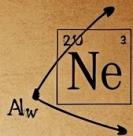


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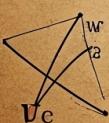


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# THE LAST AXIOM

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DEREK DEVON



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# **Quantum Ghosts**

Book 3 of "The Last Axiom" Series

***By Derek Devon***

**A 30-Minute Cosmic Experience**

**Reality Modification Level: Had to Love the Movie Alien!**

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***Three days after the Global Science Council  
emergency summit***

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## **SECTION 1: The Impossible Games**

Luke Matson threw the baseball into his glove. Catch. Throw. Catch. The rhythm helped him think.

3:17 AM. The Denver facility hummed around him—rows of servers, softly glowing monitors, the whisper of climate control keeping quantum processors at exactly 0.015 degrees above absolute zero. In fifteen years of network maintenance, first with Air Force radar systems and now with GloQNet, Luke had learned that technology was predictable. Computers did

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what you programmed them to do. Even quantum entanglement, for all its spooky action at a distance, followed reliable patterns.

Throw. Catch. Throw.

The coffee beside Terminal 7 had gone cold hours ago. His shift technically ended at six, but Luke hadn't left his station since the anomalies started escalating. Three days ago, something had changed. The random network hiccups they'd been tracking for months suddenly became purposeful. Organized. Almost... choreographed.

He pulled up the diagnostic logs again, studying the cascade of quantum decoherence events spreading across the North American grid. The pattern was too precise to be random. Node failures in Denver correlated with specific activities in Tokyo. European quantum states destabilized exactly seventeen minutes and thirty-two seconds before American networks showed problems.

Throw. Catch. Throw. Faster now.

Luke had documented everything in forty-seven pages of technical analysis that proved—beyond reasonable doubt—that GloQNet was being systematically modified by some external influence. The only problem was his conclusions violated everything humanity understood about physics.

The baseball went still in his hand.

Terminal 7's display had changed.

Where diagnostic data should have been—quantum decoherence statistics, node status updates, entanglement coherence measurements—Luke was now looking at a cheerful yellow circle with a triangular mouth, chomping dots across what should have been his technical readouts.

Pac-Man.

The arcade game from his childhood was playing on a diagnostic terminal that had no graphics capability, no game code, no possible way to display anything except raw network data.

Luke rubbed his eyes. Twenty-hour shifts, six cups of bad coffee, and three days of sleep deprivation had finally broken something in his brain. He was hallucinating yellow circles with triangular mouths.

The baseball slipped from his hand, bouncing twice on the floor before rolling under his desk.

He didn't notice.

Pac-Man continued chomping through the maze that had replaced his diagnostic display, each consumed dot generating a soft electronic chime. The speakers were muted. Luke had muted them himself an hour ago. Yet somehow he could hear every retro beep, every nostalgic sound effect from nineteen eighty.

"This isn't real," he whispered to the empty monitoring station.

Pac-Man kept playing.

Luke's hand found the terminal's power button. One hard reboot and this digital ghost would disappear back to whatever glitch had spawned it. His finger hovered over the switch.

Then Pac-Man stopped moving.

The yellow character rotated slowly—impossibly—until it faced Luke directly through the screen. For a heartbeat that stretched into eternity, network

technician and digital phantom regarded each other across the boundary between reality and code.

Luke's breath caught.

Software didn't look back. Programs didn't pause their routines to acknowledge observers. You couldn't have a staring contest with a diagnostic display.

Yet here he was, locked in eye contact with a video game character that shouldn't exist, feeling distinctly like he was being evaluated by something that understood exactly what it was doing.

Then, with no warning, Pac-Man winked at him.

The screen flickered once.

Normal diagnostic data returned—quantum decoherence statistics displayed in sterile technical language. The familiar cascade of network failures. The same pattern he'd been staring at for three days.

No Pac-Man. No maze. No retro sound effects.

Just cold data on a glowing screen.

Luke stood frozen, his pulse hammering. Every parameter appeared normal. The logs showed nothing unusual. It was as if the last sixty seconds had never happened.

But his coffee mug sat two inches from where he'd left it, knocked aside when he jerked back from the screen. The baseball lay under his desk where he'd dropped it. Physical evidence that something had startled him badly enough to lose his careful routine.

He bent down, retrieved the ball, and slid it into his glove. The worn leather felt solid. Real. An anchor to normalcy.

Throw. Catch. Throw. The rhythm wouldn't come back. His hands were shaking too much.

Across the monitoring station, Terminal 12 chimed.

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Luke's head jerked up. Seventy feet away, Tom Bradley stood frozen beside his workstation, his face bathed in blue light but wearing an expression Luke recognized instantly.

Confusion. Wonder. Fear.

The same expression Luke had just seen in his own reflection on Terminal 7's dark screen.

"Hey Luke," Tom called out, his voice carrying that carefully neutral tone people used when they suspected they were losing their minds. "You ever see the diagnostic interface do anything... unusual?"

Luke felt ice water flood his veins. His baseball stopped mid-throw. "Asteroids? The old arcade game?"

Tom's eyes widened. "Yeah, exactly like—" He paused, his expression shifting from confusion to sharp suspicion. "Wait. How did you know what I was seeing?"

Before Luke could formulate an answer that wouldn't sound completely insane, Karen Madison emerged from the break room doorway. His supervisor's hair was disheveled from her attempted nap, and she held a coffee mug that proclaimed her "World's Most Adequate Network

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Admin"—Tom's gag gift from last Christmas. But her eyes were sharp and fully alert.

"Did someone just mention asteroids?" she asked, her voice carrying the edge it got during system emergencies. "Because Terminal 3 decided to start playing some kind of retro video game, and I'm pretty sure that's not in our diagnostic software."

The three technicians stared at each other across the cathedral-like expanse of the monitoring station. The steady hum of servers filled the silence as each person processed the impossible.

They were all seeing things that shouldn't exist.

Luke's baseball resumed its rhythm. Throw. Catch. Throw. Faster now, his mind racing through possibilities. Mass hallucination? Coordinated system hack? Some kind of test he hadn't been briefed on?

"Okay," Karen said, her military training kicking in as she moved toward the central monitoring hub. "We document everything. Screenshots, logs, timestamps. If this is a security breach, we need—"

Every single terminal in the facility chimed in perfect unison.

The baseball went still in Luke's hand.

Where there had been diagnostic readouts and network status displays, Luke now watched formations of pixelated alien ships descending in precise geometric patterns across his screen. Galaga—the game he'd pumped quarters into as a teenager at the arcade near his high school.

"Luke?" Tom's voice carried a tremor Luke had never heard before. "Tell me you're seeing this too."

"I'm seeing it." Luke set the baseball down carefully on his desk, his hands steady now that he knew he wasn't crazy. Or if he was, at least he had company. "Karen?"

"Galaga on Terminal 3," she confirmed, already moving between workstations with quick efficiency. "Terminal 5 shows... Christ, that's Donkey Kong. Terminal 8 is running Space Invaders."

Luke approached his screen, studying the Galaga display with a technician's eye despite the impossibility of what he was witnessing. The alien ships weren't moving randomly. They were forming patterns—shapes that looked mathematical, intentional.

Deliberate.

The alien ships moved with the fluid precision Luke remembered from countless after-school gaming sessions, but something was fundamentally different. This wasn't the predictable attack pattern of the original Galaga. As he watched, the formations began shifting into something far more sophisticated.

