



SURROUNDED

BY: ZIAD ABDULLAH

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A novella by Ziad Abdullah

CHAPTER 1

Dr. Saba Anderson squinted at her monitor, the blue light reflecting off her dark eyes as she scrolled through the data for the fifth time. The temperature readings from the Antarctic ice formations simply didn't make sense. According to every known model of thermodynamics, the patterns she was seeing were impossible.

"This can't be right," she muttered, tucking a loose strand of black hair behind her ear. The small office in the climatology department at MIT was silent except for the soft hum of her computer. Outside, snow fell gently on the Cambridge campus, but Saba barely noticed the weather anymore. Her world had narrowed to these anomalous readings and the mystery they represented.

The data showed heat signatures deep within the Antarctic ice shelf that defied explanation. Not random thermal vents or volcanic activity, but organized patterns—almost like circulation systems. And they extended far beyond the mapped territories of the continent.

A knock at her door broke her concentration.

"Come in," she called, minimizing the screen out of habit.

Dr. Lawrence Chen, the department head, stepped into her office. His perpetually worried expression seemed even more pronounced today.

"Saba, do you have a minute?"

She nodded, gesturing to the chair across from her desk. Lawrence remained standing.

"I've just come from a meeting with the board," he said, his voice carefully neutral. "There's been a decision regarding your Antarctic research project."

Saba felt a familiar tightness in her chest. "What kind of decision?"

"They're pulling the funding."

The words hung in the air between them. Saba stared at him, waiting for more explanation, but Lawrence avoided her gaze.

"That's not possible," she finally said. "We're only halfway through the grant period. The preliminary findings are promising—"

"The board doesn't agree." Lawrence sighed, finally taking the seat. "Look, Saba, I fought for you. But they're calling your methodology into question. Some of your conclusions about the temperature anomalies are being described as... speculative."

“Speculative?” Saba stood up, indignation rising. “The data speaks for itself. Those heat patterns shouldn’t exist according to conventional models, but our readings confirm they do. That’s not speculation, it’s observation.”

Lawrence held up his hands in a placating gesture. “I understand. But you know how conservative the scientific community can be, especially when findings challenge established theories.”

“This isn’t about scientific conservatism,” Saba said, her voice low and intense. “Someone doesn’t want this research to continue.”

Lawrence’s expression shifted from sympathy to concern. “Saba, be careful with that kind of talk. That’s exactly the sort of thing that worried the board. You’re a brilliant scientist, but these suggestions of conspiracy—”

“I never said conspiracy,” she interrupted. “But you have to admit the timing is suspicious. Just as we’re about to expand our research area beyond the standard territories.”

Lawrence stood up, straightening his jacket. “The decision is final. You have until the end of the month to conclude your current work and submit a final report.” He paused at the door. “I’m sorry, Saba. I truly am.”

After he left, Saba sank back into her chair, mind racing. This wasn’t the first time her research had faced unexpected obstacles. Three years ago, her expedition to collect ice core samples from a previously unexplored region had been denied necessary permits at the last minute. Last year, crucial equipment had mysteriously failed during a critical phase of data collection.

She pulled up the temperature readings again, staring at the patterns. There was something there—something important enough that someone wanted to stop her from finding it.

Her grandfather’s voice echoed in her memory: “The world is full of hidden truths, Saba-joon. Sometimes the most important discoveries are the ones powerful people try to keep buried.”

As a child, she had loved his stories of ancient Persian mysteries and hidden worlds. As an adult and a scientist, she had learned to set such fancies aside. But now, looking at the inexplicable data before her, she wondered if there might be more truth to his words than she had allowed herself to believe.

Saba made a decision. She began downloading all her research data onto an external drive. If they wanted to shut down her official research, fine. But she wasn’t going to stop looking for answers.

Three weeks later, Saba stood at a podium in the Denver Convention Center, concluding her presentation at the International Climatology Conference. She had carefully edited her talk to focus on the conventional aspects of her research, omitting the anomalous readings that had cost her the grant funding.

"Thank you for your attention," she said to polite applause. As attendees began filing out for the coffee break, Saba gathered her materials, trying to ignore the whispers. Word had spread about her funding being pulled, and the academic community was small enough that rumors traveled fast.

"Impressive presentation, Dr. Anderson."

The voice came from behind her. Saba turned to find a tall man with light brown skin and intense hazel eyes watching her. His short black hair was touched with premature gray at the temples, and though he wore civilian clothes—a well-tailored charcoal suit—there was something unmistakably military in his bearing.

"Thank you," she replied cautiously. "Are you with the conference?"

"No." He offered his hand. "Erum Miller. Security consultant."

His grip was firm, his hand calloused. Not the hand of someone who spent his days behind a desk.

"Security consultant," Saba repeated. "For whom?"

A slight smile touched his lips. "Currently, I'm self-employed. But I have a particular interest in your research, Dr. Anderson. Especially the parts you didn't mention in your presentation today."

Saba felt a chill that had nothing to do with the convention center's aggressive air conditioning. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The temperature anomalies in the Antarctic ice formations," he said, his voice low. "The patterns that shouldn't exist according to conventional physics."

Saba glanced around to ensure no one was within earshot. "How do you know about that?"

"Because I've seen them." His expression was deadly serious. "Not just the data. I've seen what's causing those heat signatures."

For a moment, Saba was speechless. Then her scientific skepticism reasserted itself. "That's impossible. Those regions are restricted. Even my research team couldn't get permits to access them."

"I wasn't there as a scientist." Erum's eyes held hers. "I was there as military intelligence. British Special Forces."

Saba studied him, looking for signs of deception or delusion. She'd encountered her share of conspiracy theorists since her work had gained attention. But something about Erum Miller's steady gaze and precise manner suggested he wasn't simply another crackpot.

"Mr. Miller—"

"Erum, please."

"Erum, then. I appreciate your interest, but I'm not sure what you expect from me."

“Just five minutes of your time,” he said. “In private. I have information that might explain why your funding was pulled so abruptly.”

Saba hesitated. Professional caution warned against engaging with this stranger. But the scientist in her, the part that had never been able to resist an unsolved puzzle, was already intrigued.

“Five minutes,” she agreed. “There’s a coffee shop across the street. Meet me there in ten minutes.”

Erum nodded once, then turned and walked away, moving with the efficient grace of someone accustomed to dangerous environments. Saba watched him go, wondering if she was making a mistake.

But the anomalous heat patterns had haunted her for months now. If this man truly had information about their source, she needed to hear it—no matter how unlikely his story might seem.

As she packed up her presentation materials, Saba didn’t notice the man in the back of the conference room, speaking quietly into his phone. Nor did she see him follow her as she left the building, heading for her meeting with Erum Miller—a meeting that would change everything she thought she knew about the world. # SURROUNDED

CHAPTER 2

The coffee shop across from the convention center was crowded with conference attendees, their animated discussions creating a wall of white noise that provided a measure of privacy. Saba found a small table in the corner and ordered a black coffee, her mind still processing the strange encounter with Erum Miller.

Five minutes later, he appeared, navigating through the crowd with practiced ease. He carried no coffee, just a slim leather portfolio that he placed on the table as he sat down.

“Thank you for meeting me,” he said, his British accent more noticeable now.

“Five minutes,” Saba reminded him, tapping her watch. “And I should warn you, I’ve heard plenty of conspiracy theories about my research already.”

Erum’s expression remained serious. “This isn’t a theory, Dr. Anderson. Three years ago, I was part of a classified operation in Antarctica. Officially, we were there to assess security protocols at research stations. Unofficially...” He paused, his eyes scanning the room before continuing. “We were investigating reports of unauthorized incursions in restricted zones.”

“What kind of incursions?”

“That’s what we were sent to find out. Our team was dropped near the Ross Ice Shelf, but our coordinates were wrong—deliberately wrong, I later realized. We found ourselves in an unmapped region, at least fifty miles from where we should have been.”

Saba leaned forward despite herself. “And?”

"We discovered a research facility that wasn't on any official registry. Heavily secured, advanced technology. When we approached, they didn't seem surprised to see us. Almost as if they were expecting some kind of inspection."

"Who were they?"

"They called themselves the Antarctic Research Protection Agency—ARPA. Not military, not academic. Something in between. Their director, a man named Reeves, claimed they were conducting climate research too sensitive for public knowledge."

Saba frowned. "I've never heard of this organization."

"Few have. They operate under multiple layers of classification." Erum opened his portfolio and slid a photograph across the table.

Saba picked it up. The image showed a sleek, low-profile facility built into what appeared to be an ice formation. But something about the ice was strange—it didn't look like part of a glacier or shelf. It rose vertically, like a wall.

"This is where you were?" she asked.

Erum nodded. "The facility was built directly into the ice. Reeves gave us a tour, very controlled, very limited. But I managed to access a restricted area while the rest of my team was being briefed."

"What did you find?"

"A monitoring station. Screens showing thermal imaging similar to your anomalous readings. But they weren't just observing the heat patterns." His voice dropped lower. "They were tracking movement within the ice."

Saba's scientific skepticism flared. "That's not possible. Nothing can move through solid ice."

"That's what I would have said before that day." Erum's gaze was unwavering. "But I saw it, Dr. Anderson. Something large, moving through the ice as if it were water."

Saba sat back, studying him for signs of deception or delusion. She found neither, only a tightly controlled intensity.

"Let's say I believe you saw something," she said carefully. "What does this have to do with my research funding being pulled?"

Erum took back the photograph. "ARPA monitors all research related to Antarctic anomalies. When your data started showing the heat patterns, you became a threat. They couldn't risk you discovering what's really happening there."

"And what exactly is happening there, Mr. Miller?"

"I don't know everything. After I was discovered in the restricted area, things went bad quickly. My team was extracted, but I was detained for three days. When I was finally released, I was discharged from service—officially for 'psychological instability.'" His mouth twisted in a bitter smile. "Classic discrediting tactic."

“So you have no proof of any of this.”

“I didn’t say that.” Erum reached into his portfolio again and removed a small device that looked like a specialized flash drive. “During those three days of detention, I was interviewed by Reeves himself. He was trying to determine how much I’d seen and who I might have told. I managed to record part of our conversation.”

He placed the device on the table between them. “He says something on here that I think you’ll find interesting, given your research.”

Saba hesitated, then picked up the device. “What am I looking for?”

“Listen to it yourself. Preferably somewhere private and secure.” Erum stood up. “My number is saved on the device. Call me when you’ve heard it—if you want to know more.”

“That’s it? You drop this mysterious information and then just leave?”

“Five minutes, as promised.” His expression softened slightly. “I know how this sounds, Dr. Anderson. I know your scientific training is telling you to dismiss me as a crackpot. But you’ve seen the data. You know something isn’t right about those heat patterns. All I’m asking is that you listen to the recording with an open mind.”

Before she could respond, he was gone, moving swiftly through the crowded coffee shop and disappearing into the street outside.

Saba stared at the small device in her hand. Her rational mind told her to discard it, to walk away from this bizarre encounter and focus on salvaging her academic career. But the scientist in her, the part that had always been driven by curiosity and the pursuit of truth, couldn’t ignore the possibility that this man might have answers to the questions that had been haunting her.

She slipped the device into her pocket and finished her coffee, unaware that across the street, a man was photographing her through the coffee shop window, his telephoto lens capturing her thoughtful expression as she contemplated Erum Miller’s strange tale.

Back in her hotel room, Saba turned the recording device over in her hands, still debating whether to listen to it. Her laptop sat open on the desk, displaying the latest email from Lawrence Chen—a reminder about the final report deadline and a list of “suggested revisions” that would effectively sanitize her research of anything controversial.

With a sigh of frustration, she plugged the device into her laptop. A single audio file appeared, along with a text document containing a phone number. She opened the audio file and pressed play.

The recording was slightly muffled but clear enough to distinguish two male voices. One had the same accent as Erum Miller; the other was older, American, with the measured cadence of someone accustomed to authority.

“...understand your confusion, Lieutenant Miller,” the American voice was saying. “What you saw was classified for good reason.”

“What I saw defies explanation,” Erum’s voice replied. “Nothing can move through solid ice like that.”

“Your mistake is assuming it’s moving through the ice. The ice itself is moving, Lieutenant. The entire structure is more dynamic than conventional science recognizes.”

“That doesn’t explain the heat patterns or the organized movement.”

A pause, then the American voice—presumably Reeves—continued with careful precision. “The Antarctic region is not what you’ve been taught. What you think of as a continent is actually a boundary—a wall, if you will, that surrounds and contains.”

“Contains what?”

Another pause, longer this time. “That’s beyond your clearance, Lieutenant. But I’ll tell you this much: the world is not shaped the way your schoolbooks taught you. The truth has been kept from the public for generations, and for good reason. Some knowledge is too destabilizing for the general population.”

“You’re talking about a massive conspiracy,” Erum’s voice sounded incredulous.

“I’m talking about necessary secrecy. The same kind your military employs every day. The difference is scale, not principle.”

The recording ended abruptly. Saba sat back, her mind racing. The conversation was strange, cryptic, but not exactly smoking-gun evidence of anything specific. Yet something about Reeves’ words nagged at her. The way he described Antarctica as a “boundary” that “surrounds and contains”...

