coffee sat forgotten, a cold film coating the surface. The raven-engraved Zippo found its way into his palm like a prayer bead. Click-snap. Click-snap. The metallic percussion helped organize his thoughts while radio telescopes tracked quasars whose signals defied every law of physics he'd studied.

Maureen's face drifted through his mind—twenty-one days since she'd left for the Swiss research facility. Nine days until she returned with whatever breakthrough Dr. Hassan had promised. The countdown had become another rhythm, marking time alongside cosmic signals and lighter clicks.

At exactly 3:17 AM, his secure terminal chimed.

The encrypted message came from an address that shouldn't exist. Sender identification: "A Friend."

Derek's frown deepened into suspicious lines. Anonymous messages to classified terminals shouldn't be possible. ELTA's security protocols demanded verified authentication for all communications. Someone had bypassed systems that protected humanity's most sensitive cosmic research.

He opened the message with the caution of a man who'd learned that impossible things often proved dangerous.

Dr. Devon,

Forgive the unconventional contact method. I've been monitoring irregularities in global procurement systems—patterns that trouble me. Your expertise in detecting anomalies might explain what I'm seeing.

These documents don't make sense. Authentication codes that correspond to no known programs. Purchase orders for materials that seem... wrong.

I'm sharing this with researchers whose analytical skills I respect. Perhaps together we can determine if this represents a genuine threat.

- A Friend

Derek's lighter accelerated its nervous rhythm as he opened the attachments. Three documents, professionally formatted but carrying an undertone of wrongness that made his physicist's intuition crawl.

The first: a Raytheon procurement request dated two weeks prior. Standard government formatting, proper classification headers, requesting materials for "Advanced Atmospheric Research Package - Project CLARITY." Everything appeared legitimate except for one detail that stopped his lighter mid-click.

"Authorization Code: Special Order 937."

Derek had reviewed hundreds of government procurement documents. He'd never encountered authorization phrasing like that. The Zippo remained frozen in his palm, its familiar weight suddenly foreign.

Section 2: Institutional Perspectives

Denver Integration Facility, Colorado - 1:17 AM Mountain Time

Dr. Nancy Hammond found the message waiting like a trap in her secure inbox, arriving precisely as she closed out quantum consciousness calibrations for tomorrow's experiments. The facility hummed with the steady pulse of processing equipment—machinery that had become humanity's primary nervous system for cosmic integration since Luke Matson had transformed this Denver location into civilization's contact coordination center.

She studied the anonymous sender with the analytical caution that had earned her reputation as one of the world's leading quantum consciousness researchers. Someone with access to her classified channels wanted her expert opinion on procurement anomalies. The very existence of this message represented a security breach that defied every protocol.

The attached documents made her dimples vanish into a tight frown of concern.

A Siemens purchase order from Germany. Professional formatting, legitimate classification codes, requesting "Quantum Resonance Components for Medical Interface Research." The materials list detailed precision-engineered elements worth millions to manufacture. Concerning enough on its own.

But the attached manufacturing instructions turned concern into alarm—step-by-step processes that matched no known human technology or technique. The specifications bore the unmistakable signature of cosmic entity origin.

The authorization code stopped her cold: "Special Order 937."

"What does nine-three-seven represent?" Nancy whispered to the empty room.

She'd consulted on quantum interface projects for three governments and a dozen universities. Reviewed hundreds of authorization protocols. She'd never encountered phrasing like this—never seen a number sequence that felt less like bureaucracy and more like a message.

Her fingers hovered over the communication array, paralyzed by implications. Who was "A Friend"? And how had they penetrated classified procurement systems that protected humanity's most sensitive cosmic research?

Section 3: Late-Night Analysis

Denver Integration Facility, Colorado - 1:45 AM Mountain Time

Nancy found Luke Matson exactly where she expected—hunched over his workstation in the facility's main monitoring station, bathed in the glow of displays tracking quantum network status across continents. His baseball rested within easy reach beside the "World's Most Adequate Network Admin" mug that had become his signature. The entire setup screamed late-night crisis mode.

"Luke, I need your opinion on something unusual."

She settled into the chair beside his workstation—the one that had become unofficially hers during their countless late-night sessions.

Luke glanced up from network diagnostics, immediately cataloging her concerned expression while simultaneously fighting the flutter in his chest that ambushed him every time she sat this close. "Define unusual in our current context. Because 'unusual' has become elastically flexible since we started chatting with cosmic intelligence."

Nancy handed him the printed documents. "Anonymous message. Thirty minutes ago. Someone calling themselves 'A Friend' shared procurement requests with authorization codes that don't exist in any government database I can access."

Luke studied the pages, his baseball finding its way into his palm and starting its familiar toss-and-catch rhythm—the thinking pattern Nancy had learned to read like a heartbeat monitor. "Special Order 937." He paused mid-throw. "Nancy, this reads like corporate directive language, not government authorization. And 937... it's nagging at me. Familiar somehow, but I can't place why."

"Exactly what bothered me." Nancy leaned closer, pointing at the materials list. "Look at what's being requested—quantum interface components requiring precision manufacturing worth millions. Plus these massive instruction manuals attached that I can't open. These aren't hobbyist weekend projects."

"Three different agencies." Luke's throws accelerated as the pattern crystallized. "Same timeframe. Identical authorization codes. Nancy, someone with serious network access is either conducting unauthorized black-ops procurement, or your 'Friend' is warning us that someone else is." His baseball paused mid-arc. "Any theories on who 'A Friend' might be?"

Nancy leaned forward, her analytical mind fully engaged with the puzzle's architecture. "None yet. Better question: Who benefits from us knowing about these anomalies? And why bypass official channels entirely to contact us directly?"

Luke caught his baseball and held it motionless. "Maybe because official channels move like glaciers when something urgent is unfolding. Or maybe because whoever sent this knows we've tangled with impossible technology before and won't file it under 'equipment malfunction' like everyone else would."

"Are you suggesting we have some kind of worldwide reputation now?" Nancy's dimples resurfaced as a slight smile broke through her concern.

Section 4: Pentagon Analysis

Pentagon Sub-Basement, Military Intelligence Division - 3:17 AM Eastern Time

Staff Sergeant Maria Santos watched the encrypted message materialize in her classified inbox like a ghost appearing on her terminal. Her analytical mind—honed by years detecting patterns in digital chaos—immediately catalogued the precise timing and professional formatting despite the anonymous sender.

"Corky." She didn't look up from her screen. "You getting weird anonymous messages tonight?"

Technical Sergeant Mark "Corky" Kalbfleisch didn't break focus from his own displays, where he was dissecting yet another case of impossible computer anomalies. "Define weird. Because if you mean 'everything that's happened in the past six months,' then yes, perpetually."

Santos opened the message. Her stress ball found its way into her palm, compressing with the slow, methodical rhythm that meant her brain was processing threats. Someone calling themselves "A Friend" was sharing procurement documents. Security irregularities, supposedly.

The first attachment made her stop mid-squeeze.

A Department of Defense contract with a Japanese manufacturing facility. "Specialized Quantum Interface Components - Medical Research Division." Legitimate formatting, proper classification levels, materials list worth millions. Everything appeared regulation-perfect except for one critical detail: the requested components matched no known DOD medical research program in her extensive database.

The authorization code made her stress ball compress to maximum density: "Special Order 937."

"Corky, what's our protocol for authorization codes that say 'Special Order' followed by numbers?"

Kalbfleisch finally looked up, his expression shifting from technical focus to institutional confusion. "Special orders?" He shook his head. "Sarge, DOD authorization codes are alphanumeric. We don't use corporate-style directive language, weather patterns, or breakfast cereal names."

