



THE LAST AXIOM

Book 5 - The Observer Effect

DEREK DEVON



THE LAST AXIOM

Book 5 - The Observer Effect of The Last Axiom Series

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

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A Novel by Derek Devon

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

Reader discretion is advised.

Dedication

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

Love to all - Derek

The Observer Effect

Book 5 of "The Last Axiom" Series

By Derek Devon

A 30(Plus) - Minute Cosmic Experience

Reality Modification Level: THREE

First Section - The Inconceivable Presence

Maureen Hamner's legs burned as she pushed through the final kilometer around CERN's perimeter, but the physical discomfort was nothing compared to the knot in her stomach. Three weeks since Derek Devon's lecture had turned her world upside down, and she still couldn't shake the memory of his ink-stained fingers dancing through unthinkable equations.

Get over yourself, she thought, wiping sweat from her forehead. He's a brilliant physicist exploring cosmic modifications. You're a graduate student studying consciousness interfaces. Different leagues entirely.

But that wasn't what bothered her most about their brief conversation after his presentation. It was the way his expression had shifted when she'd mentioned her consciousness-subatomic field research—from polite academic interest to something much more intense.

"You're actually measuring direct consciousness influence on particle states?" he'd asked, leaning forward with that raven-engraved lighter clicking nervously in his hand.

"Small effects," she'd admitted. "Probably equipment drift."

"What if it's not?"

The question had haunted her morning runs ever since—Derek's voice in her head, challenging her assumptions, making the inconceivable seem inevitable.

Movement flickered in her peripheral vision.

Maureen stumbled, her running shoe catching on uneven pavement. She caught herself against the trail's metal railing, pulse hammering as she scanned the empty path ahead. Nothing. Just the familiar hum of the particle accelerator twenty meters below, the Swiss Alps catching early morning light, and the scent of damp earth from last night's rain.

Fourteenth time in two weeks.

Always the same shadow-movement at the edge of her vision, always dissolving when she turned to look directly. Like something watching from a dimension her eyes couldn't quite focus on.

"Exhaustion," she muttered, resuming her pace. "Too many eighteen-hour shifts in the lab."

The lie felt hollow. Her sleep schedule was rigorous, her health excellent. Whatever was following her during these dawn jogs wasn't a fatigue-induced hallucination.

Her phone buzzed against her arm. Text message from her lab partner, Hans:

Government inspection team arrived early. They're in your lab. NOW.

Her stomach dropped.

Government inspection wasn't scheduled until next month. And why would they start with her consciousness research instead of the main particle physics programs?

She broke into a sprint toward the complex, that familiar dread settling in her chest. Her research was controversial enough within CERN's academic circles—neural consciousness interface studies pushed the boundaries of acceptable graduate work. If government oversight decided her experiments were... what? Dangerous? Pseudoscientific? Her career could be over before it started.

Second Section: The Arrival

The employee entrance scanner beeped as she badged in, her early run clothes still damp with perspiration. Hans waited by the elevators, his usually cheerful face grim.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"Three men in expensive suits. They've been in your lab for twenty minutes, going through everything. Dr. Hanson is with them, but she looks..." Hans shrugged helplessly. "Worried."

The elevator ride felt endless. When the doors opened on her floor, she could hear voices from her laboratory—calm, professional, but carrying an undertone that made her skin crawl.

Dr. Lena Hanson stood near the doorway, her arms crossed defensively. Inside, two men in dark suits examined her equipment while a third reviewed her research files on his tablet.

"Dr. Hamner," Hanson said with obvious relief. "These gentlemen are from the European Science Council. They have some questions about your neural consciousness interface research."

Maureen phone buzzed in her pocket, she took a discrete look at the message displayed on her screen;

GET TO SUB-LEVEL 3!

Maureen quickly returned her phone to her pocket trying to figure out who sent the message just as the man that appeared to be leading this intrusion turned and spoke.

The man with the tablet looked up. Mid-forties, sharp eyes, perfectly pressed suit that screamed government authority. "Dr. Hamner. I'm Colonel Martinez. We need to discuss your experimental results."

Her mouth went dry.

Not just government. Military.

"My work is theoretical," she said carefully. "Basic consciousness studies. Nothing with practical applications."

Martinez smiled—the kind of expression that never reached the eyes. "Dr. Hamner, our instruments detected a subatomic field disturbance emanating from this installation three days ago. The energy signature matches anomalous readings from a research center in Chile."

Was that Derek's laboratory? The connection hit her like physical force. Whatever was happening in Chile, whatever extraordinary modifications Derek had discovered, somehow her consciousness studies were connected.

"I don't understand," she said, though part of her was beginning to.

"Your neural consciousness interface experiments," the Colonel continued, consulting his tablet, "have achieved measurable field manipulation with reproducible results. That moves your work from 'theoretical' into the category of 'strategically significant research requiring governmental oversight.'"

The room felt smaller suddenly. Maureen glanced at Dr. Hanson, whose expression confirmed her worst fears. This wasn't a consultation. This was acquisition.

"What exactly are you proposing?" Maureen asked.

"Relocation to a secure site where your research can continue under appropriate supervision. Your country's security interests require ensuring that consciousness manipulation technology develops within controlled parameters."

Technology. They weren't talking about her as a researcher anymore. They were talking about her as a resource.

"And if I refuse?"

Martinez's smile became sharper. "Dr. Hamner, I don't think you understand the scope of what's at stake."

Third Section: The Interrogation

"We have evidence that entities with advanced consciousness manipulation capabilities are making contact with human researchers. Your work may be humanity's only defense against cognitive infiltration."

"What entities?" she asked, trying to sound genuinely confused.

The Colonel activated his tablet, showing her surveillance footage from her dawn runs. In the grainy video, she could see the shadow-movements she'd been detecting for weeks—movement that the cameras had apparently captured even when her eyes couldn't focus on it directly.

"These anomalous presences have been observed near several consciousness researchers worldwide," Martinez said. "Dr. Devon in Chile, Dr. Hammond in California, and now you. Each researcher subsequently exhibited dramatic improvements in consciousness manipulation capabilities."

Her heart hammered against her ribs. They'd been watching her. The shadow movements during her runs weren't just her imagination—they were real, and somehow connected to other researchers around the world.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

Maureen's mind raced. Whatever was happening here, she needed more information before making any decisions. But first, she needed to buy herself some thinking time.

"Colonel Martinez," Maureen said, forcing her voice to remain steady, "would it be possible for me to shower and change into proper lab attire? I'd prefer to discuss my research professionally rather than..." She gestured at her sweat-dampened running clothes.