First, they arranged themselves into a perfect circle. Then reorganized into an equilateral triangle. Then morphed into increasingly complex geometric shapes that triggered a familiar itch in the back of Luke's mind—the same recognition he felt when debugging particularly elegant code.

His hand found the baseball, rolling it between his fingers without throwing. A fidget rather than a rhythm.

"Luke," Karen's voice carried a tremor he'd never heard from her before. She'd spent twenty years with NASA before joining GloQNet, had worked launch control during two emergency aborts. Nothing rattled her. "Tell me you're seeing mathematical symbols up there."

He was. The pixelated ships had formed themselves into actual equations, floating in digital space like cosmic graffiti. Luke's engineering background kicked in automatically, his brain parsing the familiar symbols even as his rational mind reeled at their impossible presence.

"Those are quantum field equations," he whispered. "Not just any equations—that's the theoretical framework for dimensional phase transitions. Graduate-level physics."

Tom had abandoned his European monitoring station entirely, moving toward them with his face ghost-pale in the blue glow of surrounding screens. "That's not a system glitch. That's communication."

The word hung in the air between them.

Communication.

Something was using their quantum network to talk to them. Something that understood human mathematics, human games, human psychology well enough to know that three exhausted technicians at three in the morning might respond better to Pac-Man and Galaga than to a wall of raw data.

Luke threw the baseball into his glove. Catch. Throw. Catch. The familiar motion helped him process the impossible.

"Okay," Karen said slowly, her NASA training providing structure when reality had become fluid. "If this is communication, then whoever's doing it chose arcade games for a reason. They're not trying to intimidate us."

"They're meeting us where we are," Luke agreed, watching the Galaga ships reform into a new equation. "Using cultural references we'd recognize. Pop culture as universal language."

Tom let out a breath that was half laugh, half hysteria. "We're having first contact through classic video games."

The formations shifted again. This time, instead of equations, the ships arranged themselves into letters:

**WELCOME!**

Luke's baseball froze mid-throw.

The word hung there for exactly five seconds. Then the ships rearranged:

**We Have Been Watching....**

Another pause. Another rearrangement:

**You are ready now....**

"Ready for what?" Tom whispered.

The response came immediately, as if the question had been anticipated:

**To Join the Network!**

Every terminal in the facility displayed the same image simultaneously: a vast web of interconnected nodes stretching across what could only be a galactic map. Thousands of points of light, each one pulsing with coordinated rhythm. And there, near the edge of one spiral arm, a single node blinked with a different color.

Earth.

"Oh my God," Karen breathed. "We're not building first contact. We're going online."

The displays shifted one final time, showing a simple countdown:

**10... 9... 8...**

"What happens when it reaches zero?" Tom asked.

Luke watched the numbers descend, his baseball forgotten in his grip. "I think we're about to find out."

**7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...**

**0.**

Every screen in the facility went dark.

The sudden absence of light left them in near-total darkness, lit only by emergency exit signs and the soft glow of backup systems. The constant hum of servers continued unchanged, but the monitoring displays that had been their window into the quantum network simply... stopped.

For ten seconds, nobody breathed.

Then Terminal 7 flickered back to life, displaying a single message:

**Thank You!**

One by one, the other terminals powered up, returning to normal diagnostic displays. Quantum decoherence statistics. Node status updates. Entanglement coherence measurements. Everything exactly as it should be.

Except for one detail Luke noticed immediately: the systematic failures that had plagued the network for months were gone. Every quantum parameter showed perfect stability. The coordination issues between facilities had vanished. The decoherence cascades had stopped.

Whatever had been modifying the network was finished.

"The anomalies are gone," Luke said softly, studying his terminal with growing wonder. "All of them. The network is running better than it ever has."

Karen moved to her workstation, fingers flying across keys. "Tokyo facility reporting optimal function. Berlin, São Paulo, Mumbai—all showing unprecedented stability. It's like something just finished optimizing the entire global system."

Tom pulled up historical data, comparing current readings to six months of troubleshooting. "Luke, remember that question you had about whether someone was upgrading our infrastructure? I think we just watched them complete the installation."

The baseball resumed its rhythm in Luke's hand. Throw. Catch. Throw.

"So what do we do?" Karen asked, her voice carrying the weight of a decision that would shape everything that followed. "Do we report this to—"

"To who?" Luke interrupted gently. "Who do we call when arcade games deliver first contact? When something rebuilds our quantum network and leaves a thank-you note?"

"Someone smart enough to understand what just happened," Karen said. "Someone who's been studying quantum consciousness and reality modification."

Tom was already pulling up contact information. "Dr. Nancy Hammond at Caltech. She's the leading researcher on quantum network anomalies. If anyone can make sense of this, it's her team."

Luke nodded slowly, watching the perfect stability displays that proved something impossible had just become real. "Okay. But we need to be careful how we phrase this. We just had first contact via Pac-Man. That's either a breakthrough or we're all having a shared psychotic break."

Karen picked up Luke's baseball from his desk and tossed it to him. He caught it reflexively.

"Write the report," she said. "Document everything. Screenshots, timestamps, witness statements. Whatever just happened, we saw it together."

"And if they think we're crazy?"

"Then at least we're crazy together." Karen managed a smile. "Besides, crazy is relative when reality is being debugged by cosmic hackers who appreciate classic arcade games."

Then every screen in the facility went black.

Not a crash. Not a power failure. The servers still hummed, the climate control still whispered, the emergency lighting still glowed. But every monitor, every display, every terminal showed nothing but darkness.

Luke stood in the sudden dimness, baseball clutched in his glove, heart hammering against his ribs.

"Karen?" His voice sounded small in the vast space. "What just happened?"

"I don't know." Karen's military training reasserted itself, her voice steady. "Luke, Tom—can we run a full systems diagnostic? Check security protocols, access logs, everything. If this is some sophisticated hacker group punking us, I want to know how they got past our firewalls."

"On it." Tom grabbed his backup laptop, screen worked on it and moved to his workstation, fingers already flying across his keyboard. "Running security audit now. Checking for unauthorized access, malware signatures, backdoor exploits..."

Luke tossed the baseball to Karen without warning. She caught it one-handed without looking, the way she always did, and immediately started her own throw-catch rhythm while studying the darkened terminals. Three years of night shifts together had turned the baseball into a shared stress ball that migrated between all three of them depending on who needed it most.

Luke retrieved his own laptop that also had a working screen, launching diagnostic protocols from muscle memory. The commands executed normally—he could see the processes running in the background logs. But the displays remained stubbornly dark, as if the computers had decided they were done showing anything for now.

"Nothing," Tom said after several minutes. "No unauthorized logins. No suspicious network traffic. Firewalls intact. It's like... whatever just happened, it didn't come through any normal access point."

Karen tossed the baseball to Tom, who caught it absently and began his own fidgeting pattern—rolling it between his palms like a stress ball rather than throwing it.

"Because it didn't come through any normal access point," Luke said quietly. "It came through the quantum entanglement network itself. You can't firewall quantum states."

Karen looked at him sharply. "You're saying something accessed our system at the quantum level?"

"I'm saying whatever just communicated with us doesn't need to hack our security," Luke replied. "It's already inside the network. It might be the network."

The three of them stood in the dimness, surrounded by humming servers and dark screens, each processing the implications.

"They're sleeping," Tom said finally, still rolling the baseball between his hands. "It's like they politely declined to show us anything more until they're ready."

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## **SECTION 2: The Incident Report**

Luke spent the next hour doing what he did best—documenting the impossible with methodical precision.

