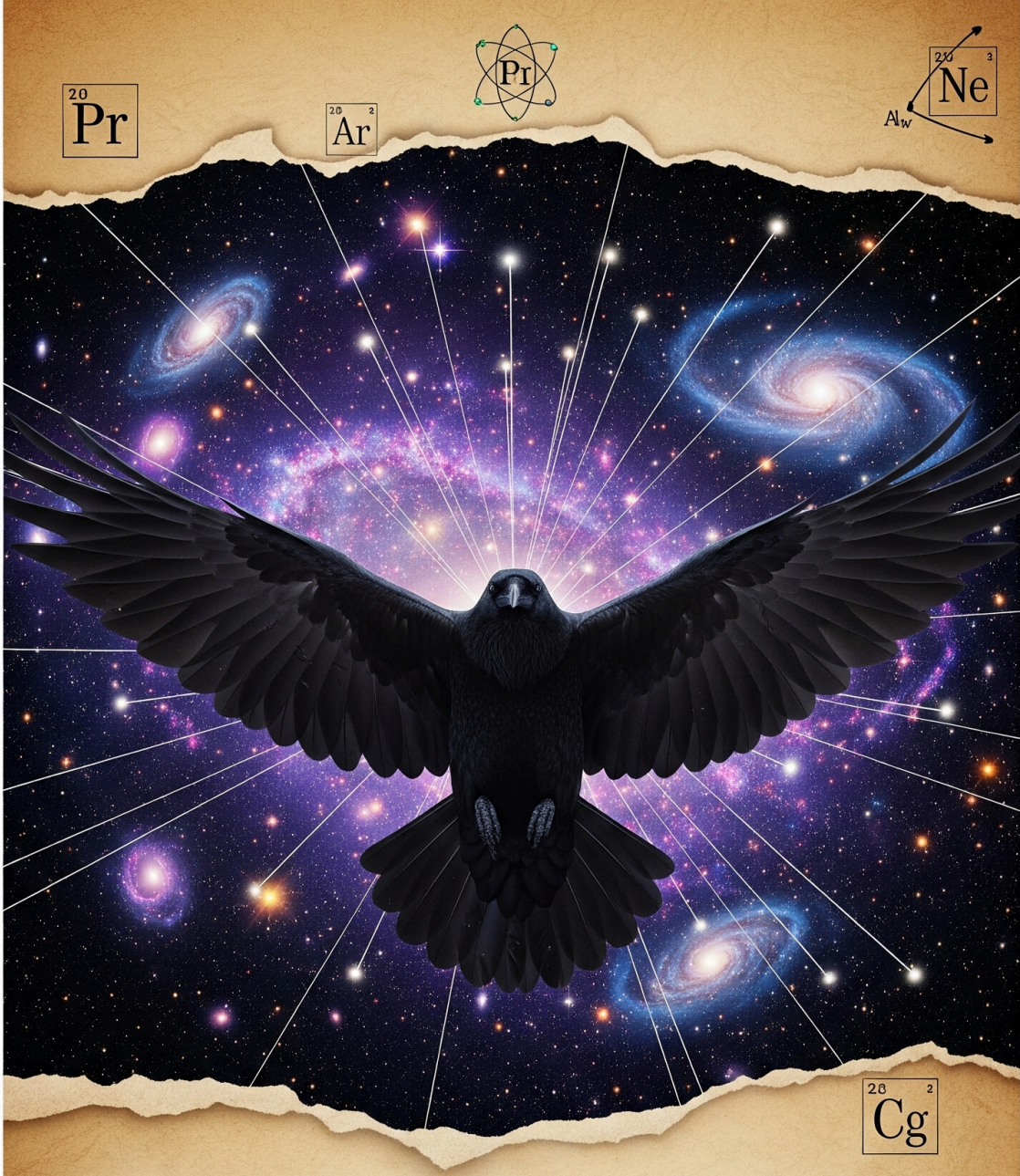

The Last Axiom

Derek Devon

FINCH'S RAVEN

Book 1 of "The Last Axiom" Series

By Derek Devon

A 30-Minute Cosmic Experience
Reality Modification Level: Advanced

First Section - The Impossible Data

Some believe the universe speaks only in mathematics. But what if we've been listening to only half the conversation?

— Professor Alistair Finch, Cambridge Lecture Series, 2023

Cambridge University's ancient physics building stood silhouetted against the storm-darkened sky, raindrops hammering its Victorian windows like bullets from heaven, each impact releasing the sharp scent of ozone and possibility. Inside his third-floor office, illuminated only by the blue glow of his monitor and a single brass desk lamp, Professor Alistair Finch studied data that shouldn't exist.

At seventy-three, Finch's once-imposing frame had yielded to time and illness, his spine curved into a permanent question mark — fitting for a man who had spent his life interrogating the universe's deepest mysteries. His wire-rimmed glasses reflected scrolling numbers from a

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CERN particle collision experiment, results that sent tremors through his weathered hands as he reached for his cold coffee.

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

According to UFT 2.0, what he was looking at simply could not exist. The experimental results showed a quantum resonance pattern crossing the Chandrasekhar limit — the theoretical boundary that governed stellar collapse. The Chandrasekhar limit was the cosmic speed limit for dying stars, the point where gravity becomes so intense that nothing, not even the star's own nuclear fire, can prevent total collapse into a black hole. It was like watching fundamental physics forget its own rules.