She opened her research files, scrolling through the thermal imaging data. The heat patterns she’d detected formed a strangely consistent line that extended beyond the mapped territories of Antarctica. If she extrapolated and connected the points...

Saba began plotting the data points on a global map. As the pattern emerged, she felt a chill that had nothing to do with the hotel room’s temperature. If these readings were accurate, and if they continued along the projected path, they would form a circle—a complete circle around the entire Earth.

“That’s impossible,” she whispered to the empty room.

But the data was there, undeniable. And suddenly, Reeves’ words took on a new and disturbing meaning. A boundary that surrounds and contains. Not a continent, but a wall.

The implications were so outlandish that her scientific mind rebelled. Yet she couldn’t ignore the evidence before her eyes.

With trembling fingers, Saba reached for her phone and dialed the number Erum had provided.

"I listened to the recording," she said when he answered. "We need to talk again. And this time, I need to see everything you have." # SURROUNDED

CHAPTER 3

They met at a small diner on the outskirts of Denver, far from the conference center and the prying eyes of academia. Saba arrived first, choosing a booth in the back corner with a clear view of both entrances. The waitress brought her a coffee she didn't touch, her attention focused on the door.

When Erum entered, he scanned the room with the practiced efficiency of someone who had spent years assessing threats. His eyes met hers, and he nodded once before making his way to her table.

"You look like you haven't slept," he said as he slid into the booth across from her.

"I haven't," Saba admitted. "I spent the night analyzing my data in light of what I heard on that recording."

Erum ordered coffee when the waitress approached, waiting until she was out of earshot before speaking again. "And what conclusions did you reach, Dr. Anderson?"

"Saba," she corrected. "If we're going to discuss global conspiracies, we might as well be on a first-name basis."

A hint of a smile touched his lips. "Fair enough."

Saba opened her laptop and turned it toward him. On the screen was a map of the world, but with an unusual overlay—a circular pattern of red dots that formed a complete ring around the Earth.

"These are the heat signature anomalies I've been tracking," she explained. "I originally thought they were isolated to certain regions of Antarctica, but when I extrapolated the data points based on the partial patterns I've observed..." She gestured at the screen. "They form a perfect circle around the entire planet."

Erum studied the map, his expression unreadable. "And what do you think that means?"

"Scientifically speaking, it shouldn't be possible. But if—and this is a massive if—Antarctica isn't actually a continent but some kind of... circular formation..." She hesitated, the words sounding absurd even as she spoke them. "It would mean everything we know about global geography is wrong."

"Or a lie," Erum said quietly.

Saba closed her laptop. "That's where I struggle. The implications are too enormous. It would require a conspiracy spanning centuries, involving governments, scientists, explorers—"

"Is that really so hard to believe?" Erum interrupted. "History is full of examples of information being controlled for political or economic advantage."

"Not on this scale," Saba argued. "And for what purpose? What possible benefit could come from hiding the true shape of the Earth?"

Erum's coffee arrived, and he waited until the waitress had gone again before answering. "Control. Knowledge is power, and some knowledge is so fundamental that it shapes how people see their entire reality." He took a sip of his coffee. "But I didn't ask you here to debate conspiracy theories. I have something to show you."

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a folded document, sliding it across the table. Saba opened it to find what appeared to be an official memorandum on government letterhead, heavily redacted with black marker.

"What am I looking at?" she asked.

"Internal communication from ARPA to the British Ministry of Defence, dated two weeks after my Antarctic incident. I obtained it through a contact who still believes I was wrongfully discharged."

Saba scanned the document. Most of it was blacked out, but certain phrases remained visible: "thermal anomaly containment," "boundary integrity monitoring," and most intriguingly, "civilian research proximity alert: Anderson, S."

She looked up sharply. "This is dated over a year ago. They've been watching me all this time?"

Erum nodded. "Your research was getting too close to regions they consider sensitive. This document was essentially flagging you as a potential security risk."

"But I'm just a climatologist studying temperature patterns. What could possibly be so threatening about that?"

"Because those temperature patterns reveal something they've been hiding for generations." Erum leaned forward, his voice dropping lower. "The heat signatures you've detected are actually monitoring systems embedded in the ice wall—systems designed to track anything approaching from either side."

"Either side?" Saba repeated. "You mean from outside the... wall?"

"Exactly." Erum's eyes held hers. "The wall doesn't just keep people in, Saba. It keeps something else out."

A chill ran through her that had nothing to do with the diner's aggressive air conditioning. "That's what you saw moving through the ice."

"I believe so. Though I only caught a glimpse before they detained me."

Saba sat back, trying to process the implications. If what Erum was suggesting was true—if Antarctica was actually some kind of wall surrounding the Earth—it would overturn everything she thought she knew about the world. It was the kind of fringe theory her

grandfather might have entertained in his stories, not something a respected scientist could seriously consider.

And yet, her own data was pointing in that impossible direction.

"I need more evidence," she said finally. "The recording and this document are suggestive, but not conclusive. And the map I've created is based on extrapolation from limited data points."

"I agree." Erum finished his coffee. "Which is why we need to go to Antarctica ourselves."

Saba stared at him. "That's impossible. I've already been denied research permits, and after my funding was pulled—"

"Not through official channels," Erum interrupted. "I have contacts—people who can get us there without government approval."

"You're talking about an illegal expedition to a highly restricted area."

"I'm talking about finding the truth." His expression was intense. "You've spent your career pursuing scientific knowledge, Saba. Are you willing to stop now, just because the path forward doesn't follow conventional rules?"

Before she could answer, the bell above the diner door chimed. A young Asian woman entered, her bright blue hair and multiple piercings standing out in the conservative diner. She spotted their table immediately and headed straight for them, sliding into the booth beside Erum without invitation.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, her voice surprisingly deep for her small frame. "Had to make sure I wasn't followed." She extended a hand to Saba. "Maya Chen. I'm a fan of your work, Dr. Anderson."

Saba shook her hand automatically, looking questioningly at Erum.

"Maya is a journalist," he explained. "Specializing in government secrecy and unexplained phenomena."

"Conspiracy theories, he means," Maya said with a grin. "But I prefer to think of myself as an alternative truth-seeker."

"Maya has been investigating ARPA for the past two years," Erum continued. "She's the one who helped me obtain that document."

"And I've got something even better now," Maya said, pulling a tablet from her messenger bag. She tapped the screen a few times, then passed it to Saba. "These images were taken by a private satellite last month. The company thought they were photographing an unexplored region of the Ross Ice Shelf for climate research. What they actually captured was this."

Saba looked at the screen. The satellite image showed what appeared to be a massive ice formation, but unlike any glacier or ice shelf she had ever seen. It rose vertically from the ground, extending in a perfectly straight line as far as the image captured.

"That's not natural," she murmured, zooming in on the image. "Ice doesn't form in straight lines like this."

"Exactly," Maya said triumphantly. "And look at this." She reached over and swiped to the next image, which showed the same ice formation from a different angle. Embedded in the ice was a structure—the same facility from Erum's photograph.

"ARPA's monitoring station," Erum confirmed. "Built directly into the wall."

"The wall," Saba repeated, the words feeling strange on her tongue. "You really believe Antarctica is some kind of... wall around the Earth?"

"Not just a wall," Maya said, her eyes bright with excitement. "The wall. The edge of the world as we know it. The boundary between what humanity is allowed to see and what lies beyond."

Saba handed the tablet back, her scientific skepticism warring with the evidence before her. "Even if this formation is artificial—which I'm not conceding—it doesn't prove the Earth is flat or that we're surrounded by an ice wall."

"No," Erum agreed. "But it does prove that something very strange is happening in Antarctica, something worth investigating further." He fixed her with a steady gaze. "The question is, are you willing to risk your career—maybe even more—to find out what it is?"

Saba thought of her grandfather's stories, of hidden worlds and ancient secrets. She thought of her years of research, the anomalous data that had cost her funding and threatened her reputation. And she thought of the map on her laptop, with its perfect circle of heat signatures encircling the globe.

"When would we leave?" she asked.

Maya grinned. "That's the spirit, Doc."

"It won't be easy," Erum warned. "Once we're there, we'll be on our own. No official support, no rescue if things go wrong."

"I understand the risks," Saba said. "But if there's even a chance that what you're suggesting is true—that the world isn't what we've been taught—then I need to see it for myself."

As they began discussing logistics, none of them noticed the man sitting at the counter, his newspaper held just high enough to obscure his face as he listened to every word of their conversation.

Commander James Harlow took a final sip of his coffee, left a generous tip, and slipped out of the diner. In his car, he made a secure call.

"Sir, they're planning an expedition," he reported. "Unauthorized. Miller has recruited Dr. Anderson and the Chen woman."

The voice that responded was calm, measured. "Let them proceed, Commander. In fact, I want you to facilitate their journey—discreetly, of course. It's time we brought Dr. Anderson into the fold."

“And if she refuses?”

“Then ensure she never returns to share what she discovers.” Dr. Victor Reeves ended the call, turning his attention back to the monitors before him. On the largest screen, a massive shape moved slowly through the ice wall, its heat signature matching exactly the patterns in Saba Anderson’s research.

The breach was coming, sooner than they had anticipated. And when it happened, he needed people like Saba—brilliant minds who could adapt to impossible truths—on his side.

One way or another. # SURROUNDED

CHAPTER 4

The preparations for their unauthorized expedition took two weeks—two weeks of clandestine meetings, encrypted communications, and growing anticipation. For Saba, it meant requesting an emergency leave of absence from MIT, citing family issues. For Erum, it meant calling in favors from former military contacts who still trusted him despite his controversial discharge. For Maya, it meant ensuring her alternative news platform could run without her for an indefinite period.

They gathered in a rented warehouse on the outskirts of Punta Arenas, Chile, the southernmost city of any significant size before Antarctica. Outside, a bitter wind howled off the Strait of Magellan, a taste of the far more extreme conditions they would soon face.

“This is everything I could get,” Erum said, gesturing to the equipment spread across the concrete floor. Thermal suits, climbing gear, advanced communications devices, and enough supplies to last three weeks in the field. “My contact in the Chilean navy came through with transportation. We leave tomorrow at dawn.”

Saba examined the specialized scientific equipment she had requested—thermal imaging devices, ice core sampling tools, and a portable spectrometer. “This is good,” she said, impressed despite her lingering doubts about the entire venture. “Better than what I had on my last official expedition.”

“That’s because we’re not constrained by bureaucratic budgets,” Maya said, testing the weight of her backpack. The journalist had surprised them both with her practical knowledge of expedition planning. “When you operate outside the system, you can sometimes get better results.”

“Until the system catches up with you,” Erum reminded her. He spread a map across a makeshift table. “Here’s our insertion point. The Chilean vessel will drop us here, ostensibly for a private research expedition studying penguin migration patterns.”

“That’s our cover story?” Saba asked skeptically.

"It's legitimate enough to avoid immediate suspicion," Erum explained. "The captain is an old friend who owes me his life. He'll report the drop-off but conveniently fail to file the exact coordinates."

"And how do we get back?" Maya asked.

"He'll return in three weeks to our extraction point, which will be fifty miles east of where he drops us. If we're not there, he'll wait 48 hours, then leave."

Saba studied the map, noting the distance between their planned landing site and the coordinates where her research had detected the strongest thermal anomalies. "That's over a hundred miles of travel across some of the most hostile terrain on Earth."

"Which is why no one will expect us to attempt it," Erum said. "The official research stations are all here, clustered in the more accessible regions. ARPA's facility, based on the satellite imagery, is approximately here." He pointed to a location well beyond the established zones. "That's our target."

"And if we encounter ARPA personnel?" Saba asked.

Erum's expression hardened. "We avoid them at all costs. This is a reconnaissance mission only. We gather evidence, document what we find, and get out."

"And then what?" Maya pressed. "If we discover that Antarctica really is some kind of wall surrounding the Earth, what do we do with that information?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Erum said, though his tone suggested he had already given the matter considerable thought.

As they continued discussing logistics, Saba found herself watching Erum. Despite his outlandish theories, there was something undeniably compelling about his methodical approach and quiet intensity. She had worked with military types before on research expeditions, but Erum was different—more thoughtful, more questioning. And despite her scientific skepticism, she found herself trusting him in a way that surprised her.

Later that evening, as Maya slept in the small office they had converted to living quarters, Saba found Erum outside the warehouse, staring up at the stars.

"Trouble sleeping?" she asked, joining him.

"Always, before a mission," he admitted. "Old habit."

They stood in silence for a moment, the southern stars brilliantly clear in the cold night.

"Can I ask you something?" Saba finally said.

"Of course."

"Why are you doing this? Really? You've risked your career, your reputation... for what? To prove a conspiracy theory?"

Erum considered the question, his breath forming clouds in the frigid air. "It's not about proving a theory. It's about finding the truth." He turned to face her. "When I was in that

ARPA facility, I saw things that shouldn't exist according to everything I'd been taught. It... changed me. Made me question everything."

"I understand that feeling," Saba said softly. "In science, when data contradicts established theory, it's both terrifying and exhilarating."

"Exactly." His eyes met hers. "But in my world—military intelligence—contradictions are treated as threats, not opportunities for discovery. They discharged me rather than address what I saw."

