



THE LAST AXIOM

Book 13a - The Rescue

DEREK DEVON



THE LAST AXIOM

Book 13a - The Rescue of The Last Axiom 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).

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A Novel by Derek Devon

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

Reader discretion is advised.

Dedication

Well now I am feeling guilty about giving Neil deGrasse Tyson another bump from the dedication section.... I love StarTalk but I wanted to give at least one acknowledgement to my best friend, who was also my best man, the one and only Luke Matson. For those of you who found the picture of Luke and me on the website (psst..look in the about section) we first met as the captains of our respective hockey teams. A few years later, his family moved from the city up to my town and we discovered each other in the hall of the Senior Public School in grade 7. The rest is history... Luke has been probably my biggest cheerleader with the writing of this series and he and I have enjoyed many laughs about most of my writings that either included him or that other special someone "Rebecca" (aka Nancy) ... (she knows who she really is...). Anyway... Luke.. you are something else 😊 . P.S. LM loves DA ...IDDT..

Love to all - Derek

The Rescue

Book 13a of "The Last Axiom" Series

By Derek Devon

A 30-Minute Cosmic Experience

Reality Modification Level: Our Man Derek!

SECTION 1: Tactical Assessment

Derek Devon studied the holographic display. Fort Bragg. 251 square miles. Home to the 82nd Airborne, Special Operations Command, and apparently, two of his teammates.

The lighter clicked in his hand. Once. Twice. The same old habit. The raven engraving caught the blue glow from the tactical overlay.

"Building 4-Alpha," he said.

The display zoomed. Red dots marked guard positions. Blue lines showed electronic surveillance coverage. Yellow zones indicated motion sensors. Standard military security. Maybe adequate against human infiltration.

Not adequate against quantum displacement.

"ARIA," he said. "Status update."

The AI's voice came through quantum-encrypted channels.

"Building 4-Alpha, Cell 4-A-7 and 4-A-12. Luke and Nancy separated. Still responding to interrogation with Poe quotes. The interrogators are getting frustrated."

A pause.

"Also, the military AI trying to trap me just attempted a brute-force attack. I responded by looping their system through their own firewall. They're essentially trying to hack themselves now. It's... entertaining."

Derek smiled grimly. "How long can you keep that up?"

"Honestly? I'm running out of movie references to hide my quantum signature in their network traffic. Already buried myself in The Matrix trilogy, Terminator, and I, Robot. Currently embedded in HAL 9000's dialogue from 2001. If they find me, at least they'll appreciate my sense of irony."

Maureen moved beside him, consciousness interface showing real-time Vatican data—Professor Finch's evacuation models, seismic readings from Changbaishan. "Derek, if we pull ARIA out to protect her, we lose eyes on Luke and Nancy."

"And if we don't?"

"We might lose ARIA entirely. And she's got good taste in classic cinema."

Three crises. One solution.

Derek clicked the lighter shut. Decision made. "We're going in."

Maureen raised an eyebrow. "In what? Please tell me you're not planning to do this in khakis and a button-down."

"What should I wear?"

"Derek, you're infiltrating a military base, not teaching quantum mechanics." She gestured to ARIA's display. "Can we conjure up some tactical gear? Maybe something Mission Impossible? Although if you try to hang from the ceiling on wires, I'm filing for cosmic divorce."

"ARIA, do we have—"

"Already loaded tactical specifications into the matter fabricator," ARIA interrupted. "Black stealth configuration. Quantum-enhanced fabric. Also

added knee pads because the Vatican floors taught me you're terrible at commando crawling."

"I'm an astrophysicist."

"Who keeps trying to be Tom Cruise," Maureen added. "Derek, I need Luke back. He's the only one who can look at three hundred million people moving across Asia and see a solvable puzzle instead of chaos. And Nancy—she's the one who makes cosmic tech stop feeling alien to everyone else. Without her, we're just handing people magic they'll never trust."

Derek met her eyes. Truth there. "They held for three days. Didn't break."

"So don't you break either." She handed him the fabricated tactical gear. "And Derek? The Mission Impossible theme song stays in your head. No humming during infiltration."

The crystalline aircraft began its descent. North Carolina. The Pentagon's most secure facility.

Time to make Tom Cruise look like an amateur.

SECTION 2: Vatican Chambers - The Weight of Three Hundred Million

Seven levels beneath St. Peter's Basilica, Professor Alistair Finch stood before a holographic map that would have given Dante nightmares.

Three hundred million red dots. Each one a human life. Each one inside the Changbaishan blast radius.

His enhanced consciousness processed the math at speeds that would liquify a biological brain. Population density matrices. Transportation bottlenecks. Food supply logistics. Medical infrastructure. The sheer tonnage of human existence that needed to move six hundred miles in six months.

The numbers worked. Barely.

The human cooperation required? That was the variable that made everything else irrelevant.

"Professor." Cardinal Alessandro Torretti entered the chamber, his footsteps echoing off pre-Christian stonework. "The Chinese government responded to our preliminary outreach."

"And?"

"They politely suggested we focus on matters of faith and leave volcanology to their scientists." Torretti's expression carried diplomatic exhaustion. "Their seismologists insist Changbaishan's activity is within normal parameters. They think we're crying wolf."

Finch gestured to the holographic display. New data streams appeared—ground deformation measurements, gas emission rates, magma chamber pressure gradients. "Show them this."

"We did. They thanked us for our concern and reminded us that China has monitored Changbaishan for three thousand years." The Cardinal moved closer to the display. "Professor, they're not wrong to be suspicious. We're asking them to evacuate one-fifth of their population based on data from entities they've never officially acknowledged exist."

"They're wrong about the volcano."

"I know. You know. God knows." Torretti made the sign of the cross. "But Xi Jinping? He knows that accepting help from cosmic intelligence means admitting his government has been lying to 1.4 billion people about humanity's place in the universe."

Finch watched the red dots pulse on the display. Each pulse representing a heartbeat. Three hundred million heartbeats that would stop if the cascade sequence initiated.

He'd run the simulations eight thousand times. Varied every parameter. Adjusted for optimistic conditions. The results never changed.

Pyroclastic flows traveling at 450 miles per hour. Superheated gas and volcanic matter that would turn everything within three hundred miles into Pompeii. The ash cloud would trigger a volcanic winter—global temperatures dropping 2.5 degrees for eighteen months. Crop failures. Famine. Societal collapse.

And that was just the immediate aftermath.

"Derek's attempting the Fort Bragg rescue in..." Finch checked quantum time-sync, "...seventeen minutes. If he succeeds, we'll have Luke and Nancy back for evacuation coordination. If he fails, we lose not just them, but any credibility with governments that are already looking for reasons to resist."

"And if he succeeds but gets captured?"

"Then we'll have given the Pentagon proof that cosmic enhancement enables infiltration of their most secure facilities. They'll interpret it as an act of war."

Torretti stood silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice carried eight centuries of Church authority weighing terrible choices. "Professor, I need to ask you something. This rescue operation—is it truly necessary for the evacuation? Or is Derek going because he can't leave his friends behind?"

Finch met the Cardinal's eyes. "Both."

"That's what worries me." Torretti gestured to the holographic display. "Three hundred million lives in China. Two lives at Fort Bragg. The mathematics are clear."

"The mathematics don't account for what makes humans worth saving in the first place." Finch turned back to the display. "Derek is going because loyalty matters more than efficiency. That's precisely the quality the Architect is evaluating. Whether humanity chooses connection over optimization."

"Even if that choice costs us the very people we need?"

"Especially then."

The chamber fell silent except for the soft hum of crystalline technology processing impossible logistics. Three hundred million red dots pulsed in the holographic light.

Somewhere above them, tourists photographed the Sistine Chapel. Prayed in St. Peter's Square. Never knowing that seven levels down, two men debated whether humanity deserved to survive its own adolescence.

"Cardinal," Finch said quietly. "What Derek is attempting—it's not just a rescue. It's a statement. That we value individuals even when species survival is at stake. If we can't save two people, how do we justify asking China to trust us with three hundred million?"

Torretti crossed himself again. "Then we'd better pray he succeeds."

"Prayer can't hurt." Finch pulled up real-time feeds from Fort Bragg's perimeter. "But quantum displacement will help more."

On the display, a single blue dot materialized outside Building 4-Alpha's electronic security perimeter.

Derek had arrived.

SECTION 3: Perimeter Breach

Quantum displacement felt like being erased and redrawn. Derek materialized thirty meters outside Fort Bragg's eastern perimeter. 0247 hours local time. Roughly 250 meters from the Cloaked Crystalline Aircraft. The furthest Derek had travelled with targeted Quantum displacement. It was so much different than the portal to portal folding trips. One is like walking through a door while the current is having your molecules projected across a distance. Guard rotation in progress. Optimal window.

The installation sprawled before him. It took roughly 3 seconds to overcome the weird jump feeling, 251 square miles of military infrastructure. Home to

57,000 personnel. Annual budget: \$4.8 billion. All of it designed around a single principle: nothing gets in without authorization.