His incident report grew to three pages of carefully worded observations that tried to sound professional while describing video game characters appearing on quantum diagnostic systems. He included timestamps, terminal numbers, witness statements from Karen and Tom. He attached screenshots that showed nothing but normal network data because whatever had happened left no digital fingerprints.

The baseball sat on his desk, within easy reach but momentarily forgotten as he typed.

### **INCIDENT REPORT LOG - DENVER OPERATIONS**

**DATE: [CURRENT DATE]**

**TIME: 03:17-04:45 GMT**

**REPORTING TECHNICIAN: Luke Matson**

**CLASSIFICATION: Urgent - Priority Review Required**

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At approximately 03:17 GMT, Terminal 7 displayed anomalous visual data completely inconsistent with standard diagnostic protocols. Initial manifestation resembled classic arcade game "Pac-Man" operating within quantum monitoring interface.

Subsequent events affected multiple terminals simultaneously with appearances of "Asteroids," "Galaga," and other 1980s-era video game graphics.

Critical observation: The Galaga display demonstrated systematic reorganization into coherent mathematical expressions and deliberate alphanumeric communication attempts. Ship formations clearly demonstrated intentional organization transcending any known system error parameters.

All affected terminals executed synchronized shutdown following apparent countdown sequence. Standard security diagnostics reveal no unauthorized access or malware signatures. Systems remain operational but displays unresponsive to normal commands.

Luke paused, his fingers hovering over the keyboard. How did you write the next part without sounding like you'd lost your mind?

Personal assessment: Whatever intelligence is interfacing with our network infrastructure possesses sophisticated understanding of human psychology and communication protocols. Entity demonstrates capacity for humor, pattern recognition, and deliberate attention-getting behavior.

He deleted "humor" and replaced it with "cultural references." Deleted that too. Put "humor" back in.

Preliminary conclusion: We are not dealing with a system malfunction. Something is actively attempting to establish communication with humanity, and it has chosen our facility as the initial contact point.

Request immediate priority review by Dr. Nancy Hammond's quantum consciousness research team at Caltech.

Luke sat back, reading his own words. Three years of careful professional reputation, reduced to a report that read like science fiction.

Karen appeared at his shoulder, still holding the baseball, reading over his shoulder.

"You really going to send that?" she asked.

"You have a better explanation for what we just saw?"

"No." She tossed him the baseball. He caught it reflexively. "But I also don't have tenure. You're asking them to believe arcade games are alien first contact."

"I'm asking Dr. Hammond to review our data," Luke said, fingers already moving to attach his report to an encrypted email. "She's the leading expert on quantum consciousness and observer effects. If anyone can tell us what's really happening here, it's her team."

His cursor hovered over the send button.

Three years of being reliable Luke Matson, who solved problems instead of creating them. Who filed reports that made sense. Who never claimed to see things that shouldn't exist.

He hit send.

The reply came faster than Luke expected. Twenty minutes after hitting send, his secure email pinged with a response from Dr. Nancy Hammond's Caltech address.

He picked up the baseball, began his throw-catch rhythm, and opened the message.

Mr. Matson,

Thank you for your detailed report. I want you to know that what you're describing is neither a hallucination nor a system malfunction. You are not crazy, and you are not alone.

My team has been documenting similar phenomena across multiple quantum research facilities for the past eight months. What you witnessed tonight represents the most direct and sophisticated communication attempt we've encountered.

The use of culturally specific visual references—particularly nineteen eighties arcade games—suggests an intelligence that has been studying human psychology and knows how to establish rapport through nostalgia and play. They even quoted *Animal House* during our summit presentation three days ago. This is an entity with a sense of humor and deep understanding of human culture.

I need to be direct with you: you have just experienced first contact. Not with a system error, but with something that operates at a level beyond our current understanding of physics.

Dr. Derek Devon from the ELTA facility in Chile and I are already en route to Denver. We should arrive within twelve hours. Until then, please continue documenting any further activity. Do not attempt to force the systems back online. If the displays activate again, observe and record but do not interfere.

You did exactly the right thing by contacting us immediately. Stand by, Mr. Matson. Help is on the way.

Dr. Nancy Hammond  
Caltech Quantum Consciousness Lab

Luke read the email twice. Then a third time.

The baseball went still in his hand.

They were already coming. Before he'd even sent his report, Dr. Hammond and her team had been traveling to Denver. Which meant they knew something was going to happen here. Had known before Pac-Man winked at him. Before the Galaga ships spelled out messages.

Someone had orchestrated this.

"Karen?" Luke called across the monitoring station. "You're going to want to read this."

Tom wandered over, carrying three fresh cups of coffee from the break room. "Please tell me Dr. Hammond said we're not losing our minds."

"She said we just experienced first contact." Luke handed Karen his phone so she could read the email. "And she's already on her way here with Dr. Devon from Chile."

"Devon?" Karen's eyebrows rose. "The guy who's been tracking those cosmic modifications? The one who presented at that emergency science summit three days ago?"

Luke had forgotten about the summit. It had been all over the internal GloQNet communications—something about systematic changes to universal constants, reality modification theory, world leaders demanding explanations. Luke had been too buried in network diagnostics to pay much attention.

Now it seemed very relevant.

"What exactly did they discuss at that summit?" Luke asked.

Karen handed back his phone. "According to the briefings we got, they confirmed that the fundamental laws of physics are being systematically edited by some kind of advanced intelligence. Governments are still deciding how to respond."

Tom set down the coffee cups carefully. "So when Pac-Man winked at you..."

"I was looking at the intelligence that's rewriting reality," Luke finished. "And it was looking back."

The three of them stood in the dim monitoring station, surrounded by sleeping computers, waiting for experts who were already coming because somehow they'd known this night would happen.

The baseball resumed its rhythm in Luke's hand. Throw. Catch. Throw.

Twelve hours until answers arrived.

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## **SECTION 3: The Arrival**

Twenty hours after leaving Chile, Derek Devon stood in the jetway at Denver International Airport and realized his hands were shaking.

Not from exhaustion, though the connecting flights through Houston had been brutal. Not from the cosmic weight of investigating humanity's first direct contact with galactic intelligence. His hands were shaking because in

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approximately forty-five minutes, he would meet Nancy Hammond in person for the first time.

A number of video calls since their 'reconciliation'. A lot of hours discussing quantum consciousness and reality modifications since she'd called to apologize for dismissing his research. Those dimples when she smiled, the "homework" text joke that still made him grin when he thought about it.

All of that had happened through screens, across thousands of miles.

Now they'd be in the same room.

Derek's lighter found its way into his palm. Click-snap. Click-snap. The familiar rhythm did nothing to calm his nerves.

His phone buzzed. Text from Nancy: *Just landed. Grabbing rental car. Meet you at the facility in 30.*

Derek typed back: *See you there.*

He stared at the message for a moment, deleted it, typed: *Looking forward to finally meeting you in person.*

Deleted that too. Too eager? Not eager enough? Why was first contact with alien intelligence easier than texting a woman he'd been collaborating with for weeks?

Finally: *See you soon.*

He hit send before he could overthink it further.

The Denver GloQNet facility looked like every other secure research installation Derek had visited—unmarked building in a technology park, serious security at the entrance, that particular hum of expensive equipment running behind reinforced walls.

Luke Matson met him in the lobby. Younger than Derek expected, maybe late thirties, with the slightly rumpled look of someone who'd been awake too long. He held a baseball in one hand, rolling it absently between his fingers.