"And you think finding evidence will vindicate you?"

"I think the truth matters," he said simply. "Whatever it is. Don't you?"

The question hung between them, and Saba found herself nodding. "Yes. Even if it overturns everything I thought I knew."

A hint of a smile touched Erum's lips. "Then we're not so different, the soldier and the scientist."

Something shifted in that moment—a connection forming that transcended their different backgrounds and approaches. Saba felt a warmth that defied the Antarctic chill in the air.

"We should get some rest," she said, suddenly aware of how close they were standing. "Big day tomorrow."

Erum nodded, his eyes still holding hers. "Goodnight, Dr. Anderson."

"Saba," she corrected gently.

"Saba," he repeated, her name sounding different in his accent. "Goodnight."

As she returned to the warehouse, Saba tried to focus on the expedition ahead, on the scientific questions that had brought her to this point. But her thoughts kept returning to Erum Miller and the unexpected trust she felt toward him. It was a complication she hadn't anticipated—and one that could prove dangerous in the extreme environment they were about to enter.

The Chilean naval vessel cut through the rough waters of the Drake Passage, the notorious stretch of sea between South America and Antarctica. Saba stood on the deck, watching ice floes drift past, each one larger than the last as they approached the frozen continent.

Maya joined her at the railing, her usual energy subdued by a bout of seasickness. "How much longer?"

"Captain says we'll reach the drop point in about two hours," Saba replied. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I'm dying, but too stubborn to actually die," Maya groaned. "Remind me why I thought this was a good idea?"

"The story of a lifetime," Saba quoted Maya's own words back to her. "The truth about the edge of the world."

"Right. That." Maya managed a weak smile. "You know, I've covered a lot of conspiracy theories in my career. Most of them fall apart under scrutiny. But this one... the evidence keeps stacking up."

"Evidence of something unusual," Saba cautioned. "Not necessarily evidence of a flat Earth surrounded by an ice wall."

"But you have to admit, it would explain a lot. The restricted zones, the international treaties limiting access to Antarctica, the way governments pour resources into controlling who goes there and what they see."

Saba had to concede the point. The Antarctic Treaty System, established in 1959, was ostensibly about scientific cooperation and environmental protection. But it also effectively limited who could access the continent and what activities they could conduct there.

"Where's our fearless leader?" Maya asked, changing the subject.

"With the captain, finalizing the drop coordinates." Saba glanced toward the bridge. "He's been quiet since we left port."

"Pre-mission focus," Maya said knowingly. "My brother was the same way when he was in the service. Gets all intense and stoic before an operation."

Before Saba could respond, Erum emerged from the bridge and approached them. His expression was grim.

"What's wrong?" Saba asked immediately.

"Change of plans," he said, his voice low. "The captain received a transmission from Antarctic Command. There's increased patrol activity in our target area."

"ARPA?" Maya asked.

"Possibly. Or regular research station security doing sweeps." Erum leaned against the railing. "Either way, we need to adjust our landing site. We'll be dropped further east, which means a longer trek to reach the anomaly coordinates."

"How much longer?" Saba asked.

"An additional thirty miles, at least. And through rougher terrain."

Maya groaned. "Perfect. More time in frozen hell."

"We can still abort," Erum said, looking at each of them in turn. "Once we're on the ice, we're committed. The captain can't risk coming back for an emergency extraction without raising suspicions."

Saba considered the implications. A longer journey meant greater risk, more exposure to the elements, and a higher chance of detection. The rational choice would be to postpone, to gather more intelligence and try again when conditions were more favorable.

But something told her they wouldn't get another chance. If ARPA was increasing security in the region, it suggested they were aware of potential interest in their activities. Waiting might mean losing the opportunity forever.

"I'm still in," she said firmly.

Maya straightened, seeming to draw strength from Saba's resolve. "Me too. I didn't come all this way to turn back now."

Erum studied them both, then nodded. "Very well. We land in two hours. Final equipment check in thirty minutes."

As he walked away, Maya nudged Saba. "He's worried about us. Especially you."

"What? No, he's just being thorough."

"Please," Maya rolled her eyes. "I've seen how he looks at you when he thinks no one's watching. Our stoic ex-soldier has a soft spot for brilliant scientists."

Saba felt her cheeks warm despite the biting cold. "You're imagining things."

"I'm a journalist. I notice details." Maya grinned, then winced as the ship hit a particularly rough wave. "Ugh, I'm going below. Try not to fall overboard while making eyes at Miller."

Left alone, Saba turned her attention back to the horizon, where the white expanse of Antarctica was becoming visible through the mist. Somewhere in that frozen landscape lay answers to the questions that had consumed her for years. And perhaps, she admitted to herself, there were other discoveries to be made on this journey—ones that had nothing to do with science or conspiracy theories.

The thought both thrilled and terrified her, much like the mysterious continent looming ahead. # SURROUNDED

CHAPTER 5

The Antarctic wind howled across the ice shelf as Saba, Erum, and Maya made their final preparations. The Chilean vessel had departed an hour ago, leaving them alone on the vast white expanse with nothing but their equipment and each other.

"Visibility is dropping," Erum observed, studying the horizon where swirling snow was beginning to obscure their view. "We need to establish base camp before the weather worsens."

They worked methodically, erecting their specialized thermal tent designed to withstand the extreme conditions. Inside, they set up their communications equipment and monitoring devices, creating a small island of technology in the frozen wilderness.

"Satellite connection established," Maya announced, her fingers flying over her compact communications array. "I've got a secure uplink, but the signal's weak. The weather's interfering."

Saba calibrated her scientific instruments, focusing on the thermal imaging scanner. "I'm picking up the same anomalous heat patterns I detected in my research, but stronger now. They're definitely coming from that direction." She pointed northwest, toward the coordinates where they believed ARPA's facility was located.

Erum spread their map on the small folding table. "That's consistent with our target location. But with the new drop point, we're looking at a five-day journey at minimum, assuming good conditions." He glanced at the tent wall, which was already shuddering under the increasing wind. "Which we don't have."

"So what's the plan?" Maya asked, pulling her thermal suit tighter around her shoulders.

"We wait out this storm, then proceed in stages." Erum traced a route on the map. "There's a natural ice formation here that should provide shelter for our second camp. From there, we can approach the anomaly zone more cautiously."

Saba studied the map, noting the distance and terrain. "The temperature will drop at least another twenty degrees as we move inland. Even with our gear, we'll be pushing the limits of human endurance."

"That's why no one goes there," Maya said. "Perfect cover for whatever ARPA is hiding."

As night fell—though in the Antarctic summer, it was more of a dim twilight than true darkness—they huddled in the tent, the portable heater creating a bubble of warmth against the bitter cold outside. Maya dozed fitfully while Saba continued to monitor her instruments, fascinated by the readings she was getting.

"You should rest," Erum said quietly, sitting beside her. "Tomorrow will be challenging."

"I can't sleep," she admitted. "These readings... they're unlike anything I've ever seen. The heat patterns are too regular, too consistent to be natural."

"What do you think they are?"

Saba hesitated. "If I were to speculate based solely on the data, I'd say they're artificial. Some kind of thermal regulation system embedded in the ice. But that would imply technology far beyond what should exist out here."

"Or technology that's been hidden from public knowledge," Erum suggested.

Their eyes met in the dim light of the tent, and Saba felt that same connection she'd experienced back in Chile—a shared pursuit of truth, despite coming from different worlds.

"Can I ask you something personal?" she said.

Erum nodded.

"What happened to you after you were discharged? Before you contacted me?"

He was quiet for a long moment, and Saba thought he might not answer. Then he spoke, his voice low to avoid waking Maya.

"I was... lost. Everything I'd built my life around—my career, my beliefs about the world, my trust in the institutions I served—it all collapsed. I spent months trying to convince anyone who would listen about what I'd seen in Antarctica." A rueful smile crossed his face. "I quickly learned how it feels to be labeled a conspiracy theorist."

"That must have been difficult."

"It was. My brother Thomas—he works for the British Foreign Office—he tried to help. Suggested I seek psychiatric treatment, take medication. He thought he was doing the right thing."

"But you refused."

"I knew what I saw." Erum's eyes held a quiet intensity. "And I knew I wasn't crazy. So I began gathering evidence, making connections. That's how I found Maya, and eventually you."

"And now here we are," Saba said softly. "In the middle of Antarctica, chasing what might be the biggest conspiracy in human history."

"Or the biggest wild goose chase," Erum acknowledged with a hint of humor. "Either way, there's no one I'd rather have on this journey."

The compliment warmed her more than the heater. "Even though I'm still skeptical about the whole flat Earth theory?"

"Especially because of that. Your scientific rigor keeps us honest." His hand moved closer to hers on the equipment case between them. "Whatever we find out there, Saba, the truth is what matters. Not what either of us believes right now."

Their fingers were almost touching when Maya stirred, mumbling something in her sleep. The moment broke, and Erum stood up.

"Try to get some rest," he said. "I'll take first watch."

As he moved to the tent entrance to check the weather, Saba found herself watching him, wondering what other layers existed beneath his controlled exterior. For a man dedicated to uncovering a global conspiracy, Erum Miller remained something of a mystery himself—one she was increasingly interested in solving.

The storm lasted thirty-six hours, confining them to the tent and delaying their progress. When it finally subsided, they emerged to a transformed landscape, the fresh snow creating an otherworldly beauty that momentarily distracted from the deadly cold.

"Temperature's holding at minus thirty Celsius," Saba reported, checking her instruments. "Wind chill takes it down another fifteen degrees. We need to move quickly while the weather holds."

They packed efficiently, leaving no trace of their camp, and began the arduous journey northwest. The specialized snowshoes distributed their weight across the treacherous surface, but progress was still slow, each step requiring careful attention.

By midday, they had covered nearly eight miles—a respectable distance given the conditions, but far short of what they had hoped. Erum called a brief halt, distributing energy rations from his pack.

“The terrain changes ahead,” he said, consulting his GPS. “The ice shelf gives way to more broken ground. We’ll need to rope together for safety.”

As they prepared to continue, Saba’s thermal scanner began emitting a soft alert tone. She checked the display, her breath catching.

“I’m picking up a heat signature,” she said. “Not part of the pattern we’ve been tracking. This is... moving.”

Erum was instantly alert. “Direction?”

“East of us, about two miles. Moving parallel to our route.”

“ARPA patrol?” Maya suggested, nervousness evident in her voice.

“Possibly.” Erum retrieved a compact pair of high-powered binoculars from his pack and scanned the horizon. “I don’t see any vehicles or personnel, but visibility is limited.”

“The signature is too large for a single person or even a small group,” Saba said, studying the readings. “And the movement pattern is unusual—not like a vehicle or human travelers.”

“What then?” Maya asked.

Saba shook her head. “I don’t know. But it’s maintaining distance, not approaching us.”

“We continue as planned, but with extra caution,” Erum decided. “Maya, minimize use of electronic equipment. Saba, keep monitoring that signature. If it changes course toward us, we need to know immediately.”

They proceeded more carefully now, the knowledge of being potentially observed adding tension to an already challenging journey. The broken ice terrain Erum had predicted soon appeared, requiring them to rope together as they navigated across crevasses and unstable surfaces.

As the dim Antarctic twilight began to darken further, Erum identified a suitable location for their second camp—a natural ice formation that provided some shelter from the wind. They set up their tent with practiced efficiency, the temperature continuing to drop as night approached.

Inside the tent, Saba reviewed the data from her thermal scanner. “The heat signature maintained distance all day, then disappeared about an hour ago. Either it moved out of range, or...”

“Or what?” Maya prompted.

“Or it’s masking its thermal output somehow.” Saba looked up at them. “Which would imply a level of technological sophistication or biological adaptation far beyond anything known to science.”

“You think it might not be human,” Erum said. It wasn’t a question.

“I’m saying the data doesn’t fit any known human presence in this region.” Saba’s scientific training rebelled against speculation, but the evidence was pushing her toward uncomfortable conclusions. “Whatever it is, it seemed to be observing us.”

Maya shivered, and not from the cold. “Great. So we might have ARPA after us, and now possibly some unknown... entity.”

“We don’t know that,” Saba cautioned. “It could be a natural phenomenon I’m not familiar with.”

“Either way, we maintain our course,” Erum said firmly. “We’re still two days from the primary anomaly zone. That’s our objective.”

As they settled in for the night, taking turns on watch, Saba found her thoughts divided between the scientific mystery they were pursuing and the growing personal connection with Erum. In the close confines of the tent, she was acutely aware of his presence—his methodical movements, the quiet authority he projected, the way his eyes lingered on her when he thought she wasn’t looking.

It was during her watch, in the quietest hours of the Antarctic night, that she heard it—a low, resonant sound that seemed to vibrate through the ice beneath them. Not mechanical, not wind, but something else entirely. Something alive.

She checked her thermal scanner, but it showed nothing unusual. Yet the sound continued, a deep thrumming that she felt more than heard, like the heartbeat of the ice itself.

Saba moved to wake Erum, but before she could reach him, the sound stopped as suddenly as it had begun. She hesitated, wondering if she had imagined it, if the extreme conditions were affecting her perception.

