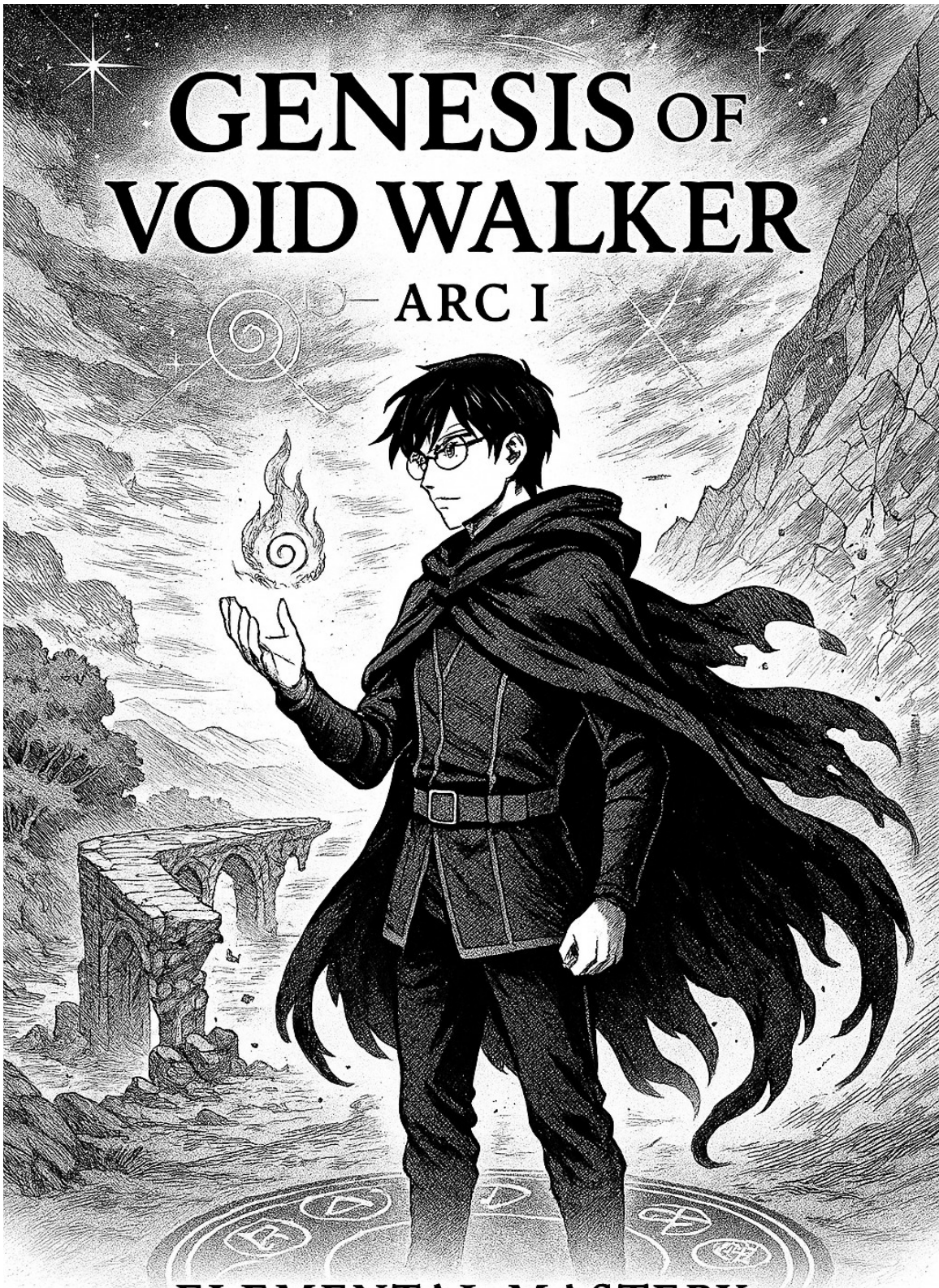


GENESIS OF VOID WALKER

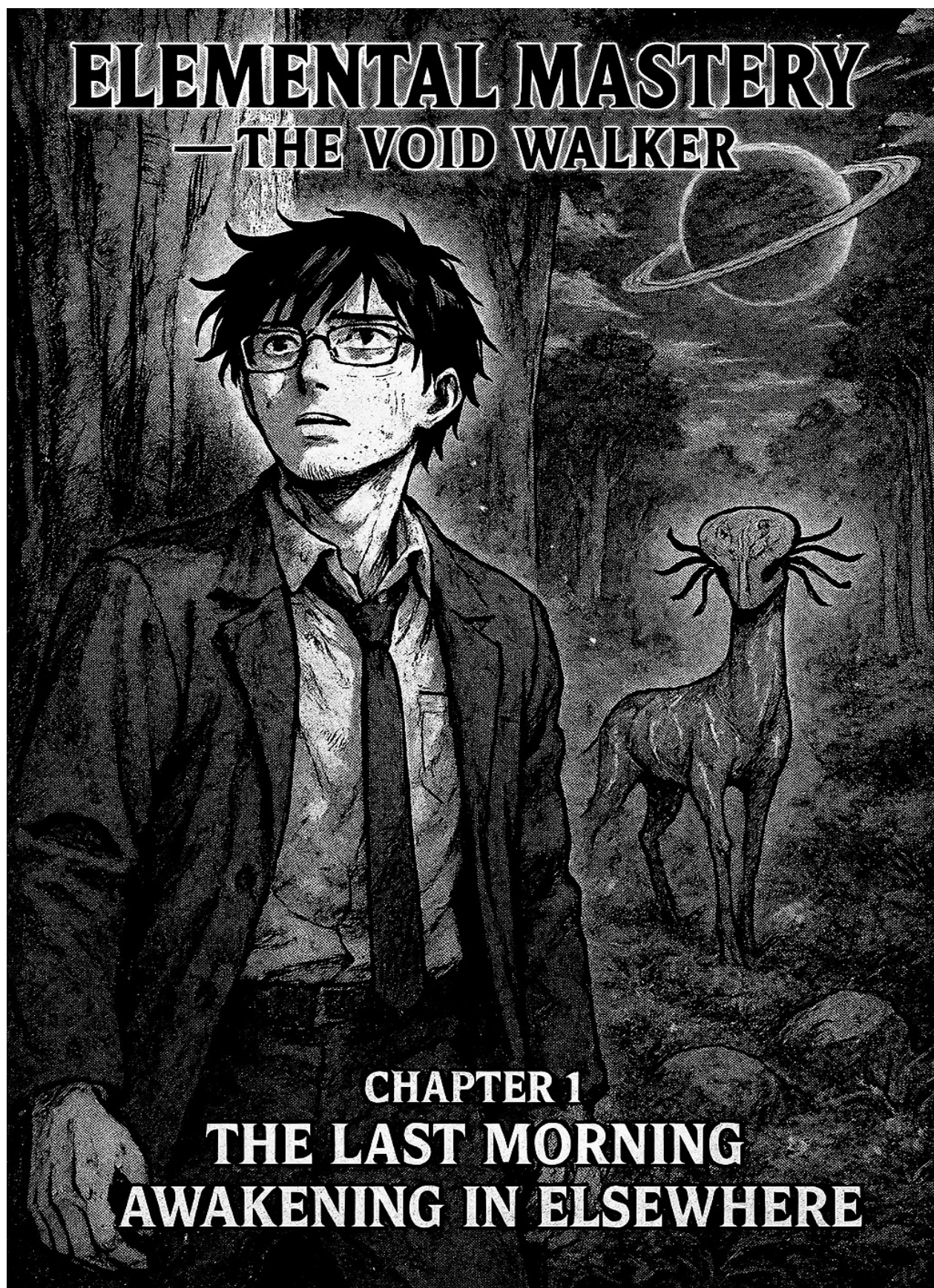
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THE VOID WALKER — ARC I

ELEMENTAL MASTERY

—THE VOID WALKER



CHAPTER 1: THE LAST MORNING / AWAKENING IN ELSEWHERE

Akira Nakamura knew something was wrong the moment he opened his eyes. It wasn't the gentle Miami sunlight filtering through their bedroom blinds or the soft rhythm of Mei's breathing beside him that bothered him. It was the perfection of it all—too perfect, like the calm before a devastating storm.