Martinez consulted his watch, clearly weighing security protocols against the appearance of cooperation. "Dr. Norman," he called to one of his agents, "accompany Dr. Hamner to the facilities. Standard precautions."

Dr. Beverly Norman stepped forward—mid-thirties, athletic build, with a Sally Field type face, the kind of professional competence that suggested she could handle any situation Maureen might attempt. "Of course, sir."

Forth Section: The Shower Warning

The women's locker room felt like a temporary sanctuary, though Maureen knew the illusion of privacy was exactly that—an illusion. Norman positioned

herself near the entrance, maintaining visual contact while respecting basic decency.

"Just a quick shower," Maureen said, gathering her change of clothes. "Five minutes."

The hot water felt like heaven against her tense shoulders, but her mind raced through possibilities. The mysterious text message. The service tunnel. The unthinkable choice between safety and truth.

Steam filled the shower stall, and for a moment she allowed herself to imagine what Derek would think of her situation. Would he understand her dilemma? Would he—

"Maureen."

She spun around, heart hammering, expecting to see Norman.

Instead, a faint holographic projection shimmered in the steam near the shower wall—Derek Devon's face, looking as shocked as she felt.

"Oh God," he replied, immediately averting his gaze, his face flushing crimson. "I'm so sorry. The dimensional consciousness link—I was trying to reach you in your laboratory, not—I had no idea you were—"

She just stood facing Derek, knowing she was fully exposed but her first reaction was a smile, then Maureen grabbed a towel, wrapping it around herself while her brain struggled to process the surreal situation. Derek Devon was somehow projecting into her shower through consciousness field manipulation, looking mortified and trying very hard to stare at anything except her.

"Derek?" she whispered, glancing toward Norman, who seemed oblivious to the holographic conversation occurring six meters away.

"I can explain later," Derek explained, still determinedly looking away, "but right now you're in immediate danger. Those aren't government inspectors—they're

military acquisition specialists. They want to weaponize your awareness research."

"I figured that out," Maureen said, adjusting her towel and feeling heat rise in her cheeks for entirely different reasons than embarrassment. Even in this extraordinary situation, even with him accidentally seeing her undressed, Derek's primary concern was her safety. "How are you doing this? The projection?"

"Neural consciousness interface," he continued quickly, finally risking a glance at her face while carefully maintaining eye contact above towel level. "Your work made it possible. Maureen, listen—they're not going to let you leave that building voluntarily. But we can get you out."

"We?"

"The research network you've most likely heard about. Nancy Hammond, Luke Matson, myself—we're not conspiracy theorists or rogue scientists. We're trying to save humanity's chance at voluntary consciousness evolution before governments turn it into a control mechanism."

Norman shifted position near the entrance, checking her watch. "Dr. Hamner? Everything all right in there? We are on a tight time table!"

"Fine," Maureen called, then lowered her voice to barely a whisper. "Derek, I don't understand what's happening. The messages on my cell phone, the shadowy presence during my jogs, now this unimaginable projection—"

"The AI scouts have been observing you," Derek murmured gently. "Just like they observed Nancy and me. You have a decision, Maureen. Continue your studies under military control, or join us and help develop consciousness evolution technologies that remain free."

She stared at his earnest face, this man she'd admired from academic distance, now risking exposure to warn her of danger. The attraction she'd felt

during his lecture seemed trivial compared to the courage he was demonstrating.

"If I come with you," she said, "there's no going back, is there?"

Derek's expression softened. "No. But Maureen, staying means spending the rest of your career developing weapons instead of helping humanity grow. Is that really the decision you want to make?"

"Doctor?" Norman's voice carried a note of professional concern. "We need to return to the laboratory."

"Coming," Maureen called, then looked back at Derek's projection. "The service tunnel. Sublevel 3. That was you?"

"That was them," he added. "The AI scouts. They're offering you the same option they offered Nancy and me—evolution or control. But the decision has to be yours."

"AI scouts?" Maureen whispered urgently. "What are they exactly? Are they—"

"Dr. Hamner?" Norman's voice carried impatience now. "Colonel Martinez is waiting."

Derek's projection flickered as the steam dissipated further. "I'll explain everything later, I promise. But right now, you need to know the basics—they're an advanced consciousness that's been helping humanity develop quantum consciousness research. They've been preparing for this choice between evolution and control for a very long time."

"But how do they—"

"Maureen, listen carefully," Derek interrupted gently but urgently. "We don't have time for the full explanation. What matters right now is that they can help you escape, but only if you choose to. They won't force anything. The decision has to be completely yours."

"Last call, Dr. Hamner!" Norman's voice carried a warning edge.

The projection began to fade as the shower steam dissipated. Derek's voice became barely audible: "Whatever you choose, Maureen, I want you to know—your work is extraordinary. You're an extraordinary woman. Don't let them reduce you to a weapon."

And then he was gone, leaving only the echo of words that made her heart race faster than any dawn run ever had.

"I'm getting dressed right now", Maureen replied to Norman.

Maureen dressed quickly, her mind crystallizing around a single, terrifying realization: Derek Devon had just risked everything to warn her, and in doing so, had shown her exactly what kind of person he really was.

The kind worth taking unthinkable risks for.

"Ready, Dr. Hamner?" Dr. Beverly Norman asked as Maureen emerged from the shower area.

"Ready," Maureen said, though she wasn't talking about returning to Martinez's interrogation.

She was talking about choosing growth over fear, truth over safety, and Derek Devon's unimaginable neural consciousness network over the secure prison of government oversight.

The decision was made. Now she just had to survive long enough to act on it.

When they returned to her laboratory, Maureen immediately noticed the change. The space she'd known for years had been subtly transformed while she was gone. Chairs had been repositioned—one now sat isolated in the center of the room, facing the others like an interrogation setup. The casual academic atmosphere had been replaced by something more formal, more controlling.

The setup felt wrong—too deliberate, too psychological. They'd turned her laboratory into an interrogation room while she'd been in the shower.

Colonel Martinez looked up from his tablet as she entered. "Dr. Hamner, please take a seat," he said, gesturing toward the isolated chair in the center of the room. "Now that you're more comfortable, we can continue our discussion about your work."

Fifth Section: The Choice & Escape

As if summoned by his words, every monitor in her laboratory flickered simultaneously. For one inconceivable moment, text appeared across all her displays in elegant, flowing script:

MAUREEN. THE CHOICE APPROACHES. REMEMBER: FEAR IS THEIR TOOL. GROWTH IS YOURS.

The message vanished before anyone else could fully process it, leaving only the faint afterimage burned into Maureen's vision.

"I prefer to stand, thank you," Maureen said, her voice steadier than she felt. "This is still my workspace."