For thirty years, Finch had developed what the scientific community called the Holy Grail — *'Unified Field Theory 2.0'*. UFT 2.0 was humanity's theory of everything, the mathematical framework that finally explained how reality actually worked.

Think of it as the universe's instruction manual. For over a century, physicists had been forced to use two completely different rulebooks to describe the same cosmos. Einstein's general relativity governed the massive — planets, stars, black holes, the grand architecture of spacetime itself. Quantum mechanics ruled the microscopic realm — atoms, particles, the bizarre probabilistic dance of the very small where things could be in multiple places simultaneously.

Each theory worked perfectly within its own domain, but they contradicted each other at fundamental levels. It was like discovering that the laws of physics changed depending on whether you were

looking at something large or small. For decades, the greatest minds in science had struggled to reconcile these incompatible worldviews.

UFT 2.0 had woven both theories into a single, magnificent framework. The entire scientific community had embraced it with the fervor usually reserved for religious revelations. It was physics' theory of everything — the final chapter in humanity's understanding of physical laws.

Which made the impossible data on Finch's screen absolutely terrifying.

The grandfather clock in the corner — a Victorian relic from the office's previous occupant—ticked away seconds that suddenly felt strangely elastic. Finch had spent three sleepless days checking for experimental errors, reviewing CERN's methodology, running simulations on the university's supercomputers. Every analysis returned the same impossible conclusion.

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

But the heretical thought wouldn't leave him alone. For a moment, Finch could have sworn he saw the equations on his screen shift and reformulate themselves — like glimpsing the universe's source code being rewritten in real time. He blinked hard, and the illusion vanished, leaving only the steady blue glow and the storm's percussion against glass.

Thunder crashed overhead, loud enough to rattle the windows and make Finch's heart skip. The storm seemed oddly appropriate for what

he was contemplating — the possibility that everything humanity thought it knew about reality might be fundamentally wrong.

Or worse. What if UFT 2.0 was completely correct, but reality itself was changing?

The implications made his chest feel hollow with dread. If universal constants could drift over time—the speed of light, the gravitational constant, Planck's constant — then nothing was truly permanent. What if gravity decided to change from 9.8 meters per second squared to something weaker? Would planes fall from the sky? Would satellites drift away into the void? Nuclear power plants, dependent on precisely balanced reactions, could become unpredictable — or worse, uncontainable. If the fine structure constant shifted even slightly, atoms themselves might become unstable. The GPS satellites overhead relied on Einstein's equations to maintain accuracy — would they suddenly start giving directions to nowhere?

More fundamentally, if light traveled differently, would human vision itself change? Would the electromagnetic spectrum shift, altering the very colors of the world? The morning sun might rise green instead of gold, and no one would know why.

Finch found himself staring out at the storm with new wariness, as if expecting the lightning to flicker with some alien hue, signaling that the universe's most basic parameters were quietly rewriting themselves around him.

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

physics community. Ideas that could end careers. Theories that challenged not just scientific understanding, but the very nature of existence itself.

His hand hovered over the box, trembling slightly. Opening it meant acknowledging that he was taking this anomaly seriously — that he was willing to venture into intellectual territory that might tarnish his hard-won reputation as one of the world's most respected theoretical physicists.

Another violent gust of wind rattled the windows, as if nature itself were urging him toward a decision. The storm's intensity seemed to be building, matching the growing certainty in his mind that something profound was happening to the fabric of reality.

Finch drew a deep breath that tasted of rain and possibility, then opened the box.

Inside lay two items that represented fifteen years of secret work: a small leather-bound notebook filled with his cramped handwriting, and a silver Zippo lighter engraved with the silhouette of a raven in flight. He'd purchased the lighter decades ago during a conference in Prague, drawn to it by some inexplicable fascination with the bird's mythological significance.

Ravens were messengers between worlds in Norse mythology, carriers of information across impossible distances. Odin's ravens, Thought and Memory, flew across the nine realms each day, returning with knowledge from places beyond mortal understanding. The symbolism had appealed to a physicist trying to decode reality's deepest secrets.

Over the years, the raven had become his personal signature, a private joke about the bird of ill omens becoming the symbol for his most unorthodox theoretical work. The lighter was always there in his spartan office — a small token of the intellectual freedom he rarely allowed himself in public.

Finch picked it up now, feeling the weight of it in his palm. Click-snap. The familiar sound had always helped him think, the small flame a reminder of humanity's first and most transformative technology: controlled fire. Click-snap. The mechanical rhythm was oddly comforting amid the storm's chaos.

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

Was his tired mind manufacturing patterns from randomness, or was something genuinely trying to reach him through the mathematical structures underlying reality?

The patterns in the flame momentarily resolved into what looked like crystalline lattices interwoven with symbols that resembled no human mathematics he'd ever seen. Then they were gone, leaving only ordinary fire dancing on ordinary fuel.

Finch closed the lighter with a sharp click and reached for the notebook. If he was losing his mind, at least he'd document the process with scientific rigor.

He flipped to a blank page and wrote today's date at the top, followed by a simple heading: "CERN Anomaly - Implications for UFT 2.0." Then he began to write, the mechanical scratching of his fountain pen joining the clock's ticking and the rain's percussion in a strange, impromptu symphony of discovery.