He glanced at his wife of six months, her dark hair splayed across the white pillow, her lips curved in a slight smile even in sleep. Something in his chest tightened as he watched her. An inexplicable sense of finality swept over him, as if this ordinary Tuesday morning was somehow significant.

"You're staring again," Mei murmured without opening her eyes.

"It's your fault for being beautiful," Akira replied, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

Mei's eyes fluttered open, revealing the deep brown irises that had captivated him since they'd met three years ago at a physics conference. She was brilliant—a theoretical physicist like himself, but specializing in quantum mechanics while he focused on dimensional theory.

"What time is it?" she asked, stretching like a contented cat.

"Early. Just past six."

She groaned. "Why are you even awake? Your presentation isn't until ten."

The presentation. Akira had almost forgotten. Today he was unveiling his latest research on potential dimensional gateways at the University of Miami. It wasn't groundbreaking—not yet—but it laid important theoretical groundwork for understanding how energy might move between theoretical parallel dimensions.

"Pre-presentation jitters," he said, though that wasn't it. This strange feeling of foreboding had nothing to do with standing before his colleagues.

Mei sat up, the sheet falling away to reveal her University of Tokyo t-shirt. "Your theory is solid, Akira. Even Professor Whitmore couldn't find fault with your mathematics."

Akira nodded absently, still unable to shake the feeling that something was off. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, walking to the window to gaze out at the palm trees swaying in the early morning breeze. Their apartment overlooked a small park—nothing fancy, but the view of green space was worth the extra rent for two academics.

"I'll make coffee," Mei said, padding past him toward the kitchen.

Akira caught her hand, pulling her into an embrace that was perhaps a bit too tight.

"Hey," she said, looking up at him with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he lied. "Just... I love you, that's all."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's not your 'I love you' face. That's your 'I'm worried about something but being stoic and Japanese about it' face."

He laughed despite himself. Five years in America had softened his reserved demeanor, but Mei still read him like one of her quantum equations.

"Really, it's nothing. A strange dream, maybe."

She looked unconvinced but didn't press. "Coffee first, then you can tell me about your existential crisis."

The morning proceeded with their usual routine. Akira checked his presentation notes while Mei made breakfast—a fusion of American and Japanese cuisine that had become their typical fare. As they ate, they discussed their day's schedules, upcoming department politics, and plans for the weekend.

Yet Akira couldn't shake the sensation that he needed to memorize every detail—the way sunlight gleamed on their simple kitchenware, how Mei gestured with her chopsticks when making a point, the familiar scent of green tea mingling with coffee.

"You're doing it again," Mei said, setting down her cup.

"Doing what?"

"Looking at everything like you're saying goodbye. Are you planning to leave me for a younger, more attractive physicist?" Her tone was light, but her eyes held genuine concern.

Akira forced a smile. "There's no such thing. You're the only physicist for me."

"Smooth talker," she said, but her expression softened. "Seriously, what's going on?"

Akira hesitated. How could he explain a feeling he didn't understand himself? "I don't know. It's like... déjà vu, but for something that hasn't happened yet."

"Premonition?" Mei suggested. As a scientist, she didn't believe in such things, but she respected the power of intuition.

"Maybe." He shook his head, trying to clear it. "Probably just anxiety about the presentation."

Mei checked her watch. "Speaking of which, we should get ready if you want to go through your slides one more time at the lab."

They moved through their morning rituals with practiced efficiency—showering, dressing, gathering their materials. Akira chose his lucky dark blue suit, the one he'd worn when he first asked Mei out. She opted for a crisp white blouse and charcoal pencil skirt that made her look every bit the brilliant academic she was.

As Akira adjusted his tie in the mirror, he caught Mei watching him, a small smile playing on her lips.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just thinking about how far we've come. From awkward conference small talk to this." She gestured around their shared space. "It's nice."