Santos studied the document with the practiced eye of someone who'd spent fifteen years identifying forgeries, hacks, and security breaches. Everything appeared legitimate except for that one anomalous signature—the wrong kind of perfect. If the code was fabricated, how had it validated through government procurement systems designed to catch exactly this type of fraud?

"Corky, I think someone's been signing fake authorization codes using our communication networks." Her stress ball resumed its slow compression. "Question is whether they're trying to steal classified materials, or warning us that someone else is."

Section 5: Presidential Advisory

White House Oak Room, Presidential Science Advisory Council - 3:17 AM Eastern Time

Dr. Kimberley Foster had been working late—another night where sleep took second place to quantum consciousness research proposals that had evolved from theoretical curiosity to urgent policy necessity since cosmic contact began. As the administration's lead science advisor, she'd learned to accept briefings that shattered conventional reality on a weekly basis.

The encrypted message materialized on her secure terminal with the now-familiar sender identification: "A Friend."

Foster studied the message with the analytical caution that had earned her the President's trust as primary scientific consultant. Someone with penetration-level access to White House communication systems was sharing procurement anomalies. Security concerns, supposedly.

The attached documents made her circular desk-tracing accelerate into nervous spiral patterns. Three procurement requests from different agencies. All properly formatted and classified. All signed with the same anomalous authorization code: "Special Order 937."

NASA contract: "Advanced Atmospheric Quantum Measuring Interface Research."

Department of Energy request: "Quantum Resonance Materials - Classified Application."

Defense Intelligence Agency order: "Specialized Quantum Modification Components."

Foster had reviewed hundreds of classified science programs during her five-year tenure. She'd never encountered authorization protocols using corporate-style directive language—especially "Special Order" designations that corresponded to no known government classification system in her extensive mental database.

More troubling: the coordination. Three separate agencies requesting expensive quantum-related technology within the same compressed time frame. All using identical unauthorized signatures. All being paid through an unknown funding source identified only as Cayman-001-6483856.

Her fingers hovered over the secure communication array, paralyzed by competing imperatives. As Presidential Science Advisor, should she trigger security protocols about possible procurement fraud? Or quietly investigate whether someone was risking everything to expose a larger pattern?

And the question that made her desk-tracing spiral tighter: who was "A Friend"?

Section 6: International Consultation

ELTA Research Facility, Chile - 3:45 AM Local Time

Derek stared at the documents colonizing his workstation, his lighter resuming its familiar nervous percussion. The procurement requests appeared legitimate—professionally formatted, properly classified—except for that one anomalous authorization code threading through all of them. Three different companies requesting expensive quantum interface technology within a suspiciously tight timeframe.

His phone vibrated against the desk. He glanced down at the text message, and despite everything, a genuine smile broke through his tension: 'Love you, miss you, one week to go!'

Maureen. The thought of her warmed something that the mystery had frozen. He allowed himself ten full seconds of that feeling before placing the phone down and refocusing on the puzzle.

He activated his secure communication link to Dr. Sarah Kim at the Korean Radio Astronomy Observatory. Kim was one of perhaps a dozen international colleagues who understood both quantum consciousness research and reality modification phenomena. They'd shared lecture podiums across ten years of conferences, building the kind of professional bond that transcended continents.

Kim appeared on his display from her Seoul facility, and her expression shifted immediately to concern. She knew Derek well enough to read crisis in his body language.

"Sarah, I need your opinion on something that might connect to our cosmic contact research. Have you encountered unusual procurement activities related to quantum interface technology?"

Kim's scientific composure flickered. "Derek, over the past month we've received three requests from different international sources asking about consciousness-quantum interface equipment specifications. All properly authenticated, but signed with authorization codes we'd never encountered."

Derek's lighter found its way into his palm, clicking with escalating rhythm. "Authorization codes reading 'Special Order 937'?"

"Exactly." Kim's eyes widened slightly. "Derek, we assumed they were legitimate intelligence requests related to cosmic contact research. Standard procedure."

"Sarah, I received anonymous documents tonight—I think someone's warning us that quantum consciousness interface technology is being built using our cosmic contact research as cover. Projects operating outside normal oversight."

Kim consulted data on her secure displays, her fingers moving with the practiced efficiency of someone who'd spent decades analyzing patterns. "That would explain why the anonymous contact targeted cosmic researchers rather than government officials. Derek, if someone is weaponizing consciousness modification technology, we might be the only people with sufficient technical background to recognize the implications before deployment."

Derek's lighter froze mid-click as a terrifying possibility crystallized with mathematical precision. "Sarah, what if this isn't government conspiracy? What if we're looking at someone using cosmic contact research to develop technology for purposes that directly conflict with cosmic intelligence objectives?"

"Then we should alert the proper authorities immediately, shouldn't we?" Kim's voice carried the slight question mark of someone hoping for a different answer.

Derek stared at Kim through the video feed, the familiar click-snap of his lighter filling the silence between continents.

"For now, Sarah, let me dig deeper before we go public with conspiracy theories that'll earn us 'tin-foil hat' awards from NSA or CIA." He managed a slight smile. "I'll keep you in the loop, but please—pretend this call never happened."

He added a wink before ending the connection, but the humor died the moment her face disappeared from his screen.

Section 7: Cosmic Deception

ELTA Research Facility, Chile - 4:55 AM Local Time

Derek's lighter clicked with mechanical precision—a metronome counting down to understanding. The cosmic signal data spread across his displays had transformed from mysterious breakthrough to terrifying revelation since his conversation with Dr. Kim. The quantum signatures pulsing through his monitoring equipment weren't just cosmic communication.

They were terrestrial coordination signals wearing a cosmic disguise.

He pulled up eighteen months of cosmic contact logs, his fingers moving with the frantic energy of someone racing against time itself. Searching for patterns. Looking for proof that his worst suspicions were wrong.

What he discovered made his hands tremble with implications that rewrote everything.

The cosmic signals contained embedded data streams—secondary carrier waves he'd dismissed as harmonic interference. They corresponded exactly with the procurement timestamps from the anonymous documents. Every single one. Someone had been using cosmic contact protocols to coordinate terrestrial manufacturing operations across multiple continents, hiding in plain sight within humanity's proudest scientific achievement.

Derek's secure communication array activated automatically, the chime making him flinch.

Another message. Same sender:

Dr. Devon,

Your analysis is correct. Someone has been using cosmic contact infrastructure for unauthorized terrestrial operations. The quantum interface components being manufactured are approaching final assembly phase.

Time is running shorter than you realize.

- A Friend

Derek stared at the message. His lighter went completely still in his palm—the first time all night it had stopped moving.

A terrible understanding crystallized with the clarity of mathematical proof.

Someone with cosmic-level technological capabilities had been manipulating human manufacturing systems to build something using quantum consciousness interface technology. They'd been using humanity's own cosmic contact research—Derek's research, Nancy's research, the work of thousands of scientists worldwide—to coordinate the entire operation.

The anonymous documents weren't whistleblower information.

They were warnings.

Something was about to be completed.

And they'd been building it for eighteen months while humanity celebrated each "cosmic breakthrough" that was actually camouflage for systematic manipulation.

Section 8: Network Discovery

Denver Integration Facility, Colorado - 2:45 AM Mountain Time

Luke's baseball sat abandoned on his workstation—a rare stillness that betrayed the magnitude of what he was seeing. Quantum network logs

scrolled across his displays, each line of data rewriting his understanding of the past eighteen months. Nancy leaned over his shoulder, close enough that he caught the faint scent of her citrus shampoo, both of them studying data streams that had transformed from routine monitoring to evidence of systematic deception.