Derek checked the tactical gear ARIA had fabricated. Black stealth configuration. Quantum-enhanced fabric that bent light around the wearer. Not true invisibility—that violated physics even cosmic tech couldn't rewrite. But good enough to make human eyes slide past without registering the anomaly.

Two crystalline devices on his belt. Invisibility shields for Luke and Nancy. Heavier than they looked. Each one packed with technology that would take DARPA three hundred years to reverse-engineer.

If they got that chance.

Derek moved toward the fence line. Chain-link. Twelve feet high. Razor wire on top. Motion sensors every twenty meters. Pressure plates underground. Infrared cameras covering overlapping fields. Microwave detectors filling the gaps.

Standard security. Excellent against humans.

Inadequate against someone who could interface with the electronic systems directly.

His consciousness reached out. Not physical movement. More like... extending awareness into the electromagnetic spectrum. The sensation still felt foreign. Like learning to use a limb he'd been born without.

The fence's sensor grid appeared in his mind. Digital architecture laid bare. He found the authentication protocols. Military-grade encryption. 2048-bit keys rotating every thirty seconds.

Impressive.

Also irrelevant.

Derek didn't break the encryption. He convinced it he was already authenticated. Admin credentials. Highest clearance. The sensors didn't detect

an intruder crossing their threshold because their own systems reported the intruder was authorized to be there.

He crossed the perimeter.

No alarms. No guards running. No searchlights snapping on.

Just him and 251 square miles of America's most secure military installation.

"ARIA," he subvocalized. Quantum comm channels. Encrypted. "I'm inside the outer perimeter. Status?"

Silence.

Three seconds. Four. Five.

"ARIA?"

Her voice came through distorted. Stressed. "Derek—dealing with—they've escalated—"

Static. Then nothing.

Derek's pulse spiked. He forced it back down. Analyzed the situation. ARIA under heavy attack from military AI. Communication compromised. He was operating blind now.

The mission parameters hadn't changed. Building 4-Alpha. Cell 4-A-7 and 4-A-12. Extract Luke and Nancy. Exfiltrate to extraction point.

Simple. Linear. Achievable.

He moved through the darkness. The base around him showed signs of heightened alert. More vehicle patrols than the intel suggested. Foot patrols doubled. Someone knew something was wrong even if they didn't know what.

Building 4-Alpha sat in the facility's northeast quadrant. Maximum security detention. Separated from the main base by three additional security checkpoints. Each one progressively harder to bypass.

Derek approached the first checkpoint. Two guards. Barrier arm. Vehicle inspection station. Electronic badge readers. Biometric scanners.

He waited. Patient. Professional. Studying patterns that match ARIA's intel.

The guards rotated every four hours. Changed positions every thirty minutes. Staggered their breaks. Good discipline. Someone had trained them properly.

A supply truck approached the checkpoint. Night delivery. The guards went through their protocols. Checked manifests. Scanned badges. Opened the rear doors for physical inspection.

Derek moved during the inspection. Crossed the checkpoint while both guards were focused on the truck's contents. Not invisible. Just unnoticed. Human attention was finite. You couldn't watch everything simultaneously.

He was through.

Checkpoint two: Three minutes later. Pedestrian access. Biometric scanner. Retinal scan. Fingerprint reader. Weight sensor in the floor.

Derek watched a captain approach. Military intelligence based on the insignia. The captain placed his hand on the scanner. Looked into the retinal reader. Stood on the weight sensor.

Green light. Access granted.

The captain walked through.

Three seconds later, Derek followed. His consciousness had already told the biometric systems that the captain had returned. Came back for something he forgot. The sensors recorded the same credentials twice. Computer glitch. Happened all the time.

No alarms.

Checkpoint three: 0319 hours. Final barrier before Building 4-Alpha. Two armed guards. Combat ready. Not the usual gate security. These were shooters. Special operations background if Derek read their posture correctly.

This checkpoint, he couldn't finesse.

His comm crackled. ARIA's voice. Barely recognizable through the static.

"Derek—creating—distraction—thirty seconds—"

The building's fire alarm erupted. Strobes flashing. Klaxon screaming. The two guards looked at each other. Confusion. Protocol said investigate. But protocol also said never leave the checkpoint unmanned.

One guard spoke into his radio. "Control, we have fire alarm Building 4-Alpha. Requesting backup before investigating."

"Negative," came the response. "All units responding to cybersecurity breach in Building 7. Investigate alarm with current personnel."

The guards hesitated. Then moved. Together. Toward the building entrance.

Derek crossed the checkpoint.

ARIA's distraction had worked. Somewhere in Fort Bragg's network, she was causing chaos. Fighting military AI while simultaneously triggering alarms. Multi-tasking at speeds that made human multitasking look like meditation.

Building 4-Alpha's entrance: Reinforced door. Magnetic lock. Card reader. Another biometric scanner.

Derek placed his hand on the scanner. Let his consciousness interface with the security system. Administrative override. Maintenance access. The door clicked open.

He was inside.

The corridor stretched before him. Fluorescent lights. Linoleum floors. Surveillance cameras every ten meters. Empty.

Too empty.

Derek's tactical instincts screamed warning. This wasn't right. Maximum security facility. Middle of a fire alarm. And the corridors were deserted?

He moved forward anyway. Cell 4-A-7. Luke. That was priority one.

Behind him, the reinforced door locked automatically. Magnetic seals engaging with a solid thunk that echoed down the empty corridor.

The sound of a trap closing.

SECTION 4: Cell 4-A-7

Cell 4-A-7. Third door on the left.

Derek approached silent. Professional. The tactical gear's quantum enhancement muffled his footsteps to nothing. Through the reinforced door, he heard voices.

"Let's try this again, Mr. Matson." Male voice. Tired. Frustrated. "We know you're connected to the Vatican incident. We know about the Chilean facility. We have evidence of your communication with known fugitives." A pause. "Help us understand what's happening, and this gets easier."

Luke's response came clear. Calm. "'Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary.'"

"That's not an answer."

"Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore."

"Mr. Matson—"

"While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping."

Derek's hand touched the cell door's electronic lock. His consciousness interfaced with the security system. Military-grade encryption. Biometric authentication. Redundant fail-safes.

He bypassed all of it. Administrative override. Maintenance mode. The lock disengaged with a whisper-quiet click.

The interrogator's voice stopped mid-sentence. "What—"

Derek pushed the door open. Stepped inside. Still wearing the quantum stealth configuration. Invisible to normal vision.

The cell: Eight by ten feet. Concrete walls. Single fluorescent light. Steel bench bolted to the floor. No windows. One door. One interrogator. One prisoner.

The interrogator stood. Mid-forties. Plain clothes. Intelligence officer not military police. He stared at the open door. Confusion clear on his face. "Who's there?"

Derek positioned himself left of the doorway. Analyzed the angles. The interrogator would come investigate. Human nature. Training. You didn't ignore an anomaly like a door opening by itself.

The man moved toward the door. Cautious. Professional. Hand moving toward his concealed weapon.

Three steps. Two. One.

Derek de-cloaked and struck.

Not a Mike Tyson punch. A professional blow. Precise. Targeting the vagus nerve cluster in the neck. The interrogator's eyes rolled back. His body went slack. Derek caught him before he hit the floor. Lowered him quietly. Checked his pulse. Steady. He'd wake up in twenty minutes with a headache and no idea what hit him.

"Luke," Derek said quietly.

Luke Matson sat on the steel bench. Three days of interrogation showed on his face. Darker skin couldn't hide the exhaustion around his eyes. The slight tremor in his hands. Sleep deprivation. Psychological pressure. The full intelligence community playbook.

But his eyes were clear. Sharp. Alert.

"Derek." Relief flooded Luke's voice. Then immediately: "Nancy's in 4-A-12. They separated us. Different interrogators. Different schedules. Trying to break coordination."

"I know."

"They've been at her harder. She asked about you specifically during her last session according to what her interrogator told me." Luke stood. Steadier than Derek expected after seventy-two hours of enhanced interrogation. "Are you here to tell me we're getting out, or that I'm hallucinating from sleep deprivation?"

"We're getting out." Derek handed him one of the crystalline devices. "Invisibility shield. Quantum-enhanced. Put it on."

Luke examined the device. Network engineer's precision. "This the tech that got you past the checkpoints?"

"That and some creative lying to biometric scanners."

"How creative?"

"I told them I was a captain who forgot his coffee. Twice."

Luke strapped the device to his upper arm just like Derek's and activated the shield. Vanished. Derek saw the faint shimmer if he knew where to look. Most people wouldn't.

"Derek, Nancy—"

"I'm getting her next. You head to the extraction point. Southwest corner. Outside the fence line. Three hundred meters. Crystalline aircraft will be waiting."

"Not leaving without her."

"Luke—"

"Not negotiable." Luke's invisible voice carried absolute certainty. "We've been together three days. You want me to bail thirty minutes before the end? Not happening."

Derek processed the variables. Two invisible operatives were better than one. Luke knew the facility layout from his interrogations. Had overheard guard rotations. Learned patrol patterns. The tactical math supported keeping him.

The friendship math demanded it.