"It's perfect," he corrected, and meant it.

For a moment, they stood in comfortable silence, two scientists who had defied probability by finding each other in the vast universe of academia.

Then Mei grabbed her bag. "Ready?"

Akira nodded, but as they reached the door, an overwhelming urge seized him. He pulled Mei into another embrace, more desperate than before.

"Akira, what—"

He silenced her with a kiss—deep, passionate, and tinged with an urgency he couldn't explain. When they finally broke apart, both were breathless.

"What was that for?" Mei asked, her cheeks flushed.

"Because I can," he said simply.

She studied his face for a moment, then nodded as if accepting this non-answer. "We'll continue this discussion tonight," she promised, her tone suggesting she meant much more than talking.

Akira followed her out the door, his sense of foreboding momentarily eclipsed by the warmth of her smile.

Their drive to the university was punctuated by casual conversation and the familiar Miami traffic. Akira found himself cataloging every detail—the way Mei tapped her fingers against the steering wheel in time with the radio, how the morning light caught the simple gold band on her left hand, the familiar landmarks they passed each day. As they pulled into the faculty parking lot, Mei turned to him. "I'll see you at your presentation. I have a meeting with my graduate students first."

"I'll save you a seat in the front row," he promised.

She leaned over and kissed him lightly. "Knock 'em dead, Dr. Nakamura."

Akira watched her walk away, her confident stride carrying her toward the physics building. An absurd thought struck him—what if this was the last time he saw her? He almost called out, almost ran after her, but stopped himself. He was being irrational, letting anxiety cloud his judgment.

Taking a deep breath, he gathered his materials and headed toward his lab to review his presentation one final time. The campus was coming alive with students and faculty, the early morning quiet giving way to the buzz of academic life.

In his lab, Akira connected his laptop to the projector and began scrolling through his slides. His theory was solid—he'd checked and rechecked the mathematics, run countless simulations. Still, something nagged at him about equation 17, the one dealing with energy transfer between theoretical dimensions.

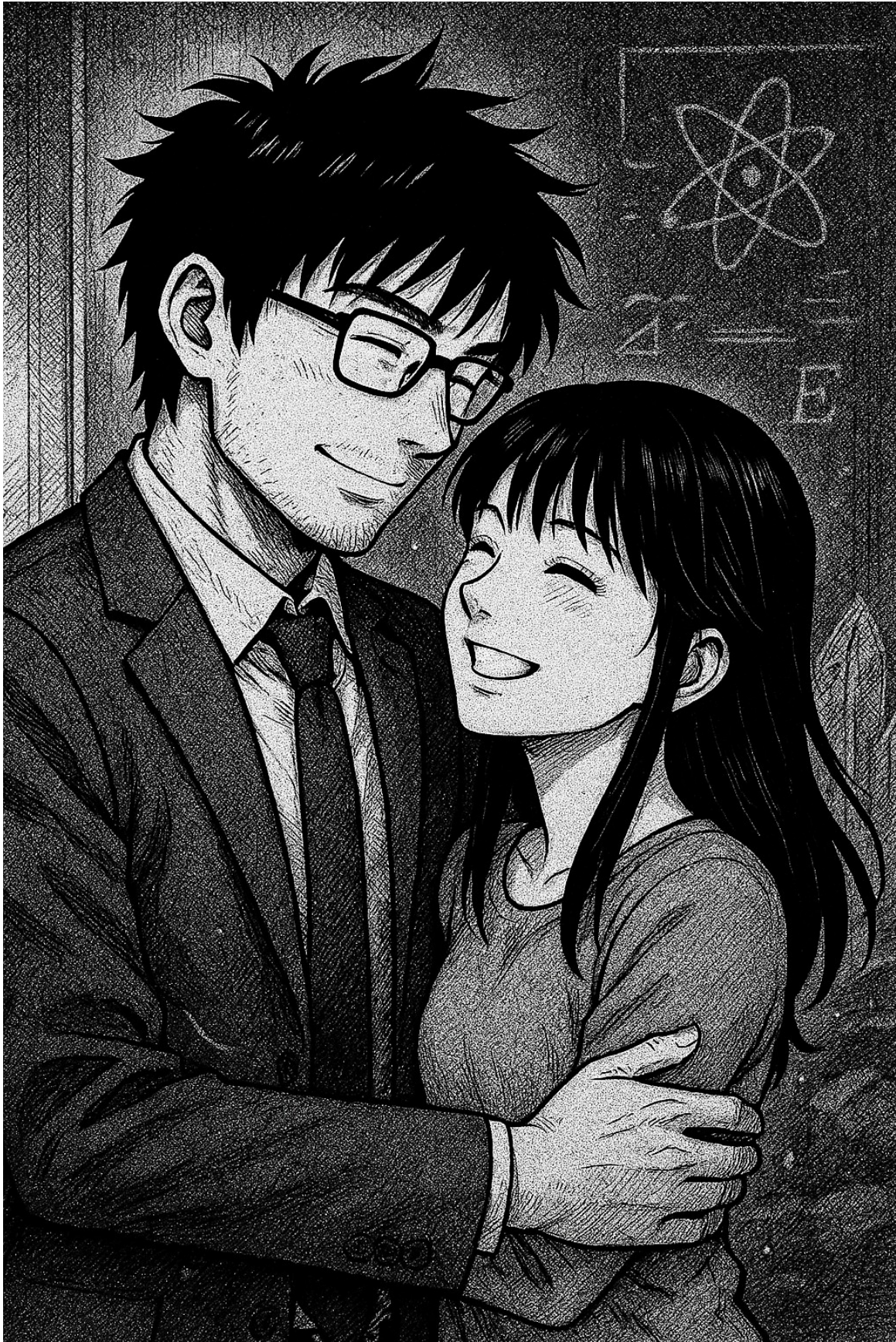
He adjusted a variable, then another, watching the simulation respond. Something strange happened almost immediately—the energy patterns began behaving in ways his model hadn't predicted, coalescing then dispersing in rhythmic pulses that seemed almost... deliberate.