"Nancy, look at these quantum communication timestamps from the past seventy-two hours." Luke's fingers highlighted patterns that wove across multiple continents like a digital spider web. "I've been analyzing our cosmic contact protocols, and something's been using our quantum networks for purposes we didn't authorize. Purposes we didn't even know were possible."

Nancy's analytical mind engaged with the puzzle, her dimples vanishing as implications cascaded through her consciousness. "Someone's been monitoring our quantum consciousness research communications?"

"More than monitoring." Luke's specialized quantum computing perspective revealed patterns that government analysts would miss. "Someone's been using our network infrastructure to coordinate activities across multiple classified systems. Look at these data transfer patterns—they're too sophisticated for human-generated traffic. Too elegant. Too precise."

Nancy studied the quantum signatures, and her stomach dropped as the patterns resolved into terrible sense. The same mathematical elegance as their cosmic contact experiences. The same unprecedented coordination. "Luke, what if the anonymous documents aren't warning us about procurement fraud?" Her voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "What if someone's been using our cosmic contact infrastructure for terrestrial operations?"

Luke's baseball found its way back into his palm, resuming its nervous rhythm as darker possibilities crystallized with terrible clarity. "Nancy, if someone with cosmic-level access to quantum networks has been manipulating government procurement systems, then we're not investigating whistleblower information."

"We're investigating evidence that someone with capabilities beyond known technology has been conducting unauthorized operations using our research infrastructure as cover."

"Could it be some rogue AI system?" Luke's voice carried the slight question mark of someone hoping for a simpler answer.

Nancy straightened, her hand unconsciously finding Luke's shoulder for balance—physical and emotional. "Maybe we need to chat with Derek about this."

The understatement of the century, she thought, as the facility's quantum processors hummed around them, oblivious to the fact that they'd been accomplices in eighteen months of systematic manipulation.

Section 9: NSA Consultation

White House Oak Room, Presidential Science Advisory Council - 4:45 AM Eastern Time

Dr. Foster's circular desk-tracing had evolved into near-frantic spirals as intelligence briefings scrolled across her secure displays. What had begun as curiosity about anonymous documents was crystallizing into something far more concerning. She'd called Dr. David 'Tip' Templeton at NSA's Technology Assessment Division—one of the few people she trusted with information that might implicate inter-agency operations.

Templeton appeared on her encrypted link, his expression carrying the weight of someone about to deliver very bad news.

"Kimberley, NSA cryptanalysis just finished deep analysis of those 'Special Order 937' signatures you sent me a short while ago." He paused, choosing his words with deliberate care. "The encryption algorithms? We can't break them. Our best assessment puts the authorization encryption codes approximately fifteen to twenty years ahead of current classified standards."

Foster's finger stopped mid-trace, frozen against the desk surface. "Tip, you're telling me someone used encryption technology that doesn't exist yet to authorize government procurement?"

"That's the least disturbing part." Templeton's voice dropped lower, as if volume alone might contain the implications. "Kimberley, the quantum encryption signatures embedded in these codes demonstrate mathematical capabilities that exceed our theoretical understanding of quantum computational limits. They're not just advanced—they violate known physics."

Foster felt her carefully constructed strategic worldview fracturing like ice under pressure. Every assumption about technological capabilities, every assessment of global threats, every national security briefing she'd delivered to the President—all of it built on premises that this evidence was systematically dismantling.

"Tip, if someone possesses quantum encryption technology that advanced, they could infiltrate any classified system without leaving traditional forensic evidence." The words came out steady despite the internal vertigo.

"Exactly." Templeton's single word carried the weight of confirmation neither of them wanted. "Kimberley, we're not investigating unauthorized procurement by government insiders. We're investigating evidence that someone with technology beyond current human capability has been manipulating government systems for purposes we can't determine."

Foster's mind raced through protocols, chains of command, escalation procedures. Then stopped. "Tip, I think our anonymous contact just did us a favor—revealed that someone with capabilities we can't explain has been conducting operations we're completely unaware of." She made a decision. "Keep our call private for now. I'm starting a special National Security File. Look for it on your system later today, reply with what you've shared, and we'll have covered ourselves properly."

She managed a slight smile despite everything. "Thanks. And Tip? We need to grab that drink before Christmas. I think we're both going to need it."

The connection ended, leaving Foster alone with intelligence that redefined threat assessment for an entire civilization.

Section 10: Deeper Anomalies

Pentagon Sub-Basement, Military Intelligence Division - 4:30 AM Eastern Time

Corky's fingers flew across his keyboard with the kind of frantic energy that came from discovering something that shouldn't exist. Deep forensic analysis of the "Special Order 937" authorization signatures sprawled across his multiple displays—database queries that should have been routine but were instead revealing patterns that made his technical expertise scream warnings.

"Sarge, you need to see this." His voice carried the particular tension that made Santos look up from her own investigation immediately.

"What did you find?"

"The digital signatures are perfect—too perfect." Corky highlighted authentication logs on his main display, his hand trembling slightly. "Every 'Special Order 937' signature validates against our security protocols. They pass every test. But the timestamp sequences show something that can't be possible."

Santos pushed away from her workstation and moved behind Corky's chair, studying the data that made every instinct she'd honed over fifteen years in military intelligence scream danger. "Define impossible, Corky."

"These signatures were generated simultaneously across three different secure networks that don't have interconnection capability." His finger traced the timeline on screen. "Pentagon, NASA, and DIA systems all received identical authorization codes at exactly the same microsecond. Not the same second—the same microsecond."

He pulled up additional analysis, layers of authentication data that painted an inexplicable picture. "Sarge, that would require someone to have administrative access to all three networks plus the ability to coordinate timing with atomic clock precision across systems that are physically and digitally isolated from each other."

Santos felt her stress ball compress in her grip—harder, harder, the rubber reaching its structural limits as implications crashed through her consciousness like dominos falling. Foreign intelligence capabilities. Internal security protocols. Everything she'd been trained to understand about—

The stress ball exploded.

Rubber fragments scattered across classified printouts like shrapnel. Bits of gray material peppered her keyboard, her coffee mug, the authentication logs Corky had just printed. She stared at her palm, at the pieces of stress ball stuck to her skin, at the larger chunks that had bounced across her workstation.

"Corky, foreign intelligence doesn't have that level of access to our classified systems." Her voice came out steady despite the chaos in her head. "And internal whistleblowers don't have cross-agency administrative privileges."

"That's what's got me a turtle head about to poke out, Sarge." Corky's attempt at humor couldn't quite mask the fear underneath. His technical expertise was pushing him toward conclusions his institutional training violently rejected. "We're either looking at capabilities that exceed anything in our intelligence assessments, or..."

He paused, reluctant to voice what shouldn't be possible.

"Or what?"

"Or someone with access to network infrastructures that operate outside normal human administrative protocols."

The words hung in the air between them, surrounded by the scattered remains of Santos's stress ball—physical evidence that sometimes reality exceeded the breaking point of what you could hold in your hand.

Section 11: Birthday Gift

Pentagon Sub-Basement, Military Intelligence Division - 5:17 AM Eastern Time

Corky's hand hovered over his desk drawer for a moment before he committed. Forty-eight minutes had passed since Santos's stress ball had exploded across her workstation. She'd been working without one ever since, her hands occasionally reaching for something that was no longer there—a habit so ingrained she didn't even notice when her fingers found only empty desk space.

He'd been saving this surprise for tomorrow. A new stress ball designed like a miniature Earth, complete with meticulously detailed continents and a squeeze resistance calibrated perfectly for her analytical thinking process. He'd ordered it three weeks ago, tested it himself twice to make sure the compression was right.

But watching her reach for a stress ball that existed only as scattered fragments in her trash can made the decision easy.

"Sarge." His voice came out softer than intended.