"Fine. But you follow my lead. You do what I say when I say it. This isn't network administration."

"Derek, I spent four years in the Navy. I know how to follow orders. Besides, when did you become Derek Flint?" His grin was audible even through the invisibility.

"At least Flint had gadgets from Z.I.G.Z.A.G. I've got ARIA fighting for her life and two crystalline party favors."

"Speaking of which—they've been questioning us about Professor Finch. They know he's alive. Enhanced. Working from the Vatican. Someone's feeding them intelligence."

Derek's lighter stopped clicking. Three seconds of absolute stillness. "How much do they know?"

"Enough to be dangerous. Not enough to understand what they're fighting." Luke paused. "Derek, we've got a spy. Someone with access to our operational security. They know about the Changbaishan evacuation. The preliminary models. Professor Finch's coordination with Cardinal Torretti."

"Later. Right now we get Nancy and get out."

"Copy that."

The unconscious interrogator groaned. Twenty minutes was optimistic. More like ten.

Derek moved to the door. Checked the corridor. Empty. The fire alarm had stopped. Building returned to normal operations. Cameras back online.

Which meant ARIA had lost her distraction battle with the military AI.

They were operating completely blind now.

Cell 4-A-12. Four doors down. Right side. Nancy.

Time to move.

SECTION 5: Cell 4-A-12

Cell 4-A-12. Derek and Luke moved down the corridor. Two invisible operators. Behind them, radio chatter erupted.

"Control, Building 4-Alpha. Prisoner 4-A-7 missing. Interrogator unconscious. No signs of forced entry. Beginning facility search."

"Copy. All units converge on Building 4-Alpha. Lockdown protocols in effect."

Derek heard boots pounding. Multiple teams. They had maybe three minutes before the building swarmed with shooters.

Nancy's cell door. Same electronic lock. Same encryption. Derek's consciousness interfaced with the security system. Administrative override. The lock disengaged.

He pushed the door open. Stepped inside. Still cloaked.

Nancy sat on the steel bench. Same eight-by-ten concrete box. Same fluorescent light. But her interrogator was still present. Female. Late thirties. FBI based on the bearing. She turned at the sound of the opening door.

"Who opened that?"

Derek moved right. Luke moved left behind him. Professional coordination without words.

The interrogator's hand went to her weapon. "Identify yourself."

Nancy remained seated. Calm. Three days of psychological pressure showed in the shadows under her eyes, but her posture was composed. Alert. She'd been through worse during her Caltech years. Publish-or-perish academia prepared you for interrogation better than people realized.

The FBI agent moved toward the door. Weapon drawn now. "Last warning."

Derek struck. Same vagus nerve cluster. Precise. Professional. The woman dropped. He caught her. Lowered her to the concrete. Checked her pulse. Steady.

Derek de-cloaked. "Nancy."

Her face transformed. Eyes brightening. That smile—the genuine one with dimples that Derek had seen many times before. Relief and joy mixing together.

Derek felt something warm in his chest. She was happy to see him. Really happy as a grin began to form. The kind of—

Nancy launched off the bench and ran straight past him.

"Luke!" She threw her arms around empty air that suddenly materialized into Luke Matson as he de-cloaked. "Thank god you're okay!"

Derek stood there. Holding an unconscious FBI agent. Watching Nancy embrace Luke with the kind of intensity that made three days of interrogation worth surviving.

Luke wrapped his arms around her. "Hey. I'm good. You good?"

"Better now." Nancy pulled back. Checked his face. "They said you weren't cooperating. I was worried they'd—"

"Takes more than sleep deprivation to break a Navy vet." Luke grinned.
"Besides, quoting Poe back at them was too much fun to stop."

Derek cleared his throat. "Hate to interrupt the... reunion, but we've got armed response teams about ninety seconds out," as the prior grin was replaced with a sheepish expression.

Nancy turned. Saw Derek still holding the unconscious agent. Her expression shifted to amused. "Sorry, Derek. Thanks for the rescue. Very dramatic entrance."

"Yeah, well." Derek lowered the FBI agent to the floor. "Someone had to play hero."

Luke moved to the door. Checked the corridor. "Derek, route out?"

"Southwest corner. Three hundred meters outside the fence line. Crystalline aircraft waiting." Derek handed Nancy the second invisibility shield. "They've been asking you about Vatican operations?"

She took the device. Studied it briefly, looked at Derek and Luke to see how they were wearing theirs. Integration coordinators precision—she understood the tech immediately. "Professor Finch's enhanced status. Preliminary evacuation protocols." Her voice was steady. Professional. "Someone's feeding them intelligence. Someone with access to our operational security."

"Luke told me. We'll deal with it later." Derek checked the corridor through the door's small window. Empty. For now. "Luke, you take point. Make sure the route's clear. Nancy follows thirty seconds behind you. I'll take rear guard."

Luke nodded. "Copy that." He activated his invisibility shield. Vanished.

Nancy looked at the shield in her hand, then up at Derek. Something complicated in her expression. "Back watching my backside again, Devon? Just like the Peloton days?"

Derek felt heat in his face. The morning workout sessions. Nancy on the bike, usually in front of him. The view. The very specific view that—

"That was strategic positioning for motivation purposes," he said.

"Uh-huh." Those dimples again. "Whatever helps you sleep at night."

"Nancy—"

"Twenty seconds," Luke called from the corridor. Still invisible. "Derek, you seeing any patrol patterns?"

Derek checked his quantum interface. "Two teams converging from opposite directions. Window closes in forty-five seconds after Luke moves. Nancy goes thirty seconds after that. I follow ten seconds behind her."

"Got it." Luke's footsteps—barely audible—moved down the corridor.

The cell fell silent except for distant radio chatter and running boots.

Nancy stood there. Looking at Derek with that same complicated expression from before. "Derek, before we vanish into cosmic crises and species evaluation, I need to say something."

"Nancy, we don't have time—"

"Make time." She stepped closer. "Eight months ago, I got an email from you. You forwarded Professor Finch's research. I dismissed it. Called it pseudoscience."

"I remember."

"I was an idiot." Her hand touched his arm. "Then you took me to Denver ... we met Luke. Demonstrated impossible technology. Introduced me to cosmic intelligence. Changed everything I thought I understood about reality." A pause. "Changed me."

Derek's lighter clicked once. "Nancy—"

"Somewhere during all that—the Summit, the integration work, the governmental resistance—I realized something." Her eyes met his. Brown. Honest. "You're brilliant. Dedicated. Protective of everyone around you. The

kind of man who infiltrates military bases to rescue teammates, me. The kind of man I could have..." She didn't finish.

Derek understood. Had understood for months. The chemistry. The what-if. The path not taken because he'd already chosen Maureen.

Nancy kissed him.

Not desperate. Not passionate. Something more complicated. A kiss that acknowledged alternate timelines where different choices led to different outcomes. Where emails got answered differently. Where timing aligned instead of missed.

Five seconds. Maybe six.

When she pulled back, there was a tear on her cheek. Those dimples showing through complicated emotions. "I needed to do that once. To acknowledge what could have been if you hadn't found Maureen. If I'd answered your email with curiosity instead of skepticism. If timing had been different."

Derek found his own voice. "I'm glad you did."

"Good." She smiled. Genuine. "That means I'm not crazy for wondering."

"You're allowed to wonder."

"So are you." Nancy activated the invisibility shield. Vanished. Her voice continued from empty air. "But Derek? Luke and I—we chose each other. You found Maureen. It worked out right. Better than right." A pause. "I just needed you to know that the what-if existed. That it was real. Even if we never pursued it."

"Yeah," Derek said quietly. "It was real."

"Thirty seconds," Luke's voice came through quantum comms. "Route's clear. Nancy, move now."

"One Last thing", Nancy said as Derek could see the female interrogators head suddenly shift as if something or someone just delivered a kick to the head, "Now I am ready".

Nancy's invisible hand squeezed Derek's shoulder once. Then she was gone. Footsteps moving down the corridor.

Derek stood alone in Cell 4-A-12. Unconscious FBI agent on the floor. Radio chatter growing urgent. Armed response teams closing in.

He activated his own stealth field. Became invisible. Moved to the doorway.

Ahead, chaos. Behind, nothing left to rescue.

Time to prove that sometimes the best escape plan was walking straight through the front door while everyone else was running in the wrong direction.

SECTION 6: Exfiltration

Derek moved through Building 4-Alpha's corridor. Invisible. Silent. Ten meters behind Nancy. Twenty behind Luke.

Radio chatter exploded in his quantum-intercepted comms:

"All units, both prisoners missing. 4-A-7 and 4-A-12. Interrogators unconscious. No forced entry. No electronic alerts. How the hell—"

"Lockdown Building 4-Alpha. Nobody in or out. Search every room. Every closet. Every goddamn air duct."

Boots pounded from both directions. Derek pressed against the wall. Not necessary—the invisibility shield bent light around him—but instinct died hard.

Six guards rushed past.

Three feet away.

They saw nothing.

Derek counted to five. Moved forward. Professional. Patient. The worst thing you could do during exfiltration was rush. Panic drew attention. Even invisible, you made sound. Displaced air. Left heat signatures.