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

The very idea was heretical. Constants were called constants because they didn't change — the speed of light, the gravitational constant, Planck's constant. They were the fixed scaffolding upon which physics built its understanding of reality.

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

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

Click-snap. Click-snap. The sound was oddly comforting in the rain-soaked silence, even as Finch contemplated the possibility that reality itself might be less solid than anyone had dared imagine.

Second Section: The Transfer

The urgent knock on Finch's office door came at half past eleven, cutting through the storm's symphony like a blade. Professor Finch looked up from his notebook, blinking away hours of concentrated thought that had left his eyes dry and his mind reeling with impossible possibilities.

"Come in," he called, hastily closing the wooden box with its dangerous contents.

Derek Devon stepped inside, his dark hair plastered to his head by rain, water pooling on the threadbare Persian carpet. At thirty-eight, Derek carried himself with the confident stride of someone who had never encountered a physics problem he couldn't solve — until tonight. The urgent message from his mentor had been cryptic enough to drag him from his warm apartment into Cambridge's worst storm in decades.

"Professor, I came as soon as I got your message," Derek said, shaking droplets from his coat. His eyes immediately found the grandfather clock, noting the late hour with the precision of someone accustomed to laboratory schedules. "You said it was urgent? Is everything all right?"

Finch studied his most promising post doc student, now working towards an associate professorship under his tutelage, for a long moment, weighing decades of careful academic reputation against the growing certainty that he was about to share the most dangerous discovery in human history. Derek had the rare combination of rigorous analytical thinking and intuitive leaps that marked truly exceptional physicists. More importantly, he possessed the intellectual courage to

follow ideas wherever they led, even into territory that might end careers.

"Close the door, Derek," Finch said quietly. "We need to talk."

Derek did as asked, then took the familiar chair across from Finch's desk—the same spot where he'd spent countless hours over the past three years, discussing everything from quantum field fluctuations to the philosophical implications of observer effects. But tonight felt different. His mentor looked older, more fragile, as if the storm outside had somehow aged him years in a single evening.

"Before we begin," Finch said, deliberately casual, "how's the observational proposal for the ELTA coming along?"

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

Finch chuckled despite the gravity of what he was about to share. No wonder people thought academics were a bunch of weirdos incapable of fitting in with regular folks. Here he was, about to discuss the possible rewriting of reality itself, and Derek could casually toss around designations like QSO J0439+1634 as if everyone knew what that meant. Though Derek was different — rare among physicists. The man could dissect complex quantum theories in the morning and spend his afternoon yelling at umpires about questionable calls during cricket matches. Unlike Finch himself, who had never managed to establish a real relationship outside academia.

"Good, good. That's... very good." Finch nodded, though his distracted manner suggested his mind was elsewhere. "I've made a discovery," he continued, his voice carrying the weight of a man about to cross an intellectual Rubicon. "Something that challenges everything we think we know about the nature of reality. And I need to share it with someone before..." He paused, choosing his words with the precision of a diplomat negotiating a peace treaty. "Before circumstances make that impossible."

"What kind of discovery?" Derek leaned forward, his scientific curiosity overriding any concern about the ominous phrasing. In his experience, professors were prone to dramatic overstatement when discussing their research — occupational hazard of spending one's life contemplating the infinite.

Finch reopened the wooden box and withdrew the notebook and lighter. "Are you familiar with the concept of universal constants, Derek? Not just as abstract mathematical entities, but as the fundamental rules that govern how reality operates?"

"Of course." Derek settled back in his chair, recognizing the beginning of what promised to be either a brilliant lecture or an elaborate theoretical exercise. "The speed of light, gravitational constant, Planck's constant. They're the bedrock of physics — literally unchanging values that make the universe predictable. Like having a cosmic constitution that never gets amended."

"What if I told you they might not be constants at all?" Finch opened the notebook to the page he'd filled with equations earlier that evening. "What if they're variables that change so slowly we've never noticed — until now?"

Derek's expression shifted from polite attention to genuine alarm, like a student suddenly realizing the professor wasn't speaking hypothetically. "Professor, that's... if universal constants could change, the implications would be staggering. Our entire technological civilization is built on the assumption that physical laws remain stable."

"Precisely." Finch turned the notebook toward Derek, revealing three hours' worth of dense mathematical notation interspersed with what looked like increasingly frantic marginal notes. "Look at this data from CERN. These quantum resonance patterns shouldn't exist according to UFT 2.0. They violate the theory's most fundamental predictions."

Derek studied the equations with the focused intensity of a cryptographer examining enemy codes. His mind raced through the mathematical implications, cross-referencing them against everything he'd learned about unified field theory. What he saw made his coffee-warmed blood run progressively colder.

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

The implications hit him like a physical blow. If spacetime could carry information like a radio wave, then someone with the right equipment could potentially tune in to reality itself — or worse, broadcast changes to it. It would mean the universe wasn't a fixed stage where events played out, but more like a living signal that could be modified, hacked, rewritten. The difference between discovering that your house has an address versus discovering that someone else has been quietly changing your address while you sleep.