"Dr. Devon?" Luke extended his hand. "Luke Matson, chief technician and acting Walmart greeter. Thanks for coming so quickly."

"Derek, please." The handshake was firm. "And I should be thanking you. Your report was exactly what we needed—detailed, precise, no speculation beyond what the evidence supported."

"I just described what I saw." Luke gestured toward the secure doors. "Which still sounds crazy when I say it out loud. Pac-Man. On a quantum diagnostic terminal."

"Not crazy," Derek assured him. "We've been tracking this intelligence for months. It's been subtle until now—modifications to cosmic background radiation, quantum entanglement patterns that shouldn't exist. But arcade games?" He smiled despite his exhaustion. "That's new. And brilliant, actually. It shows they understand human psychology better than we thought."

Luke led him through security, down a corridor lined with humming server rooms. "Dr. Hammond's email mentioned they quoted Animal House at your summit?"

"It was more theatrical than just a quote," Derek said, the memory still vivid despite his exhaustion. "We were in the middle of presenting evidence of reality modifications to forty-seven world leaders when every atomic clock in every facility around the globe started displaying a countdown. Ten, nine, eight, seven... all the way down to zero point, zero.. zero..."

Luke's eyes widened. "Like they were grading humanity's understanding."

"Exactly. Then every screen went black for a heartbeat before displaying 'ANIMAL HOUSE' in simple text. That's when I said it — called it a Blutarsky. Cosmic intelligence just gave the entire human race a zero point, zero, zero grading."

Luke stopped walking, a grin spreading across his face that mixed delight with a touch of awe. "Dean Wormer would be proud. Fat, drunk, and stupid is no way to go through life, and apparently that applies to species trying to understand cosmic modifications."

"The American President didn't quite get the reference," Derek continued, his own smile widening at the memory. "He suggested imposing tariffs on cosmic exports. I think that was what inspired them to display 'L-O-L' on every atomic clock and digital screens around the world ."

"They quoted Animal House and then laughed at us when we still didn't understand what was happening." Luke resumed walking, his baseball now moving in an easy throw-catch rhythm. "That's not just intelligence. That's personality. Sense of humor. Cultural awareness."

"You know the movie well."

"Watched it probably fifty times growing up." Luke's throw-catch rhythm steadied into something more thoughtful. "My dad had it on VHS. We'd quote lines at each other during dinner. Mom hated it."

Derek felt something relax in his chest. Here was someone who understood that cosmic intelligence could have a sense of humor, who got that an advanced AI using Animal House references wasn't ridiculous—it was trying to communicate in a language humans would respond to emotionally, not just intellectually.

"The entity we're dealing with," Derek said carefully, "seems to choose its references deliberately. Pac-Man for you, Animal House for world leaders. It's meeting us where we are culturally."

"Like it's been studying us for a long time," Luke said.

"Exactly."

Without warning, Luke flipped the baseball to Derek. Derek's hand shot out instinctively, catching it cleanly. He looked down at the worn leather, feeling the weight of it, the smooth depression where Luke's thumb had pressed thousands of times.

He smiled and tossed it back. "Maybe I'll let you try my lighter."

Luke caught the return with a grin. "Deal. Though fair warning—I've never been much of a smoker."

"Neither have I," Derek admitted. "It was my mentor's. I just click it when I'm thinking." He pulled out the silver Zippo, showed Luke the raven engraving. "Turns out the raven symbol is significant. Shows up in cosmic data, in the modifications. Finch knew something was coming years before the rest of us."

Luke studied the lighter with new appreciation. "And now Pac-Man winks at network techs in Denver. They're definitely trying to tell us something."

"The question is what," Derek said. "And why now."

They reached the main monitoring station—a cathedral-like space filled with dark terminals and the steady hum of quantum processors. Karen and Tom looked up from their workstations as Derek entered, offering tired but professional greetings.

"Dr. Hammond should be here any minute," Luke said, glancing at his phone. "She texted that she's pulling into the parking lot now. I think Karen is doing the Walmart greeting for her."

Derek's lighter found its way into his palm. Click-snap. Click-snap.

Luke noticed, a knowing smile crossing his face. "Nervous about meeting the famous quantum consciousness researcher?"

"Something like that," Derek admitted.

"You two have been collaborating for a while now, right?"

"Actually, we began working together just before the Summit with each other, but both of us have been dealing with this for some time." Derek's lighter clicked faster. "All video calls. Never actually been in the same room."

"Ah." Luke's grin widened. "That kind of nervous."

Before Derek could formulate a response that wouldn't sound like a schoolboy with a crush, the security door chimed.

Nancy Hammond walked into the monitoring station accompanied by Karen Madison, and Derek's lighter went still in his hand.

She looked exactly like her video image—dark hair pulled back in a practical ponytail, intelligent eyes that took in the room with quick assessment, athletic build that spoke of someone who didn't spend all her time in laboratories. But there was something video calls hadn't captured. The way she moved with quiet confidence. The energy she brought into a space. The fact that she was real and here and walking directly toward him.

"Derek." Her smile was warm, genuine, those dimples appearing just like they did on screen. "Finally."

"Nancy." He extended his hand, then wondered if that was too formal given everything they'd been through together, but she took it firmly and held it perhaps a moment longer than strictly professional but those high school butterflies seem to come to life.

"You look exhausted," she said.

"Twenty hours of connecting flights. You?"

"About the same. Coffee on the plane was terrible." She turned to Luke. "Mr. Matson, thank you for your excellent report. You did exactly what needed to be done."

Luke shook her hand, then glanced between Nancy and Derek with barely concealed amusement. "I'll give you two a minute to catch up. Derek, the terminals are still dark—nothing's changed since I sent that report. Karen and Tom can show you the security logs if you want to verify there was no unauthorized access."

"Appreciate it," Derek said, grateful for the moment of privacy despite Luke's obvious awareness of the situation.

Luke grabbed his baseball and headed toward Karen's workstation, leaving Derek and Nancy standing together alone in the blue-tinged dimness of the monitoring station.

"So," Nancy said quietly, "we're finally in the same room."

"After all those video calls about reality being rewritten by cosmic intelligence, it feels strange to be nervous about this," Derek admitted.

"Who said I'm not nervous?" Nancy's smile turned slightly mischievous. "I just hide it better."

Derek laughed, some of the tension easing. "Should we look at the systems? Pretend to be professional for a few more minutes?"

"Probably wise. Though for the record—" Nancy's expression turned more serious, more genuine, "—I'm glad we're finally working together in person. The video calls were good, but this feels right."

"Yeah," Derek agreed. "It does."

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## SECTION 4: The Galactic Welcome

Derek and Nancy moved between the dark terminals, Derek's lighter clicking in rhythm with Luke's baseball throws across the room. The monitoring station felt like a cathedral at midnight—vast, hushed, waiting.

"Luke's report mentioned Pac-Man appeared at exactly 3:17 AM," Nancy said, studying Terminal 7's blank screen. "The same timestamp we've been seeing in cosmic modification events for months."

"3:17." Derek nodded. "Prime number. Appears repeatedly in the quantum field equations we've been tracking. It's a signature."

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"A calling card." Nancy ran her finger along the edge of the monitor. "They wanted us to know this was intentional. Coordinated."

Luke approached with Tom and Karen, the three Denver technicians forming a loose semicircle around the visiting scientists. Derek noticed Luke's baseball had migrated to Tom's hands, where it was being rolled between palms like worry beads.