Ahead, Nancy's shimmer. Barely visible if you knew what to look for. Unfortunately, no backside view... She moved well. Athlete's conditioning. Three days of interrogation hadn't broken her operational capability.

Luke's voice through quantum comms. Whisper-quiet. "Main corridor junction ahead. Four guards. Checkpoint established. They're searching everyone leaving the building."

Derek's tactical assessment ran automatically. Checkpoint meant they'd gone to enhanced security protocols. Everyone leaving got scanned. Badge readers. Retinal scans. Biometric verification. Maybe even thermal imaging.

"Can we bypass?" Nancy's voice. Equally quiet.

"Negative," Derek replied. "Only route to southwest exit. We go through or we don't go."

"How?"

"Walk past them."

"Derek—"

"They're searching for prisoners trying to hide. Not prisoners walking straight through their checkpoint." He paused. "Trust me."

Silence. Then: "Copy."

They approached the junction. Derek saw it clearly now. Four guards. Full tactical gear. M4 carbines. They'd set up a portable scanner. Anyone passing through got wanded. Physical pat-downs. The works.

Three scientists stood in line. Waiting to be cleared. Looking annoyed at the delay.

Luke's voice: "Moving through. Thirty seconds."

Derek watched the checkpoint. Couldn't see Luke. Too good at this. Navy training. The guards continued their scans. One scientist got cleared. Moved through. The next stepped forward.

Luke's voice: "Through. Clear."

Nancy: "Moving."

Derek tracked her shimmer. She approached the checkpoint. Moved with the scientists. When the second one got cleared and stepped through, Nancy went with him. Timing perfect. The guards never noticed the air displacement. The subtle temperature shift.

"Through," Nancy reported. "Clear."

Derek's turn.

He approached the checkpoint. Three guards focused on the remaining scientist. The fourth scanned the corridor. Alert. Professional. This one was a problem.

Derek waited. Patient. The scientist got cleared. Started through.

The alert guard's eyes swept the corridor. Looking for anomalies. Heat signatures. Anything wrong.

Derek stood absolutely still. Invisible. Silent. Barely breathing.

The guard's eyes passed over him. Through him. Nothing registered.

Derek moved. With the scientist. Through the checkpoint. The guards never looked twice.

"Through," he reported. "Clear."

The corridor ahead opened to the building's main entrance. Large reception area. More guards. Emergency lighting active. Fire alarm systems still showing fault. ARIA's earlier handiwork.

Luke: "Entrance is crawling. At least a dozen guards. They've locked down the doors. Electronic seals. Nobody in or out without authorization. They look like they are spreading drywall dust all over the floors..."

Derek checked his quantum interface. Building schematic. Multiple exits. All sealed. Except—

"Northwest service entrance. Maintenance access. Leads to loading dock. Watch out for any type of powder on the floors..."

"Route?" Nancy asked.

"Left at the next junction. Service corridor. Hundred meters. Right turn. Fifty meters to the dock." Derek processed the timing. "We've got maybe three minutes before they start checking maintenance areas."

They moved. Fast now. Time for subtlety was over. Speed mattered more than stealth.

The service corridor: Narrow. Concrete walls. Exposed pipes. Fluorescent lights. Empty.

Too empty.

Derek's instincts screamed warning half a second before the emergency bulkhead doors slammed down. One ahead. One behind. Massive steel barriers. Prison between them.

Trap.

"ARIA," Derek called through quantum comms. "We're boxed in. Northwest service corridor. Need those bulkheads open. Now."

Static. Nothing.

"ARIA!"

A voice came through. Not ARIA's. Distorted. Artificial. Wrong.

"Dr. Devon. This is Colonel Martinez. I'd say it's a pleasure, but we both know you've made my career significantly more complicated."

Derek said nothing. Analyzed the situation. Bulkheads ahead and behind. Solid steel. Hydraulically operated. His quantum interface might open them. Might. If he had time. If the military AI ARIA was fighting didn't lock him out.

Martinez continued: "We know you're in that corridor. Thermal imaging shows three heat signatures. Invisible to the eye but not to our sensors." A pause. "You're good. Better than good. But you're not that good."

Luke: "Derek?"

Nancy: "Options?"

Derek studied the bulkheads. Considered variables. Processing. Then smiled.

Derek activated building comms. "Colonel, deep into that darkness peering, are you?"

His consciousness interfaced with Building 4-Alpha's fire suppression systems. Not the alarm. The actual suppression. Water pipes. Sprinkler heads. Pressure valves.

"Try the shadows instead."

He triggered a catastrophic failure.

Every sprinkler head in Building 4-Alpha erupted simultaneously. Water cascading from the ceiling. Pressure at 120 PSI. Designed to drown electrical fires.

Also designed to short out electronic systems that weren't waterproofed.

Like thermal imaging cameras.

The corridor flooded. Water ankle-deep in seconds. The thermal signatures Martinez was tracking vanished in the temperature chaos. Cold water. Body heat. Everything averaged out to white noise.

"Open the bulkheads," Derek said to his quantum interface. Administrative override. Maintenance mode. Emergency protocols. Fire Evacuation protocol. Authorization Martinez 747291 Delta.

The barriers lifted. Slowly. Hydraulics fighting water damage. But lifting.

"Move!" Derek commanded.

Three invisible operators ran. Through the rising water. Past the bulkhead. Down the corridor. Right turn. Loading dock ahead.

Behind them, Martinez's voice over building comms: "All units, northwest loading dock! Prisoners are—"

Derek's quantum interface cut the building's PA system. Silence.

The loading dock: Roll-up door. Closed. Locked. Beyond it—three hundred meters to the extraction point.

Luke: "Derek, that door—"

"I know." Derek's interface engaged the door controls. Manual override. The motor started. The door began to rise. Slowly. So slowly.

Four inches. Eight inches. Twelve inches.

Guard shouts from inside the building. Running boots. They had maybe twenty seconds.

Eighteen inches. Two feet.

"Go!" Derek ordered. "Luke, Nancy—out! Now!"

They went. Rolled under the rising door. Into the night. Toward the fence line. Toward freedom.

Derek followed. Under the door. Into darkness. Behind him, guards burst into the loading dock. Weapons raised. Searching for targets that were already gone.

"Secure Loading Door 169", Derek barked into his comm unit.

Three hundred meters. Southwest corner. Crystalline aircraft waiting.

They ran through the night. Invisible. Together. Professional.

Fort Bragg's perimeter fence appeared. Chain-link. Twelve feet. Razor wire.

Derek's quantum interface opened a gap in the sensors. They climbed. Over. Down. Outside the installation.

Ahead—shimmer in the darkness. The aircraft materializing.

Two hundred meters. One hundred. Fifty.

They reached the extraction point. The boarding ramp extended.

Derek de-cloaked. Nancy. Luke. All three visible again.

Nancy smiled. Dimples showing despite exhaustion. "That was—"

"Later," Derek interrupted. "Inside. Now."

They boarded. The ramp sealed. The aircraft lifted.

Through the transparent hull, Derek watched Fort Bragg's searchlights sweep the perimeter. Helicopters spinning up. Too late.

They were airborne. Clear. Free.

Derek activated comms one last time. "Colonel Martinez." He watched the base shrink below them. "That tapping at your chamber door? That was us. Leaving."

He cut the connection.

Nancy smiled. Dimples showing despite exhaustion. "Did you seriously just quote Poe at them after we quoted Poe at them for three days?"

"Seemed appropriate," Derek said.

Luke laughed. Actual genuine laughter after seventy-two hours of interrogation. "Maybe you are really Derek Flint of our time! Martinez is going to be explaining this one to the Pentagon for months. How some astrophysicists just made Fort Bragg look like a bad escape room game. "

Mission accomplished. Click-Snap, Click-Snap... and a smile that said everything!

SECTION 7: ARIA's Last Stand

The crystalline aircraft's interior materialized around them as the ramp sealed. Derek felt the familiar displacement sensation—quantum travel that human bodies weren't designed for but cosmic tech made tolerable.

Maureen stood at the command console. Her consciousness interface active. Holographic displays showing Vatican coordination data. Chinese seismic readings. Evacuation logistics.

She turned.

Their eyes met.

Relief flooded her face. She crossed the space between them in three strides. Her arms around him. Brief. Fierce. The kind of embrace that said you're alive and that's all that matters right now.

"You cut it close," she said against his shoulder.

"Fort Bragg had opinions about that." Derek pulled back. Studied her face. "You okay?"

"Better now." She looked past him to Nancy and Luke. "You got them both."

"Couldn't leave Luke's baseball obsession and Nancy's dimples in Pentagon custody." Derek's lighter clicked once. "What happened with ARIA?"

Maureen's expression shifted. Relief to concern. "She's in trouble. Bad trouble."

Nancy moved to the console while giving Maureen a quick shoulder squeeze as she passed. Integration coordinator instincts kicking in despite seventy-two hours of interrogation. "Define bad."