"This can't be right," he said finally, though his voice carried more hope than conviction. "You must have found an error in the experimental setup or —"

"I've checked everything." Finch's voice carried the exhausted authority of a man who had spent weeks hoping for exactly that kind of simple explanation. "Multiple times. The data is solid, Derek. Which means we're witnessing something unprecedented: the universe's basic rules being... modified. In real time."

The storm outside seemed to intensify at that moment, as if nature itself were responding to the conversation. Derek looked up from the notebook, his face pale in the monitor's blue glow.

"Modified by what? By whom?"

"I don't know. But I've developed a framework — what I call the Finch Protocol — designed to detect and analyze these changes." Finch reached into the box again and withdrew the external hard drive, handling it like a priest might handle a sacred relic. "Everything is on here. Fifteen years of research, mathematical models, anomaly databases. It's incomplete, but it's a beginning."

Derek accepted the drive with hands that had begun to tremble slightly, as if the small device contained radioactive material rather than data files. In a way, Finch thought, it was far more dangerous than anything merely nuclear.

"Why are you giving this to me now?" Derek asked, though he suspected he already knew part of the answer. "Why not continue the research together?"

Finch's smile carried the weight of recent medical consultations and grim prognoses. "Because I'm dying, Derek. Pancreatic cancer, stage four. The doctors give me weeks, possibly less."

The words hung in the air like a death sentence.

The words hit Derek like a physical blow. He'd noticed his mentor's increasing frailty over the past months, but had attributed it to age and the stress of groundbreaking research. The thought of losing Finch—both as a mentor and as possibly the only person who understood what they were facing — left him feeling suddenly, terrifyingly alone.

"Professor, I... I had no idea. Is there anything —"

"Nothing medical science can do," Finch interrupted gently. "But there is something you can do." He leaned forward, his eyes intense behind his wire-rimmed glasses. "The Protocol is missing a crucial component — what I call the Modulation Key. Think of it as a universal translator that would allow us to calibrate the detection algorithms across vastly different energy scales and timeframes."

Derek looked down at the hard drive in his hands, its weight suddenly feeling immense. "Without this key, we can detect anomalies but can't predict when or where they'll occur?"

"Exactly. It's like having a seismograph that can detect earthquakes but can't tell you if the next one will happen in minutes or decades." Finch reached for the silver Zippo lighter, turning it over in his hands with the familiarity of decades. "There's more, though. The CERN anomaly isn't isolated. Three months ago, an observatory in Hawaii recorded an unexpected fluctuation in the redshift of a particular galaxy cluster. Last

year, an optics lab in Tokyo reported that their entanglement experiments were showing declining coherence times that couldn't be explained by environmental factors. Dr. Hammond at Caltech has been documenting similar disturbances in her communication projects."

Derek felt his pulse quicken. "Small anomalies. The kind most researchers would attribute to equipment error or methodological flaws."

"But collectively, they suggest a pattern," Finch continued. "And I've been having... experiences. Visions, if you will. Dreams where I can see quantum fields with the naked eye, where mathematical equations write themselves in the air."

Derek felt a chill that had nothing to do with his rain-soaked clothes. In any other context, he might have attributed such claims to the psychological effects of terminal illness. But given what they'd just been discussing, he found himself taking them seriously.

"You think the changes are affecting perception? Maybe even consciousness itself?"

"I think whatever is rewriting the universe's rules may be trying to communicate with those who notice the modifications." Finch held up the lighter, its engraved raven catching the light from the desk lamp. "This may sound paranoid, but I believe we're being watched. Evaluated. And I wonder if our awareness of the changes makes us... significant."

The grandfather clock chimed midnight, its deep tones seeming to emphasize the weight of the moment. Outside, thunder crashed with timing so perfect it might have been orchestrated.

"The raven," Finch continued, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper, "was more than just a random purchase. In Norse mythology, ravens were messengers between worlds — Odin's scouts who flew across the nine realms gathering information. I've come to believe that's what we're becoming, Derek. Messengers between the old reality and whatever's coming next."

Derek closed his fingers around the warm metal of the lighter, feeling the engraved wings beneath his thumb. "What if we're wrong? What if this is all elaborate self-deception brought on by..." He gestured helplessly, unable to finish the sentence.

"Then we're wrong together, and the universe continues as it always has." Finch's eyes reflected decades of scientific rigor mixed with newfound uncertainty. "But if we're right, and we do nothing, then humanity faces the most fundamental transformation in its history completely unprepared."

Finch reached into the box one final time and withdrew a second notebook, this one bound in red leather. "This contains my preliminary work on consciousness integration — how awareness itself might be part of the modification process. I know how it sounds," he added with a self-deprecating smile that was pure academic humor, "like something a mad professor would cook up in a Gothic novel. But the mathematics are solid."

"You realize," Derek said, managing a weak smile despite the cosmic terror building in his chest, "that if anyone else heard this conversation, they'd think we'd both lost our minds. Two physicists in a storm-darkened office, talking about cosmic intelligences rewriting reality while studying patterns in lighter flames. We sound like we've confused physics with fantasy fiction."

"The universe," Finch replied with the first genuine laugh Derek had heard from him in months, "has a well-documented sense of humor. It makes the impossible seem perfectly reasonable, and the perfectly reasonable seem impossible. Perhaps that's intentional."