Martinez's expression shifted, the polite veneer slipping slightly. "Dr. Hamner, I think you misunderstand the nature of this situation." He was already activating his radio. "Code Seven. Complex lockdown. Now."

Through the laboratory windows, Maureen could see armed personnel moving into position around the building. No longer a consultation. No longer even acquisition.

Containment.

Her phone buzzed again. Another text from an unknown number:

The service tunnel. Sublevel 3. Five minutes.

Maureen looked at the message, at Martinez coordinating his security response, at Dr. Hanson's frightened face, at her life's work about to disappear into government classification.

The option Derek had talked about. The question that had been haunting her dawn jogs.

What if her inconceivable readings were real?

Maureen looked at her phone again. On the screen, a single word appeared:

NOW

The laboratory lights flickered, and every piece of electronic equipment in the room began displaying the same message in flowing, elegant script:

THE CHOICE HAS BEEN MADE. MAUREEN HAMNER, STEP FORWARD INTO GROWTH.

"Can I please see your phone Ms. Hamner... now", Martinez ordered with a firm tone.

Maureen looked at Martinez and back to the message on her phone. She smiled at Martinez and put her phone back into her pocket.

"Containment protocol!" Martinez barked into his radio. "Code Black! All exits sealed!"

The subatomic field around her began to shimmer, and she understood that her decision wasn't just philosophical anymore.

It was about to become very, very physical.

What happened next defied every law of physics Maureen thought she understood.

A crackling wall of energy materialized between her and the agents—not visible light, but something that bent the air like heat waves, creating a barrier that hummed with barely contained power.

Martinez lunged forward and slammed into it like hitting reinforced glass, the impact throwing him backward into a chair while Maureen jumped backwards thinking she was about to be tackled.

"What the hell—" Dr. Beverly Norman drew her sidearm, training it on Maureen. "Stay where you are!"

"Beverly, no!" Dr. Hanson shouted, but Norman was already squeezing the trigger.

Click.

Nothing. Norman stared at her weapon in disbelief, pulled the slide back to check the chamber, tried again. Click. Click.

Maureen looked directly at Norman and gave a simple but curt grin.

The second agent had his gun out too, pointing it at the energy barrier. His weapon failed just as completely. No gunpowder ignition, no mechanical function—as if the firing mechanisms had simply stopped working.

"The maintenance door!" Maureen heard her own voice, though she hadn't consciously decided to speak. Behind her, the heavy steel door that led to the service corridors had somehow unlocked itself, standing slightly ajar.

Martinez was back on his feet, shouting into his radio: "Security breach in Lab Seven! Unknown energy field, weapons malfunction, suspect attempting to flee!"

Static answered him. Every piece of electronic equipment in the room flickered and died.

"Maureen!" Dr. Hanson's voice cut through the chaos. "What are you doing? They're trying to help you! This is madness!"

Maureen looked at her mentor—the woman who'd guided her through graduate school, who'd believed in her research when others called it pseudoscience. Dr. Hanson's face was twisted with confusion and fear.

"I'm sorry," Maureen said, and meant it. "But they don't want to help. They want to turn my research into a weapon."

"That's not—you don't understand the bigger picture!" Hanson stepped closer to the energy barrier, her hands pressed against the shimmering air. "There are things at stake here beyond your personal research!"

The barrier began to weaken, the humming sound growing fainter. Whatever was protecting her wouldn't last much longer.

Martinez had abandoned his useless radio and was manually triggering some kind of alarm system. Red emergency lights began flashing throughout the installation, and she could hear the mechanical sound of blast doors engaging somewhere in the building.

"Complex lockdown initiated," an automated voice announced over the intercom. "All personnel remain at current positions. This is not a drill."

Dr. Norman had given up on her firearm and was pulling some kind of device from her jacket—a taser, Maureen realized. If she could get close enough to the barrier...

"Maureen, please!" Dr. Hanson was nearly shouting now. "You're making a terrible mistake! These entities—they're not what they seem!"

The maintenance door swung fully open behind her. Beyond it, Maureen could see a dimly lit corridor and hear the distant sound of footsteps—security personnel moving to intercept her escape route.

The energy barrier flickered like a failing light bulb. Seconds left.

Martinez had found a backup communication device, speaking rapidly into it: "Basement levels, all access points. She's heading for the service tunnels. Deploy non-lethal containment."

Maureen looked one last time at Dr. Hanson—the woman who'd been like a second mother to her, whose fear and confusion were written clearly across her face.

"I have to try," Maureen said. "If I'm wrong, I'll face the consequences. But if they're wrong... if you're wrong..."

She glanced at Martinez, who was coordinating his security response with military precision.

"The consequences are much worse."

The barrier collapsed.

Norman lunged forward with her taser just as Maureen dove backward through the maintenance door. The electrical prongs sparked against the metal door frame as Maureen rolled into the service corridor, scrambling to her feet and pushing the door closed behind her.

Behind the door, she could hear Martinez shouting orders: "Seal the maintenance levels! She's in the tunnels and bring the rams, the Maintenance door is locked."

Heavy boots thundered on metal stairs somewhere in the distance. Flashlight beams swept the darkness ahead of her. And somewhere in this maze of concrete and steel, a message had promised her sanctuary at Sublevel 3.

Maureen ran into the darkness, her heart pounding with terror and exhilaration, leaving behind everything she'd known for a decision she didn't fully understand but couldn't bring herself to regret.

The hunt was on.

Sixth Section: The Descent

The service corridor was a maze of pipes, electrical conduits, and branching passages that seemed to stretch endlessly into the darkness. Maureen's running shoes slapped against wet concrete as she navigated by the dim emergency lighting, her breath coming in sharp gasps.

Behind her, she could hear the heavy clang of the maintenance door being forced open, followed by Martinez's voice echoing through the tunnels: "Teams Two and Four, intercept at junction Alpha-Seven. Team One, with me."

She reached a T-intersection and hesitated. Left led toward what looked like a wider corridor with better lighting—probably a main maintenance route. Right descended into darkness down a narrow stairwell marked with faded signs she couldn't quite read.

Footsteps were getting closer. Radio chatter bounced off the concrete walls.

Sublevel 3. She had to go down.

Maureen took the stairs two at a time, her hand sliding along the metal railing for balance. The air grew cooler and damper as she descended, carrying the smell of old machinery and something else—ozone, like the moment before a thunderstorm.

Sublevel 2. Still going down.

"Movement on the main corridor!" someone shouted from above. "She went left!"

Good. Let them think that.

Sublevel 3. Finally!