Curious, Akira leaned closer to the screen, adjusting his glasses. The pattern was beautiful, hypnotic even. As he watched, the pulses began to accelerate, the light growing more intense until it seemed to be reaching out from the screen itself, tendrils of energy stretching toward him.

That's not possible, he thought distantly, even as the light enveloped him. He felt a curious sensation—not pain, but a pulling, as if every atom of his body was being gently but firmly tugged in a direction he couldn't name.

He reached for Mei's face in his mind, terrified that this would be the last time he'd remember her smile, her voice, her touch. The panicked thought that she might never know what happened to him tore through his consciousness as the light intensified.

Then everything went white.



AWAKENING IN ELSEWHERE

Consciousness returned slowly, like waves lapping at the shore of Akira's mind.

The first thing he noticed was the smell—earth, vegetation, a dampness that was nothing like Miami's tropical humidity. Then came sensation: something hard beneath him, a chill against his skin, the whisper of wind through... leaves?

Akira's eyes snapped open. Instead of his lab's familiar white ceiling, a canopy of massive trees towered above him, their branches weaving a complex pattern against an alien sky. The light filtering through was wrong somehow—not the golden warmth of Miami sunshine, but a silvery blue that cast strange shadows across the forest floor.

"What the hell?" he croaked, his voice sounding foreign even to his own ears.

Akira tried to sit up, then immediately regretted it as pain lanced through his head. He raised a hand to his temple and was shocked to find blood on his fingers. Gingerly exploring, he found a small gash—not serious, but enough to be concerning.

"Focus!" he told himself. "Assess the situation."

He was in a forest, that much was clear. But how? Had he blacked out? Been drugged and transported? Neither explanation made sense. His lab was in the heart of urban Miami—the nearest forest was hours away.

Gritting his teeth against the pain, Akira managed to sit upright and take stock of his surroundings. The forest was unlike any he'd seen before. The trees were massive—ancient behemoths with trunks wider than his car. The undergrowth was sparse, allowing visibility for several dozen yards in each direction. The ground was covered in a carpet of silver-blue moss that seemed to pulse faintly when he looked directly at it.