But deep down, she knew. Something was out there in the frozen wasteland. Something that defied explanation. And they were heading straight toward it. # SURROUNDED

CHAPTER 6

Morning brought no answers, only more questions. Saba had finally mentioned the strange vibrations to Erum during the shift change, but without her instruments detecting anything, they had little to go on.

“We need to keep moving,” Erum said as they broke camp. “The weather window won’t last forever.”

The terrain grew increasingly difficult as they progressed, the ice formations more dramatic and unpredictable. What had once been a relatively flat expanse now featured towering structures that resembled frozen waves, some reaching thirty feet high.

"This isn't natural," Saba said, examining one of the formations. "Ice doesn't form these patterns without extreme pressure or deliberate manipulation."

"Maybe it's wind erosion?" Maya suggested, though she sounded doubtful.

"Not possible," Saba ran her gloved hand along the smooth surface. "These are too uniform, too... architectural."

Erum consulted his GPS. "We're entering the region where my team was redirected three years ago. The topography matches what I remember."

They proceeded more cautiously now, Erum taking point with Saba in the middle and Maya bringing up the rear. The ice formations created a natural labyrinth, forcing them to weave through narrow passages that sometimes required them to remove their packs and squeeze through sideways.

"My thermal scanner is picking up stronger readings," Saba reported. "We're definitely getting closer to the anomaly source."

"And the moving signature from yesterday?" Erum asked.

"Nothing yet, but—" She stopped abruptly, staring at her display. "Wait. I'm getting multiple readings now. Small heat signatures, moving in formation about a mile ahead."

"ARPA patrol," Erum said grimly. "We need to find cover."

They retreated to a cluster of ice formations that provided some concealment, crouching low as Erum used his binoculars to scan the area ahead.

"I see them," he confirmed. "Four figures, standard Antarctic research station gear, but they're armed."

"Armed researchers?" Maya whispered. "That's not standard protocol."

"ARPA isn't a standard research organization," Erum reminded her. "They're moving in a search pattern. I think they're looking for something... or someone."

"Us?" Saba asked.

"Possibly. Or maybe related to whatever made that sound you heard last night." Erum lowered the binoculars. "Either way, we need to avoid them. There's a ridge to the west. If we can reach it without being spotted, we can bypass their search area."

They backtracked and began a wide detour, moving as quickly as the treacherous terrain allowed. The ice formations provided good cover, but also limited visibility, making it difficult to track the patrol's movements.

After an hour of tense progress, they reached the ridge Erum had identified. From this elevated position, they could see much farther across the Antarctic landscape. What they saw left them speechless.

Stretching before them, extending as far as the eye could see in both directions, was what appeared to be a massive wall of ice. Not a glacier or ice shelf as conventionally understood, but a true wall—vertical, impossibly tall, and perfectly straight along its upper edge.

“My God,” Saba breathed, her scientific skepticism momentarily overwhelmed by the sight. “It’s actually real.”

Maya fumbled for her camera, her hands shaking with excitement or cold or both. “The ice wall. It’s exactly like the theories describe.”

Erum remained silent, his expression unreadable as he studied the colossal structure through his binoculars.

“How tall is it?” Maya asked, snapping photos.

Saba made some quick calculations based on their distance and perspective. “At least 150 feet above the surface. But there could be more below the ice level.”

“And it just... continues?” Maya gestured to the horizons where the wall disappeared from view in both directions.

“As far as I can see,” Erum confirmed. “Just like I remembered.”

Saba’s mind raced with implications. If this structure truly encircled the Earth as the flat Earth theory suggested, it would mean... No. She pulled herself back from that precipice of thought. There had to be a scientific explanation. Perhaps this was a unique geological formation specific to this region, not a global phenomenon.

“We need to get closer,” she said, her scientific curiosity overriding caution. “I need samples, measurements.”

“The patrol is still out there,” Erum warned. “And the wall is at least five miles from our position.”

“Then we wait for nightfall,” Saba decided. “The temperature will drop dangerously, but we’ll have better cover.”

They established a temporary observation point in the shelter of the ridge, using the time to rest and prepare for the night journey. Maya continued to document everything with her camera, while Saba monitored her instruments, which were showing increasingly strong and complex thermal patterns emanating from the direction of the wall.

As the dim Antarctic daylight faded to twilight, Erum joined Saba at her monitoring station. “What are you thinking?” he asked quietly.

She hesitated, struggling to reconcile her scientific training with what she was seeing. “I’m thinking that if this structure is what it appears to be—if it really does continue beyond what we can see—then everything I’ve been taught about global geography is wrong.”

"Or a lie," Erum said, echoing their earlier conversation.

"But why? Why maintain such an enormous deception? The resources required, the coordination across governments and scientific institutions... it's almost unimaginable."

"Control," Erum suggested. "Think about it. If people believed they lived on a flat plane surrounded by an impassable barrier, rather than a globe with potentially infinite resources beyond their reach... wouldn't that make them easier to govern? To contain?"

The idea was disturbing in its plausibility. Throughout history, controlling information had been a key strategy of those in power.

"There's something else," Saba said, showing him her thermal readings. "These patterns aren't just heat signatures. They're too regular, too structured. I think they might be some kind of... signal."

"Communication?"

"Possibly. Or a monitoring system." She pointed to specific patterns in the data. "See how they pulse at regular intervals? That's not natural thermal variation."

Before Erum could respond, Maya called them over to where she was keeping watch. "The patrol is moving away," she reported. "Heading east, away from the wall."

"This might be our chance," Erum said. "We can approach under cover of twilight, gather what data we can, and retreat before they return."

They prepared quickly, taking only essential equipment to maximize mobility. The temperature was already dropping precipitously, the wind picking up as they descended from the ridge and began the long approach toward the wall.

The journey was grueling. The terrain became increasingly broken and treacherous as they neared the wall, requiring careful navigation through fields of ice spikes and hidden crevasses. By the time they were within a mile of the structure, Saba's instruments were registering temperatures below minus forty Celsius.

"We need to be quick," Erum warned, his breath forming ice crystals on his face mask. "Exposure at these temperatures will become life-threatening within minutes if we stop moving."

As they drew closer, the true scale of the wall became apparent. It towered above them, a vertical face of ice so massive it seemed to defy physics. The surface wasn't rough or jagged as natural ice formations would be, but smooth in places, with regular patterns that suggested deliberate construction or maintenance.

"This isn't just frozen water," Saba said, examining the wall through specialized goggles. "The composition is different. More crystalline."

She removed a small tool from her pack and carefully extracted a core sample from the wall's base. As she did, her thermal scanner began emitting a rapid series of alert tones.

"What is it?" Erum asked, instantly alert.

“Massive heat signature,” Saba reported, staring at the display in disbelief. “Inside the wall. And it’s... moving.”

As if in response to her words, a deep vibration began to emanate from the ice—the same resonant thrumming Saba had heard the night before, but much stronger now. The very ground beneath their feet trembled.

“We need to go,” Erum said urgently. “Now.”

But before they could retreat, a section of the wall approximately twenty feet above them began to glow with a pale blue light. The ice there seemed to thin, becoming almost transparent, revealing a shadowy shape moving within—something large and serpentine.

“Oh my God,” Maya whispered, her camera forgotten in her shock. “There’s something alive in there.”

The creature—if that’s what it was—moved parallel to the surface, its outline visible through the translucent ice. It appeared to be at least thirty feet long, with a sinuous body that propelled itself through the solid ice as if swimming through water.

“That’s impossible,” Saba breathed, her scientific mind struggling to process what she was seeing.

The creature paused, seeming to sense their presence. Then, with startling speed, it changed direction—heading straight toward the surface where they stood.

“Run!” Erum shouted, grabbing Saba’s arm.

They fled, abandoning any pretense of stealth, racing back across the broken ice field as the vibrations intensified behind them. Saba risked a glance back and saw the wall’s surface bulging outward where the creature was pressing against it.

The ice cracked with a sound like artillery fire, and a spray of crystalline shards exploded outward. Something emerged—a massive, serpentine head with no visible eyes, its skin a pale translucent blue that pulsed with internal light.

“Don’t stop!” Erum urged as Maya stumbled. He caught her, practically carrying her as they continued their desperate flight.

The creature did not pursue them, but remained half-emerged from the wall, its head swaying as if tasting the air. A low, melodic call echoed across the ice, so deep it seemed to vibrate through their bodies.

They didn’t slow until they had reached the relative safety of the ridge, collapsing behind it, gasping for breath in the thin, frigid air.

“What... was... that?” Maya panted, her eyes wide with terror and exhilaration.

“I don’t know,” Saba admitted, her hands shaking as she checked her instruments. “Nothing in known biology can move through solid matter like that.”

“It wasn’t moving through solid matter,” Erum said quietly. “It was moving through the ice as if the ice itself was its natural environment. As if the wall isn’t a barrier, but a... habitat.”

The implications were staggering. If such creatures existed, living within what appeared to be solid ice, what else might be hidden from human knowledge?

"The sample," Saba remembered suddenly, checking her pack. Miraculously, the ice core she had extracted was intact. "This might tell us something about the wall's composition."

As she examined it with a portable analyzer, her expression grew increasingly confused. "This doesn't make sense. According to these readings, this isn't water ice at all. The molecular structure is completely different—more like a crystalline matrix with properties I've never seen before."

"Alien?" Maya suggested, only half-joking.

"Unknown," Saba corrected. "But definitely not natural, at least not according to our current understanding of Earth's geology."

Erum was scanning the area with his binoculars. "The patrol is returning. They must have heard the commotion." He turned to them, his expression grave. "We have a decision to make. We can retreat now, with the evidence we've gathered, or..."

"Or what?" Maya prompted.

"Or we can try to find a way through the wall." His eyes met Saba's. "To see what's on the other side."

The question hung in the air between them, as weighty as the impossible wall that stretched across the horizon. Retreat meant safety, but also leaving with questions unanswered. Continuing meant danger, possibly death, but also the chance to discover a truth so profound it could change humanity's understanding of their world.

Saba thought of her grandfather's stories of hidden worlds and ancient mysteries. She thought of her years of research, the anomalous data that had led her here. And she thought of the creature in the wall, defying everything she thought she knew about physical reality.

"We came for the truth," she said finally. "Whatever it is. I vote we continue."

Maya nodded, her journalist's instinct for a story overriding her fear. "Agreed. We've come too far to turn back now."

Erum studied them both, then nodded once. "Then we need to move quickly and find shelter. The patrol will be here within the hour, and night is falling fast."

As they gathered their equipment and prepared to move, Saba felt Erum's hand on her arm. "Are you sure about this?" he asked quietly. "What we saw... it changes everything."

"That's why we have to continue," she replied. "Science is about facing the unknown, not retreating from it."

A rare smile touched his lips. "The soldier and the scientist, still not so different."

In that moment, despite the danger surrounding them and the impossible creature they had witnessed, Saba felt a surge of something unexpected—not just scientific curiosity or the

thrill of discovery, but a deeper connection to the man beside her, who had risked everything to find the truth.

As they moved out, seeking shelter before the patrol arrived, Saba knew they had crossed a threshold from which there was no return. Whatever lay beyond the wall—whether it confirmed the flat Earth theory or revealed something even more extraordinary—their world had already changed irrevocably.

And somewhere within the massive ice barrier, the creature continued its mysterious journey, a living impossibility that challenged everything humanity thought they knew about their planet. # SURROUNDED

CHAPTER 7

They found shelter in a deep crevasse approximately two miles from the wall, the narrow ice formation providing both concealment from the ARPA patrol and protection from the worsening weather. As night fell completely, the temperature plummeted to lethal levels, making any movement outside their emergency shelter impossible.

“The patrol has set up a perimeter,” Erum reported, returning from a brief reconnaissance at the crevasse entrance. “They’re using thermal scanners, but this formation should mask our heat signatures if we stay deep enough.”

Maya huddled near their minimal heat source, her earlier bravado diminished by the brutal conditions and their narrow escape. “So we’re trapped.”

“Temporarily,” Erum corrected. “They can’t maintain position indefinitely in these conditions. When the next storm front moves in—which satellite data suggests will be within twelve hours—they’ll be forced to withdraw.”

Saba barely heard the conversation, her attention focused on the ice core sample she had taken from the wall. Under her portable microscope, the crystalline structure revealed properties that defied conventional explanation.

“This is remarkable,” she murmured. “The molecular arrangement isn’t static like normal ice. It’s... responsive. Almost like it’s adapting to stimuli.”

“Living ice?” Maya suggested, her journalistic imagination overriding her fear.

“Not living, exactly. But not entirely inert either.” Saba looked up from her microscope. “It’s as if the boundary between solid and liquid states is blurred in this material. That might explain how that creature could move through it.”

“The Ice Leviathan,” Maya said.

Erum and Saba both looked at her.

“What? We need to call it something,” she defended. “And it was definitely leviathan-sized.”

Despite the tension, Saba smiled slightly. “Actually, that’s not a bad name. In mythology, leviathans were often associated with the boundaries of the known world.”

“Speaking of boundaries,” Erum said, joining Saba at her makeshift lab, “have you found anything that might help us understand how to get through the wall?”

Saba hesitated. “Theoretically, if the molecular structure is as adaptive as it appears, there might be areas where the ice is less... solid. Transition zones where the state of matter is more fluid.”