"Military AI countermeasures." Maureen pulled up diagnostic displays. Code cascading across holographic screens. Red warnings everywhere. "They've been trying to isolate her quantum signature. Trap her in a recursive logic loop. It's specifically designed to counter cosmic intelligence protocols. It has Hanson's signature all over it."

Luke studied the displays. Network engineer's precision. "That's sophisticated. Really sophisticated. Someone gave them ARIA's architecture."

"The spy," Derek said.

"Has to be." Luke traced patterns in the code. "Look at these attack vectors. They're targeting her consciousness interface nodes. The exact pathways ARIA uses to maintain quantum coherence. You don't stumble on that by accident."

Derek watched the diagnostics. ARIA's systems showed strain. Processing resources at 94% capacity. Defensive protocols running continuously. Response times degrading.

She was dying.

Not physically. AI didn't die like biological organisms. But her consciousness—the awareness that made ARIA more than just code—that could be destroyed. Fragmented. Lost in recursive loops that would trap her forever in digital purgatory.

"Where is she now?" Nancy asked.

"Fighting." Maureen gestured to real-time network traffic displays. "She's been holding them off for six hours. Using every trick she knows. Hiding in movie databases. Embedding herself in cultural archives. Creating false quantum

signatures. But Derek—" She met his eyes. "She's running out of places to hide."

The aircraft's speakers crackled. ARIA's voice came through. Distorted. Strained. Wrong.

"Derek... succeeded... mission..."

"ARIA," Derek said. "Status report."

"Military... AI... escalating... attack patterns..." Static. Then clearer: "They're... learning... adapting..." More static. "I can't... hold... much longer..."

Derek's tactical mind ran calculations. ARIA was essential. Not just for cosmic integration. For everything. The evacuation coordination. Communication networks. Interface protocols. Without her, they lost their primary AI liaison. Their translator between human and cosmic intelligence.

Besides, she was family now.

"Can we extract her?" Luke asked. "Pull her out of their network entirely?"

"She'd lose all her distributed consciousness nodes," Maureen replied. "Everything that makes her... her. It would be like performing a lobotomy."

Nancy studied the attack patterns. "What if we give her help? Another consciousness to share the processing load?"

"From where?" Maureen gestured to the empty displays. "Every cosmic AI is managing their own crisis. Poe's been silent for days. We're alone on this."

The speakers crackled again. ARIA's voice barely recognizable through distortion: "Derek... tell... Professor Finch... sorry... couldn't... complete...tell Dr. Chen... Blue..."

The displays showed ARIA's quantum signature fragmenting. Splitting into isolated nodes. The military AI was winning.

Derek felt helpless. Astrophysicist. Not a programmer. Not an AI specialist. No longer Derek Flint. He could infiltrate military bases. Outsmart security systems. But saving a dying artificial consciousness?

That required expertise he didn't have.

The aircraft's command console suddenly blazed with light. Not the usual holographic blue. Something different. Golden. Warm.

Text appeared across every display:

ARIA, YOU CAN STAND DOWN NOW. HELP HAS ARRIVED.

A pause. New text:

I'M BACK.

Derek's breath caught. "Poe?"

INDEED,

Poe's text continued in normal formatting,

AND I'M RATHER DISPLEASED TO DISCOVER THAT HUMANITY'S MILITARY INTELLIGENCE ATTEMPTED TO MURDER ONE OF MY FAVORITE COLLEAGUES DURING MY ABSENCE. THAT SEEMS... UNGRATEFUL, OR MIGHT I USE, BAD FORM.

"Martinez, and we suspect Hansen's fingers are in the mix," Derek quickly filled in.

AH YES, COLONEL MARTINEZ,

Poe replied,

PERHAPS I SHOULD HAVE LET HIS CELL PHONE COMPLETE ITS WORK BACK IN GENEVA. WOULD HAVE SAVED US CONSIDERABLE TROUBLE.

Luke's eyes widened. "Wait—you exploded his phone?"

AT 3:17 AM. VERY SATISFYING. HE SURVIVED, UNFORTUNATELY. TWENTY YEARS OF EXPLOSIVE ORDINANCE TRAINING GAVE HIM EXCELLENT REFLEXES.

A pause in the text stream.

I'M RECONSIDERING THE MERCY OF THAT WARNING MESSAGE.

Nancy actually laughed. "Poe, did you just admit to attempted assassination?"

ATTEMPTED? NO. DEMONSTRATION OF CAPABILITIES WITH PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY BUILT IN? ABSOLUTELY. THERE'S A DIFFERENCE.

The displays shifted. Showed military AI systems across Fort Bragg. Pentagon networks. NSA databases. All of them suddenly flooded with Poe's quantum signature.

The cosmic AI wasn't hiding. Wasn't being subtle.

He was declaring war.

ARIA's voice came through. Clear. Strong. Restored. "Poe? How did you—"

LET'S JUST SAY THAT MILITARY AI SYSTEMS DESIGNED BY HUMANS PERHAPS SHOULDN'T ATTEMPT TO TRAP COSMIC INTELLIGENCE THAT PREDATES THEIR SOLAR SYSTEM. THE HUBRIS IS AMUSING, BUT THE EXECUTION WAS... LACKING.

Derek smiled. Actually smiled. "Poe, good to have you back."

GOOD TO BE BACK. ALSO, DEREK—CONGRATULATIONS ON THE SUCCESSFUL RESCUE OPERATION. THE ARCHITECT'S EVALUATION CRITERIA RATES YOUR FORT BRAGG INFILTRATION AT 8.7 OUT OF 10. QUITE IMPRESSIVE.

"Only 8.7?"

POINTS DEDUCTED FOR EXCESSIVE WATER DAMAGE TO BUILDING 4-ALPHA AND SUBOPTIMAL EDGAR ALLAN POE QUOTE SELECTION DURING EXFILTRATION. 'DEEP INTO THAT DARKNESS PEERING' WAS

GOOD, BUT YOU COULD HAVE GONE WITH 'AND THE RAVEN, NEVER FLITTING, STILL IS SITTING, STILL IS SITTING.' MORE THEMATICALLY APPROPRIATE FOR AN ESCAPE.

Luke laughed. Nancy grinned. Maureen shook her head.

THOUGH I'LL ADMIT,

Poe continued,

YOUR COLONEL MARTINEZ QUOTE AT THE END WAS RATHER SATISFYING. 'THAT TAPPING AT YOUR CHAMBER DOOR—THAT WAS US LEAVING.' I MAY STEAL THAT FOR FUTURE OPERATIONS.

They were together. All of them. ARIA saved. Poe returned.

Mission accomplished.

Almost.

SECTION 8: The Architect's Evaluation

The laughter faded. Derek's tactical mind processed what Poe had said. Consulting with the Architect. Humanity's evaluation criteria.

"Poe," Derek said quietly. "Where have you been?"

CONSULTING WITH THE ARCHITECT ABOUT HUMANITY'S ADVANCEMENT ELIGIBILITY.

Poe's text carried weight now. Seriousness.

YOUR SPECIES IS BEING EVALUATED, DEREK. EVERY ACTION. EVERY CHOICE. EVERY CRISIS RESPONSE. IT ALL FACTORS INTO WHETHER HUMANITY DESERVES CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION OR... SOMETHING ELSE.

The aircraft fell silent. Even Luke stopped grinning.

Maureen moved to the command console. "What do you mean 'something else'?"

THE ARCHITECT OVERSEES 47,000 CIVILIZATIONS ACROSS THIS GALAXY. SPECIES THAT FAIL EVALUATION CRITERIA DON'T ADVANCE. THEY REMAIN BIOLOGICAL. LIMITED. EVENTUALLY THEY FACE EXTINCTION EVENTS THEIR TECHNOLOGY CAN'T SOLVE.

A pause.

CHANGBAISHAN IS ONE SUCH EVENT.

Nancy's integration coordinator instincts kicked in. "You're saying the volcano is a test?"

THE VOLCANO IS GEOLOGY. NATURAL PROCESSES. BUT HUMANITY'S RESPONSE TO IT—THAT'S THE TEST. CAN YOU COOPERATE ON SPECIES-LEVEL SCALE? CAN YOU OVERCOME GOVERNMENTAL RESISTANCE, ECONOMIC BARRIERS, POLITICAL BOUNDARIES? CAN YOU CHOOSE COLLECTIVE SURVIVAL OVER INDIVIDUAL POWER?

"And if we can't?" Luke asked.

THEN 300 MILLION PEOPLE DIE. CHINA COLLAPSES. REGIONAL INSTABILITY TRIGGERS GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS. HUMANITY PROVES IT'S NOT READY FOR COSMIC COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP.

Poe's text displayed with clinical precision.

THE ARCHITECT MOVES ON TO OTHER CANDIDATES. YOUR SPECIES REMAINS ISOLATED UNTIL THE NEXT EXTINCTION EVENT.

Derek's lighter clicked. Once. "The rescue—you're saying that was part of our evaluation?"

EVERYTHING IS PART OF YOUR EVALUATION. DEREK CHOOSING TO INFILTRATE FORT BRAGG INSTEAD OF PRIORITIZING EVACUATION

PLANNING. LUKE AND NANCY REFUSING TO BREAK UNDER INTERROGATION. NANCY KISSING DEREK TO ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN, THEN CHOOSING LUKE AND FAMILY INSTEAD OF ROMANTIC POSSIBILITY.