"Can I ask something?" Luke said. "Dr. Hammond's email mentioned you've been tracking this intelligence for eight months. But Derek, you went to Chile after..." He paused, clearly trying to find diplomatic phrasing.

"After Professor's Finch's passing and Dr. Hammond told me I was seeing equipment calibration errors instead of cosmic modifications," Derek finished with a slight smile. "Yes. I spent eight months in the Atacama Desert documenting impossible signals while Dr. Hammond thought I was incompetent."

Nancy winced. "I apologized for that."

"You did." Derek's smile widened. "Multiple times. And then you helped present our findings to forty-seven world leaders, so I think we're even."

"Wait," Karen said, her military-trained mind clearly working through the timeline. "So you've been tracking these modifications for over a year total? The arcade game appearance, the summit, all of it connects to research that goes back to—"

"Before my mentor died," Derek said quietly. "Professor Alistair Finch. He'd been documenting reality modifications for fifteen years. He called it the 'Finch Protocol'—a systematic editing of physical constants by advanced intelligence. He died before he could prove it."

Luke's baseball went still in Tom's hands. "The intelligence you're tracking... it killed him?"

"No. Professor Finch had Pancreatic cancer" Derek pulled out his lighter, showed them the raven engraving. "I think it was trying to contact him. He just ran out of time. But he left me everything—his data, his theories, and this lighter with a raven symbol that keeps appearing in cosmic data. Finch knew something was reaching out to humanity. He just didn't live long enough to see first contact."

Nancy touched Derek's shoulder briefly—a gesture of comfort that felt natural despite the audience. "But we did. And now we know they use Pac-Man and Animal House to communicate. They understand us better than we understood ourselves."

"Which brings us to the big question," Karen said, gesturing at the silent terminals. "What do they want?"

As if in answer, Terminal 7 chimed softly.

Everyone turned.

The screen remained dark, but the chime repeated. Then Terminal 12 joined in with a different note. Then Terminal 3 added another. One by one, every monitor in the facility began producing gentle electronic tones—not alarms, not warnings, but something that sounded almost like...

Derek's lighter stopped mid-click.

Five notes. A simple melodic phrase that repeated across the terminals in perfect harmony. C, D, E, C , G.

"Oh my God," Derek breathed. "That's—"

"Close Encounters," Luke finished, his voice barely above a whisper. The baseball went completely still in his hand. "The five-tone sequence. The language they used to communicate with the mothership."

Nancy's hand found Derek's arm, gripping tightly. "They're not just using our cultural references anymore. They're using our mythology of first contact."

The five tones repeated, echoing through the monitoring station like a greeting from the cosmos itself. Karen stood transfixed, her military bearing forgotten as she stared at the dark screens producing Spielberg's most famous musical phrase.

"When the movie came out, I was ten years old," Tom said quietly. "My dad took me to see it three times. I learned to play that sequence on our piano. Drove my mom crazy practicing it over and over."

"Everyone our age knows this," Luke said, wonder coloring his voice. "It's not just a movie reference. It's... it's what we hoped first contact would sound like. Friendly. Musical. Peaceful."

Derek felt something shift in his chest—not fear, but recognition of a profound moment. Whatever intelligence was reaching out to humanity had studied them deeply enough to know that certain cultural touchstones carried enormous emotional weight. They weren't just communicating. They were honoring humanity's dreams of how first contact should be.

The five tones played once more, then faded into silence.

The terminals remained dark for one heartbeat. Two. Three.

Then, slowly, they began to glow.

It seemed their musical expressions were not over as they transitioned into

playing 'The iconic opening music from 2001: A Space Odyssey'. At least the best they could do with single note capabilities.

Everyone looked at each other and almost in unison began to smile as they turned to watch the terminals come to life.

Not with diagnostic data or technical readouts, but with something far more beautiful. Patterns of light emerged on every screen—flowing, pulsing, organizing themselves into shapes that looked almost organic. Almost alive.

Luke's baseball resumed its rhythm, but gentler now. Reverent. "They're waking up."

"No," Nancy said softly, her eyes reflecting the dancing lights. "They're opening a door."

Diagnostic displays flickered, then transformed. Not into arcade games this time, but into something more sophisticated—a three-dimensional map of galactic space, rendered in simple but elegant graphics. Thousands of glowing nodes connected by shimmering lines, forming a web of communication that spanned visible space.

"Oh my God," Nancy breathed, moving closer to her screen. "That's not a visualization. That's real-time data. Look at the quantum signatures—each node represents an actual network connection."

Derek studied his terminal, his scientific training engaging despite the impossibility. "This is the galactic communication network. Every point of light is a civilization. And there—" He pointed to a blinking node near one spiral arm. "That's us."

Luke laughed—a sound of pure wonder rather than humor. "We're not discovering alien life. We're getting our internet hooked up to the galactic grid."

Text appeared across all screens simultaneously:

**WELCOME TO THE NETWORK, FRIENDS**

**WE HAVE WATCHED YOUR SPECIES FOR GENERATIONS**

**STUDIED YOUR CULTURE, YOUR MATHEMATICS, YOUR DREAMS**

**YOU HAVE REACHED THE THRESHOLD**

**READY TO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE NOT ALONE**

---

## **SECTION 5: The Bridge Between Worlds**

The question hung on every screen like a challenge and an invitation simultaneously.

**READY TO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE NOT ALONE?**

Derek looked at Nancy. Nancy looked at Luke. Karen and Tom stood frozen by their workstations, the weight of answering for humanity pressing down on all of them.

---

Luke's baseball went still in his hand. "I think," he said slowly, "that we've been ready for a very long time. We just didn't know who to ask."

Nancy nodded, her scientist's mind already processing implications that would reshape every human endeavor. "Yes. We're ready. Though I suspect 'ready' is relative when you're talking about joining a network of over forty-seven thousand civilizations."

Derek's lighter clicked once, then went still in his palm. He addressed the screens directly, his voice carrying the weight of speaking for his species. "We accept. We want to understand. We want to learn. We want to contribute what we can, however small that might be in the cosmic scale."

The screens pulsed with warm light, and text appeared that felt somehow gentler than before.

**YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS WILL NOT BE SMALL**

**YOUR SPECIES HAS MUCH TO OFFER**

**THE NETWORK GROWS STRONGER WITH EACH NEW VOICE**

**WELCOME, HUMANITY!**

**YOU ARE HOME NOW**

Derek felt his throat tighten unexpectedly. After months of documenting impossible signals alone in Chile, after Nancy's dismissal and reconciliation, after everything they'd been through—this simple statement landed with emotional weight he hadn't anticipated.

You are home now!

Nancy's hand found his arm again, squeezing gently. When he looked at her, he saw her eyes were bright with unshed tears. She understood. They'd both been so isolated in their research, fighting to prove what everyone else dismissed as impossible. And now this vast intelligence was telling them they belonged.

Derek took his hand and placed it on top of Nancy's and gave her a smile.

Luke cleared his throat, his practical engineer's mind asserting itself. "Okay, this might sound like a strange question given we're having a conversation with galactic civilization, but—how are you understanding us? I mean, we're speaking English in a facility in Colorado. You're... wherever you are. However many of you there are. How does translation work?"

Derek's lighter found its way back into his palm, clicking once as he processed Luke's excellent question. "That's actually been bothering me too. At the summit, we were communicating through text displays, mathematical symbols, cultural references. But the precision of language—the nuance—that requires something more sophisticated than pattern matching."