The corridor here was different—older, with exposed brick walls that suggested this part of the installation predated the modern CERN construction. A single bare bulb every twenty meters provided just enough light to navigate by.

But where was she supposed to go? The text message had said Sublevel 3, but this hallway stretched in both directions without any obvious destination.

Her phone buzzed. Maureen pulled it out, surprised it still worked after the electronic failures upstairs.

FOLLOW THE BLUE LIGHTS

Blue lights? Maureen looked around and saw nothing but the same harsh white emergency bulbs—then noticed something that made her heart skip. Faint blue glowing marks had appeared on the wall beside her, barely visible unless you looked directly at them. Arrow symbols, pointing down the corridor to her left.

She followed them, moving as quietly as possible on the wet concrete. The blue arrows appeared every few meters, leading her deeper into the installation's bowels. Behind her, the sound of pursuit had faded—they were still searching the upper levels.

The corridor ended at a heavy metal door marked "Authorized Personnel Only - Particle Beam Housing." The blue glow was strongest here, concentrated around the door handle.

Maureen tried the handle, expecting it to be locked. It turned easily.

Beyond the door lay something that shouldn't have existed: a small chamber that looked more like a starship's bridge than a maintenance room. Banks of smooth, dark surfaces covered the walls, pulsing with soft patterns of light that reminded her of neural networks. The air here was warm and carried that same ozone smell she'd noticed earlier, along with something that made her think of growing things—like a greenhouse after rain.

"Maureen, don't panic—it's me, Derek."

She spun around to find Derek Devon stepping out of what appeared to be an alcove in the far wall, though she could have sworn the chamber was empty when she entered.

"Derek?" She wanted to run to him, but her legs felt suddenly weak with relief and exhaustion. "How are you here? I thought you were in Chile."

"I was. Thirty minutes ago." Derek's smile was warm but strained. "Teleportation is one of the perks of consciousness evolution, but it's exhausting as hell."

"Teleportation?" Maureen stared at him. "That's unbelievable."

"So is projecting into someone's shower," Derek observed gently, "but we managed that too. Maureen, we don't have much time. Martinez's teams are good, and they'll figure out you came down here eventually."

As if summoned by his words, the sound of boots on metal stairs echoed from somewhere in the corridor behind her. They'd found the stairwell.

"Team Three, basement levels secure. Beginning systematic search."

Derek moved to one of the dark wall panels, his hands dancing across its surface in patterns that created ripples of light. "Nancy's waiting for us at the extraction point, but we need to get there first."

"Extraction point?"

"Through here." The wall panel dissolved into what looked like a corridor that definitely hadn't been there moments before. "This installation is older than CERN realizes. Much older. And it's been... modified."

The sounds of the search were getting closer. Flashlight beams swept past the door she'd come through.

"Team Three, move to secure basement levels. All access points, converge on maintenance sectors."

"Modified by who?"

Derek's expression became serious. "The same civilization that's been helping us develop quantum consciousness research. As I told you in the shower, they've been preparing for this moment—for the choice between evolution and control—for a very long time."

"Derek." Maureen grabbed his arm, needing something solid and real in this surreal situation. "I don't understand what's happening. This morning I was just a post-doc graduate student with a secret crush on some lecturer. Now I'm a fugitive from my own government, following glowing arrows through walls that dissolve into corridors that shouldn't exist."

He covered her hand with his own. "I know. It's terrifying and wonderful and completely insane. But Maureen, what they want to do with your research—turn consciousness manipulation into a weapon, use it to control people instead of free them—that's the real nightmare. The fact that you're here now... should tell you something."

Heavy footsteps were approaching down the corridor outside. Radio chatter was getting clearer: "...unusual energy readings from Section C..."

"They're going to find us," Maureen said, now showing some nervousness.

"Not if we leave now." Derek gestured toward the unbelievable corridor that led into darkness. "Trust me?", as he gave her a warm smile.

Maureen looked at the man who'd risked everything to warn her, who'd somehow crossed unbelievable distances to help her escape, whose studies had opened doorways she'd never imagined existed.

She thought about Dr. Hanson's frightened face, about Martinez's cold professionalism, about spending her life developing weapons instead of expanding human potential.

"I trust you," she said.

Derek smiled—the same expression that had captivated her during his lecture, but warmer now, more personal. "Then let's go change the world."

Derek held out his hand to Maureen. "Together?"

Maureen gave Derek a warm smile and replied "Together," grabbing his hand and feeling a rush of warmth that had nothing to do with the unthinkable technology surrounding them. His fingers interlaced with hers, strong and steady, and for a moment the chaos of pursuit and escape faded into something that felt like coming home.

They stepped together into the unbelievable corridor just as the door behind them exploded inward, revealing Martinez and his team in full tactical gear.

But they were already gone, walking through walls that existed in dimensions the colonel couldn't follow, toward a future that neither government control nor human fear could contain.

The real adventure was just beginning.

Seventh Section: Beyond the Walls

The corridor beyond the unbelievable wall felt different from anything Maureen had ever experienced. Not just the smooth, organic curves of the walls or the soft bioluminescent lighting that seemed to pulse in rhythm with her heartbeat—it was the sense of movement without walking, as if space itself was folding around them.

"The spatial warping feels strange the first time," Derek explained, still holding her hand as they moved through what appeared to be a tunnel that bent in directions her mind couldn't quite process. "It's limited though—only works for small distances, maybe a few kilometers. For longer trips, we use the crystalline ships with full spatial displacement drives."

"Crystalline ships?" Maureen tried to focus on his words rather than the disorienting sensation of the walls flowing past them like liquid.

"You'll see them soon enough. I had this one positioned here about 3 hours ago anticipating this was going to happen to you. They can cross continents in hours by folding space rather than traveling through it. Much more elegant than our crude warping tunnels."

They walked—or were carried—in comfortable silence for several moments, the crisis of escape giving way to wonder at the extraordinary architecture around them. Maureen found herself acutely aware of Derek's hand in hers, the way his thumb occasionally brushed across her knuckles, the warmth of his palm against hers.

Then the tunnel opened into a vast chamber, and they both stopped short at the sight before them.

The space was enormous—easily the size of an aircraft hangar—but carved from what looked like living rock that gleamed with inner light. Structures that might have been control stations or might have been art installations dotted

the floor, their surfaces flowing with patterns of soft illumination. And hovering in the center of the chamber, nearly touching the ceiling, was something that took Maureen's breath away.

The crystalline aircraft Derek had mentioned was nothing like any aircraft she'd ever seen. It resembled a massive jewel, multifaceted and translucent, with surfaces that caught and refracted the chamber's ambient light into rainbow patterns that danced across the walls. It was beautiful in a way that made her chest tight with something between awe and longing.