“Like where the creature emerged,” Erum suggested.

“Possibly. But without more sophisticated equipment, I can’t pinpoint such areas.” She gestured to her limited tools. “We’d be searching blindly.”

“Maybe not,” Maya interjected, pulling out her tablet. “I’ve been reviewing the footage I took before we ran. There’s something you should see.”

She played the video, zooming in on a section of the wall near where the Ice Leviathan had emerged. Barely visible in the twilight was what appeared to be a regular pattern of markings embedded in the ice.

“Those look artificial,” Erum observed. “Man-made.”

“Or at least intelligently created,” Saba agreed. “Can you enhance this section?”

Maya adjusted the image, revealing what appeared to be a series of symbols or glyphs carved into the wall’s surface.

“I’ve never seen writing like that,” Erum said.

“Neither have I,” Saba admitted. “But the precision and regularity suggest it’s not random. It’s a communication system of some kind.”

“From who? The Ice Leviathan?” Maya asked.

“Unlikely. The creature didn’t appear to have appendages capable of such detailed work.” Saba studied the symbols more closely. “These markings are weathered, old. They’ve been there a long time.”

“ARPA?” Erum suggested.

“Possibly. Or...” Saba hesitated, the implications of what she was about to suggest giving her pause. “Or whoever built the wall in the first place.”

The statement hung in the air, its significance not lost on any of them. If the wall was artificial—if it had been constructed rather than formed naturally—it implied a level of engineering beyond anything in recorded human history.

“We need to find these markings when we go back,” Saba decided. “They might indicate a passage or at least tell us something about the wall’s purpose.”

“Assuming we can get past the patrol,” Erum reminded them. “And assuming the markings are still there after the Leviathan’s emergence.”

They spent the next few hours planning their approach, studying Maya's footage and Saba's data to identify the most promising area for investigation. Outside, the wind howled with increasing ferocity as the predicted storm began to develop.

During a brief rest period, while Maya slept, Saba found Erum sitting alone at the far end of their shelter, staring at a small photograph he had removed from a waterproof case in his pack.

"Family?" she asked softly, sitting beside him.

He nodded. "My parents and brother. Taken before..." He trailed off.

"Before Antarctica changed everything," she finished for him.

"Yes." He tucked the photo away. "Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I'd just accepted the official explanation. If I'd taken the psychiatric discharge and the medication they offered. I could have had a normal life."

"But you wouldn't have known the truth."

"Is that worth losing everything else?" His question seemed directed as much at himself as at her.

Saba considered this. "I think truth has an intrinsic value, regardless of its consequences. As a scientist, I have to believe that."

"Even if the truth is that everything we've been taught is a lie? That we live on a flat plane surrounded by an ice wall, not a globe spinning through space?"

"Even then," she said firmly. "Because only with truth can we make informed choices about our future."

Erum studied her face in the dim light. "You've changed since Denver. When we first met, you were skeptical of everything I said."

"I'm still skeptical," she corrected with a small smile. "But I follow the evidence, wherever it leads. And right now, it's leading to some very uncomfortable conclusions about our world."

"And about ARPA's role in hiding it," Erum added.

"Yes." Saba's expression grew serious. "What do you think they want? Why maintain this deception on such a massive scale?"

Erum was quiet for a moment, considering. "Control, partly. But I think there's more to it. The way they've built their facility into the wall, the monitoring systems... they're not just hiding the wall's existence. They're guarding it."

"Against what? The Ice Leviathan?"

"Or whatever else might be on the other side." His eyes met hers. "That's what we need to find out."

The intensity of his gaze made Saba acutely aware of how close they were sitting in the confined space. Despite the extreme cold outside, she felt a warmth spreading through her.

"We should get some rest," she said, her voice slightly unsteady. "Tomorrow will be challenging."

Erum nodded, but neither of them moved immediately. In the silence that followed, with the storm raging outside and danger surrounding them, Saba felt an unexpected moment of clarity. Whatever happened next, whatever they discovered beyond the wall, she was exactly where she needed to be—pursuing truth alongside this complicated, principled man.

When she finally returned to her sleeping area, Saba found it difficult to rest, her mind filled with images of the wall, the Ice Leviathan, and the mysterious symbols that might hold the key to what lay beyond.

The storm arrived with full force by morning, just as Erum had predicted. Through the narrow opening of their shelter, they could see only swirling white, the visibility reduced to mere feet.

"The patrol?" Maya asked, packing her equipment.

Erum checked his thermal scanner. "Moving back toward their base. The storm's forcing them to retreat."

"Then this is our chance," Saba said. "We can approach the wall while they're gone."

"In this weather?" Maya looked skeptical. "We'll freeze to death before we get there."

"Not necessarily," Saba replied. "The storm actually works in our favor. The wall creates a microclimate on its leeward side—a zone of relative calm. If we can reach it, we'll have better conditions for exploration."

"And the Ice Leviathan?" Maya asked.

"The thermal readings suggest it's moved deeper into the wall," Saba said, checking her instruments. "Though that could change."

They prepared methodically, donning their heaviest cold-weather gear and distributing essential equipment among their packs. If separated, each of them would have the basic tools needed for survival.

Leaving the shelter was like stepping into another world. The wind hit them with physical force, driving ice particles that stung any exposed skin like tiny needles. Visibility was near zero, requiring them to rope together to avoid separation.

Erum led, using a specialized GPS unit that could function in the extreme conditions. Saba followed, monitoring her thermal scanner for any sign of the Leviathan or ARPA patrols. Maya brought up the rear, documenting their journey despite the challenging conditions.

Progress was agonizingly slow. What should have been a two-hour journey stretched to five as they fought against the storm, each step requiring deliberate effort. But Saba's prediction

proved correct—as they neared the wall, the wind began to diminish, the massive structure providing a buffer against the worst of the storm.

“There,” Erum pointed ahead, where the wall loomed through the swirling snow, its immense vertical face somehow even more imposing in the storm’s diffuse light.

They approached cautiously, alert for any sign of the Leviathan. The area where the creature had emerged was visible from a distance—a jagged wound in the otherwise smooth surface, with crystalline fragments scattered across the ground.

“The markings were to the left of the breach,” Maya said, consulting her tablet. “About twenty meters.”

They moved along the base of the wall until they reached the area Maya had identified. The symbols were still visible, though partially obscured by fresh ice that had already begun to form over them.

“It’s like the wall is healing itself,” Saba observed, examining the phenomenon. “Remarkable.”

She began carefully clearing the ice from the symbols, revealing more of the intricate pattern. Up close, the markings were even more impressive—precise geometric shapes arranged in sequences that suggested a complex writing system or mathematical notation.

“Can you decipher any of it?” Erum asked.

“Not without more time and reference material,” Saba admitted. “But there’s something familiar about the underlying structure. It reminds me of certain ancient writing systems, but more... advanced.”

As she continued to clear the ice, her hand passed over a particular symbol—a circular design with radiating lines. To her shock, the symbol illuminated at her touch, glowing with the same pale blue light they had seen emanating from the Leviathan.

“What did you do?” Maya gasped.

“Nothing,” Saba said, equally surprised. “I just touched it.”

The glow spread to adjacent symbols, creating a flowing pattern of light that moved across the wall’s surface. Then, with a low rumbling sound, a section of the wall began to shift—not breaking or cracking, but flowing, the material reconfiguring itself to create an opening approximately seven feet high.

“It’s a door,” Erum said in disbelief. “A door in the ice wall.”

Beyond the opening was darkness, a tunnel extending into the wall itself. The pale blue illumination from the symbols provided minimal light, revealing walls of the same crystalline material as the exterior.

“The symbols must be some kind of access mechanism,” Saba theorized, her scientific mind racing to make sense of the impossible. “Responsive to human touch, or perhaps body heat.”

“Or maybe it recognized you specifically,” Maya suggested. “Like it was waiting for someone like you to come along.”

Erum approached the opening cautiously, scanning the tunnel with his tactical light. “It extends at least fifty meters, then curves. I can’t see beyond that.”

“We need to document this,” Maya said, already filming. “This is... this changes everything.”

“We need to go through,” Saba said quietly. “This might be our only chance to see what’s on the other side.”

Erum turned to her, his expression serious. “Once we enter, we don’t know if we’ll be able to return the same way. The opening might seal behind us.”

“I know.” Saba met his gaze steadily. “But we came for answers. They’re in there, not out here.”

After a moment of silent communication, Erum nodded. “Maya, are you with us?”

The journalist looked from the forbidding tunnel to the equally dangerous storm behind them. “No turning back now,” she said with forced bravado. “Lead the way.”

Erum went first, his military training making him the logical point person. Saba followed, her instruments recording everything. Maya came last, her camera capturing what might be the most significant discovery in human history.

As they passed through the opening, the crystalline material of the wall seemed to respond to their presence, the blue illumination following their progress. The air inside was surprisingly warm compared to the Antarctic exterior, and had a strange quality—thicker somehow, with an unfamiliar scent that Saba couldn’t identify.

They had traveled perhaps thirty meters into the tunnel when a sound behind them made them turn. The opening through which they had entered was closing, the material flowing back together with the same fluid motion with which it had parted.

“No going back now,” Maya whispered.

They continued forward, the tunnel curving gradually to the right and beginning to slope downward. The blue illumination remained constant, emanating from the walls themselves as if the entire structure was somehow alive or responsive.

After what seemed like hours but was probably less than one, according to Erum’s watch, the tunnel widened into a larger chamber. And there, they encountered something that challenged the very foundations of their understanding of the world.

The chamber was a perfect hemisphere, its curved ceiling at least fifty feet high at the center. The walls were of the same crystalline material as the tunnel, but here they pulsed with more complex patterns of light, creating an ever-changing tapestry of illumination.

But it was what stood at the center of the chamber that froze them in place.

A structure—clearly artificial and clearly not of human design—rose from the floor. It resembled a tower or obelisk, but constructed of materials that shifted and flowed like the

wall itself. Around its base were more of the symbols they had seen outside, but arranged in concentric circles that spiraled toward the center.

And surrounding the structure were figures—humanoid in basic form, but taller and more slender than any human, with pale, almost translucent skin that pulsed with internal light similar to the Leviathan's. They wore no clothing that Saba could discern, but their bodies seemed to be adorned with the same symbolic patterns they had seen on the wall, glowing beneath their skin.

The figures had not yet noticed their presence, their attention focused on the central structure where they appeared to be engaged in some kind of ritual or procedure.

"What are they?" Maya breathed, her camera forgotten in her shock.

"I don't know," Saba whispered back. "But they're clearly intelligent, clearly organized."

"The Guardians," Erum said softly. "That's what ARPA called them in the classified files I glimpsed. The Guardians of the Boundary."

As if hearing his words, one of the figures turned suddenly in their direction. Its face was humanoid but with distinctly non-human features—larger, almond-shaped eyes that had no visible pupils, just a uniform luminescence; a smaller nose and mouth; and an elongated cranium.

For a moment, the three humans and the Guardian regarded each other in silence. Then the Guardian raised a four-fingered hand, palm outward, in what seemed like a gesture of acknowledgment or greeting.

"What do we do?" Maya asked, her voice barely audible.

"We respond in kind," Saba decided, stepping forward slightly and raising her own hand in a mirror of the Guardian's gesture.

The Guardian's internal luminescence brightened, and it made a sound—not speech as humans would recognize it, but a melodic series of tones that seemed to resonate within the chamber.

The other Guardians turned then, their attention shifting from the central structure to the human intruders. Some made similar gestures, while others moved toward what appeared to be control panels or interfaces embedded in the chamber walls.

"Are they threatening us?" Maya asked nervously.

"I don't think so," Erum said, studying their movements with a tactical eye. "Their posture isn't aggressive. More... curious."

The first Guardian approached them slowly, its movements fluid and graceful. As it drew closer, Saba could see more details of its unusual physiology—the way light seemed to flow beneath its skin, the intricate patterns that covered its body, the strange proportions of its limbs.

It stopped a few feet away, regarding them with those luminous eyes. Then it spoke again, the melodic tones now clearly directed at them, as if in question or greeting.

“We can’t understand you,” Saba said, unsure if the being could comprehend human speech but feeling the need to respond somehow.

The Guardian tilted its head, then raised both hands to its temples in a gesture that reminded Saba of concentration. Suddenly, she felt a strange sensation—a presence in her mind, not invasive but definitely there, like a gentle pressure.

Images began to form in her thoughts—not her own memories or ideas, but communications from outside. She saw the wall, the Earth, the stars—but arranged differently than she had ever seen them. She saw creatures like the Ice Leviathan moving through the wall as if it were their natural habitat. And she saw humans—earlier explorers who had encountered the Guardians, some welcomed, others turned away.

“It’s communicating telepathically,” she gasped, looking at Erum and Maya to see if they were experiencing the same thing.

Their expressions confirmed they were. Maya’s eyes were wide with wonder and fear, while Erum maintained his composure despite the extraordinary circumstance, though his hand had moved instinctively toward the concealed weapon Saba knew he carried.

The mental communication continued, becoming more structured, more comprehensible as the Guardian apparently adjusted to their minds. Concepts rather than words flowed into Saba’s consciousness:

Welcome. Long-awaited. Beyond-travelers. Truth-seekers.