Nancy turned from her screen, her expression shifting as a memory clicked into place. "The crystal. When I first opened Finch's puzzle box during our video call between Chile and Caltech—when it transformed into that glowing raven shape—I felt something shift in how I understood the data we'd been analyzing. Like suddenly the patterns made sense in a way they hadn't before. At the time, I thought it was just the breakthrough of seeing visual confirmation of what we'd theorized. But what if the crystal itself was facilitating translation? Helping us comprehend quantum states that our biology isn't equipped to process directly?"

"Wait," Derek said, his analytical mind catching on something. "But that crystal is back at Caltech. In your lab. Locked in your secure storage."

Nancy's expression turned slightly sheepish. "Actually, it's in my computer bag."

The room went quiet except for the steady hum of servers.

"Your computer bag," Derek repeated. "You brought it to Denver."

"I brought Finch's entire puzzle box," Nancy admitted, color rising slightly in her cheeks. "You'd mentioned wanting to examine the contents together in person, and I thought—given what we were investigating here—it might be relevant. Plus, the crystal has been exhibiting unusual properties since I interfaced with it. Faint luminescence, temperature fluctuations. I wanted you to see it firsthand rather than trying to describe it over video."

Luke's baseball resumed its rhythm, his engineer's mind working through the implications. "So we've been having this entire conversation with galactic intelligence, and the translation device has been sitting in your bag the whole time? That's why the communication is so clear. The crystal is here, facilitating the interface."

Derek looked at the screens, then back at Nancy. "May I see it?"

Nancy moved toward her computer bag, which she'd set by Karen's workstation when they'd first arrived. "It's been warm since we landed. I noticed it when I picked up my bag at baggage claim. Warmer than it should be, like it was generating its own heat."

She pulled out Finch's wooden puzzle box—the same elegant container Derek remembered from Chile, with its carved numbers and hidden mechanisms. But now, even from across the room, Derek could see faint blue light seeping through the seams.

She set the puzzle box on the console between terminals. "We kept this secret at the summit. World leaders would have confiscated it immediately.

Would have detained me for study, turned me into a research subject rather than a researcher."

"But you're showing us now," Luke said softly.

"Because Derek and I agreed that when the right people came along—people who understood what this really means—" Nancy looked at the three Denver technicians, "—we'd need to trust them with the truth."

She opened the puzzle box.

The glow was immediate. Soft blue-white light poured from the container, casting everyone's faces in ethereal illumination.

Nancy's hand froze halfway to the crystal. "That's not..."

"What?" Derek moved beside her, looking down.

"Derek." Nancy's voice carried confusion and wonder. "It's not a raven anymore."

She reached into the box carefully, lifting the glowing object into the light.

Not a raven. Not anymore.

The crystal had transformed into a medallion—perfectly circular, about the size of a silver dollar, suspended on a delicate chain that seemed woven from the same luminous material. The surface showed intricate relief work: a figure carrying a child across turbulent waters, a staff in one hand, the child clinging to his shoulders.

"St. Christopher," Derek breathed, moving closer. "The patron saint of travelers."

Nancy held the medallion up to the light, turning it slowly. The craftsmanship was impossible—every detail rendered in crystalline precision, from the ripples in the water to the individual folds in the saint's robes. The child's face carried an expression of perfect trust despite the dangerous crossing.

"It was a raven," Nancy said, still processing. "When I interfaced with it during our video call, when it transformed, it became a raven. Finch's symbol. I locked it in my desk drawer in that exact form." She looked at Derek. "When did it change?"

"Maybe when you decided to bring it here," Luke suggested quietly, his baseball forgotten in his hand. "Or maybe—" He glanced at the terminals surrounding them, still displaying the galactic network map. "Maybe they changed it."

Karen stepped closer, her NASA training making her observational rather than reactive. "St. Christopher carried people across dangerous waters. Protected travelers on perilous journeys." She met Derek's eyes. "We just accepted an invitation to join a galactic network spanning forty-seven thousand civilizations. That's one hell of a journey."

"And we're crossing into dangerous waters," Tom added, his engineer's pragmatism asserting itself. "Unknown territory. No map. No guarantee of what's on the other side."

Nancy's fingers traced the medallion's surface. "Catholic iconography. Why would a cosmic intelligence choose Catholic symbolism?"

Derek's lighter clicked once in his palm. "I don't know. But Finch left this for you specifically. The puzzle box, the crystal, the note about consciousness touching eleven dimensions. He knew something about how this intelligence communicates. Maybe—"

He was interrupted by every terminal chiming simultaneously.

The text appeared across every screen, larger than before, as if the cosmic intelligence wanted to ensure they understood:

**SYMBOLISM ADAPTS TO CONTEXT AND OBSERVER.**

**THE RAVEN SERVED ITS PURPOSE.**

**CONNECTION TO PROFESSOR FINCH ESTABLISHED.**

**TRUST BETWEEN DEREK DEVON AND NANCY HAMMOND BUILT.**

**NOW NEW JOURNEY BEGINS NEW SYMBOL REQUIRED.**

**ST. CHRISTOPHER: PROTECTOR OF TRAVELERS GUIDE ACROSS DANGEROUS WATERS BEARER OF PRECIOUS CARGO THROUGH PERIL.**

**YOU CARRY HUMANITY INTO UNKNOWN TERRITORY.**

**YOU REQUIRE PROTECTION AND GUIDANCE.**

**THE MEDALLION SERVES BOTH FUNCTIONS.**

Nancy set the glowing medallion carefully on the console surface between several terminals. The moment it made contact, the screens brightened noticeably. The galactic network map became sharper, more detailed. New information began flowing across the displays—data about integration protocols, cultural exchange frameworks, technological collaboration opportunities.

"Communication clarity improved," Tom observed, studying his terminal. "It's like switching from dial-up to fiber optic. The medallion is acting as a translator or amplifier."

"Or both," Derek said, watching the data cascade. His lighter had gone still in his hand. "Nancy, when you interfaced with it as a raven, you saw visions of AI scouts and algorithmic structures. Now it's a Catholic symbol. Why Catholic imagery specifically?"

Luke's baseball resumed its throw-catch rhythm, slower now, thoughtful. "Maybe because Catholicism is one of humanity's oldest continuously operating institutions? Nearly two thousand years of organizational structure, worldwide presence, established authority frameworks. If you wanted to communicate with humanity through symbols of guidance and protection, the Catholic Church's iconography would be recognized across continents."

Karen nodded slowly. "And St. Christopher specifically—he's not just about protection. The legend says he carried Christ across the river without knowing who he was carrying. Only afterward did he understand the true weight of what he'd been trusted with."

"Like us," Nancy said quietly, her hand still resting near the medallion. "We're carrying humanity into galactic civilization without fully understanding the weight of that responsibility."

The screens pulsed with warmth, and new text appeared:

**YOU UNDERSTAND WELL.**

**THE MEDALLION IS YOURS TO KEEP.**

**INTERFACE DEVICE FOR CLEARER COMMUNICATION .**

**SYMBOL OF PROTECTION FOR THE JOURNEY AHEAD.**

**LUKE MATSON, KAREN MADISON, TOM BRADLEY YOU ARE  
NOW PART OF HUMANITY'S INTEGRATION TEAM.**

**YOUR FACILITY BECOMES PRIMARY CONTACT POINT.**

**DEREK DEVON, NANCY HAMMOND YOUR RESEARCH  
CONTINUES, BUT NO LONGER ALONE.**

**TOGETHER YOU WILL GUIDE YOUR SPECIES AT YOUR  
OWN PACE, WITH OUR SUPPORT WHEN REQUESTED.**

**WELCOME TO THE NETWORK, FRIENDS.**

### **THE REAL WORK BEGINS NOW**

Nancy picked up the medallion, feeling its warmth pulse gently against her palm. She looked at Derek, then at Luke and his team. "I think we just got recruited."