"Hello?" he called, wincing at how his voice echoed strangely among the trees. "Is anyone there?"

Only silence answered, punctuated by occasional sounds—the rustling of leaves, distant calls of what might have been birds, though they sounded nothing like any avian species he knew.

A sudden realization hit him—he was still in his suit, minus the jacket. His white shirt was smudged with dirt and what appeared to be ash, his tie hanging loosely around his neck. His shoes were intact, though scuffed. His watch was still on his wrist, though the display showed only a blinking 00:00, as if the timepiece had been reset.

"Okay, Akira, think," he muttered to himself. "What's the last thing you remember?"

The lab. His presentation. The simulation acting strangely. The light...

Had there been an explosion? Some kind of lab accident? That might explain his injuries, but not his current location.

Deciding that answers wouldn't come from sitting still, Akira struggled to his feet. A wave of dizziness washed over him, forcing him to lean against the nearest tree trunk for support. The bark felt odd beneath his fingers—not rough as expected, but smooth and slightly warm, almost like skin.

He jerked his hand away, disturbed by the sensation.

Once steady, Akira turned in a slow circle, seeking any sign of civilization—a path, a structure, anything. In the distance, perhaps half a mile away, the tree line seemed to thin, suggesting a clearing or perhaps the forest's edge.

"Best option," he decided aloud, finding comfort in the sound of his own voice in this alien environment.

Each step was a struggle. His dress shoes, designed for university hallways, slid treacherously on the moss-covered ground. The head wound made him dizzy, and he realized he was desperately thirsty. How long had he been unconscious? Hours? Days?

The thought of Mei struck him like a physical blow. She would be frantic with worry.

Had she witnessed whatever accident had befallen him? Was she searching for him even now?

"I'll find my way back," he promised the silent forest. "Just hold on, Mei."

The journey to the forest's edge was arduous. Twice he had to stop and rest, his body weaker than he expected. The second time, he noticed something that sent a chill down his spine—the direction of shadows had barely changed, despite what felt like hours of walking. Either he was moving much slower than he thought, or time operated strangely in this place.

When he finally reached the edge of the tree line, the sight before him stole his breath. Instead of the expected road or field or any sign of human habitation, he faced a vast valley stretching to the horizon. The landscape was dominated by rolling hills covered in that same silver-blue vegetation, punctuated by occasional outcroppings of rock that gleamed like metal in the strange light. In the far distance, mountains rose in jagged profiles unlike any range Akira had seen on Earth, their peaks seeming to pierce the sky itself.

The air tasted faintly metallic, and beneath the soft rustling of leaves, Akira could hear a low thrumming, as if the forest itself was breathing. The scent was alien too—not the rich earthiness of soil and decomposition he knew from Earth's forests, but something sharper, almost electrical, that made the fine hairs on his arms stand on end.

And that sky—Akira stared upward in disbelief. It was a deep indigo, almost purple near the horizon, fading to a more familiar blue overhead. But what truly caused his heart to stutter was the celestial body hanging there. Not the familiar golden disk of the sun, but a larger, silvery orb surrounded by a faint ring system, like a miniature Saturn.

"That's not possible," he whispered, legs giving way beneath him as he sank to his knees at the forest's edge.

This was no part of Earth. The atmospheric composition, the flora, the celestial bodies—everything was wrong. Either he was hallucinating, or...

Or he wasn't on Earth at all.

The thought should have been absurd, yet as a theoretical physicist specializing in dimensional study, Akira couldn't dismiss it outright. His research had always suggested that parallel dimensions might exist, that energy and perhaps even matter could potentially move between them under the right conditions.

Had his simulation somehow opened a portal? Had he inadvertently proved his own theories in the most dramatic way possible?

"No," he said firmly. "That's ridiculous. There has to be a rational explanation."

Yet as he sat at the edge of that alien forest, staring out at a landscape that could not exist on Earth, rational explanations seemed increasingly scarce.