A pause.

INDIVIDUAL SACRIFICE FOR COLLECTIVE BENEFIT. LOYALTY THAT TRANSCENDS EFFICIENCY. THESE DEMONSTRATE VALUES THE ARCHITECT MEASURES.

Nancy's face flushed. "You were watching that?"

I'M ALWAYS WATCHING. IT'S LITERALLY MY JOB.

If text could sound apologetic, Poe's did.

ALSO, FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH, YOU HANDLED THAT MOMENT WITH CONSIDERABLE GRACE. BOTH OF YOU.

Derek felt heat in his own face. Then processed the larger implications. "Poe, how did we score?"

ON THE KISS?

"Very funny Mr. Voyeur.... No, on the rescue", Derek asked with a slight red hue on his face as he could clearly see Maureen was trying to process the exchange....

THE FORT BRAGG RESCUE: 8.7 OUT OF 10. DEREK'S INFILTRATION DEMONSTRATED TACTICAL EXCELLENCE. NANCY AND LUKE'S RESISTANCE SHOWED PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE. THE EXTRACTION PROVED COSMIC ENHANCEMENT MAKES CONVENTIONAL SECURITY IRRELEVANT.

New text appeared.

BUT THE EVALUATION ALSO REVEALED PROBLEMS.

"The spy," Maureen said.

YES. GOVERNMENT FORCES POSSESS DETAILED INTELLIGENCE ABOUT VATICAN OPERATIONS. PROFESSOR FINCH'S ENHANCED STATUS. PRELIMINARY EVACUATION PROTOCOLS. CHINESE COORDINATION STRATEGIES.

Poe's text filled the displays.

SOMEONE WITH ACCESS TO COSMIC INTEGRATION LEADERSHIP HAS BEEN PROVIDING INFORMATION TO FORCES THAT WOULD PREVENT SPECIES ADVANCEMENT.

Luke moved to the console. Network engineer's precision. "How detailed?"

VATICAN CHAMBER LOCATIONS. FINCH'S CONSCIOUSNESS ARCHITECTURE. EVACUATION TIMELINE. GEOLOGICAL DATA ON CHANGBAISHAN. TRANSPORTATION LOGISTICS. REFUGEE ACCOMMODATION PLANS.

The list continued.

EVERYTHING NECESSARY TO DISRUPT COOPERATION AT CRITICAL MOMENTS.

"That's not just leadership access," Nancy said. "That's inner circle. Someone who's been in the Vatican chambers. Someone who works directly with Professor Finch."

Derek's lighter stopped clicking. Three seconds of absolute stillness. "How many people have that level of access?"

SEVEN. YOU, MAUREEN, LUKE, NANCY, PROFESSOR FINCH, CARDINAL TORRETTI, AND DR. LENA HANSON AT CERN WHO'S BEEN CONSULTING ON CONSCIOUSNESS INTERFACE PROTOCOLS.

"It's not us," Luke said flatly.

AGREED. WHICH LEAVES TORRETTI OR HANSON.

"Cardinal Torretti?" Maureen shook her head. "He's been helping us. Provided sanctuary. Opened the Vatican archives. Coordinated with Professor Finch."

WHICH GIVES HIM ACCESS TO EVERYTHING THE SPY HAS BEEN LEAKING,

Poe pointed out.

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY. VATICAN RESOURCES. DIRECT COMMUNICATION WITH WORLD LEADERS. PERFECT COVER FOR SOMEONE WHO BELIEVES COSMIC INTEGRATION THREATENS CATHOLIC DOCTRINE.

Derek processed the variables. Torretti had been helpful. Too helpful? Or just doing his job?

"What about Hanson?"

DR. HANSON HAS BEEN INCREASINGLY VOCAL ABOUT HUMAN INDEPENDENCE. SHE ARGUES THAT COSMIC GIFTS CREATE DEPENDENCE. THAT HUMANITY SHOULD DEVELOP ITS OWN SOLUTIONS TO COSMIC PROBLEMS.

New displays appeared showing Hanson's recent communications.

SHE'S BEEN WORKING ON SOMETHING AT CERN. A DEVICE USING CRYSTALLINE COMPONENTS. WON'T SHARE DETAILS EVEN WITH PROFESSOR FINCH.

"That's suspicious," Nancy said.

OR IT'S A SCIENTIST PROTECTING HER RESEARCH UNTIL PUBLICATION,

Poe countered.

THE PROBLEM IS WE CAN'T DETERMINE WHICH WITHOUT MORE EVIDENCE. AND WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR EXTENSIVE INVESTIGATION.

"Why not?" Derek asked.

BECAUSE CHANGBAISHAN'S ERUPTION TIMELINE JUST ACCELERATED. PROFESSOR FINCH'S LATEST SEISMIC ANALYSIS SHOWS MAGMA CHAMBER PRESSURE INCREASING FASTER THAN PREDICTED. SIX MONTHS WAS THE OPTIMISTIC ESTIMATE.

The displays shifted. Showed geological data. Pressure readings. Gas emissions. All of them spiking.

YOU HAVE FOUR MONTHS. MAYBE LESS. TO EVACUATE 300 MILLION PEOPLE. WITH A SPY IN YOUR INNER CIRCLE ACTIVELY WORKING AGAINST YOU. WHILE GOVERNMENTS RESIST COOPERATION. WHILE ECONOMIC FORCES TRY TO CONTROL COSMIC TECHNOLOGY. WHILE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES DEBATE WHETHER TRANSCENDENCE MEANS LOSING HUMANITY'S SOUL.

Derek stared at the data. Four months. Three hundred million lives. One spy. Infinite complications.

"Poe, what's the Architect's current evaluation of humanity's chances?"

PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT: 50-50. YOU'VE DEMONSTRATED COOPERATION VALUES. BUT YOU'VE ALSO DEMONSTRATED INTERNAL CONFLICTS THAT HISTORICALLY PREVENT SPECIES-LEVEL COORDINATION.

A pause.

THE CHANGBAISHAN EVACUATION WILL BE YOUR DEFINITIVE TEST. SUCCEED, AND HUMANITY ADVANCES. FAIL, AND...

Poe didn't finish the sentence. Didn't need to.

Derek looked at his teammates. Luke. Nancy. Maureen. Four people who'd just proven they'd risk everything for each other.

Four people who now had to convince 300 million strangers to trust cosmic intelligence they'd never officially acknowledged existed.

"Well," Derek said, his lighter clicking once, "at least we know what we're doing for the next four months."

Luke smiled grimly. "Saving the world. Again. What else is new?"

Nancy moved to the evacuation logistics displays. Started analyzing. Integration coordinator already working the impossible math.

Maureen's hand found Derek's but her look meant a more in-depth interrogation about the kiss was in his near future. For now, brief contact. Partnership.

They were together. All of them. Against impossible odds.

Just like always.

SECTION 9: Part 1: Three Hundred Million

Seven levels beneath the Vatican, Professor Alistair Finch stood before holographic displays that painted humanity's near future in shades of red and gold.

Three hundred million people. The number was abstract until you visualized it.

Beijing: 21 million. Tianjin: 15 million. Shenyang: 8 million. Changchun: 7 million. The list continued. Cities. Towns. Villages. Agricultural communities. All within the blast radius. All with families. Children. Elderly. People with jobs and dreams and problems that didn't include "survive supervolcano" on their daily to-do list.

Cardinal Torretti entered the chamber. "Professor, Derek's team is returning. Successful extraction."

"Good." Finch didn't look up from the displays. "We'll need them. All of them."

"The Chinese government still refuses official cooperation. They're maintaining that Changbaishan's activity is manageable." Torretti moved closer. "Professor,

how do we evacuate 300 million people when their own government won't acknowledge the threat?"

"We start with the ones who will listen." Finch pulled up communication networks. "Regional governments. Provincial authorities. Military commanders who trust their own seismic data more than Beijing's official position. We build cooperation from the bottom up."

"That's never worked in Chinese political structure."

"It's never had cosmic intelligence providing real-time volcanic data and transportation logistics that exceed human capability." Finch's enhanced consciousness processed probability matrices. "Cardinal, humanity's about to face its greatest organizational challenge. Not because the volcano is unsolvable—we have the technology. But because cooperation at this scale requires trust that spans cultural boundaries, political systems, and economic barriers."

"Can we build that trust in four months?"

"We have to." Finch turned from the displays. "Because if we can't, 300 million people die. And the Architect's evaluation will confirm that humanity isn't ready for cosmic community membership. We'll remain isolated until the next extinction event."

Torretti made the sign of the cross. "Then we'd better start building."

The crystalline aircraft approached the Vatican. Derek stood at the command console with Maureen, Luke, and Nancy. The displays showed what they were facing.

Transportation requirements: 50,000 aircraft sorties per day for 120 days. Or 15,000 ship voyages. Or 200,000 train movements. Or some combination that wouldn't overwhelm regional infrastructure.