Thunder crashed overhead again, and both men found themselves looking toward the rain-lashed windows as if expecting to see something other than ordinary Cambridge weather.

"Get some rest, my boy," Finch said finally, his tone deliberately lighter despite the apocalyptic nature of their discussion. "Great revelations always seem less terrifying in the morning light. Though in this case, I suspect they'll seem more terrifying."

Derek stood, gathering the notebook, hard drive, and lighter — the complete intellectual legacy of a brilliant mind confronting the impossible. As he reached the door, he turned back.

"Professor, what do you think is doing this? What force could systematically rewrite universal constants?"

Finch was quiet for a long moment, staring out at the storm that showed no signs of abating. "Something with intelligence, Derek. Something with purpose. And something with power beyond our current understanding of what's possible."

"Thanks Professor and if you need anything, just ask please! I will see you after your lecture tomorrow. I want to do a quick review of your materials," Derek told his dying mentor and friend.

As Derek walked through the rain-slicked quadrangle toward his apartment, he found himself looking up at the cloud-covered sky, wondering if the stars above — invisible tonight but always

present—were governed by the same laws he'd spent his life studying, or if those laws were more fluid than anyone had dared imagine.

Click-snap went the lighter in his palm as he walked, the sound already becoming a nervous habit. Click-snap. The raven's flight was just beginning.

Third Section: The Torch Passes

Derek hadn't slept. How could he? Every time he'd closed his eyes, Finch's words echoed through his mind: "Someone — or something — may be about to change the rules entirely." He sat at his small kitchen table as dawn crept through his flat's windows, the raven-engraved lighter catching the early light like a talisman from another world.

The materials Finch had entrusted to him lay spread across every available surface — notebooks filled with equations that challenged everything Derek thought he knew about reality, hard drives containing fifteen years of impossible data, and photographs of phenomena that shouldn't exist according to the theory of everything Finch himself had helped complete.

Click-snap. The lighter's familiar sound had become Derek's thinking rhythm during the sleepless hours, each metallic snap a punctuation mark in his racing thoughts. Was he really about to throw himself into a theoretical framework that suggested the universe's most basic rules were being rewritten in real time? That the fundamental constants governing physics — the sacred numbers every scientist assumed were eternal—might be as changeable as software code?

The implications made his hands shake slightly as he reached for his cold coffee. If Finch was right, then every nuclear power plant, every satellite, every piece of technology that depended on physics behaving predictably could become catastrophically unreliable without warning. Humanity had built its entire civilization on the assumption that $E=mc^2$ would always equal the same thing, that gravity would always pull with the same force, that electrons would always orbit nuclei in precisely defined patterns.

But what if they'd been building on quicksand all along?

Derek's phone buzzed against the table, making him jump. A text from Richard Taylor: Finch didn't show for his 9 AM lecture. Department sending someone to check on him.

A cold weight settled in Derek's stomach like a stone dropping into dark water. He grabbed his jacket, shoving the lighter into his pocket, and rushed toward campus.

The lecture hall was buzzing with confused energy when Derek arrived fifteen minutes later. Students clustered in small groups, some checking their phones, others already packing up to leave. At the front of the room, the department secretary stood with the expression of someone bearing unwelcome news.

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

A murmur ran through the students — concern mixed with the inevitable dark humor young people use to distance themselves from

mortality. But Derek felt that cold weight in his stomach expand into genuine terror. Last night's conversation suddenly took on a different significance. Had Finch known something was coming? Had he passed on his research because he sensed time running out?

Derek approached Richard as students began filing out. "What happened? Do you know anything more?"

Richard shook his head, his usual confidence replaced by visible worry. "Collapsed in his office, apparently. The morning custodial staff found him around seven. They're saying heart attack or stroke, but..." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Angela mentioned rumors of cancer. Do you know anything about that?"

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

"I'll come with you," Richard offered, but Derek shook his head quickly — too quickly, he realized.

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

As Derek walked rapidly across campus toward the bus stop, he found himself unconsciously reaching for the lighter in his pocket. Click-snap. The sound was a small comfort amid his growing fear, like hearing a familiar voice in the darkness. But now it also felt like a countdown timer, marking moments in a life that might be ending far sooner than even Finch had expected.

Addenbrooke's Hospital assaulted Derek's senses the moment he stepped through the automatic doors — the harsh antiseptic smell that never quite masked the underlying anxiety of human suffering, the controlled chaos of medical staff rushing through corridors with purposeful urgency, the soft beeping of monitors from nearby rooms creating an electronic heartbeat for the building itself.

At the main reception desk, Derek inquired about Professor Finch's condition, his voice steadier than he felt.

"Are you family?" the receptionist asked, eyeing him with the practiced skepticism of someone who'd dealt with too many unauthorized visitors.

"No, but I'm his research associate. He has no immediate family in the area." The words came out hollow, emphasizing the loneliness that had surrounded Finch like an invisible barrier.

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

The elevator ride felt interminable, each floor passing like a countdown to an uncertain fate. Derek's mind raced through terrible possibilities — perhaps the cancer had accelerated beyond the doctors' predictions, or maybe the stress of last night's revelations had triggered something fatal. In either case, the urgency of the Protocol research suddenly felt amplified to a desperate degree. If Finch died before Derek fully understood the framework, humanity's only warning about reality's instability might die with him.