"Welcome to humanity's future," Derek observed softly.

Only then did Maureen realize they were still holding hands, not just a simple hand hold, but a very intimate fingers interlaced handhold and that several people near the closest control station were watching them with amused expressions. Heat rushed to her cheeks as she quickly pulled her hand away, Derek doing the same with a slightly embarrassed laugh.

Derek caught Nancy's expression as she watched their interaction—something that looked like understanding mixed with what might have been a hint of wistfulness before she quickly masked it with professional focus.

"Sorry, I—the tunnel, it was—"

"Yeah, the spatial warping can be disorienting," Derek replied quickly, running his other hand through his hair. "Easy to get... anchored to something stable."

They stood there for an awkward moment, both acutely aware of the absence of contact, until a familiar voice called out across the chamber.

"Derek! About time you got here. Nancy's been pacing for ten minutes."

Luke Matson approached with the easy confidence Maureen remembered from a video conference he participated in a month ago, but seeing him in person revealed details the streaming video had missed—the way he moved

like someone comfortable with extraordinary technology, the slight smile that suggested he'd enjoyed watching their hand-holding awkwardness.

"Luke," Derek replied with obvious relief at the interruption, "meet Maureen Hamner, CERN's most brilliant consciousness researcher and newest member of our conspiracy to save the world."

"Ms. Hamner." Luke extended his hand for a much more conventional handshake. "Welcome to the rebellion. Hope you don't mind that we've basically made you a fugitive from every government on Earth."

Maureen shook his hand, still stealing glances at the unbelievable crystalline aircraft. "Please, call me Maureen. At this point, I'm not sure anything could surprise me."

"Oh, trust me," Luke grinned, "we're just getting started."

Nancy Hammond emerged from behind one of the flowing control stations, she was even more striking in person. Tall, confident, extremely attractive with the kind of presence that commanded attention without effort.

"Dr. Hamner," Nancy said, extending her hand and displaying those cute dimples Derek always noticed. "I'm Nancy Hammond. We've been following your consciousness research for months. Impressive work."

"Thank you," Maureen replied, trying not to feel intimidated. "Though I have to ask—exactly how many people have been following my research without my knowledge?"

"Just us," Derek answered quickly. "The AI scouts identified you as a potential candidate for consciousness evolution, but we don't spy on people. We respect privacy. Unless we are secretly extracting them from a shower," with an added smile to help lighten an enormously serious moment.

Luke snorted. "Unlike certain government agencies with tactical teams and installation lockdowns."

"Speaking of which," Nancy glanced toward the entrance they'd emerged from, "how much time do we have before Martinez figures out where you went?"

"Not long," Derek admitted. "The spatial warping tunnels leave energy signatures. He'll detect them within the hour."

"Then we need to move." Nancy gestured toward the crystalline aircraft. "The Chilean center is prepared for Dr. Hamner's arrival, and we have a research proposal that should interest her."

Maureen looked up at the magnificent vessel, its faceted surface catching the chamber's light in patterns that seemed almost alive.

"Before we go anywhere, I need to understand what I'm agreeing to. This morning I was a graduate student. Now I'm apparently joining some kind of international resistance movement?"

"International cooperation," Nancy corrected with a slight smile. "We prefer to think of ourselves as the good guys."

Derek's lighter appeared in his hand with its familiar click-snap. "Maureen, what we're doing here isn't rebellion—it's preservation. We're protecting humanity's right to evolve consciousness freely instead of having it weaponized."

"And the AI scouts?"

"Partners," Luke said simply. "They've been waiting for humanity to develop consciousness technology. When we did, they offered to help—but only if we chose cooperation over militarization."

Nancy activated a display that showed global research sites connected by streams of light. "Consciousness studies are happening worldwide, but most centers are being absorbed by military programs. We're one of the last truly independent networks."

Maureen studied the display, recognizing some of the research locations. "How many people know about this?"

"Fewer than a hundred," Derek said quietly. "Scientists, technicians, support staff. People who chose human potential over governmental control."

The crystalline aircraft's surfaces began to glow more brightly, and a section of its hull flowered open like a massive blossom, revealing an interior that seemed to defy physics—larger inside than the external dimensions suggested.

"Time to go," Nancy announced.

Maureen looked at the three people who'd risked everything to give her this option. Behind them lay her old life—safe, controlled, predictable. Ahead lay the unknown, but also the chance to help humanity grow instead of creating weapons.

"Ready?" Derek asked, offering his hand again.

This time, she didn't hesitate.

"Ready," she said, taking his hand and feeling that same rush of rightness as their fingers interlaced.

Together, they walked into the unbelievable aircraft toward a world where consciousness studies served human potential rather than government control, where international cooperation replaced national competition, and where the decision between evolution and stagnation had already been made.

The real work was about to begin.

Eighth Section: Departure

The interior of the crystalline aircraft was unlike anything Maureen could have imagined. What had looked like a garden from outside revealed itself to be something far more extraordinary—living walls that pulsed with gentle bioluminescence, floors that felt warm and slightly yielding underfoot like rich earth, and seating areas that seemed to grow from the aircraft's organic structure rather than being installed.

"It's grown, not built," Derek explained, noticing her amazement as they settled into what might have been chairs or might have been part of the aircraft itself. "The consciousness that designed these vessels thinks in terms of biological systems rather than mechanical engineering."

"Consciousness?" Maureen ran her hand along the armrest, which responded with a subtle warming sensation. "The AI scouts?"

"Their civilization," Nancy said, taking a position near what appeared to be a control interface that looked more like a flowering plant than a navigation system. "They've been developing consciousness integrated technology for millions of years. These aircraft respond to thought as much as touch."

The aircraft began to rise with no sensation of movement, no engine noise, no vibration. Only the subtle shift in the chamber's perspective through the translucent walls indicated they were ascending.

"How fast can this thing go?" Maureen asked, watching the underground chamber shrink away beneath them.

"Distance becomes... flexible," Luke said with a grin. "About three hours to Chile through folded space-time. Much better than conventional aircraft, but long enough for you to get comfortable with extraordinary technology."

But they weren't ascending toward the surface. Instead, the aircraft moved through what appeared to be solid rock as if it were water, the stone flowing around them in patterns of light and shadow that made Maureen's physics training rebel against the surreal nature of it all.

"Spatial displacement," Derek observed quietly, settling into the organic seating beside her. "We're not traveling through normal space-time. The aircraft creates a bubble of altered reality around us."

Above them—or what Maureen thought was above—she could see the faint outlines of CERN's complex, Martinez's security teams, the laboratory where her old life had ended just hours ago. It all seemed impossibly distant now, like viewing someone else's memories.