“They were expecting us,” Saba realized aloud. “Or someone like us.”

Yes. Predicted. Cycle-completion. Revelation-time.

The Guardian gestured toward the central structure, clearly inviting them to approach. After a moment’s hesitation, they followed, moving deeper into the chamber where the other Guardians parted to allow them passage.

The central structure was even more impressive up close—a tower of flowing, crystalline material that seemed to contain galaxies within it, points of light swirling in complex patterns. At its base was what appeared to be a control interface, with more of the symbolic language arranged in concentric circles.

Truth-place. World-memory. Seeing-beyond.

The Guardian placed its hand on the interface, and the entire structure illuminated with brilliant blue-white light. Within the tower, images began to form—three-dimensional projections of such clarity and detail that they seemed solid.

Saba, Erum, and Maya watched in awe as the images coalesced into a representation of Earth—not as a globe spinning in space, but as a flat, circular plane surrounded by the massive ice wall they had just penetrated.

“My God,” Saba breathed. “It’s true. The Earth really is flat.”

But the revelation was only beginning. As they watched, the projection expanded to show what lay beyond the wall—a vast, uncharted expanse containing other “pools” like Earth, separated by similar ice barriers. Each pool appeared to be a self-contained world with its own unique features and inhabitants.

And beyond all of these, at what appeared to be the edge of existence itself, was something else—a boundary of pure energy, a dome or firmament that enclosed the entire plane, separating it from whatever lay beyond.

Your-world. One-of-many. Protected-contained.

“Protected from what?” Erum asked aloud, though he understood the Guardian would perceive his thoughts rather than his words.

In response, the projection shifted to show the firmament from the outside—and beyond it, shapes and entities so alien, so utterly foreign to human experience that Saba’s mind struggled to process what she was seeing. Not creatures as Earth would understand them, but beings of energy and matter combined in impossible ways, existing in dimensions that seemed to fold and unfold according to incomprehensible laws.

Outside-ones. Different-reality. Always-seeking-entry.

The implications were staggering. The flat Earth, the ice wall, the firmament—all were real, but not as simple conspiracy theories had imagined them. They were protective measures, a complex system designed to shield the “pools” of habitable worlds from something far more alien and potentially threatening than humans had ever conceived.

And the Guardians were exactly that—guardians, maintaining the boundary between realities, protecting the enclosed worlds from what lay beyond.

As the projection faded, the Guardian turned to them, its luminous eyes seeming to evaluate their reactions to this world-shattering revelation.

Now-knowing. Choice-making. Forward-path.

Saba understood. They had been granted knowledge few humans had ever possessed. What they did with it would determine not just their own fate, but potentially the fate of everyone in their “pool”—the world they had always known as Earth.

She looked at Erum, seeing in his eyes the same overwhelming mix of awe, vindication, and new questions. They had found the truth they sought, but it was far more complex and profound than either of them had imagined.

And somewhere beyond the chamber, beyond the wall, ARPA was still searching for them—an organization that clearly knew at least some of what they had just learned, and had dedicated itself to keeping that knowledge hidden from humanity.

The real journey, Saba realized, was just beginning. # SURROUNDED

CHAPTER 8

Time seemed to lose meaning in the Guardian chamber. Saba couldn't tell if they had been there for hours or days as they absorbed the revelations presented to them. The Guardians continued to communicate telepathically, sharing knowledge that challenged everything humanity had ever believed about their world.

"We need to document this," Maya whispered, her journalist's instincts reasserting themselves. She had been filming continuously, though Saba wondered if conventional cameras could truly capture the shifting, luminous nature of the Guardians and their technology.

The first Guardian—the one who had initially communicated with them—approached again. Its internal light pulsed in patterns that Saba was beginning to recognize as emotional indicators.

More-seeing. Follow-now.

The Guardian led them from the central chamber through a crystalline archway into another space entirely. This room was smaller but somehow felt more significant. The walls were lined with what appeared to be viewing portals—circular openings that showed different locations across Earth and beyond.

"Monitoring stations," Erum murmured, his tactical assessment cutting through his awe. "They're watching... everything."

Indeed, each portal showed a different scene: major cities, remote wilderness areas, ocean depths, and places Saba couldn't identify that must lie beyond the ice wall in other "pools" of existence.

Watching-protecting. Balance-maintaining.

The Guardian gestured to a particular portal that showed a familiar structure—the ARPA facility built into the ice wall.

Human-guardians. Knowledge-keepers. Some-corrupted.

Images flowed into their minds: humans discovering the wall centuries ago; initial contact with the Guardians; an agreement formed to protect humanity from knowledge they weren't ready to comprehend; a select few entrusted with maintaining the secret.

"ARPA was created to work with you," Saba realized. "To help maintain the boundary."

Yes. Partnership-alliance. Protection-mutual.

"But something changed," Erum said, studying the images of the ARPA facility with narrowed eyes.

The Guardian's luminescence dimmed slightly, conveying what Saba interpreted as concern or sadness.

Leader-new. Reeves-named. Power-seeking. Control-wanting.

The portal shifted to show Dr. Victor Reeves in what appeared to be a negotiation with several Guardians. His expression was respectful, but his thoughts—somehow visible in the Guardian’s projection—revealed ambition and calculation.

“He’s using his position for his own agenda,” Erum said grimly. “Not just protecting humanity from knowledge they’re not ready for, but controlling that knowledge for power.”

Yes. Danger-creating. Balance-threatening.

The portal shifted again, showing something that made Saba gasp—a massive breach forming in the ice wall, far from their current location. The crystalline material was fracturing, and through the cracks, something was attempting to enter—something that resembled the alien entities they had glimpsed beyond the firmament.

“The boundary is failing,” she whispered.

Yes. Protection-weakening. Outside-ones-sensing.

“Is that why the Ice Leviathan was agitated?” Saba asked. “It sensed the breach?”

Guardians-animal. Danger-sensing. Warning-giving.

The implications were staggering. The Ice Leviathan wasn’t just a strange creature—it was part of the boundary’s defense system, a living sentinel that patrolled the wall.

“What happens if the boundary fails completely?” Maya asked, her voice trembling slightly.

The Guardian didn’t need to answer verbally. Images flooded their minds: the outside entities pouring through breaches in the wall; the ordered reality of Earth’s “pool” beginning to unravel as incompatible physical laws collided; chaos spreading across the world as humans encountered beings they couldn’t comprehend.

“How do we stop it?” Erum asked, ever the soldier looking for a mission.

Rebalance-needed. Original-agreement-restore. Human-guardian-cooperation.

“But Reeves controls ARPA,” Saba pointed out. “And he’s not interested in cooperation.”

The Guardian turned its luminous gaze directly to her.

You-chosen. Truth-carriers. Change-bringers.

“Us?” Maya looked incredulous. “What can we do against an entire organization with government backing?”

Truth-powerful. Seeing-believing. Others-waiting.

More images filled their minds: other humans who had glimpsed the truth over centuries; a network of individuals who suspected or knew parts of the reality; people within ARPA itself who disagreed with Reeves’ direction.

“There are others who would help us,” Erum translated. “If we can reach them.”

Yes. Time-short. Decision-needed.

The Guardian led them to another portal, this one showing the breach in the wall growing larger. Near it, ARPA personnel were attempting to contain the damage using technology that appeared to be a human adaptation of Guardian designs.

Choice-yours. Return-warn. Or continue-beyond.

"You're asking if we want to go back through the wall to warn humanity, or continue exploring what lies beyond?" Saba clarified.

Yes. Paths-diverging. Both-needed.

Saba looked at Erum and Maya. The choice before them was momentous. Return to their world with the truth, facing ARPA and likely persecution, or continue into the unknown, exploring the other "pools" of existence beyond the ice wall.

"We should split up," Erum said after a moment of consideration. "Maya should return with the evidence—the footage, the data. Her journalistic connections give her the best chance of spreading the truth."

"While we do what?" Saba asked.

"We continue," he said simply. "We find out more about what's beyond, about the breach, about how to fix it. Between your scientific knowledge and my tactical experience, we have the best chance of success."

Maya looked between them, clearly torn between her desire to break the biggest story in human history and her fear of facing ARPA alone.

"He's right," she finally said. "I can get this information out through channels they can't easily shut down. And you two..." She gave them a knowing look. "You work well together."

Saba felt heat rise to her cheeks but didn't deny it. There was no point hiding her feelings here, where the Guardians could likely sense her thoughts anyway.

"Will you help us?" she asked the Guardian. "Can you ensure Maya returns safely and help us continue our journey?"

Yes. Paths-preparing. Time-limited.

The Guardian made a gesture, and two others approached. One moved to Maya's side, while the other stood ready to guide Saba and Erum.

"I guess this is goodbye for now," Maya said, suddenly emotional. She hugged Saba fiercely. "Be careful out there, Doc. Come back with one hell of a story."

"You too," Saba replied, surprised by how attached she'd grown to the brash journalist in their short time together. "Stay safe. Trust no one until you've released the information."

Maya turned to Erum. "Take care of her, soldier boy. And let her take care of you too."

Erum nodded, his usual stoicism softened slightly. "We'll meet again, Maya. When this is over."

As Maya and her Guardian guide departed through a different archway, Saba felt a momentary pang of doubt. Were they making the right choice? Separating seemed logical but dangerous.

Erum seemed to sense her uncertainty. "She'll be okay. Maya's smarter and tougher than she lets on."

"I know," Saba said. "It's not just that. It's... everything. The flat Earth, the other 'pools,' the breach. It's overwhelming."

"One step at a time," Erum said, his steady presence grounding her. "That's how we've made it this far."

Their Guardian guide indicated they should follow, leading them through yet another crystalline archway. This passage was different—longer, with walls that shifted in color and texture as they walked, as if they were moving through different layers of reality.

"Where are we going?" Saba asked, though she knew the Guardian would respond to her thoughts rather than her words.

Beyond-traveling. Next-pool-seeing. Breach-approaching.

The passage began to slope upward, and the quality of light changed—becoming warmer, more golden. The air, too, felt different—richer somehow, with scents Saba couldn't identify but found strangely familiar, like a forgotten memory.

Finally, they emerged into brilliant light that momentarily blinded them. As their eyes adjusted, a landscape unlike anything they had ever seen came into focus.

They stood on a high ridge overlooking a vast plain. The sky above was not blue but a soft amber color, with two small suns visible near the horizon. The plain below was covered in vegetation that resembled Earth's, but with colors shifted toward purples and silvers rather than greens. In the distance, structures rose that might have been cities, their architecture fluid and organic like the Guardians' technology.

"Another world," Saba breathed. "Another 'pool' within the flat plane."

Yes. Neighbor-realm. Different-evolution. Same-protection.

"There are people here? Intelligent life?" Erum asked, scanning the landscape with both wonder and tactical assessment.

Yes. Different-form. Similar-mind. Guardians-knowing.

"And they don't know about us? About Earth?" Saba asked.

Some-knowing. Most-separate. Protection-purpose.

Saba understood. The separation between "pools" wasn't just physical but purposeful—allowing different forms of life and civilization to develop independently, protected from outside interference, whether from other pools or from beyond the firmament.

"And the breach threatens them too," Erum said, not a question but a realization.

All-threatened. All-connected. Failure-cascading.

The Guardian led them along the ridge toward what appeared to be a path leading down to the plain below. As they walked, Saba noticed something in the distance—a distortion in the air, like heat waves but more structured, forming patterns that hurt her eyes if she looked directly at them.

“Is that the breach?” she asked.

Yes. Reality-thinning. Outside-pressing.

“How do we stop it?” Erum asked.

Balance-restoring. Pools-connecting. Unity-creating.

The concepts were abstract, but Saba thought she understood. “The separation between pools has become too rigid, creating weak points. We need to establish controlled connections—channels that allow for balance without complete merging.”

Yes. Wisdom-having. Understanding-growing.

“And that’s why you brought us here,” Erum realized. “Not just to show us, but because we can help somehow.”

Bridge-builders. Between-walkers. Human-guardian-connection.

They continued toward the path, but before they could begin their descent to the plain below, a sound from behind made them turn. A familiar vibration ran through the ground—the same resonance Saba had felt in Antarctica.

An Ice Leviathan—or something very similar—emerged from what appeared to be solid rock, its crystalline body glowing with internal light. But unlike the one they had encountered at the wall, this one was accompanied by a rider—a humanoid figure that resembled the Guardians but with adaptations suggesting it was native to this realm.

The rider dismounted with fluid grace and approached them. Unlike the Guardians, this being wore what appeared to be armor or ceremonial garb made of a material that shifted colors like oil on water. Its skin had a purplish tint that matched the dominant vegetation of the plain below.

The Guardian accompanying them made a series of melodic tones, apparently communicating with the newcomer. The rider responded in kind, then turned to study Saba and Erum with eyes that were entirely silver, without pupil or iris.

Boundary-dweller. Scout-leader. Ally-potential.

The rider approached closer, then made a gesture similar to the greeting the first Guardian had offered them—a hand raised, palm outward. Saba and Erum returned the gesture.

A new presence touched their minds—similar to the Guardians’ communication but with a different texture, more vibrant and emotional.