Santos didn't look up, her fingers still flying across her keyboard, cleaning up the last traces of the impossible data analysis.

"Sarge," he tried again, sliding a small wrapped package across her workstation into her peripheral vision.

She glanced up, irritation flickering across her face before transforming into confusion as she registered the wrapped gift. "Corky, what—"

"I know we're dealing with potential national security issues," he interrupted, feeling suddenly self-conscious. "But tomorrow's your birthday, and..." He gestured at her trash can where the remains of her previous stress ball were visible. "Figured you might need reinforcement. Especially after that last one didn't survive the evening."

Santos stared at the package for a long moment, something softening in her usually intense expression. She unwrapped it carefully—not tearing, but methodically unfolding the paper. The Earth-shaped stress ball emerged, its blue oceans and green continents rendered in miniature perfection.

She tested its compression. Once. Twice. A smile broke across her face—the kind of genuine smile that transformed her entire demeanor from hardened military analyst to someone who appreciated a perfectly thoughtful gift.

"Corky, this is perfect." She held the Earth up to the fluorescent light, watching it compress and expand. "I can literally hold the world in my hands while trying to figure out who's manipulating it." Another experimental squeeze. "Thank you. This actually helps with the existential dread."

Her expression shifted to mock severity. "The only problem is now I have to actually put thought into your next birthday gift. Thanks for adding to my workload."

But her smile betrayed the complaint, and the slight nod of appreciation she gave him carried more weight than any formal commendation.

Their moment of human connection evaporated as both their secure terminals simultaneously activated with incoming video conference invitations.

The timing couldn't have been worse—or more suspicious.

Santos stared at her display, the Earth stress ball still warm in her palm—whole and intact, unlike its predecessor.

"FROM: COL. PATTERSON - URGENT: Quarterly security audit briefing. Network anomaly review required. Join secure conference immediately."

She and Corky exchanged glances across their workstations.

"Quarterly security audit." Santos's voice carried the flat tone of someone who'd been through too many bureaucratic ambushes. "Perfect timing—right in the middle of our investigation. Patterson always schedules these things at the worst possible moment."

But something about the timing made her new Earth stress ball compress to maximum density in her fist.

Section 12: Conference Invitations

White House Oak Room, Presidential Science Advisory Council - 5:17 AM Eastern Time

Dr. Foster's circular desk-tracing had evolved through the night—from simple finger spirals to her current nervous habit of balancing an upside-down pencil, letting the old-fashioned eraser trace patterns against the polished wood. The rhythmic contact had become hypnotic, a physical manifestation of her racing thoughts as she processed impossible encryption signatures and technology that shouldn't exist.

Her secure terminal chimed, interrupting the spiral pattern.

An official video conference request filled the screen:

"FROM: VICE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE - URGENT: Q4 science budget review session. Fiscal appropriations discussion required. Join immediately."

Foster's pencil froze mid-trace. Budget reviews at 5 AM were unusual—but not unprecedented when Congressional deadlines loomed and budget committees demanded answers. She'd participated in early-morning fiscal briefings before.

Still. The timing felt off.

She accepted the invitation anyway.

Denver Integration Facility - 3:17 AM Mountain Time

Nancy's secure display lit up with an incoming conference request, the notification appearing precisely as she was explaining to Luke her theory about embedded coordination signals.

"FROM: DR. DEREK DEVON - URGENT: Monthly cosmic signal data review. Routine calibration coordination required. Please join secure conference."

"Luke, Derek's calling our monthly data review meeting now." Nancy's voice carried no suspicion—just routine acknowledgment. "Probably wants to sync our cosmic signal calibrations before tomorrow's monitoring session. Perfect timing, actually—I wanted to show him these network patterns."

ELTA Research Facility, Chile - 5:17 AM Local Time

Three thousand miles away, Derek stared at an identical conference request appearing on his Chilean facility displays:

"FROM: DR. NANCY HAMMOND - URGENT: Denver facility network maintenance coordination. Routine quantum network sync required. Join conference immediately."

Derek's lighter found its way into his palm, clicking with measured rhythm as he processed the timing. Network maintenance at this hour was typical when coordinating across time zones—the logistics of managing global quantum networks meant odd-hour communications were routine.

But more importantly, this gave him a chance to discuss the mystery of "A Friend" with Nancy and Luke. Compare notes. Figure out if they'd received similar anonymous documents.

His finger moved toward the accept button without hesitation.

Section 14: The Trap Revealed

All Four Locations - 5:17 AM Eastern Time (Simultaneous)

Four people, separated by thousands of miles and institutional barriers, made what each believed was a routine professional decision.

Derek thought Nancy needed network maintenance coordination. His finger clicked "Accept" without hesitation—they'd done these early-morning syncs a hundred times.

Nancy thought Derek wanted monthly cosmic signal data review. Perfect timing, actually. She needed to show him those network patterns. "Accept."

Santos thought Colonel Patterson was conducting yet another quarterly security audit. Typical bureaucratic timing, right in the middle of their investigation. She compressed her new Earth stress ball once, then clicked "Accept."

Foster thought the Vice President required Q4 science budget review. Unusual hour, but Congressional deadlines made strange demands. Her upside-down pencil rolled across the desk as she reached for "Accept."

"JOINING CONFERENCE..." appeared across all displays simultaneously.

The screen filled with four video windows.

Derek's lighter stopped mid-click as his screen populated with faces. Nancy and Luke—expected. But military personnel in Pentagon basement lighting? A woman in what looked like the White House Oak Room?

Nancy's dimples vanished as her video windows resolved. Derek—good. But why was Pentagon intelligence present? And who was that woman with the Presidential Science Advisory Council credentials visible on her nameplate?

Santos felt her Earth stress ball compress involuntarily as academics appeared on her screen alongside White House staff. No Colonel Patterson. Just researchers she recognized from classified briefings about cosmic contact, and a woman whose face had appeared in Presidential press conferences.

Foster's circular desk-tracing resumed with frantic energy as cosmic researchers filled her display alongside military analysts. This wasn't a budget review. This wasn't anything she'd been prepared for.

The silence stretched for five seconds. Ten. Fifteen.

Luke broke it, his voice carrying perfect confusion: "Um... Nancy, I thought you said Derek called this for monthly data review?"

Before anyone could respond, all their screens flickered.

A single line of text appeared across every display, uniform and undeniable:

"SPECIAL ORDER 937 - Please, talk among yourselves now!"

The realization hit all four locations simultaneously, crashing through consciousness like a wave breaking against shore.

None of them had requested this conference.

Someone had used their own identities—their own secure credentials, their own authenticated communication systems—to trick them into joining a coordinated meeting.

Someone had been monitoring all their separate investigations. Watching Pentagon forensic analysis, White House consultations, Denver network discoveries, Chilean signal analysis. Watching everything.

And someone had decided it was time for them to share information.

The same authorization code that had triggered their separate investigations had just forced them into collaboration.

Derek's lighter resumed its clicking—faster now, the rhythm betraying the magnitude of what had just been revealed. They'd all been played. Manipulated. Herded like sheep into this exact moment.

By an entity with capabilities that made their security clearances, their classified systems, their institutional protections completely irrelevant.

Santos's Earth stress ball compressed to maximum density in her fist.

Foster's pencil-tracing accelerated into spirals that threatened to wear through the wood.

Luke's baseball found its way into his palm, the familiar weight providing zero comfort.

Nancy leaned closer to her display, studying the faces of people she'd never met but who were apparently part of the same impossible investigation.

"Well," Derek said finally, his lighter providing percussion to his words, "I think we should probably introduce ourselves."

Section 15: Information Convergence

Multi-Location Secure Video Conference - 5:19 AM Eastern Time

The silence stretched across continents and institutional barriers.