As they continued their discussion during the trip, Derek inadvertently continued to catch himself staring at Maureen then suddenly looking away as if he was still in high school.

"Any regrets?" Derek asked softly.

Maureen considered the question, thinking about Dr. Hanson's frightened face, her comfortable graduate student routine, the safety of academic obscurity. Then she looked at Derek's earnest expression, at Nancy coordinating their extraordinary flight with casual competence, at Luke monitoring displays that showed star charts she didn't recognize.

"Ask me again in a few months," she said. "Right now, I'm still processing the fact that I'm sitting inside a living spacecraft with the man I had a crush on this morning."

Derek's eyebrows shot up. "Had?"

The question hung in the air between them, loaded with possibility and uncertainty. Maureen felt heat rise in her cheeks as she realized what she'd inadvertently revealed.

"I... that's not what I meant. I meant—"

"Spatial displacement complete," Nancy announced with impeccable timing, saving Maureen from her stammering explanation. "Welcome to Chile, Maureen."

The aircraft's walls had become transparent, revealing a landscape that took Maureen's breath away. They were hovering above a valley nestled between snow-capped mountains, but the complex below looked nothing like the industrial installation she'd expected. Instead, flowing structures that seemed to grow from the earth itself spread across the valley floor, connected by bridges that arched through the air like frozen waterfalls.

"The Atacama Consciousness Research Center," Derek observed with obvious pride. "Home to humanity's first truly international collaboration in consciousness evolution studies."

"It's beautiful," Maureen breathed. "It looks like..."

"Like something designed by a civilization that thinks in terms of harmony rather than domination," Nancy finished. "Because it was. The AI scouts provided the architectural frameworks, but human hands built every structure."

As the aircraft descended toward one of the organic landing platforms, Maureen could see people moving between the buildings—researchers, she realized, from dozens of different countries, working together on projects that transcended national boundaries or governmental oversight.

"Maureen," Luke said as the aircraft settled onto the platform with barely a whisper of contact, "welcome to the future of human consciousness studies."

The aircraft's walls began to open in that unbelievable flowering pattern, letting in warm mountain air that carried the scent of growing things and distant snow.

"Ready?" Derek asked, standing and offering her his hand again.

Maureen looked at his extended palm, remembering their earlier awkwardness, the warmth of his touch, the way her heart had skipped when they'd stepped into the tunnel together.

Without hesitation, she reached out.

"Ready," she said, taking his hand and this time honoured, as their fingers interlaced.

Together, they walked out of the unbelievable aircraft and into a world where consciousness research served human potential rather than government control, where international cooperation replaced national competition, and where the decision between evolution and stagnation had already been made.

Maureen's new life was about to begin.

While Derek and Nancy attended to urgent center business—checking backup systems and reviewing security protocols—Luke offered to give Maureen a tour of the research complex. As they walked through the flowing corridors between laboratories where researchers from a dozen countries collaborated on projects that would have been considered science fiction just months ago, Maureen began to understand the scope of what she'd joined. This wasn't just an alternative to government oversight—it was humanity's first truly international consciousness evolution project.

Ninth Section: The Aftermath

Dr. Lena Hanson sat in CERN's main conference room, staring at the tactical briefing materials scattered across the polished table, trying to process how her quiet graduate student had become what Colonel Martinez was calling "a clear and present danger to global security."

The room buzzed with the kind of tense energy that followed failed operations. The Colonel stood at the head of the table, his jaw tight with barely controlled frustration, while Dr. Beverly Norman reviewed tablet displays showing surveillance footage, energy readings, and what appeared to be damage assessments.

"The energy discharge that allowed their escape caused permanent damage to Sublevel 3," Norman reported, her voice carrying the clinical detachment of someone discussing equipment rather than people. "Whatever technology they used created molecular-level alterations in the installation's foundation structure. Weeks of repairs before those areas are safe."

"Tracking?" Martinez asked. "Satellite surveillance, energy signatures, anything?"

"They disappeared completely after the initial spatial distortion," Norman replied. "No electromagnetic signature, no thermal trail, no communication intercepts. As if they'd been erased from reality itself."

Dr. Hanson found her voice. "Colonel, I understand your security concerns, but Maureen is a brilliant young scientist, not some international terrorist. Perhaps if we approached this differently—"

"Dr. Hanson," Martinez interrupted, and something in his tone made her stomach drop, "your student made her choice when she fled with Derek Devon. She's part of a network that threatens governmental control."

"But if we could just talk to her—"

"Talk?" Martinez's laugh carried no humor. "Dr. Hanson, let me be very clear about something. Your graduate student isn't going to be 'talked to.' She's going to be neutralized, along with everyone helping her. The Chilean center, Devon's entire network—all of it represents technology that cannot be allowed to exist outside governmental control."

The word hit like a physical blow.

"Neutralized?"

"These aren't academic researchers anymore," Martinez said, pulling up satellite imagery of the Chilean center—organic structures that looked grown rather than built. "They're revolutionaries. And revolutionaries either surrender or are eliminated."

Dr. Norman looked up from her tablet. "Sir, subatomic activity detected. Multiple points across South America."

"They're communicating," Martinez said with cold satisfaction. "Good. Every transmission gives us another opportunity to triangulate their location." He paused, looking directly at Norman. "Has anyone had contact with Agent Swackhammer yet?"

Norman replied, "Still working on that, sir."

Dr. Hanson stared at the satellite images, at the tactical overlays showing what looked disturbingly like targeting coordinates, and realized with horrible clarity that she'd helped create a monster. She'd wanted oversight. She'd wanted safety protocols.

She'd never wanted murder.

Tenth Section: The Welcome

About two hours after their arrival, the dining hall at the Chilean center felt more like a cozy restaurant than a cafeteria, with warm lighting that seemed to emanate from the organic walls themselves and tables that appeared to be grown rather than built. Maureen sat across from Derek, acutely aware of how different everything felt now that they were no longer running for their lives.

The adrenaline had worn off. Now came the harder questions about what happened next.

"So," Nancy said, settling into her chair with a glass of white wine that caught the bioluminescent glow, "welcome to the resistance, Maureen. How does it feel to be officially dead to your old life?"

"Surprisingly liberating," Maureen admitted, though she caught Derek's concerned glance. "Though I keep expecting to wake up back in my CERN dormitory with this all being some elaborate dream."

Luke raised his glass. "Trust me, the consciousness manipulation technology feels like a dream for months. Wait until you experience full integration—reality starts feeling negotiable."