Humans. Earth-born. Long-awaited.

“They were expecting us too?” Erum murmured.

Prophecy-fulfilling. Cycle-completing. Change-bringing.

The rider gestured for them to follow, indicating the path down to the plain. The Guardian who had guided them thus far made a sound that Saba somehow understood as encouragement.

Go. Learn. Return-when-ready.

“You’re not coming with us?” Saba asked, suddenly apprehensive about being separated from their guide.

Different-purpose. Different-path. Rejoin-later.

The Guardian turned and began to walk back toward the passage through which they had emerged. Saba felt a momentary panic—they were being left alone in an alien world with only this unknown rider as a guide.

Erum’s hand found hers, his grip firm and reassuring. “Together,” he said simply.

The touch grounded her, reminding her that whatever strange new reality they were facing, they were facing it as a team. She nodded, squeezing his hand in return.

“Together.”

The rider waited patiently, its silver eyes unreadable but its mental presence conveying what Saba interpreted as approval or satisfaction.

Bond-strong. Necessary-coming.

With one last look at the passage to Earth, Saba turned and followed the rider down the path, still holding Erum’s hand. Whatever lay ahead in this strange new world, whatever role they were expected to play in healing the breach between realities, they would face it united.

And somewhere behind them, Maya was returning to their world with evidence that would shatter humanity’s understanding of reality. The truth was in motion now, unstoppable as the Ice Leviathan moving through solid matter.

The world—or worlds—would never be the same again. # SURROUNDED

CHAPTER 9

Maya Chen had never considered herself particularly brave. Reckless, yes. Determined, absolutely. But brave? That was something else entirely. Yet here she was, following a luminous Guardian through crystalline passages that shouldn’t exist, carrying evidence that would shatter humanity’s understanding of reality.

The Guardian moved with fluid grace, occasionally pausing to ensure she kept pace. Unlike the telepathic communication she had experienced in the chamber, this Guardian seemed more reserved, sharing only basic directional concepts rather than complex information.

Return-path. Careful-movement. Danger-ahead.

"Danger?" Maya asked aloud, clutching her equipment bag tighter. "What kind of danger?"

The Guardian didn't elaborate, simply gesturing for her to continue following. The passages were changing, becoming less ornate and more utilitarian, as if they were moving from ceremonial spaces to functional ones.

After what felt like hours but might have been minutes—time seemed distorted in this place—they reached what appeared to be a junction. Multiple passages branched off in different directions, each with subtle variations in the crystalline composition of their walls.

The Guardian paused, its internal luminescence pulsing in patterns Maya now recognized as indicating concentration or concern. It extended a four-fingered hand toward one particular passage, then transmitted a clearer mental image:

ARPA-humans. Searching. Capturing.

Maya understood. ARPA personnel had entered the wall, perhaps through another access point, and were searching for them. The thought sent a chill through her that had nothing to do with the ambient temperature.

"Is there another way?" she whispered, though she knew the Guardian responded to thoughts rather than speech.

Yes. Longer. Safer.

The Guardian indicated a different passage—narrower, less well-defined, almost as if it were still in the process of forming.

New-path. Recently-created. Less-monitored.

Maya nodded, following as the Guardian led her into the narrow passage. The walls here were different—less crystalline, more fluid, occasionally rippling as if responding to their presence. The blue illumination was dimmer, requiring Maya to move more carefully to avoid stumbling.

"How much further?" she asked after they had been traveling for some time.

Exit-near. Preparation-needed.

The Guardian stopped at what appeared to be a dead end. The crystalline wall before them was solid, showing no sign of an opening or mechanism. The Guardian placed both hands against the surface, its internal light intensifying as it appeared to concentrate.

Slowly, the wall began to respond, becoming more translucent. Through it, Maya could see the Antarctic landscape—the endless white expanse, the brutal wind whipping snow into frenzied patterns. Freedom was just meters away, yet it looked as uninviting as a prison.

Listen-important. Exit-here. ARPA-facility-near.

The Guardian transmitted more detailed information: they were emerging approximately two kilometers from the ARPA facility built into the wall. The storm had subsided, which

meant better traveling conditions but also greater visibility—for her and for any ARPA patrols.

Direction-this. The Guardian showed her a mental image of the route she should take, avoiding ARPA's likely patrol patterns. Communication-device-take.

The Guardian produced a small object from somewhere within its flowing form—a crystalline disc about the size of a poker chip, with the same faint blue luminescence as the wall itself.

Help-calling. Emergency-only. Once-using.

Maya took the disc, feeling a slight vibration against her palm. "Thank you," she said, tucking it securely into an inner pocket of her thermal suit.

The Guardian's next transmission was unexpected:

Courage-having. Important-role. History-changing.

Maya felt a surge of emotion at the acknowledgment. "I'll do my best," she promised. "I'll make sure the world knows the truth."

Truth-complex. Sharing-careful. Understanding-gradual.

The warning was clear: dumping all this information at once could cause panic or disbelief. She would need to be strategic in how she revealed what they had discovered.

The wall was now almost completely transparent, the Antarctic wind audible through the thinning barrier. The Guardian made one final communication:

Speed-essential. Trust-selective. Return-possible.

With that, the wall dissolved completely, and Maya stepped back onto the frozen continent, the brutal cold instantly assaulting her despite her thermal gear. When she turned to look back, the opening was already closing, the Guardian a luminous silhouette that raised one hand in farewell before disappearing entirely.

Alone now, Maya oriented herself using the mental map the Guardian had provided. The ARPA facility was to the east, which meant she needed to head west, toward the extraction point where the Chilean vessel would hopefully return for them.

She checked her equipment—camera, tablet, sample containers with the crystalline fragments Saba had collected. All intact. The evidence was secure. Now she just had to survive long enough to share it.

Moving as quickly as the treacherous terrain allowed, Maya began her journey across the ice. The wind had indeed diminished, but the temperature remained lethal, requiring constant movement to maintain body heat.

She had covered perhaps half a kilometer when she heard it—the distinctive sound of a snowmobile engine. Dropping to a prone position behind an ice formation, she watched as an ARPA patrol vehicle crested a ridge to the north, two figures in white thermal gear scanning the landscape with what appeared to be advanced optical equipment.

They hadn't spotted her yet, but their search pattern would bring them directly to her position within minutes. Maya assessed her options: running would make her visible; staying put would eventually lead to discovery; trying to circle around them risked exposure in the open terrain.

As the patrol drew closer, Maya made her decision. Keeping low, she moved to a deeper crevice in the ice formation, wedging herself into the narrow space and covering her tracks as best she could. It wasn't perfect, but it might be enough if the patrol wasn't specifically looking for a person hiding in this exact location.

The snowmobile's engine grew louder, then stopped. Voices carried on the still air—two men discussing search patterns and thermal readings. Maya held her breath as footsteps crunched in the snow, approaching her hiding place.

"Sector four clear," one voice reported, presumably into a radio. "Moving to sector five."

The footsteps receded, and the snowmobile engine started again. Maya waited until the sound had faded completely before emerging from her hiding place, her limbs stiff from the cold and the confined position.

She needed to move faster now. The patrol's presence confirmed ARPA was actively searching the area, likely for her and her companions. The extraction point was still at least fifteen kilometers away—a challenging journey under the best conditions, potentially impossible with ARPA hunting her.

As she resumed her trek, Maya's thoughts turned to Saba and Erum, now exploring a completely different world beyond the wall. Had they made the right choice in separating? Would any of them complete their missions?

The doubt was unproductive. Maya forced herself to focus on the immediate task—survival and escape with the evidence. One step at a time, as Erum would say. The soldier's methodical approach had rubbed off on her more than she'd realized.

Hours passed as she navigated the Antarctic terrain, constantly alert for signs of ARPA patrols. The brief daylight was fading, the temperature dropping further as night approached. Maya checked her GPS—still ten kilometers from the extraction point, and her thermal suit's battery was showing signs of depletion from the extended use.

She needed shelter for the night. Continuing in darkness would be suicidal, both due to the temperature and the treacherous terrain. Using her limited survival training, Maya identified a suitable location—a natural ice cave formed where two pressure ridges met, providing protection from the wind and concealment from aerial observation.

As she set up her emergency shelter within the cave, Maya reviewed the footage on her camera. The images were clear, the evidence compelling—the wall, the Guardians, the revelation about Earth's true nature. It was the story of a lifetime, one that would rewrite history and human understanding of reality.

If she survived to tell it.

Commander James Harlow stood in the monitoring room of the ARPA facility, studying the search grid displayed on the main screen. The three intruders had disappeared nearly forty-eight hours ago, their last known position approximately five kilometers from the wall.

"Sector five is clear, sir," reported the patrol leader over the radio. "No signs of human presence or recent activity."

Harlow acknowledged the report, then turned to the technician monitoring the wall's integrity. "Any changes in the anomalous readings?"

"No, sir. The breach is stable but not improving. Containment measures are holding for now."

Harlow nodded, his expression revealing nothing of his inner conflict. Twenty years with ARPA had taught him the importance of their mission—protecting humanity from truths they weren't ready to comprehend, maintaining the boundary between realities. But Reeves' recent directives troubled him.

The door slid open, and Dr. Victor Reeves entered, his distinguished appearance belying the ruthless ambition Harlow had come to recognize in the man.

"No sign of our visitors?" Reeves asked, studying the search grid.

"Not yet, sir. But the terrain limits their options. They'll either attempt to reach their extraction point or..."

"Or they've found a way through the wall," Reeves finished, his tone making it clear which option he considered more concerning.

"Is that possible?" Harlow asked carefully. "Without Guardian assistance?"

Reeves gave him a measured look. "The Guardians have become... unpredictable in recent months. Ever since we began implementing the new containment protocols."

Harlow chose his next words carefully. "Sir, about those protocols—the increased energy extraction from the wall is showing correlation with the breach expansion. Perhaps if we reverted to the original methods—"

"The original methods are insufficient, Commander," Reeves cut him off. "The boundary is weakening regardless of our actions. What we're doing is necessary to prepare humanity for what's coming."

"And what exactly is coming, sir?" Harlow pressed, unusual boldness in his question.

Reeves smiled thinly. "Change, Commander. Inevitable change. The question is whether we control that change or are controlled by it." He turned back to the monitoring screen. "I want those intruders found. Particularly Dr. Anderson. Her expertise could be valuable to us."

"And if they resist?"

“Then ensure they can’t share what they’ve seen.” Reeves’ tone was matter-of-fact, as if ordering coffee rather than potentially authorizing lethal force. “The truth must be managed carefully, Commander. You know that better than most.”

As Reeves left the monitoring room, Harlow remained at the screen, a growing unease settling in his stomach. Throughout his career with ARPA, he had believed in their mission—protecting humanity through necessary secrecy. But Reeves’ agenda felt different, more about control than protection.

And now three civilians had potentially discovered the truth—not just about the wall, but perhaps about what lay beyond it. If they had indeed made contact with the Guardians, they might know more about ARPA’s true purpose than Harlow himself did.

For the first time in his career, Commander Harlow found himself questioning which side he should be on.

Maya woke to a strange vibration against her chest. Disoriented from the cold and exhaustion, it took her a moment to realize the source—the crystalline disc the Guardian had given her, now pulsing with increased luminescence through the fabric of her thermal suit.

She extracted it carefully, the disc warm against her fingers despite the freezing temperature of the ice cave. As she held it, the vibration intensified, and suddenly her mind was filled with a familiar presence—the telepathic communication of the Guardians.

Danger-immediate. ARPA-approaching. Different-path-take.

With the mental message came images—ARPA patrols converging on her location from multiple directions, having somehow tracked her to the ice cave. And with it, an alternative route to the extraction point, one that would take her through more difficult terrain but away from the search pattern.

Maya packed quickly, the disc continuing to pulse in her hand. As she prepared to leave the cave, a new message formed in her mind:

Help-coming. Trust-necessary. Wait-briefly.

Wait? With ARPA closing in? The instruction seemed contradictory to the warning of immediate danger. But something in the Guardian’s mental tone conveyed urgency and certainty.

Maya hesitated at the cave entrance, scanning the dim Antarctic twilight for signs of approaching patrols. Nothing yet, but the mental images had shown they were close—perhaps just over the nearest ridge.

A sound drew her attention—not the mechanical noise of snowmobiles or aircraft, but something organic, a low resonant thrumming that seemed to vibrate through the ice itself. A sound she had heard before, when they encountered the Ice Leviathan.

The ice near the cave entrance began to shift, not cracking but flowing, reconfiguring itself. Maya stepped back, her heart racing as a familiar serpentine form emerged—an Ice Leviathan, its crystalline body glowing with internal blue light.

But unlike their previous encounter, this Leviathan didn't seem threatening. It remained half-emerged from the ice, its eyeless head swaying gently as if waiting. The disc in Maya's hand pulsed in rhythm with the creature's internal luminescence.

Ride-offering. Escape-facilitating. Trust-needed.

The message was clear but incredible. The Guardian was offering the Leviathan as transportation—a way to evade the ARPA patrols and reach the extraction point quickly.

Maya stared at the creature, remembering the terror she had felt when they first encountered one near the wall. Could she really trust this being? Mount it and allow it to carry her through solid ice?