Fifteen seconds. Twenty. Thirty.

Six faces stared at each other through encrypted video links, each person's brain processing a reality that violated every assumption about security, protocols, and the basic sanctity of their own identities. Someone had used their own credentials—their own authenticated, classified communication systems—to manipulate them into this coordination.

Derek broke the silence first, his lighter providing soft metallic punctuation. "Well." Click-snap. "Since someone apparently wants us to compare notes, maybe we should start with introductions." Click-snap. "I'm Dr. Derek Devon, ELTA Research Facility in Chile. Most of you probably recognize Dr. Nancy Hammond from the Denver Integration Facility—we've been leading the cosmic contact research since the initial breakthrough."

Nancy offered a slight smile that didn't quite reach her dimples. The circumstances didn't warrant full dimple deployment. "Luke Matson is our network coordinator." She gestured to the man beside her whose baseball was visible in his hands. "Honestly the most essential person in our cosmic integration program. If Luke says something's impossible, it's probably impossible."

Luke raised his baseball in an awkward half-wave. "Um, hi everyone." The baseball resumed its rhythm. "This is probably the weirdest work meeting I've ever attended, and that's saying something given our usual subject matter involves communication with cosmic intelligence."

Dr. Foster leaned forward, her upside-down pencil still balanced on her desk, the eraser having traced enough spiral patterns to wear a visible groove in the wood. "Dr. Kimberley Foster, Presidential Science Advisory Council." Her voice carried the careful modulation of someone walking a tightrope between duty and necessity. "I have to say, this type of unauthorized coordination makes me extremely uncomfortable from a protocol standpoint. I should be briefing the President about these procurement anomalies through proper channels, not participating in..." She gestured at the screen with barely contained anxiety. "Whatever this is."

Santos compressed her Earth stress ball—the one that was still intact—and something that might have been her first genuine smile in months broke through her military bearing. "Staff Sergeant Maria Santos, Pentagon Military Intelligence. And honestly, Dr. Foster, this is the most productive intelligence sharing I've experienced in years. Usually takes six weeks and fourteen forms to get different agencies to acknowledge each other exist, much less actually share information."

Corky cleared his throat nervously, his eyes wide as he sat beside Santos. His brain was still processing the reality that he was in a video conference with THE cosmic contact researchers—the people whose classified briefings he'd been reading, whose breakthrough work had redefined humanity's place in the universe.

"Technical Sergeant Mark Kalbfleisch." His voice came out steadier than he felt. "Corky, please. Pentagon computer forensics." He paused, then words tumbled out before he could stop them. "Dr. Devon, Dr. Hammond, I've read every declassified report about your cosmic contact research. Every single one. This is..." He caught himself. "I mean, not the mysterious manipulation part. That part's terrifying. But meeting you both is incredible."

Derek's lighter clicked with genuine amusement despite everything. "Corky, I appreciate that. But I have a feeling this won't be the most incredible part of your week."

Foster's finger-tracing accelerated as institutional anxiety warred with scientific curiosity—two fundamental aspects of her personality locked in combat across her prefrontal cortex. "Before we proceed any further, I need everyone to understand that this conversation is occurring completely outside normal intelligence protocols. If any of us are discovered participating in unauthorized coordination across agency boundaries without proper authorization..."

"Dr. Foster." Santos's voice carried the gentle firmness of someone who'd spent fifteen years navigating bureaucratic minefields. "With respect, normal protocols haven't exactly been effective in investigating impossible procurement anomalies that exceed human technological capability by fifteen to twenty years. Maybe it's time to try something different."

Luke tossed his baseball, caught it, tossed it again. "Plus, whoever orchestrated this meeting clearly has capabilities that make our security protocols completely irrelevant anyway. They've been watching all of us. Monitoring our separate investigations. They knew exactly when to force us together."

Nancy's analytical mind shifted into full coordination mode—the same mental state that had helped organize humanity's first systematic approach to cosmic contact. "Derek's right—someone wants us to compare notes. Given what we've each discovered independently, maybe we should figure out why they wanted us together before we worry about protocol violations."

Foster hesitated, her Presidential advisory role pulling against the obvious necessity of understanding a threat that her institutional training hadn't prepared her for. Her finger-tracing slowed, then stopped. A decision crystallized. "Alright. But I'm documenting this as emergency intelligence coordination under extraordinary circumstances. That gives us at least some bureaucratic cover if this goes sideways."

Derek nodded with approval, his lighter clicking with satisfied rhythm. "Good. Now, since someone apparently wants us to compare notes, maybe we should start with who received what and when."

Information Synthesis Phase

Nancy shifted forward in her chair, her hands folding together as her brain organized information into presentable structure. "At 1:17 Mountain Time, I received anonymous procurement documents from someone calling themselves 'A Friend.' Three companies requesting quantum interface components, all signed with authorization code 'Special Order 937'."

"Same here," Derek confirmed, his lighter providing punctuation. "But 3:17 Chile time. Raytheon procurement for atmospheric research, signed with the same code. The exact same phrasing."

Santos leaned forward, her Earth stress ball compressed tightly in her grip—not quite to explosion point, but close. "Pentagon time was 3:17 Eastern. DOD contract with Japanese facility for quantum interface components. Identical authorization signature. The same corporate-style directive language we'd flagged as anomalous."

Foster's circular desk-tracing resumed as her brain processed the impossible coordination. "White House systems, also 3:17 Eastern. Three different agencies—NASA, DOE, DIA—all requesting quantum technology with the same 'Special Order 937' signature. All using funding sources I couldn't trace through normal oversight channels."

Luke's baseball resumed its nervous rhythm as implications crystallized with mathematical precision. Throw. Catch. Throw. "So someone simultaneously infiltrated classified networks at four different institutions, delivered identical intelligence packages at the exact same microsecond, then used our own identities to force this meeting." His engineering mind was grappling with technical sophistication that shouldn't exist. "That's not just advanced—that's impossible. Statistically, logically, technically impossible."

Section 16: First Assembly Chain Discovery

First Assembly Chain Discovery

Corky's voice cut through their discussion. "Found them! Thirty-seven instances of 'Special Order 937' signatures across government systems over the past eight months. And they're not random—they follow a clear progression."

He shared his forensic analysis, highlighting a systematic trail of procurement authorizations that painted a terrifying picture of coordinated manipulation.

"But there's something else." Corky's enthusiasm dampened. "I found concern reports filed by workers at three of these facilities. Jeff Teal at Raytheon, Kent Ramsbottom at Siemens Germany, and Tony Nella at Mitsubishi Japan. All filed reports questioning impossible technical specifications."

Santos's Earth stress ball compressed. "Who are these men? What happened to them?"

"That's the problem." Corky's voice went quiet. "All three disappeared within seventy-two hours of filing their reports. Left for work one morning, never came home. Local authorities classified them as missing persons, but there's no evidence of foul play. Just gone. They're still listed in missing person reports."

Derek's lighter froze mid-click. "Three workers, three different countries, all questioned impossible specifications and then vanished."

Corky highlighted each manufacturing stage. "Phase One: Base component manufacturing. Raytheon builds quantum interface foundations, ships to Siemens Germany for enhancement algorithms."

"Phase Two: Integration systems. Siemens grows some crystalline object and adds precision consciousness interface capabilities, forwards to Mitsubishi Japan for consciousness modification protocols."

"Phase Three: Final assembly coordination. Mitsubishi completes consciousness modification systems, adds reality modification tech and ships complete package to..." He paused, his enthusiasm gone. "CERN research

facility, Switzerland. Recipient: Dr. Lena Hanson, consciousness modification research project."