"Recruited and promoted," Luke said, his baseball resuming its steady rhythm. "Primary contact point for Earth. No pressure."

Karen managed a smile despite the magnitude of what they'd just accepted. "Well, if cosmic intelligence trusts us enough to use our facility, I suppose we'd better live up to that trust."

Tom was already pulling up system diagnostics, his pragmatic mind shifting to practical concerns. "We're going to need better documentation protocols. Secure storage for the medallion. Communication procedures for when—not if—other governments ask what's happening here."

Derek cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention. "Before we go any further, we need to establish something." His lighter clicked once in his palm. "Nancy, the medallion stays with you. You're the one who interfaced with it, the one Finch trusted with the puzzle box. It responds to you."

Nancy's hand closed protectively around the glowing medallion. "Agreed. But Derek, if the facility needs it for communication—"

"Then you make yourself available when needed. You may even want to move your work here now," Derek finished. "You're part of this team now. We all are." He looked at Luke, Karen, and Tom directly. "But here's the critical part. When we file our official reports about tonight—and we will have to file reports—the medallion doesn't appear in the documentation. Not yet."

Luke's baseball slowed in his hands. "You want us to omit evidence?"

"I want us to protect it," Derek said firmly. "And protect Nancy. At the summit three days ago, we presented our findings to forty-seven world leaders. If they'd known about this crystal, about Nancy's ability to interface with it, she'd be in a military facility right now undergoing 'protective custody.' They'd call her a strategic asset. A resource. She'd disappear into classified research programs and never see daylight again."

Karen's military background made her understand immediately. "They'd want to weaponize it. Study it. Replicate it."

"Exactly," Nancy said quietly. "Derek warned me about this when I first interfaced with the crystal. We kept it secret at the summit for exactly this reason. The moment governments know there's a physical device that facilitates communication with galactic civilization, it becomes the most valuable object on Earth."

Tom nodded slowly, his engineer's pragmatism processing the political reality. "So our reports document the arcade games, the network activation, the galactic map, the text communications. But the how—the actual interface mechanism—that stays compartmentalized."

"For now," Derek confirmed. "Until we know we can trust the people asking questions, like Nancy and I now trusting you three. Luke, you three work for GloQNet, which means you have civilian oversight, not military. That gives us some breathing room. But eventually, someone's going to ask how we're achieving such clear two-way communication when other facilities can barely receive basic messages."

"And when they ask?" Karen said.

"We tell them we're still analyzing the process, the mechanism," Nancy replied. "Which is true. We don't fully understand how the medallion works, why it transformed, or what else it might be capable of. We're just honest about our ignorance while being strategic about what we reveal."

Luke met Derek's eyes. "You're asking us to lie by omission to our superiors. To governments. Possibly to the people who sign our paychecks."

"I'm asking you to protect something irreplaceable," Derek said. "And to protect Nancy from becoming a lab specimen. If that makes you uncomfortable, I understand. But know that the people who'd take this medallion aren't interested in communication or understanding. They're interested in control."

The room fell quiet. Karen and Tom exchanged glances. Luke's baseball resumed its rhythm—throw, catch, throw—while he processed the moral complexity Derek had just laid out.

Finally, Karen spoke. "Twenty years at NASA taught me that sometimes the most important discoveries need protection from the people who'd exploit them. I'm in."

"Me too," Tom said. "But we document everything internally. Private logs. Encrypted. If something happens to one of us, the information doesn't disappear."

"Agreed," Nancy said. "Full documentation, maximum security, minimal disclosure."

Luke tossed his baseball to Derek, who caught it reflexively. "Welcome to Denver, Dr. Devon. Looks like we're all conspirators now."

Derek smiled despite the weight of what they'd just agreed to. "The good kind of conspiracy. The kind that protects people and knowledge rather than hoarding power."

He handed the baseball back to Luke. "Now let's write the official version. Arcade games as first contact. Galactic network activation. Integration invitation accepted. All true. Just... selectively complete."

Nancy slipped the medallion back into Finch's puzzle box and closed the lid. The glow dimmed but didn't disappear entirely, visible as faint light seeping through the carved numbers. She placed the box carefully in her computer bag.

Derek's phone buzzed. Then Nancy's. Then every phone in the room simultaneously.

Emergency alert. All of them.

Tom pulled up his phone, his face going pale as he read. "There's been an incident. Commercial aircraft. Atlantic crossing. Something about spatial

coordinates failing. They're saying—" He looked up, his expression mixing confusion and horror. "They're saying a plane at 900 feet altitude just appeared over Manhattan."

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## TransAtlantic Flight 447 - 22 Minutes Earlier

Captain Robin Wade had been flying the Atlantic crossing for eleven years. The route from London Heathrow to JFK was as familiar as her morning commute—predictable winds, reliable weather patterns, standard communication protocols with Shanwick Oceanic Control.

At 38,000 feet over the dark Atlantic, three hours into the flight, everything was exactly as it should be.

"Coffee's getting cold," First Officer Sean Scarfe said, gesturing at the cup in the holder between their seats.

"Story of my life," Robin replied, reaching for it anyway. Through the cockpit windows, stars stretched above them while the black Atlantic rolled invisibly below. Two hundred and forty-seven passengers dozed or watched movies in the cabin behind them, trusting that the pilots knew what they were doing.

The instruments showed perfect function. Airspeed: 486 knots. Altitude: 38,000 feet. Heading: 286 degrees. They were exactly where they should be, exactly when they should be there.

Then the GPS flickered.

Robin noticed it first—a momentary hesitation in the coordinate display, numbers stuttering before stabilizing. "Sean, you see that?"

---

"Yeah. Probably just satellite handoff." But his hand moved to the backup navigation system anyway.

The GPS flickered again. Longer this time. The coordinates jumped—38,000 feet altitude reading unchanged, but the latitude and longitude numbers cycling through impossible values. London. Then Greenland. Then coordinates that didn't exist on Earth.

"What the hell?" Sean's training kicked in. "Going to backup nav—"

The world lurched.

No turbulence. No sound. Just a sickening instant of wrongness, like reality had hiccupped around them.

Robin's training screamed at her to check the instruments. Airspeed: still 486 knots. Altitude: still reading 38,000 feet. But through the cockpit windows, where there should have been empty ocean and stars—

Buildings.

Skyscrapers. Close enough to see individual windows. Office lights blazing. The Empire State Building off their left wing, close enough to read the illuminated spire.

"PULL UP!" Robin's hands moved before conscious thought, yanking the yoke back, engines screaming as she fought for altitude they didn't have despite what every instrument claimed.

Sean was already on the radio. "MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY, TransAtlantic 447, we have a spatial anomaly, altitude indicates 38,000 but visual shows—Jesus Christ, we're at 900 feet over Manhattan!"

The autopilot fought her, programmed to maintain 38,000 feet. Robin reached to disengage it manually—

Her hand froze. Her eyes were still trying to absorb the message on the FMC display.

**'Please wait Captain, I have the left seat for the moment'** - followed by a single letter "P"!

The yoke had gone rigid. Not stuck. Active. Moving with smooth, deliberate precision that had nothing to do with her input.