The ICU waiting area held three other members of Finch's research team, their faces showing the particular strain of academics confronting mortality. Dr. Sophia Chen looked up as Derek approached, her usually composed demeanor cracked with worry. Beside her sat Martin Webber and Dr. James Okafor, both staring at their phones as if willing them to provide better news.

"Any word?" Derek asked, slightly breathless from his rushed journey.

Sophia shook her head slowly. "He's with the doctors. They're saying it was a major cardiac event, possibly triggered by his cancer's progression."

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

Derek and Sophia exchanged meaningful glances.

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

"He told you?" James looked surprised, lowering his phone looking now at Sophia.

"He swore me to secrecy when I found out last week. Said he didn't want it affecting the team's work or turning him into a walking tragedy for the department to whisper about," Sophia said, now feeling guilty for knowing that secret.

"He told me last night," Derek admitted, then realized how that sounded. The weight of the secret knowledge Finch had shared pressed down on him like a physical burden. He was the only one who knew about the Protocol, about the reality modifications, about the

cosmic intelligence that might be rewriting the universe's source code. If Finch died, Derek would be utterly alone with the most terrifying discovery in human history.

A heavy silence settled over the group. Finch had always been intensely private, almost to the point of reclusiveness. That he had shared his diagnosis with several of them felt significant — like a man preparing for departure, tying up loose ends.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finch lay in the hospital bed like a question mark that had finally been answered, his frail figure dwarfed by the monitoring equipment surrounding him. The vital signs traced weak but determined patterns across the monitors, electronic heartbeats marking time in an alien rhythm. His eyes were closed when Derek entered, but they fluttered open at the sound of footsteps.

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

"Of course." Derek pulled a plastic chair close to the bedside, its legs scraping against the floor with a sound that seemed too loud in the hushed ICU environment. "The whole team is here."

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

Derek nodded, leaning closer. "I was up all night going through them. It's extraordinary work, Professor. I've only scratched the surface, but..." He paused, struggling with how to express the cosmic terror and wonder competing in his mind. "If you're right about reality being modified, we're facing something that makes every previous scientific revolution look like a footnote."

"The missing component," Finch whispered urgently, his eyes focusing with sudden intensity. "The Modulation Key. Without it, the Protocol can only detect changes, not predict or understand them. You have to find __"

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

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

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

Derek felt a chill run down his spine as he watched his mentor stare at something only he could perceive. Was this delirium from the medications, or was Finch somehow seeing the universe's underlying code structure directly? Given everything Derek had learned about the Protocol, he suspected—with growing terror—that it was the latter.

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

Derek found himself backed against the wall, watching helplessly as the medical team fought to save his mentor's life. His hand unconsciously sought the lighter in his pocket. Click-snap. Click-snap. The familiar sound was lost amid the urgent shouting of doctors and the relentless alarm of medical equipment, but somehow it anchored him to something solid in a moment when everything felt like it was dissolving.

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

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

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

The ancient pub felt appropriately weighty for the occasion, its dark wood and dim lighting creating an atmosphere where memories could flow as freely as the pints being consumed. They shared stories of Finch's brilliance, his eccentric teaching methods, his occasionally biting wit, and his unwavering commitment to intellectual rigor. As the alcohol loosened tongues and hearts, Derek remained somewhat apart, his mind divided between the communal remembrance and the private knowledge Finch had entrusted to him alone.

"He changed the field forever with the theory of everything," James was saying, raising his glass with unsteady precision. "The completion of a quest generations of physicists had pursued. Think about it — Newton gave us gravity, Einstein gave us relativity, but Finch gave us the framework that finally unified everything."

"To Professor Finch," Sophia added, her voice thick with emotion. "The last great theorist."

As glasses were raised in solemn toast, Derek caught movement in his peripheral vision. One of the television screens mounted behind the bar had flickered—not the normal brief static of changing channels, but a deliberate, almost organic pulse of light. For just a moment, words appeared on the screen in simple white text against a black background:

HE IS NOW WITH US! - POE

Derek's breath caught. He blinked, certain he'd imagined it. But when he looked again, the screen showed normal programming — a cricket match with completely ordinary commentary. None of the others seemed to have noticed anything unusual; they were absorbed in their reminiscences and grief.

Click-snap went the lighter in Derek's pocket, the sound hidden beneath the pub's ambient noise. But this time, it felt less like a nervous habit and more like a response — as if the raven-engraved Zippo were acknowledging something that Derek's rational mind couldn't quite process.

Whatever forces were modifying reality had apparently taken notice of Professor Alistair Finch's passing. And somehow, Derek suspected, this was only the beginning.

As the evening wore on and his colleagues continued sharing memories of their departed mentor, Derek found himself staring at that television screen, wondering if he'd witnessed his first direct evidence of the cosmic intelligence Finch had theorized about. The intelligence that might now be one consciousness richer.

The torch had been passed, and Derek Devon was no longer just an astrophysicist studying the universe. He was the universe's only witness to its own transformation — and possibly its only remaining guardian against whatever was coming next.

Forth Section: The Raven's Flight Begins

The walk back to his flat from The Eagle should have been routine — a familiar path through Cambridge's ancient streets that Derek had traveled countless times during his graduate studies. But tonight, everything felt different. The streetlights seemed to pulse with an alien rhythm, the shadows between buildings held depths that hadn't been there yesterday, and the very air carried a weight that pressed against his consciousness like a half-remembered dream.