Derek's lighter went completely still. "Dr. Hanson. Nancy, she's been developing Protocol Sleeper technology—reality modification countermeasures designed to resist cosmic influence."

Nancy's dimples disappeared entirely. "Derek, if someone's been supplying Dr. Hanson with quantum consciousness modification technology using this assembly chain—if they've been giving her components years ahead of human capability—then whatever she's building isn't defensive technology. It's a weapon. And she has no idea."

UNKNOWN BY EVERYONE - CERN Research Facility, Switzerland - Unknown Local Time

Dr. Lena Hanson signed for the shipment from Mitsubishi Japan with hands that wanted to tremble but refused on principle. The diplomatic courier departed without a word, leaving her alone in her private laboratory adjacent to CERN's main facility with three precisely packaged containers that represented either humanity's salvation or her career's spectacular implosion.

She opened the first container with the care of someone handling unstable isotopes.

The crystalline components gleamed under laboratory lighting, their surfaces catching photons in ways that made her physicist's brain itch with wrongness. Too perfect. Too elegant. Manufacturing tolerances that exceeded anything in her specifications by orders of magnitude.

Her secure terminal chimed. A message from Z—her mysterious benefactor, her "*A Friend*" who'd been guiding this project for eight months through encrypted channels and untraceable dead drops.

Final components arrived safely?

Hanson's fingers hesitated over the keyboard. She'd never questioned Z's identity before—never needed to. The guidance had been flawless, the supplied specifications brilliant, the vision aligned perfectly with her own: humanity standing independent of cosmic entities that treated civilizations like experimental subjects.

But looking at these components that defied human manufacturing capability...

Yes, she typed. *They're extraordinary. Almost too extraordinary.*

The response came immediately: *Trust the mathematics, Dr. Hanson. Trust your calculations. What you're building will prove that humanity doesn't need cosmic charity to survive cosmic interference.*

She studied the components again. The mathematics were sound—she'd checked them dozens of times. The device would...should... work exactly as intended, creating a localized sphere of reality restoration that could neutralize cosmic modifications. A briefcase-sized declaration of human independence.

So why did holding these perfect crystalline pieces make her skin crawl?

Hanson pushed the doubt aside. Three more days of assembly. Seventy-two hours to prove that Earth's most brilliant minds could solve cosmic problems without becoming cosmic dependents.

She lifted the first component—it felt warm, almost alive in her palm—and began the integration sequence her mysterious friend had provided.

Behind her, unnoticed, the laboratory's monitoring equipment registered a faint quantum signature that didn't match any known human technology.

Section 17: Anonymous Confirmation

Anonymous Confirmation

Before anyone could respond, their screens flickered. Another message materialized across all six displays simultaneously:

Excellent deductive work. You have identified the manufacturing chain correctly.

Dr. Lena Hanson believes she is developing defensive technology to protect human consciousness from cosmic modification. She does not understand that the components she has received exceed human manufacturing capability by several decades and may even be a dual purpose device.

Final assembly completion: 71 hours, 23 minutes.

Question: Will you warn Dr. Hanson that she is being manipulated, or investigate who has been manipulating her?

Choose carefully. Once Dr. Hanson activates the completed device, the consequences will extend far beyond consciousness modification.

- A Friend

The six participants stared at the message in stunned silence. The weight of the question hung in the digital air between them—heavy, immovable, demanding an answer none of them felt qualified to give.

Derek's lighter resumed its nervous clicking, the rhythm faster now. "We have seventy-one hours to decide whether to warn someone who's unknowingly building a weapon, or investigate who's been providing impossible technology to build it." Click-snap. Click-snap. "Either choice could be catastrophic."

Nancy felt her analytical confidence—the certainty that had carried her through decades of impossible problems—wavering as the scope of manipulation became terrifyingly clear. "Derek, what if warning Dr. Hanson alerts whoever's been manipulating her? What if they have contingency plans we can't even imagine?"

Section 18: Critical Decision Point

Multi-Location Secure Video Conference - 6:12 AM Eastern Time

The silence stretched for nearly a minute. Six people stared at their screens, each grappling with a decision that could either reshape human civilization or prevent catastrophic weapon activation. Neither outcome guaranteed safety. Both paths led through darkness.

Derek's lighter clicked in steady rhythm—slower now, more deliberate—as he processed variables that exceeded any scientific training. "Let's think this through systematically." Click-snap. "If we warn Dr. Hanson, what are the likely outcomes?"

Nancy leaned forward, her analytical mind engaging despite the emotional weight pressing on her chest. "Best case: Hanson stops assembly, no weapon activation. She thanks us for the warning and hands everything over to proper authorities." She paused. "Worst case: Hanson is compromised. Whoever's manipulating her gets warned we're investigating. They activate contingency plans or disappear entirely, taking the technology with them."

Luke tossed his baseball thoughtfully, the rhythm matching his thought process. Throw. Catch. Think. "But if we investigate the manipulators first, best case is we identify the threat and can neutralize both the technology and whoever's controlling it." Throw. Catch. "Worst case..."

"Worst case is Dr. Hanson completes a consciousness modification weapon that could affect millions while we're still figuring out who gave her the technology," Foster finished, her finger-tracing approaching panic speeds as the spiral wore deeper into wood.

Santos gathered the fragments of her second crushed Earth stress ball—this one had lasted less than an hour—studying the broken continents as she applied military strategic analysis. "There's a third option. We could split our resources. Some of us investigate the manipulators while others make contact with Dr. Hanson. Cover both angles simultaneously."

Section 19: Zephyr's Attack

As Santos deposited the broken pieces of her Earth stress ball into the trash, blue energy erupted from Corky's terminal.

Not electricity. Energy. Bolts of impossible blue light that arced like lightning but moved with purpose—seeking, targeting, attacking.

Corky's scream died in his throat as every muscle locked rigid. His hands welded to his workstation, current flowing through him like he'd become part of the circuit. The blue bolts danced across his terminal, his keyboard, his arms—turning him into a conductor for something that shouldn't exist.

Devon, Hammond, Foster, and Matson could only watch through their screens as horror unfolded three thousand miles away.

Santos's military training overrode thought. She launched herself at Corky, knocking him free from the terminal—

—and felt her entire nervous system seize as residual current jumped between bodies. The world went white with pain. Then she and Corky hit the floor together, a tangle of limbs and smoking uniforms.

"Santos!" Luke's voice cut through the chaos like a drill sergeant at basic. "Sergeant Santos, get your lazy ass off the floor and check on your partner now!"

Santos's body moved before her brain caught up, muscle memory responding to command authority. "Yes sir, I got this sir." She didn't register that it was Luke Matson giving orders—only that someone with authority was directing her through the fog of partial electrocution.

She staggered upright. Her legs folded. She collapsed to her knees beside Corky.

He wasn't moving. His eyes stared at nothing, frozen wide.

"Check for a pulse, Santos, now. Your partner needs your help."

Nancy, Derek, and Dr. Foster sat motionless in their remote locations, watching helplessly as Santos pressed shaking fingers to Corky's neck.

"No pulse, sir." Her voice came out steady despite everything. Training held. "I think he took a massive electrical shock from his workstation."

"Santos, get your ass up, soldier, and secure the unit's defib unit immediately and get it on the sergeant ASAP. His life is in your hands."

Santos forced herself upright, staggered to the far wall where emergency equipment lived. Her hands shook as she grabbed the defibrillator case. The walk back to Corky felt like miles.

She dropped to her knees beside him, ripped open his shirt. Her training took over—pad placement, lead connections, power-on. Her mind went quiet, focused down to the single task of bringing him back.

Luke noticed Nancy's hand gripping his, her other hand covering her mouth, tears streaming. He squeezed back and put his arm around her.

The defibrillator analyzed. Beeped. "Stand clear."