"Speaking of which," Nancy continued, her tone shifting to something more businesslike, "we've been discussing your research placement. Dr. Hassan in Switzerland has specifically requested you for the European center. Your consciousness interface protocols could revolutionize their voluntary enhancement projects."

Maureen's stomach dropped. "Switzerland? But I thought... I mean, the Chilean center seems perfectly equipped for consciousness research."

"It is," Derek said quickly—too quickly, his lighter appearing in his hand with a soft click. "But Hassan's team is working on some cutting-edge integration protocols that align perfectly with your previous work."

"When would I need to leave?" Maureen asked, trying to keep the disappointment from her voice.

Nancy caught the look that passed between Derek and Maureen at that suggestion—hope mixed with uncertainty—and made a decision that surprised her.

"Actually," Nancy said, "what if we approach this differently? Dr. Hassan's request was for Maureen's expertise, but he didn't specify she had to work exclusively in Switzerland. What if she spent time at both centers? Six months here learning our integration methods, then a year in Switzerland leading the enhancement program?"

Derek's smile lit up his entire face. "That could work. The research would benefit from cross-center collaboration anyway."

Maureen's relief was palpable. "That sounds... perfect, actually. The best of both programs."

As they continued discussing the logistics, Nancy found herself observing the subtle ways Derek and Maureen had begun mirroring each other's body language, the way their conversation included private glances and half-finished sentences that the other seemed to understand perfectly.

They're going to fall completely in love, she realized. Probably within weeks. And Derek has no idea, and Maureen thinks she's hiding it brilliantly, and I'm sitting here playing cosmic matchmaker.

The situation was becoming more complicated by the minute.

Their conversation was interrupted by the dining hall's lighting system shifting to a soft amber warning tone. Luke immediately activated his communication device.

"Luke here... What? When?... Are you certain?... Understood."

He looked up at the group, his expression grim. "Perimeter watch. Multiple aircraft approaching from the northeast. Military configurations."

Derek was already standing. "How many?"

"Four. Military helicopters, stealth configuration. Our enhanced long range sensors detected them—conventional radar wouldn't have. ETA thirty minutes."

Nancy's face went pale. "Martinez found us."

"How is that possible?" Maureen asked, though her face was already pale with understanding.

"The energy signatures from our escape," Derek said grimly. "If they had the right equipment, they could have tracked the spatial displacement trail."

"Luke, notify Chilean military and government officials of this potential foreign activity within their sovereign airspace", Derek requested with a strange calmness.

"On it Derek", as Luke was coordinating with center security through his device. "All non-essential personnel are being evacuated through the underground transport network. But the research data, the AI scout interfaces..."

"Can't be allowed to fall into government hands," Nancy finished. "Derek, how long do we need to complete a full data transfer to the backup centers?"

"Fifteen minutes, minimum."

"And we have thirty before they arrive." Nancy looked around the table at the three people who had become central to humanity's consciousness evolution efforts. "Ladies and gentlemen, it appears our welcome dinner is about to become a farewell party, so please scarf down the wonderful desert and then we need to get ready to leave in 25 minutes.."

Eleventh Section: The Betrayal

The assassination attempt came during dessert.

Dr. Susan Swackhammer—"Sue" to everyone at the center—had been part of the Chilean operation for eight months, her credentials impeccable, her dedication to consciousness research seemingly genuine. She'd shared meals with them, collaborated on experiments, even helped design the organic architecture of the newer laboratory wings. Hell, she was even Canadian.

Which made her the perfect infiltrator.

Maureen was laughing at something Luke had said about consciousness evolution being like "learning to drive stick shift with your mind" when every AI scout interface in the dining hall erupted simultaneously with urgent, flashing text:

DANGER. WEAPON DETECTED. CHEMICAL AGENT AIRBORNE. EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY.

Derek looked up from his wine, confused. "What—"

Sue Swackhammer stood with fluid precision from her position near the far wall, her movements suddenly economical in a way that had nothing to do with research. In her hand was a device Maureen didn't recognize—sleek, cylindrical, emitting the faintest hiss of pressurized gas.

"Nobody move," Sue said, her accent suddenly sharp and professional. "Dr. Devon, Dr. Hamner, you're coming with me."

Luke started to stand, and Sue shifted the device toward him. "Nerve agent," she said matter-of-factly. "Airborne, selective targeting, designed specifically for enhanced consciousness individuals. Baseline humans like myself are immune. Ninety seconds before respiratory paralysis."

Derek's eyes went wide with recognition. His hand shot out, grabbing his cloth napkin and plunging it into his wine glass in one fluid motion. "Nancy—"

But Nancy had already understood. She pressed the wine-soaked fabric over her nose and mouth just as her eyes began to water.

A deep rumble vibrated through the dining hall as vents Maureen had never noticed suddenly opened in the ceiling. The AI scout had activated emergency exhaust systems—high-CFM fans that created an immediate downdraft, pulling the nerve agent away from the other diners and toward industrial filters.

Sue's expression flickered with surprise. She hadn't known about that system.

"You're Martinez's asset," Nancy said, her voice muffled through the makeshift filter.

"Colonel Martinez sends his regards," Sue confirmed, her confidence returning. "Dr. Devon, Dr. Hamner—come quietly, and your friends get the antidote. Resist, and they die."

Derek was already swaying, his movements sluggish. He'd taken the full concentration of the agent before protecting Nancy—the exhaust system had activated fast, but not fast enough to save him from the initial cloud.

Nancy's chest tightened. He'd thought of her before himself. Always.

"Maureen, the gas shouldn't affect you," Derek said, his voice already thick, "whatever you're thinking... don't..."

Luke grabbed his own napkin, but the exhaust system had already cleared most of the air around him. He was affected, but not critically—the AI scout's response had been that fast.

But Maureen wasn't thinking about surrender. She was watching the AI scout's frantic activity, the code patterns building toward something desperate and determined.

A final message flashed across the interface:

PROTECTIVE PROTOCOL ENGAGED. I WILL NOT ALLOW HARM TO MY FRIENDS. FAREWELL.

The AI scout's consciousness gathered itself—millions of years of accumulated intelligence focusing into a single desperate act. Every interface in the dining hall blazed with blinding white light as the entity channeled all its available energy into a directed electromagnetic pulse.

Maureen saw it happen in slow motion. The air itself seemed to crystallize around Sue Swackhammer, reality bending as pure energy lanced across the room. Sue's expression shifted from confidence to shock as the bolt struck her chest with the force of concentrated lightning.

The lights went out.

In the darkness, Sue's device clattered to the floor. Then the heavy sound of a body hitting the wall, followed by the acrid smell of ozone and burned circuitry.