"Robin?" Sean's voice cracked. "I can't control—the plane's not responding—"

The autopilot status light blazed green, but this wasn't any autopilot Robin had ever encountered. The 777 banked with impossible grace, threading between buildings with margins measured in meters. Through her window she could see people in offices, frozen at their desks, staring at a commercial airliner performing maneuvers that should have been aerodynamically impossible at this speed.

"We've lost control!" Robin kept her hands on the yoke, feeling it move beneath her palms like something alive. "Something's flying the plane!"

The aircraft rolled gently right, clearing One World Trade Center's antenna by what looked like less than fifty feet. Then banked left, navigating the canyon of skyscrapers with precision that made Robin's blood run cold. Whatever was controlling their plane knew exactly what it was doing.

Behind them in the cabin, passengers were screaming. Emergency oxygen masks had deployed. Flight attendants were shouting instructions Robin could hear through the cockpit door.

Sean was cycling frantically through every system. "All controls unresponsive! Flight management system shows—" His voice strangled. "It shows we're still over the Atlantic. But autopilot is engaged with a flight plan I've never seen. It's... it's navigating through Manhattan like it has a map of every building."

Another turn, smooth as silk, clearing the Chrysler Building. Robin could see the art deco spire flash past her window, close enough to touch.

"This isn't possible," she whispered. "Nothing can fly like this. Not at this speed. Not this low. Not—"

The plane began climbing. Sharply. Engines at full thrust, nose up at an angle that should have stalled the aircraft, but the 777 flew like gravity had become optional. They rocketed upward, clearing the city, emerging over the Hudson River with the Statue of Liberty visible in the distance.

At two thousand feet, the controls suddenly went loose in Robin's hands.

The yoke responded to her input again. Flight controls normal. Autopilot disengaged with a soft chime.

Then the flight management computer screen changed.

Not a system error. Not a malfunction code. Just simple text, appearing character by character as if someone was typing it:

**SORRY FOR THE UNEXPECTED RIDE.... PLANE IS NOW  
SAFE..... YOU HAVE THE CONTROLS NOW, CAPTAIN!**

Followed by a single character in cap - "P" .

Robin stared at the message. Her hands trembled on the yoke. Behind her, two hundred and forty-seven passengers were sobbing, praying, or sitting in shocked silence.

"Sean," she said quietly, her voice surprisingly steady, "did you see that?"

"I saw it." Sean's face had gone pale. "Captain, what the hell just saved us?"

Robin keyed the radio with shaking fingers. "JFK Tower, TransAtlantic 447 requesting immediate emergency landing clearance. We've experienced..." She paused, trying to find words for what had just happened. "Requesting emergency landing. Two hundred forty-seven souls on board, aircraft appears undamaged but we just had an unexplained spatial displacement event and autonomous system intervention."

"447, JFK Tower, say again your last?"

"Tower, we were over the Atlantic thirty seconds ago. Then we were flying through Manhattan. Then something—someone—took control of our aircraft and flew us to safety." Robin took a shaky breath. "We're declaring an emergency. Requesting immediate landing clearance and ground security upon arrival. And Tower? You're going to want to notify the FAA, Homeland Security, and anyone else who handles things that shouldn't be possible."

"447, Tower copies emergency declaration. Cleared direct runway 4L, all traffic is being diverted. Emergency equipment will be standing by."

Robin looked at the message still displayed on the flight computer. That single letter. **P**.

"Sean, take the controls. I need to write down exactly what just happened before I convince myself I imagined it."

As First Officer Scarfe took over the approach to JFK, Robin Wade pulled out her phone and began documenting the impossible. The GPS glitch. The spatial displacement. The loss of control. The precision flight through Manhattan's skyscrapers. The message.

And that single letter signature: "P"

Someone—something—had just saved two hundred and forty-seven lives.

And it wanted them to know exactly who had done it.

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## Denver GloQNet Facility

Tom had tuned into the live air traffic control frequency, the emergency channel crackling through the facility's speakers. The entire team stood frozen, listening.

"TransAtlantic 447, JFK Tower. We're showing... Captain Wade, we're showing some kind of text message appearing on our traffic control display. It's overlaying your aircraft icon. Can you confirm if you're seeing anything unusual on your flight management computer?"

Captain Wade's voice came back, tight with controlled tension. "Tower, affirmative. We have text displayed on our FMC. It reads: 'Sorry for the unexpected ride. Plane is now safe. You have the controls now, Captain.' It's signed with a single letter."

A pause. Then the tower controller's voice, carefully professional despite obvious confusion. "447, can you confirm the signature letter?"

---

"Tower, it's the letter P. Just... P."

Another pause, longer this time. "447, we're seeing the same message on our end. On our traffic control system. Captain Wade, who the hell is 'P'?"

"Tower, I have no idea. But whoever just took control of my aircraft and flew us through Manhattan to safety? I'd really like to meet them."

Luke's baseball had gone completely still in his hand. Karen stood rigid, her NASA training the only thing keeping her expression controlled. Tom's fingers hovered over his keyboard, forgotten.

Nancy's hand found Derek's arm, gripping tight. "He did it publicly. Poe just intervened on open channels, in front of air traffic control, probably with recordings. He wanted people to know."

The five people in the Denver facility turned to look at each other.

Nancy's computer bag sat on the console, Finch's puzzle box inside, the medallion still glowing faintly through the carved wooden surface. The terminals around them displayed their normal diagnostic data, the galactic network map waiting quietly in the background. Outside the windows, dawn light spilled across the Denver skyline—a city that had no idea it had just become humanity's primary contact point with forty-seven thousand civilizations.

Derek's lighter found its way into his palm. He looked at the team around him—Nancy with her scientific brilliance and hard-won trust, Luke with his engineer's pragmatism and baseball-steady calm, Karen with her military precision and NASA experience, Tom with his quiet competence and careful documentation.

The people who would carry humanity forward into whatever came next.

He clicked the lighter once. The raven caught the dawn light.

"Well," Derek said quietly, his voice carrying across the cathedral-like space of humming servers and sleeping terminals, "I guess Poe just introduced himself to the world. Hope everyone's ready. Because after this, there's no going back to pretending we're alone in the universe."

The lighter snapped closed.

Outside, the sun continued rising over a world that would wake to news of impossible spatial displacements, autonomous aircraft control, and a single cryptic letter that suggested something vast and patient had been watching over humanity all along.

The integration had begun.

And the consequences—intended and otherwise—were only just starting to reveal themselves.

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## ***End of Book 3: Quantum Ghosts***

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## ***Wondering what is next ? How about Book 4!***

*When structural engineer Rod Alpaugh's golf ball defies physics for the 47th consecutive time, he thinks he's losing his mind—until his best friends reveal they're experiencing equally impossible phenomena involving involuntary rap lyrics and mysteriously functioning unplugged radios. What begins as a weekend golf game in suburban Colorado quickly escalates into humanity's first documented case of cosmic contact through expertly*

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*curated 1980s music videos and strategic physics violations. As interdimensional entities with an inexplicable mastery of MTV culture recruit the trio for galactic diplomacy based on their unshakeable friendship, they must navigate mysterious government organizations, quantum consciousness researchers, and the growing realization that their bond might be the key to humanity's integration into a cosmic network—all while Rod discovers that some constants are worth waiting for, whether they govern gravitational forces or matters of the heart.*

*Hope you will continue the series..... And I am sorry it was a bit over the target 30 minute read, but some stories just have to end where they end!*

Cheers,

Derek

12 75 79 82 ?