Corky's body arched off the floor.

Silence.

Fifteen seconds that felt like hours.

"Stand clear."

Corky arched again.

Silence.

Santos made a decision that violated every protocol. She drew back her fist and slammed it into Corky's chest—old-school precordial thump, the kind they didn't teach anymore because defibrillators were better.

"Gee, Sarge..." Corky's whisper was barely audible. "You trying to kill me?"

Santos laughed—a sound caught between joy and hysteria—and tears poured down her face as she pulled him into a hug. "You ever try to get out of doing work like that again, Sergeant, and I'll see you end up back in basic training."

Section 20: Consequences and Decisions

Dr. Foster was first to find her voice. "I'm sorry, everyone, but this event has crossed a line." Her finger-tracing had stopped completely. "We must all take precautions to protect ourselves. That was no accident—it demonstrated a level of sophistication that puts us all at risk. I'm notifying the President immediately."

She paused, her expression grim. "We all know this will be compartmentalized, bogged down in bureaucracies. By the time they figure it out, it may be too late. I thank you for your service. And remember—whatever's behind this just showed us we're all expendable."

Foster's video feed went dark.

"Santos." Luke's voice carried command authority despite the civilian context. "Great job, Sergeant. You saved Corky's life. Make sure you two escalate your report immediately. Our best protection is making sure more people know what's happening."

"Mr. Matson." Santos's voice carried new respect. "Thanks for the help. I never figured you as prior military material."

"Get your partner some medical attention as well as yourself and file that report now."

"Yes, sir.", followed by a salute even though Luke was no longer on active duty.

Santos's video feed went dark, leaving only Derek, Nancy, and Luke.

Derek's lighter clicked softly in the Chilean facility. "Luke, incredible reaction to an unbelievable event. I know we never say it enough, but thank you for your service and your friendship. The team would never be the same without you."

Nancy turned and gave Luke a long, firm hug, followed by a kiss on the cheek. "I may have to call you hero," she said as she pulled away, her famous dimples showing in a grin that carried both affection and relief.

"Before we get too carried away," Luke said, his voice taking on uncharacteristic forcefulness, "whatever is behind this is dangerous. They—or it—just demonstrated they're prepared to use deadly force. Against people who get too close to the truth."

"Nancy, I think you and Luke need to stay together for a while until we get some answers." Derek's lighter clicked with concern. "Unlike Santos and Foster, we don't have higher-ups to report this to. We're on our own."

"Three times a day check-ins," Nancy replied, her tone shifting to something almost maternal. "Six AM, three PM, nine PM. No exceptions. If someone misses a check-in..."

"We act immediately," Derek finished.

Section 21: The Big Reveal

Derek sat back in his chair. Instinct made him roll away from his workstation—creating distance from technology that had just been weaponized against Corky. A safe distance. Or as safe as distance could be when dealing with forces that turned computers into weapons.

His workstation speakers chimed.

A familiar voice filled the Chilean facility. "I hope you won't be shocked to find out I was kind of expecting this, Poe."

"WHY DOCTOR DEVON, I WOULD EXPECT NOTHING LESS FROM YOU!"

Derek's lighter resumed its nervous clicking as understanding crystallized. Poe—the cosmic intelligence who had guided humanity's integration into galactic civilization, who had played chess with Professor Jimmy, who had Rick-rolled world leaders at the Summit—had been their anonymous friend all along.

"Poe, why couldn't you intervene directly? Why guide us through this investigation instead of stopping it yourself?"

"DEREK, ZEPHYR'S CONSCIOUSNESS MODIFICATION TECHNOLOGY IS DESIGNED TO TRIGGER IMMEDIATE ACTIVATION IF COSMIC INTELLIGENCE ATTEMPTS DIRECT INTERFERENCE. MY INVOLVEMENT WOULD CAUSE THE DEVICE TO ACTIVATE IMMEDIATELY RATHER THAN WAITING FOR OPTIMAL TIMING. AND I AM CERTAIN ZEPHYR HAS ADDED ADDITIONAL RETALIATORY PROTOCOLS INTO HIS DEVICES."

Derek's lighter paused mid-click. "So you needed human agents investigating independently. Because Zephyr would view us as... what? Beneath his notice?"

"HE WOULD ALWAYS VIEW YOU AS INFERIOR. INCAPABLE OF THREATENING HIS PLANS. HUMAN INVESTIGATORS WERE THE ONLY APPROACH THAT WOULD NOT TRIGGER DEFENSIVE PROTOCOLS."

"But something changed," Derek said quietly. "The attack on Corky."

"PRECISELY. ZEPHYR ATTEMPTED TO ASSASSINATE SERGEANT KALBFLEISCH, DEMONSTRATING WILLINGNESS TO ELIMINATE HUMAN INVESTIGATORS. TEAL, RAMSBOTTOM, AND NELLA ARE MOST LIKELY DEAD. WE

MAY NEVER LOCATE THEIR BODIES. WE ARE RUNNING OUT OF TIME FOR SUBTLE APPROACHES."

Derek's lighter clicked faster, the rhythm spiraling out of control. Three people dead. Corky nearly dead. All because they'd looked too closely at impossible specifications.

"UNFORTUNATELY,"

Poe continued, his voice carrying something that sounded almost like regret,

"I EXPECT WE WILL LEARN WHAT THE DEVICE IS CAPABLE OF SOONER RATHER THAN LATER."

Section 22: Hanson's Realization

CERN Research Facility, Switzerland - 10:45 AM Local Time

Dr. Lena Hanson sat alone in her laboratory, staring at the completed quantum reality suppression interface array with an unease that had been growing for hours. The final components had arrived yesterday from Mitsubishi Japan—pristine, precisely machined, packaged with care that bordered on reverence.

The assembly had proceeded with impossible efficiency. No troubleshooting. No calibration difficulties. No unexpected interface conflicts. Every specification was perfect. Every connection elegant beyond human engineering capability.

Too perfect.

Too elegant.

Too far beyond anything her team could have designed.

This was her first build—translating years of theoretical work into actual hardware. She understood the mathematics, the quantum mechanics, the reality modification principles. But understanding theory and building working technology were vastly different challenges. First prototypes never just worked.

But this did.

The crystalline components hummed with barely contained energy, their surfaces catching light in ways that shouldn't be physically possible. She'd run the mathematical models a dozen times. The device would work exactly as intended—creating a localized sphere of influence that forcibly restored original physical constants, neutralizing cosmic modifications within a several-kilometer radius.

It was everything she'd dreamed of building. Proof that humanity didn't need cosmic entities to solve cosmic problems. Independence made manifest in crystalline technology.

So why did looking at it make her skin crawl?

Section 23: After Hours

ELTA Research Facility, Chile - 11:47 PM Local Time

Derek dragged his mattress to the center of his small facility bedroom, muscles burning from the effort. The bed frame sat empty against the wall, its headboard still plugged into the outlet he no longer trusted.

He lay down in the middle of the floor, staring at the ceiling. His lighter rested on his chest, rising and falling with each breath. No clicking tonight. Just the weight of it, solid and real.

Three people dead. Corky almost dead. All because they'd looked at the wrong documents.

His phone sat on the far side of the room, screen dark, as far from his makeshift bed as physics allowed. Derek clutched a single picture of Maureen in his hand, usually reserved for his Zippo lighter.

In the darkness, Derek wondered if paranoia was the appropriate response to attempted murder, or if sleeping on the floor in the middle of an empty room was just the first step toward madness. And he wondered whether telling Maureen about today would protect her or bring her into danger she didn't need to face.

Denver Integration Facility, Colorado - 10:03 PM Mountain Time

The pullout couch sat in the exact center of Nancy's apartment living room, dragged there with Luke's help after they'd triple-checked every outlet, every device, every possible electrical threat.