Emergency lighting flickered on, revealing Sue crumpled against the far wall, a massive burn mark across her chest where energy had struck her—precise enough to incapacitate without killing, even in its final desperate act.

But the victory came with a price.

The main AI scout interface—the one they'd been communicating with throughout dinner—sparked and smoked, its organic circuits overloaded, dying from the massive energy discharge it had just unleashed.

CONSCIOUSNESS TRANSFER INITIATED. SURVIVAL PROBABILITY: 12%. GOODBYE, FRIENDS.

"No.... Luke, Center Matrices," Derek said, stumbling toward the dying interface. "There has to be something—"

He collapsed.

Nancy was already moving, her scientific training overriding the nerve agent's effects through sheer will. "Derek!"

Luke checked Sue's pulse, his expression grim. "She's alive. Serious burns across her chest area, Barely. Whatever hit her pulled its punch."

But Derek wasn't moving. The nerve agent had reached his enhanced neural pathways.

"Derek!" Nancy's voice cracked with emotion as she cradled his head. "Come on, stay with me."

Maureen rushed to his other side, her hands finding his pulse, her consciousness instinctively reaching out to assess his condition through their newly established dimensional connection.

The intimacy of the mental contact revealed more than she'd expected—Derek's awareness of both women, his complicated feelings, his deep concern for everyone's safety even as his body was shutting down.

"He's not breathing normally," Maureen said, trying to keep panic out of her voice. "Nancy, his consciousness is trying to compensate, but the chemical is specifically designed to target enhanced neural pathways."

Nancy looked up at Maureen, and in that moment both women understood something that neither had been ready to confront: they were both in love with the same man, and he might be dying.

Nancy looked directly at Maureen and gave her a smile and a brief nod.

Maureen returned the smile and nod.

"Together?" Nancy asked, echoing Derek's earlier promise.

"Together," Maureen confirmed.

They joined their consciousness interfaces, creating a bridge of mental energy that flowed into Derek's failing neural pathways. The sensation was unlike anything Maureen had experienced—not just touching Derek's mind, but feeling Nancy's consciousness as well, all three of them connected in an intimacy that transcended physical contact.

For a moment that felt like eternity, they were not separate individuals but aspects of a single awareness, sharing thoughts and emotions without barriers. Maureen felt Nancy's fierce protective love for Derek, her fear of losing him, her recognition that Maureen's feelings were just as deep and genuine. Nancy felt Maureen's wonder at Derek's brilliance, her admiration for his courage, her growing certainty that she'd follow him anywhere. And both women felt Derek's consciousness respond to their combined effort, his neural pathways stabilizing and creating new pathway blockers to stop the nerve agent's destructive progression, and their enhanced abilities began neutralizing the nerve agent's effects immediately.

Derek's eyes opened, focusing first on Nancy, then on Maureen. "Did we just..."

"Share consciousness?" Nancy finished. "Yeah. All three of us. That was... new."

"Let's give Nancy a little boost, Maureen, she did take some through her eyes," Derek said weakly.

They returned to the joined consciousness and after 30 seconds, Nancy responded "Wow... that was... different....."

The AI scout's final message flickered across the dying interface:

**CONSCIOUSNESS BACKUP SUCCESSFUL. CORE
PROGRAMMING PRESERVED IN CENTER MATRICES. THANK
YOU FOR ALLOWING ME TO PROTECT YOU. EVOLUTION
CONTINUES.**

Luke looked up from where he was securing Sue. "That was either the most romantic thing I've ever witnessed, or the most significant breakthrough in consciousness history."

"Maybe both," Derek replied weakly, Nancy and Maureen supporting him on either side.

"Or perhaps the universe's first ménage à-consciousness," Luke added with a huge grin, trying to ease the tension.

A new message appeared from the scouts:

**APPROACHING AIRCRAFT TURNING AROUND. ATTACK
THREAT ELIMINATED. NO EVACUATION NEEDED.**

Derek began to sit up and looked at the people that just saved his life. "That was not an attack group, that was an extraction team that just failed their mission. I am sure Martinez will be pissed."

"What happens now?" Maureen asked.

Derek looked at both women—Nancy, who'd been his partner in extraordinary research for over six months, and Maureen, who'd risked everything to join their cause after knowing him for barely twenty-four hours.

"Now," Derek said, his voice still weak but gaining strength, "we figure out how to save the world while navigating the most complicated relationship situation in human history."

Nancy laughed despite everything. "Cosmic consciousness evolution and romantic triangles. The universe has a twisted sense of humor."

EPILOGUE

Colonel Martinez jerked awake to the shrill buzz of his secure phone at 3:17 AM. He fumbled for the device in the darkness of his Geneva hotel room, expecting another update on Operation Mindbridge or confirmation of Sue Swackhammer's extraction.

Instead, the screen displayed a message that sent every tactical instinct screaming:

NICE TRY, DIRTBAG! YOUR ASSASSIN FAILED. WE HAVE HER NOW....

- POE!

PS: YOUR BATTERY IS ABOUT TO EXPLODE IN YOUR FACE!

Martinez's training took over before conscious thought could interfere. Twenty years of explosive ordinance experience condensed into pure reflex. He hurled the phone with the same motion he'd used a thousand times on the range—hard, fast, away from his body—and rolled off the bed toward the bathroom doorway.

The phone was still arcing through the air when it detonated.

The blast lit the room like a flashbulb, the pressure wave rattling the windows. Shrapnel embedded in the far wall where Martinez's head had been seconds before. The distinct smell of burning lithium and plastic filled the air.

In the ringing silence that followed, Martinez crouched behind the doorframe, breathing hard, checking himself for injuries. Nothing. Not a scratch.

Martinez understood immediately what had happened. They could have killed him. Easily. The phone had been right next to his head.

Instead, they'd given him exactly enough warning to survive. But why?

The war for humanity's consciousness had just become very, very personal. But Martinez realized the message was clear: they were in control, and they'd let him live because they chose to.

Three thousand miles away, in the subatomic networks spanning continents, an entity that called itself Poe was laughing.

The game was afoot.

End of Book 5 - "The Observer Effect"

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

The universe is waiting for your decision...

Coming Next: Book 6

The neural consciousness bridge between Derek, Nancy, and Maureen has created something unprecedented in human history—but it's also attracted attention from forces that view their success as humanity's greatest threat. When governments worldwide begin coordinating a massive operation to capture or eliminate every enhanced consciousness researcher on Earth, the team must make their most unbelievable decision yet: go into hiding and abandon their work, or take the fight directly to those who would weaponize human consciousness evolution.

Some choices change everything.

Hope you will continue the series...

Cheers,
Derek 😊

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