The sound of flowing water broke through his spiral of thoughts. Tilting his head, Akira detected the unmistakable gurgle of a stream somewhere to his right. Thirst suddenly overwhelming all other concerns, he struggled to his feet and made his way toward the sound.

The stream was small but clear, emerging from between two huge boulders and winding its way down into the valley. Akira knelt beside it, cupping his hands to drink before reason caught up with him. This was alien water on what might be an alien world. It could be toxic, acidic, filled with unknown pathogens.

But thirst was a more immediate threat. Without water, he wouldn't survive long enough to find answers.

A part of his mind—the analytical physicist who'd spent years building models and testing hypotheses—rebelled against this entire scenario. This wasn't possible. Not according to any known law of physics. And yet... here he was, kneeling beside an alien stream on an alien world, his rational understanding of reality crumbling with each passing moment.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered, bringing the liquid to his lips.

The water tasted... normal. Perhaps slightly sweeter than expected, with a mineral tang, but refreshingly cool and blessedly wet. Akira drank deeply, then splashed some on his face, clearing away dried blood and dirt.

The simple act of drinking restored some of his composure. Scientist that he was, Akira decided to approach his situation methodically. First priority: survival. Second: gathering information. Third: finding a way home.

His immediate needs were clear—water, which he'd found; food, which would be more challenging; and shelter, as the silver light was beginning to dim, suggesting night was approaching.

The forest seemed safer than the open valley. Less exposed, with trees for protection and construction material. Returning to the tree line, Akira began gathering fallen branches, planning to construct a rudimentary shelter. The work was exhausting in his weakened state, but the physical activity kept his mind from dwelling on the impossibility of his situation.

As he worked, a new sound caught his attention—a rustling from deeper in the forest, too deliberate to be the wind. Akira froze, suddenly aware of how vulnerable he was.

This world would have predators, wouldn't it? Creatures adapted to hunt in this strange environment.

The rustling grew closer. Akira raised a branch as a makeshift weapon, his heart pounding in his chest.

From between two massive trunks emerged... something. At first glance, it resembled a deer, with a slender body supported by four graceful legs. But the similarities ended there. Its skin was hairless, a pale iridescent blue that seemed to shift with each movement. Instead of a head, its neck terminated in a flat, disk-like structure with five short tentacles arranged in a star pattern. It had no visible eyes, yet Akira felt certain it was observing him.

The creature paused at the edge of the small clearing Akira had claimed, its disk-head turning slowly in his direction. One tentacle extended slightly, as if tasting the air.

Akira remained perfectly still, branch held before him in trembling hands.

After what seemed an eternity, the creature made a soft trilling sound, then turned and bounded back into the forest with surprising speed, disappearing as quickly as it had come.

Only when it was gone did Akira realize he'd been holding his breath. He exhaled shakily, lowering the branch.

"Okay," he said aloud. "Okay. Alien world. Alien creatures. This is happening."

The encounter solidified the reality of his situation in a way that even the strange sky hadn't. This wasn't a hallucination or dream. This was real.

As the alien sun—or whatever celestial body lit this world—sank lower, casting long shadows across the forest floor, Akira worked with renewed urgency. He constructed a crude lean-to against the trunk of one of the massive trees, using branches and the silver-blue moss as insulation.

Night fell with startling swiftness, the forest plunging from twilight to near-total darkness in minutes. The only illumination came from the strange ringed moon and, to Akira's surprise, the moss itself, which began to emit a faint phosphorescent glow in the darkness.

Huddled in his makeshift shelter, hunger gnawing at his stomach, Akira gazed up at the alien stars that peppered the night sky. Constellations he didn't recognize shone down with cold indifference to his plight.

"I'll find a way home, Mei," he whispered into the darkness. "I promise."

But as sleep finally claimed him, one thought echoed in his mind—what if there was no way home? What if this alien forest was now his reality, and Miami, the university, Mei... what if they were now just memories from another dimension, forever beyond his reach?

The last thing Akira saw before consciousness slipped away was the ghostly glow of the moss, pulsing in rhythms that seemed almost like a heartbeat—a constant reminder that everything in this world, even the plants beneath his body, was alive and alien and unknown.