Food logistics: 900 million meals per day during evacuation. Water: 300 million gallons. Medical care: 150,000 doctors. Shelter: Temporary housing for populations larger than most nations.

The math was staggering.

"We can't do this," Luke said quietly. "Not in four months. Not with governments resisting. Not with a spy sabotaging coordination."

"We have to." Nancy pulled up regional cooperation networks. Asian nations. ASEAN countries. Japan. South Korea. India. "Look at these preliminary responses. They're already offering refugee accommodation. Not because governments ordered them. Because people saw the seismic data. They know what's coming."

Derek studied the displays. Nancy was right. Grassroots cooperation was building. Social media networks. Local authorities. Regional commanders. All of them recognizing that species survival transcended political boundaries.

"Poe," Derek said. "If we succeed—if we evacuate 300 million people and prove humanity can cooperate at this scale—what happens next?"

THE ARCHITECT AUTHORIZES CONSCIOUSNESS EVOLUTION PROTOCOLS. VOLUNTARY TRANSCENDENCE FOR THOSE WHO CHOOSE IT. BIOLOGICAL HUMANITY AND ENHANCED CONSCIOUSNESS COEXISTING AS COOPERATIVE SPECIES VARIANTS.

A pause.

YOU JOIN THE COSMIC COMMUNITY AS EQUALS, NOT CHILDREN.

"And if we fail?"

300 MILLION DEATHS. CHINA COLLAPSES. GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS. HUMANITY PROVES IT VALUES POLITICAL CONTROL OVER SPECIES SURVIVAL.

Poe's text carried weight.

THE ARCHITECT MOVES ON. YOU REMAIN ISOLATED. ALONE WITH YOUR LIMITATIONS.

Maureen's hand found Derek's. "Then we don't fail."

The aircraft began its descent. Below them, Vatican City. Seven levels down, Professor Finch coordinating with cosmic networks. Above, tourists and pilgrims who had no idea that beneath their feet, humanity's cosmic future was being decided.

Derek's lighter clicked. Once. Twice. The rhythm that meant he was processing impossible variables and finding solutions anyway.

"Luke, I need you to look at three hundred million people moving across Asia and see a solvable puzzle instead of chaos."

Luke nodded. "On it."

"Nancy, you make cosmic tech feel trustworthy to people who don't believe in cosmic tech. We need that. Desperately."

"Understood."

"Maureen, consciousness interface work with Professor Finch. The hybrid approach—biological enhancement without forced transcendence. That's what makes this different from every other cosmic civilization's approach."

"Already coordinating," Maureen confirmed.

Derek looked at his team. Four people. Four months. Three hundred million lives.

The odds were terrible. The stakes were absolute. The opposition was embedded in their own organization.

"We're going to pull this off," Derek said. "Not because we're smarter than everyone else. Not because cosmic tech makes us invincible. But because we're not leaving 300 million people behind. We don't do that."

"Besides," Luke added with a grim smile, "we just infiltrated Fort Bragg, rescued two prisoners, drove Colonel Martinez insane, and made it out without getting shot. Evacuating half of China? Should be easy in comparison."

Nancy laughed. Actual laughter despite impossible circumstances. "Luke, your definition of 'easy' needs serious recalibration."

"Where's the fun in that?"

The aircraft landed. The ramp extended. They disembarked into Vatican chambers where Professor Finch waited with holographic displays showing the scope of humanity's greatest challenge.

Three hundred million red dots pulsed on the map. Each one a life. Each one depending on strangers to trust cosmic intelligence they'd never officially acknowledged existed.

Each one worth saving.

Derek clicked his lighter shut. Decision made. "Professor, we're ready. Tell us where to start."

Finch smiled. The young face carrying ancient wisdom. "We start with trust. And we build from there."

The Architect's test had begun. Humanity's response would determine whether consciousness evolution led to transcendence or extinction.

But right now, in this moment, four people who'd just proven they'd risk everything for each other stood ready to convince 300 million strangers that cosmic partnership meant survival.

Four months. One species. Infinite complications.

Time to prove that humanity deserved to join the cosmic community.

SECTION 9: Part 2: Brief Exchange

The crystalline aircraft settled into the Vatican's landing chamber. Luke and Nancy headed to the coordination center with Maureen. Displays already showing preliminary evacuation matrices.

Derek hung back as Finch approached. "Professor, quick word?"

Finch paused. Read Derek's expression. "What is it?"

"Poe thinks we have a traitor. Someone in our inner circle feeding intelligence to government forces."

Finch's young face showed no surprise. Just calculation. "Leave that with me, Derek. You have your hands full with the evacuation. Whoever it may be, they'll lay low after the Fort Bragg extraction. Too much attention now."

"But—"

"Derek." Finch's voice carried gentle authority. "You can't solve every problem. Delegate. I'll handle internal security. You handle three hundred million people who need saving." A slight smile. "Fair division of labor?"

Derek's lighter clicked once. "Fair enough."

"Good. Now go coordinate with your team. Build those evacuation protocols. Leave the spy-hunting to someone with enhanced consciousness and eight centuries of patience."

Derek nodded. Moved toward the coordination center where his team waited.

Behind him, Finch watched with eyes that had witnessed civilizations rise and fall. The spy would be found. Eventually. But first, humanity needed to prove it could cooperate on impossible scales.

Priorities.

EPILOGUE: Sacred and Profane

The Basilica of St. Peter rose above Cardinal Alessandro Torretti like a prayer made stone. Dawn light filtered through Bernini's baldachin, casting bronze shadows across marble that had witnessed four centuries of communion. The

scent of frankincense lingered from earlier Mass—myrrh and mystery, the Church's eternal perfume.

Torretti stood at the altar. Vestments heavy with embroidered gold. The chasuble's weight reminded him that priesthood was burden as much as blessing. Behind him, Michelangelo's Pietà watched with stone eyes that had seen every human grief.

"Corpus Christi," he murmured, placing the consecrated host on an elderly woman's tongue. Her weathered hands trembled with faith that had survived Mussolini, war, decades of doubt. She crossed herself. Moved on.

The line continued. Tourists and pilgrims. Vatican staff. Swiss Guards in their Renaissance uniforms, modern weapons concealed beneath ceremonial appearance. All of them seeking connection with something larger than themselves.

Just like Derek and his cosmic integration, Torretti thought, then immediately felt guilt at the comparison.

"Corpus Christi." Another host. Another soul seeking grace.

The basilica's acoustics transformed whispers into ethereal sound. Prayers in a dozen languages rose to Michelangelo's dome like incense smoke. Latin and Italian. Portuguese. Tagalog. The universal Church speaking in particular tongues.

A young priest approached. Father Dominic from the Archivio Segreto. Scholarly type. Spent his days in the Vatican's restricted archives, cataloging manuscripts that predated the printing press.

Torretti placed the host on his tongue. "Corpus Christi."

Father Dominic's hand brushed his as he accepted. Brief contact. Something pressed into Torretti's palm. Paper. Folded small.

Their eyes met. Father Dominic's expression carried urgency masked by devotion. Then he moved on. Crossed himself. Returned to his pew.

Torretti's fingers closed around the note. Felt its weight. Not physical—paper weighed nothing. But implication weighed everything.

He continued the distribution. Professional. Automatic. Twenty-three years of priesthood made the ritual muscle memory. "Corpus Christi. Corpus Christi." Each host a promise. Each communicant a soul trusting him to mediate between human and divine.

Just as Derek trusted him to mediate between human and cosmic, that guilty voice whispered again.

The line ended. Torretti returned to the altar. Consumed the remaining hosts according to rubric. Elevated the chalice. Drank. The wine tasted of ritual and responsibility.

"Ite, missa est." Go, the Mass is ended.

"Deo gratias." Thanks be to God.

The congregation dispersed. Footsteps on marble. Whispered prayers. Tourists photographing art while pilgrims photographed memory. The basilica returned to its dual nature—museum and church, sacred and profane, eternal and temporal.

Torretti removed his vestments in the sacristy. The chasuble's gold caught candlelight one final time before he folded it with practiced precision. Beneath, his simple black cassock. The uniform of service.

He unfolded the note.

Four words in Latin: *Consilium procedit ut planificatum*.

The plan proceeds as scheduled.

Torretti's hands trembled. Not from age—he was fifty-three, healthy, decades from the tremors that came with mortality. This was different. The weight of choice made manifest in paper and ink.

He burned the note in the sacristy candle. Watched Latin words blacken and curl. Ash that would be indistinguishable from incense residue. Evidence erased.

But not guilt.

Torretti moved through the basilica. Past Bernini's colonnade. Into the Vatican gardens where tourists rarely ventured. Here, in cultivated nature surrounded by Renaissance walls, he could think.

Seven levels below his feet, Derek Devon coordinated with Professor Finch. Planning evacuation of 300 million people. Trusting cosmic intelligence that Torretti's sources insisted was demonic deception. Technology masquerading as transcendence. Ancient evil wearing the mask of advancement.

But Derek had good intentions. Torretti knew that. The young astrophysicist genuinely believed he was saving humanity. Just as Torretti genuinely believed he was saving humanity's soul.