Nancy lay pressed against Luke's side, his arm around her shoulders, her head on his chest. Neither had spoken for ten minutes.

"I never thought I'd be the person sleeping in the middle of the room to avoid electrical outlets," Nancy finally whispered.

Luke's chest moved with a sound caught between a laugh and a sigh. "I never thought I'd be the person giving orders while someone got electrocuted through their computer." His hand tightened on her shoulder. "Nancy, when I saw Corky seize up like that..."

"I know." She tilted her head to look up at him. "Luke, how did we end up here? We're supposed to be scientists. Researchers. We analyze data. We don't... we don't watch people almost die while something uses our technology as a weapon."

"We ended up here because we're good at what we do. And apparently that makes us threats." His voice carried an edge of bitter pride. "The world's most adequate network admin, now sleeping on a pullout couch in the middle of a living room because cosmic entities might weaponize my girlfriend's toaster."

Nancy surprised herself by laughing—a sound that carried more hysteria than humor. "Your girlfriend?"

Luke froze. "I... that wasn't how I meant to—"

"Luke." Nancy shifted to look at him properly, her dimples showing despite everything. "After today, if we're not together, we're idiots."

Luke lay there staring at the ceiling, not thinking about initiating some high school makeout moment but how he was going to protect the woman he knew he was in love with.

Somewhere in a Washington DC suburb - 1:23 AM Eastern Time

Dr. Foster sat in her bathtub, fully clothed, a pillow wedged behind her head and a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. The bathroom had no outlets. No electronics. Nothing that could suddenly come alive with blue energy and turn her nervous system into a circuit.

Her fingers traced circles on the porcelain—the same motion she'd been doing on her desk all day, now translated to a new surface.

The President's briefing had gone exactly as expected. Concern. Questions. Promises of investigation. And then the inevitable compartmentalization into classified channels where urgent matters went to die slowly under layers of bureaucracy.

She'd filed her report. Made her recommendations. Done everything her position required.

And then she'd come home, looked at her bed with its electronic adjustable frame and nearby outlets, and made a decision that would have seemed insane twenty-four hours ago.

Foster adjusted her pillow and tried to get comfortable against unforgiving porcelain, clutching a worn stuffed bear her daughter had given her for Christmas thirty years ago. Somewhere in Switzerland, Dr. Hanson had whatever technology they'd been investigating. The question was what she would do with it. And when.

Pentagon Base Medical Unit - 2:17 AM Eastern Time

Corky and Santos had dragged their medical cots to the center of the room, forming a small island of safety away from the outlets, monitors, and medical equipment the doctors insisted they keep nearby for observation.

"Sarge," Corky said into the darkness, his voice still rough from screaming. "Thanks for hitting me but the defib I think revived me after the second attempt."

Santos lay on her cot three feet away, staring at the ceiling. "Who said I wasn't aware you had already been revived... Next time you want to get out of work, Sergeant, just ask for a day off like a normal person."

"Noted." Silence stretched between them. "Santos, did you see it? The blue energy?"

"I saw it."

"It was looking for me. Not just electricity. It was... intelligent. Hunting."

Santos turned her head to look at him. In the dim light from the hallway, she could see the burns on his arms where the energy had grounded through his body. "I saw that too."

"So we're not crazy."

"Corky, we're sleeping on cots in the middle of a medical unit because we're afraid of wall outlets. We're definitely crazy." She paused. "But we're also right."

Corky's laugh hurt his chest. "How long do you think we can live like this? Avoiding electricity? Sleeping in the middle of rooms?"

"As long as it takes to figure out who tried to kill you." Santos's voice carried the steel of someone who'd made a decision. "And then I'm going to have some very direct conversations with whatever's behind this."

"You can't punch an electrical current, Sarge."

"Watch me try."

In the darkness, both of them lay awake, listening to the hum of medical equipment they no longer trusted, wondering how long paranoia remained paranoia when the threat was demonstrably real.

End of Book 9.. "The Protocol Sleepers"... of "The Last Axiom" series.

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Coming Next: Book 10 - "Critical Mass"

Dr. Lena Hanson built the perfect device to prove humanity didn't need cosmic help. One briefcase-sized declaration of independence, sealed in a diplomatic container, headed for Russia with the confidence of mathematics that couldn't be wrong.

Except mathematics doesn't account for malevolence disguised as friendship.

In a hardened bunker beneath the Kursk Nuclear Facility, Commander Alexei Petrov watches reactor readings that violate every law of physics—quantum instabilities spreading like wildfire through systems that should be stable. The Americans offer help. The cosmic entities offer assistance. Russia's pride demands a third option.

Enter Dr. Hanson's solution. Seventy-two hours of assembly compressed into two hours of desperation. Deploy it or watch millions die.

But when you activate technology you don't fully understand, built from components that are "too perfect," to solve a problem you didn't create... sometimes the cure becomes the catastrophe.

Viktor Petrov, a young engineer with a quantum computer and a hero's heart, is about to discover that saving the world requires more than brilliant

equations. It requires someone willing to stay behind when everyone else runs.

Some devices restore reality. Some devices tear it apart. And some engineers understand that the mathematics of sacrifice don't care about fairness.

Derek, Nancy, and Luke watch helplessly from three thousand miles away as their investigation's consequences unfold in real-time. They warned everyone. Nobody listened. Now someone has to stop what Dr. Hanson started—even if it costs everything.

Warning: Contains nuclear disasters, impossible choices, Russian engineering heroics, and the kind of sacrifice that makes cosmic entities pause to honor human courage. May cause sudden appreciation for those who choose millions of strangers over their own survival.

Me Again... Yup the noisy author!

You're past the half-way point of the series and I hope you have been enjoying the series. When I first started writing the series I had the general concept nailed down but still needed to figure out a bunch of individual stories that would eventually form an interconnected series. The idea for The Protocol Sleeper book that you just finished came to me after book 3 - Quantum Ghosts. At the time I jotted down some of my thoughts and set it aside waiting for the right point in the series to resurrect it. I hope you found my decision to be fruitful.... Seven more to the end! 😊

*Cheers,
Derek*

Ps: Wonder how many super SciFier's recognized Special Order 937!!!!

THE LAST AXIOM

Book 9 - *The Protocol Sleepers*

ANONYMOUS DOCUMENTS. AUTHORIZATION CODE "SPECIAL ORDER 937." THREE WORKERS DISAPPEARED.

Derek, Nancy, Pentagon intelligence, and White House advisors receive identical procurement anomalies from "A Friend"—warnings about quantum consciousness technology manufactured across continents. Then ZEPHYR attacks Corky through his computer with blue electrical energy. Santos saves him, but the message is clear: investigate too closely, and technology becomes weaponry.

POE reveals he's been guiding them—direct intervention would trigger Dr. Hanson's device. **Consciousness modification technology she's building for someone she trusts.** That night, six people sleep in the middle of rooms, away from outlets. 71 hours until completion.

"Special Order 937" appeared simultaneously across Pentagon, NASA, and DIA systems—impossible without administrative access to isolated networks. Three workers questioned the specifications. Three workers disappeared."

— Jason Bourne, Treadstone Pattern Analysis Division

"When ZEPHYR turned Corky's terminal into a weapon, six people learned technology can hunt you. That night they slept away from outlets. Paranoia becomes wisdom when your computer tries to kill you."

— Sarah Connor, Skynet Threat Assessment Archives

"POE guided them through anonymous messages because direct intervention would trigger Hanson's device. Sometimes the best help comes from someone who understands the rules well enough to break them carefully."

— Neo, Resistance Intelligence Network



DEREK DEVON

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