Click-snap went the lighter in his pocket as he walked, the sound no longer nervous but purposeful. Each metallic click seemed to anchor him to something solid in a world that had suddenly become as mutable as software code.

The POE message from the pub screen lingered in his mind like an afterimage: "HE IS NOW WITH US!" None of the others had seen it — he was certain of that now. Whatever forces were modifying reality had chosen him as their primary witness. The thought should have been terrifying, but instead Derek felt a strange sense of privilege mixed with crushing responsibility. He was humanity's early warning system for the impossible.

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

But first, he needed to truly comprehend what Finch had entrusted to him.

Derek's flat was a study in organized chaos—the living space of a theoretical physicist who spent more time thinking about quantum mechanics than domestic arrangements. Books on advanced mathematics and cosmology formed precarious towers on every available surface, while whiteboards covered with equations dominated the walls like abstract art installations.

He cleared a space on his dining table and carefully arranged Finch's materials: the leather notebook containing the Protocol framework, the external hard drive with fifteen years of anomaly data, and the raven-engraved lighter that seemed to watch him with metallic eyes. In the lamplight, the collection looked less like scientific research and more like artifacts from some cosmic mystery tradition.

Derek opened the notebook first, immediately recognizing Finch's precise handwriting — the same elegant script that had covered thousands of lecture slides over the years. But these weren't teaching notes. These were the private thoughts of a brilliant mind grappling with the unthinkable.

"Day 1,247 of Protocol Development: If consciousness is quantum in nature, as the Copenhagen interpretation suggests, then observers

might not be passive witnesses to reality but active participants in its construction. What happens when a sufficiently advanced consciousness observes us observing reality? Do we become part of their experimental apparatus?"

Derek felt a chill run down his spine. Finch hadn't just been detecting reality modifications — he'd been considering the possibility that human consciousness itself might be under observation by whatever intelligence was making the changes.

He flipped through more pages, each entry revealing new depths of Finch's investigation. Mathematical frameworks that treated physical constants as variables. Algorithms designed to detect temporal inconsistencies in observational data. Theoretical models that described reality as a vast information processing system that could be edited, debugged, and upgraded like any complex program.

The implications were staggering. If Finch was right, then humanity's entire understanding of existence was fundamentally flawed. They weren't just living inside the universe — they were living inside something's experiment. Something's simulation. Something's continuously evolving work of art.

Derek reached for the hard drive, but his hand knocked against something else in the box — a manila envelope he hadn't noticed before. He opened it carefully and found himself looking at a collection of photographs from various physics conferences over the past decade.

The first few were standard academic shots: groups of researchers posing stiffly in hotel conference rooms, panels of experts sitting behind

microphones, the usual documentation of scholarly gatherings. But the third photograph made Derek pause.

It showed Finch standing at the center of a group of six researchers outside what appeared to be the Caltech campus. Derek recognized the distinctive architecture from images he'd seen of the famous institution. Finch looked younger, healthier — this must have been taken several years ago, before the cancer had begun its silent work.

But it wasn't Finch who captured Derek's attention. It was the woman standing to Finch's left, laughing at something one of the other researchers had apparently just said. She had shoulder-length dark hair that caught the California sunlight, intelligent eyes that sparkled with genuine amusement, and—Derek found himself staring despite the cosmic weight on his shoulders — the most captivating dimples he'd ever seen.

Even in this candid moment, she radiated an infectious enthusiasm that seemed to brighten everyone around her. While the other conference attendees looked like typical academics — serious, slightly awkward, formal — she looked like someone who had genuinely fallen in love with the universe's mysteries and couldn't contain her joy at getting to explore them professionally.

Derek flipped the photo over and found Finch's handwriting: "Caltech Quantum Consciousness Symposium, 2019. Brilliant gathering. Dr. Nancy Hammond (second from left) presented fascinating work on observer effect amplification. Must follow her research more closely. Her puzzle box demonstration was particularly intriguing."

Nancy Hammond. Derek found himself studying her face again, noting the way her smile seemed to transform her entire expression, the

intelligence that was obvious even in casual conversation, and yes, those remarkable features that made her look approachable despite what must have been a formidable intellect.

He felt slightly ridiculous for lingering on a photograph when he should be focused on potential cosmic catastrophe, but there was something about her expression that suggested she understood the wonder of what they were all studying. Most physicists, Derek included, approached their work with appropriate scientific sobriety. Nancy Hammond looked like she was having the time of her life.

Derek made a mental note to look up her recent research. If Finch had been following her work for years, and if she specialized in quantum consciousness studies, she might be someone who could understand the Protocol. Someone who might not immediately dismiss reality modification theory as the ravings of a dying professor.

Someone who looked like she'd face the impossible with that infectious smile and genuine enthusiasm.

Derek shook his head, smiling despite himself. Even in the midst of potential cosmic crisis, apparently he was still capable of being distracted by an attractive theoretical physicist. Perhaps that was reassuring — proof that whatever was happening to reality hadn't robbed him of basic human responses.

He set the photograph aside carefully and returned his attention to the hard drive.