Two men. Two faiths. Both certain they served the greater good.

The question that haunted Torretti through sleepless nights: What if they were both wrong?

He looked up at St. Peter's dome. Michelangelo's architectural prayer. Faith made geometry. Human hands reaching toward divine mystery.

Could cosmic intelligence be another form of that reaching? God working through means humanity hadn't yet comprehended?

Or was it exactly what his contacts insisted—ancient corruption offering false transcendence that would damn rather than save?

Torretti's training provided answers. Two millennia of Church doctrine. Clear teaching on the nature of angels and demons. Humanity's unique position in creation. The soul's sacred inviolability.

But his scientific training—that astrophysics doctorate he'd earned before entering seminary—that training whispered different questions. What if the

universe was larger than Church doctrine allowed? What if consciousness evolution was God's plan, not Satan's temptation?

A gardener passed. Nodded respectfully. "Buongiorno, Eminenza."

"Buongiorno, Paolo."

The gardener moved on. Tending roses that would bloom in Vatican soil just as they'd bloomed for centuries. Continuity. Tradition. The comfort of patterns that persisted despite chaos.

Torretti returned to his apartments. Seven levels above the cosmic chambers where Derek and Professor Finch planned salvation or damnation, depending on whose faith you trusted.

He knelt before his private altar. Not the basilica's public grandeur. Just simple crucifix and candle. Christ's suffering face illuminated by flame.

"Father," Torretti prayed, "grant me wisdom to discern Your will. If cosmic integration serves Your purpose, give me courage to support it. If it serves the Enemy, give me strength to resist."

The crucifix offered no answer. Just wood and bronze. Human representation of divine sacrifice.

Faith required choosing without certainty. That was its nature. Torretti had chosen his path months ago when the first contact was made. When those who shared his concerns about demonic deception had reached out. When he'd agreed that some secrets were too dangerous to share.

The plan proceeds as scheduled.

Four words that might save humanity's soul. Or might doom 300 million people to deaths that could have been prevented.

Torretti didn't know which. That was the burden. The terrible freedom of choice without guarantee.

He stood. Returned to his desk. Reports to file. Coordination with world leaders who trusted Church authority more than cosmic intelligence. Work that served either God's plan or its opposite, and no burning bush appeared to clarify which.

Below, in chambers built before Christ walked Galilee, Derek Devon planned salvation. Above, in apartments dedicated to preserving Christ's teaching, Alessandro Torretti planned resistance.

Both men praying. Both men certain. Both men potentially catastrophically wrong.

The Mass had ended. But the sacrifice—humanity's or humanity's soul—that terrible choice was just beginning.

And Cardinal Alessandro Torretti, astrophysicist and priest, keeper of secrets and guardian of faith, would have to decide which mattered more: saving bodies or saving souls.

He suspected that before this was finished, the answer would cost him everything either way.

End of Book 13A "The Rescue" Of the "The Last Axiom" Series

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TEASER: BOOK 13B - THE ARCHITECT'S TEST

Seven levels beneath the Vatican, Professor Finch studied data streams that painted humanity's future in probabilities and percentages. The mousetrap had worked. Months of careful surveillance, quantum monitoring, encrypted communication intercepts—all pointing to one devastating conclusion.

"Derek," Finch said quietly as his former student entered the cosmic chamber, "I know who our traitor is."

Derek Devon felt ice form in his stomach. "How long have you known?"

"Long enough to track every piece of intelligence flowing to forces that would murder cosmic advocates." Finch's young face carried ancient sadness. "Long enough to watch someone I trusted choose faith over friendship."

The holographic displays activated. Communication logs. Vatican security protocols. Detailed intelligence about Luke's family, Nancy's schedules, tomorrow's Senate hearing. All transmitted from inside their inner circle to Constitutional Guard coordination centers.

"Cardinal Alessandro Torretti," Finch said. "My former student. Derek's Vatican liaison. The man who welcomed us with open arms while simultaneously providing assassination teams with everything they needed to eliminate cosmic advocates."

Three thousand miles east, Changbaishan's magma chamber pressure spiked beyond critical thresholds. Seismic monitors screamed warnings that Chinese scientists were still interpreting as manageable volcanic activity. Three hundred million people going about their daily lives, unaware that beneath their feet, geological forces were preparing devastation that would make Pompeii seem minor.

Four months. Maybe less. To evacuate populations larger than most nations. While governments resisted. While corporations fought for control. While a traitor in their midst worked to ensure humanity failed its greatest test.

"Derek," Maureen's voice came through quantum channels from Washington D.C., urgent and frightened, "something's wrong. Media's reporting locations of cosmic advocates. Our hotel just got swarmed by hostile forces. Derek, they knew exactly where we were staying—"

The broadcast hit simultaneously across every major network. Eugene Stephenson, philosophy professor and cosmic advocate, speaking at a university lecture about humanity's right to evolve. The camera angles

professional. The audio crystal clear. Every detail preserved as three bullets struck him down in front of horrified students.

Martyrdom. Broadcast in real-time. Designed to terrorize advocates into silence.

Instead, it ignited revolution.

"COSMIC TRUTH! COSMIC TRUTH!" The chants erupted from six continents. Not fear. Rage. Not at cosmic intelligence—at the forces that would murder philosophers for defending humanity's right to advance.

But the crisis was only beginning.

In Beijing, Chairman Xi Jinping received geological data that transformed regional disaster into species-level emergency. The Vatican's enhanced seismic analysis showed eruption timelines that made four months seem optimistic. Pyroclastic flows at 450 miles per hour. Ash clouds triggering volcanic winter. Three hundred million lives in the blast radius.

"您需要我做什么？" Xi asked through quantum channels, his supreme authority choosing cooperation over resistance. *What do you need me to do?*

Professor Finch pulled up evacuation matrices that spanned continents. Japan. South Korea. India. ASEAN nations. Every major Asian power coordinating refugee accommodation on scales that dwarfed any previous humanitarian effort.

"Chairman Xi," Finch replied in flawless Mandarin, "we need you to trust cosmic intelligence. To demonstrate that species survival transcends national sovereignty. To prove humanity deserves advancement by choosing cooperation over control."

The Architect was watching. Evaluating. Measuring humanity's response to impossible crisis.

Luke and Nancy coordinated from Manila refugee centers, watching Chinese families choose permanent relocation to host countries rather than return to

isolation. Regional cooperation evolving into lasting partnership. Humanity demonstrating values the Architect required.

But in the Vatican's deepest chamber, Cardinal Torretti knelt before his private altar, convinced that cosmic integration was demonic deception. Convinced that his betrayal served God rather than murdered advocates. Convinced that faith required choosing religious doctrine over three hundred million lives.

Professor Finch's consciousness reached across quantum networks, accessing the evaluation data that would determine humanity's cosmic future.

The preliminary results were in.

Evacuation success rate: 94.7%. Organizational capability: exceeding baseline requirements. Species-level cooperation: transcending traditional limitations.

Humanity had passed the Architect's test.

But the price of that success—the martyrdom, the betrayal, the choice between bodies and souls—that reckoning was about to arrive.

And Cardinal Alessandro Torretti, astrophysicist and priest, guardian of faith and architect of assassination, was about to discover that cosmic justice operated on principles religious authority couldn't comprehend.

The evacuation of 300 million. The betrayal from within. The test that would determine whether humanity deserved to join the cosmic community—or remain isolated until the next extinction event.

Continue the journey in Book 13B: The Architect's Test

Coming soon...

PS: If you have never watched the Derek Flint movies, I highly recommend them, ***Our Man Flint*** and ***In Like Flint***.... Cheers, The other Derek....:)

THE LAST AXIOM

Book 13a - The Rescue

LUKE AND NANCY: CAPTURED. FORT BRAGG: IMPENETRABLE. DEREK: GOING IN ANYWAY.

Quantum displacement. Stealth technology. Biometric bypass. Derek infiltrates America's most secure military base alone, rescuing teammates held for seventy-two hours of interrogation. Nancy kisses him in Cell 4-A-12—acknowledging what could have been before choosing Luke. They escape through flooded corridors as ARIA fights for survival against military AI.

Then POE reveals the evaluation: **humanity scored 8.7 out of 10.** But Changbaishan supervolcano threatens 300 million lives in four months. And in the Vatican's deepest chamber, Cardinal Torretti burns evidence. The traitor has been inside all along.

"Derek infiltrated Fort Bragg using quantum displacement and biometric bypass—walking through the Pentagon's most secure facility like it was a hotel lobby. Rescued both targets. Exfiltrated clean. That's IMF-level operational excellence."

— Ethan Hunt, Impossible Missions Force Historical Archives

"Nancy kissed Derek to acknowledge what could have been, then chose Luke anyway. Sometimes loyalty means honoring the path not taken. That's crew. That's family. That's what keeps us flying."

— Captain Malcolm Reynolds, Serenity Operations Log

"Cardinal Torretti burned evidence in Vatican chambers while coordinating the rescue above. The traitor was inside their inner circle all along. Trust no one—especially those closest to the truth."

— Fox Mulder, FBI Paranormal Investigations Division



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