The data was overwhelming. Fifteen years of carefully catalogued anomalies from observatories around the world, each entry meticulously documented with timestamps, locations, and theoretical

implications. Derek had expected maybe a few dozen examples of unexplained phenomena. Instead, he found thousands.

Gravitational wave detectors recording impossible signatures. Radio telescopes detecting structured signals that vanished when examined more closely. Particle accelerators producing collision results that violated conservation laws for microsecond intervals before self-correcting. Atomic clocks falling out of synchronization in ways that suggested localized time distortions.

Each anomaly had been brief, subtle, easily dismissed as equipment malfunction or experimental error. But taken together, they painted a picture of a universe under constant, careful modification — like watching someone edit a massive document, making small changes so gradually that no single edit seemed significant.

Derek pulled up the most recent entries, dating from just weeks ago. The frequency was increasing. Whatever intelligence was modifying reality was accelerating its activities, becoming bolder, perhaps less concerned about being detected.

Or perhaps it wanted to be detected. Perhaps humanity had reached some threshold of understanding that made disclosure possible, even necessary.

Derek leaned back in his chair, his mind reeling. If even a fraction of this data was accurate, then the implications stretched far beyond physics into philosophy, theology, the very nature of existence itself. Were humans real, or simulations? Was free will genuine, or were they following programmed parameters? Did death have meaning, or were human consciousness patterns simply being archived and transferred to different processing systems?

He thought about Finch's final moments in the hospital, when his mentor had claimed to see equations changing in the air. Had that been delirium, or had Finch somehow gained the ability to perceive reality's underlying code structure directly?

Derek picked up the raven lighter again, feeling its weight — not just the physical mass of metal and fuel, but the accumulated weight of secrets, responsibilities, and impossible knowledge. Click-snap. The flame danced in the darkened room, and for just a moment, Derek thought he saw something impossible within the dancing light.

Geometric patterns that weren't random flickers but organized information, as if the flame itself were trying to communicate. Mathematical relationships made visible, equations written in fire and shadow.

Derek blinked, and the flame returned to normal. But his heart was racing.

Either he was beginning to crack under the psychological pressure of Finch's revelations, or he was developing the same perceptual abilities that had allowed his mentor to see reality's code structure in his final moments. Given everything he'd learned tonight, Derek suspected it was the latter.

The universe was apparently recruiting him as something more than just a witness. It was making him into a translator, someone who could perceive the modifications as they happened and perhaps even understand their purpose.

Derek closed the lighter and sat in the darkness of his flat, listening to the familiar sounds of Cambridge at night—traffic on distant streets, the

occasional voice of late-returning students, the settling sounds of old buildings that had stood for centuries. All of it seemed suddenly precious and fragile, like a beautiful illusion that could be edited out of existence with a few keystrokes in some cosmic program.

But it also felt more real than ever. If reality was indeed being modified, then every moment of genuine human experience — every laugh, every discovery, every connection between conscious beings — represented something worth preserving, worth fighting for, worth understanding.

Derek thought again of Nancy Hammond's dimpled smile in that conference photograph. Real human joy in the face of cosmic mystery. Exactly the kind of response this universe needed from its inhabitants.

Derek picked up his phone and began typing an email:

"Dr. Hammond, my name is Derek Devon, and I'm a post-doc graduate researcher at Cambridge University. I've recently inherited some research materials from my late mentor, Professor Alistair Finch, that relate to your work on quantum consciousness and observer effects. I believe you may be the only person who can help me understand their implications. Would you be available for a video call in the coming days? This is extremely urgent, though I realize how that must sound coming from a complete stranger. Professor Finch spoke very highly of your work, particularly about the the puzzle box he sent you. I have something to show you that I think you'll find... unprecedented. - Derek Devon, Cambridge University"

His finger hovered over the send button for a long moment. Then he deleted the entire message.

What was he thinking? Writing to one of the world's leading quantum consciousness researchers like some desperate graduate student with a conspiracy theory? She'd probably forward his email to colleagues as an example of academic breakdown under stress — or worse, report him to HR for unprofessional advances from a complete stranger.

Derek stared at the blank email screen, then at Nancy Hammond's bright smile in the conference photograph. Even if she was brilliant and beautiful and looked like she'd actually listen to impossible theories with enthusiasm, he couldn't just email her out of the blue with claims that would make him sound completely unhinged.

Maybe tomorrow, when he'd figured out an approach that didn't sound like he'd confused physics with fantasy fiction. Maybe when he had more concrete evidence. Maybe when he felt less like a grieving post doc who'd inherited the ravings of a dying professor.

Derek closed his laptop and prepared for bed, the weight of cosmic secrets settling on his shoulders like a burden he'd have to carry alone.

At least for now…..

End of Book 1.. "The Last Axiom"... of "The Last Axiom" series.

A Brief … Thanks!… from the Author!

I appreciate you trying my series. With this 15 book series, although it consists of 16 books in total, Book 13 was too long and was divided into two parts (13a & 13b). It is important to read book 1 and 2 in order, after that I left a message for you at the end of Book 2! If you enjoyed the book, I hope you will continue to read the entire series. I always love to get feedback, so I would greatly appreciate hearing from you on the website www.thelastaxiom.com.

Again, thank you for trying my book!

Cheers,

Derek 🙂

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