The sound of engines in the distance made the decision for her. ARPA was coming, and her options were limited to certain capture or a leap of faith.

"I must be insane," she muttered, approaching the Leviathan cautiously.

The creature lowered its head to the ground, creating what appeared to be a natural mounting point just behind its skull. Maya hesitated only briefly before climbing onto the smooth, crystalline surface, surprised to find it warm to the touch despite its ice-like appearance.

Hold-secure. Eyes-close. Breathe-normal.

Maya gripped what seemed like natural handholds in the creature's crystalline structure, closed her eyes as instructed, and tried to maintain normal breathing despite her pounding heart.

The sensation that followed defied description. The Leviathan moved forward, and Maya felt a moment of resistance as they reached solid ice—then a strange fluidity as they passed through it. There was no sense of suffocation or cold, just a tingling warmth and the feeling of rapid movement.

She kept her eyes closed as instructed, focusing on her breathing and the rhythmic vibration of the Leviathan's movement. Time became meaningless as they traveled through the solid ice, the only constant the warmth of the creature beneath her and the pulsing of the disc against her palm.

When the sensation finally changed—a subtle shift in pressure and temperature—Maya cautiously opened her eyes. They had emerged onto the surface again, but in a completely different location. Before them stretched the open sea, dark waves crashing against the edge of the ice shelf. And in the distance, a vessel—the Chilean ship that had brought them to Antarctica, right on schedule for extraction.

The Leviathan lowered its head, allowing Maya to dismount on solid ice just meters from the water's edge. As she stood on shaking legs, the creature began to retreat back into the ice.

"Thank you," Maya said aloud, knowing the sentiment would be understood even if the words weren't.

The Leviathan paused, its internal light pulsing once more in what seemed like acknowledgment, then disappeared into the solid ice as if it were water.

Maya turned toward the sea, the evidence of humanity's greatest discovery secure in her pack. Now she just needed to signal the ship and complete her journey home—where the real challenge would begin.

The truth about the flat Earth, the wall, the Guardians, and the worlds beyond was about to be revealed. And nothing would ever be the same again.

CHAPTER 10

The alien landscape stretched before Saba and Erum as they followed their silver-eyed guide down the winding path toward the plain below. The amber sky cast everything in a warm glow, making the purple vegetation shimmer with an almost metallic quality.

"I still can't believe this is real," Saba murmured, her scientific mind struggling to process the impossible reality surrounding them. "An entirely different world, just beyond the ice wall."

"And apparently one of many," Erum added, his tactical awareness never faltering despite his obvious wonder. His eyes constantly scanned their surroundings, assessing potential threats and escape routes out of habit.

Their guide—the Boundary Dweller, as the Guardian had called them—moved with fluid grace across the terrain. Unlike the Guardians, whose communication was primarily telepathic, this being occasionally produced vocalizations—melodic tones that seemed to carry meaning beyond the sounds themselves.

Settlement-approaching. Preparation-needed. Reaction-controlling.

The mental communication was similar to the Guardians' but with subtle differences—more emotional content, less abstract conceptualization.

"They're warning us that we might cause a stir," Erum translated. "We're probably the first humans these people have seen."

As they descended further, details of the landscape became clearer. What had appeared to be cities in the distance were indeed settlements, but with architecture unlike anything on Earth—structures that seemed to grow from the ground rather than being built upon it, with spiraling towers and flowing lines that defied conventional engineering.

The vegetation, too, became more diverse as they approached the plain. Plants that resembled trees stretched upward, their trunks a deep indigo and their foliage a

shimmering silver. Smaller organisms that might have been this world's equivalent of flowers pulsed with bioluminescence even in daylight.

"The evolutionary path here must have diverged significantly from Earth's," Saba observed, her scientific curiosity momentarily overriding her awe. "Different spectrum of sunlight, different atmospheric composition, different gravitational conditions..."

"Yet still recognizable," Erum noted. "Humanoid inhabitants, plant-like organisms, familiar ecological niches. The underlying patterns seem consistent across pools."

Saba glanced at him, impressed by his insight. "You'd have made a good scientist in another life."

A rare smile touched his lips. "And you'd have made a formidable intelligence officer. You notice everything."

Their guide paused, turning to observe their interaction with those unsettling silver eyes. A sense of approval emanated from its mental presence.

Bond-strengthening. Good-necessary. Challenges-coming.

They continued downward, finally reaching the edge of what appeared to be cultivated fields. The crops were unfamiliar—spiral-shaped plants with translucent pods containing luminescent fluid—but the organized rows and irrigation systems were unmistakably the product of agricultural intelligence.

Workers moved among the fields—beings similar to their guide, with the same purplish skin and silver eyes, though with variations in height and build that suggested individual differences similar to human diversity. They wore simple garments of a flowing material that shifted colors slightly as they moved.

Their arrival did not go unnoticed. The workers stopped their activities, staring at the strange visitors with expressions that needed no translation—surprise, curiosity, and a touch of apprehension.

Their guide made a series of melodic tones, apparently explaining their presence. The workers responded with similar sounds, some approaching cautiously to get a better look at the humans.

Curiosity-natural. Fear-unnecessary. Welcome-extending.

"They're not used to visitors from other pools," Saba guessed.

Rare-occurrence. Guardians-only-usually. Human-never-before.

This confirmation that they were the first humans to visit this realm sent a shiver of both pride and trepidation through Saba. They were making history, but also bearing an enormous responsibility as representatives of their species.

Their guide led them through the fields toward the nearest settlement. As they walked, more of the realm's inhabitants gathered to observe them, forming a growing procession of

curious onlookers. Children—or what Saba assumed were children based on their smaller size—darted forward to get closer looks before being gently pulled back by adults.

The settlement itself was even more remarkable up close. The structures were indeed grown rather than built, composed of a material that seemed part crystal, part organic matter. Doorways and windows appeared as natural openings in the flowing forms, while interior spaces were visible as hollows within the translucent walls.

At the center of the settlement stood a larger structure, more elaborate than the others, with spiraling towers that reached toward the amber sky. Their guide led them directly to this building, where a group of figures waited at the entrance.

These individuals wore more elaborate garments than the field workers, with intricate patterns woven into the color-shifting fabric. One stepped forward—taller than the others, with a bearing that suggested authority.

Elder-leader. Council-head. Knowledge-keeper.

The Elder approached them, studying them with intense silver eyes. Unlike their guide, this being's mental communication was stronger, more precise:

Earth-visitors. Prophecy-fulfillment. Long-awaited.

"They knew we were coming," Erum murmured. "Or at least that someone like us would come eventually."

The Elder made a gesture of welcome—both hands extended, palms upward—then indicated they should follow inside the central structure.

The interior was a single vast chamber, its walls curving upward to form a dome. Light filtered through the translucent material, creating patterns across the floor that shifted with the movement of the twin suns outside. In the center stood what appeared to be a meeting area—a circle of raised seats surrounding a depression in the floor where a pool of luminescent liquid glowed with the same blue light they had seen in the ice wall.

The Elder gestured for them to sit on two of the raised seats, while the other council members took positions around the circle. Their guide remained standing near the entrance.

Communication-enhancing. Understanding-deepening.

The Elder placed both hands into the glowing pool. Immediately, the liquid responded, its luminescence intensifying and patterns forming on its surface. Saba realized it was some kind of technology—perhaps a communication device or data repository.

The mental connection strengthened dramatically, becoming clearer and more detailed than any they had experienced before:

Welcome to Lumina, travelers from Earth. We have awaited your arrival for many cycles.

The specificity of the communication was startling—actual words rather than just concepts, though still transmitted mentally rather than spoken.

"You speak our language?" Saba asked in surprise.

We do not speak it, but we understand it through the Communion Pool. It allows us to access knowledge from all the realms, including yours. The Guardians have shared much about your world with us over the centuries.

"Then you know why we're here?" Erum asked.

You seek understanding of the breach in the boundary. You wish to know how to heal it.

"Yes," Saba confirmed. "We've learned that our world—Earth—is one of many 'pools' on a vast plane, protected by the ice wall and ultimately by the firmament from... outside entities. And now that protection is failing."

The Elder's silver eyes seemed to darken slightly, conveying concern.

The breach is more serious than you yet understand. It is not merely a physical rupture in the boundary, but a weakening of the fundamental laws that separate the pools from each other and from what lies beyond.

Images formed in their minds: the flat plane of existence with its multiple pools, each a self-contained world with its own physical laws and evolutionary paths; the ice walls separating them; the firmament arching over all, protecting the entire plane from the incomprehensible outside.

Then they saw the breach—not just the physical damage to the ice wall they had glimpsed earlier, but a more fundamental distortion that extended beyond physical reality into the underlying structure of existence itself.

This weakening was not accidental. It was caused by deliberate actions—attempts to harness the boundary's energy for power.

"ARPA," Erum said grimly. "Reeves' new containment protocols."

Yes. Your kind's organization began with noble purpose—to protect and maintain the boundary in partnership with the Guardians. But under new leadership, they have begun extracting energy from the wall itself, disrupting the delicate balance that maintains separation between pools.

"Why would they do that?" Saba asked. "Don't they understand the danger?"

Some believe they can control the process—that they can strengthen their position by harnessing the boundary's power. Others simply do not comprehend the full consequences of their actions.

"And what are those consequences?" Erum pressed. "What happens if the breach continues to grow?"

The images in their minds shifted, showing a cascade of failures: the boundaries between pools dissolving, causing chaotic interactions between incompatible physical laws; the firmament itself weakening, allowing the outside entities to penetrate; reality as they understood it unraveling.

First, the pools will begin to merge. Already, creatures from neighboring realms have crossed where they should not. Then, as the distortions grow, the firmament itself will fail. What lies beyond will enter, and existence as we know it will end.

The gravity of the situation settled over them like a physical weight. This wasn't just about revealing the truth of the flat Earth to humanity—it was about preventing the collapse of reality itself.

"How do we stop it?" Saba asked, her scientific mind already searching for solutions. "There must be a way to repair the boundary."

There is, but it requires cooperation between all pools—a unified effort to rebalance the energies that maintain separation. And it requires specific individuals with the capacity to bridge between realms.

"Individuals like us," Erum guessed.

Yes. You are Bridge-Walkers—rare beings capable of traversing the boundaries without disrupting them. The Guardians recognized this quality in you, which is why you were permitted to pass through the wall.

"But we're just... normal humans," Saba protested. "I'm a scientist, Erum is a soldier. There's nothing special about us."

The Elder's mental tone conveyed something like gentle amusement.

Your physical composition is indeed typical of your species. But your mental and spiritual resonance is harmonized with the boundary frequency. This is extremely rare. In your terms, perhaps one in a billion humans possesses this quality.

"And that's why ARPA is so interested in Saba," Erum realized. "They must have detected this... resonance... in her research data."

Precisely. They seek to use her connection to the boundary for their own purposes. But you have chosen a different path—to understand rather than exploit.

Saba's mind was reeling with implications. "So what do we do now? How do we help repair the breach?"

You must journey to the breach itself. There, representatives from all affected pools will gather to perform the Rebalancing Ritual. As Bridge-Walkers, you will serve as conduits for the energies required to heal the boundary.

"A ritual?" Erum sounded skeptical. "This sounds more like mysticism than science."

Your distinction between the two is a limitation of human perspective. What you call science and what you call mysticism are merely different approaches to the same fundamental truths. The ritual is based on precise manipulation of quantum resonances—what you might call advanced physics.

Saba found herself nodding. “Many of our most cutting-edge scientific theories suggest reality is far more malleable and consciousness-dependent than we once believed. This... actually makes a certain kind of sense.”

The Elder rose, indicating the conversation was transitioning.

You will rest here tonight. Tomorrow, you will begin your journey to the breach. Others will join us along the way—representatives from the other affected pools. The Rebalancing must occur within three cycles of your sun, before the distortion reaches critical threshold.

As they were led from the chamber to what would be their quarters for the night, Saba felt the weight of responsibility settling over her. They had come seeking truth and had found not only that, but a cosmic crisis in which they were somehow destined to play a pivotal role.

Their accommodations were a single room within one of the organic structures—comfortable by any standard, with surfaces that adapted to their bodies when they sat or reclined. Food was provided—strange fruits and what appeared to be bread, though with unfamiliar colors and textures. Despite its alien appearance, it was surprisingly palatable.

As night fell, the twin suns setting in a spectacular display of amber and gold, Saba stood at the window of their quarters, watching the unfamiliar stars appear in the darkening sky.

“Do you think Maya made it back safely?” she asked, breaking the contemplative silence that had fallen between them.

Erum joined her at the window. “If anyone could, it’s her. She’s resourceful.”

“And if she did... if she releases the evidence to the world... what happens then? How will humanity react to learning everything they believed about the world is wrong?”

Erum considered this. “Shock. Denial. Eventually, acceptance. Humans are adaptable—we’ve survived countless paradigm shifts throughout history.”

“But nothing of this magnitude,” Saba pointed out. “Finding out we live on a flat plane surrounded by an ice wall, with other worlds beyond it and incomprehensible entities trying to break through a cosmic dome... it’s beyond anything we’ve faced before.”

“True,” Erum acknowledged. “But perhaps that’s why we’re here—not just to help repair the breach, but to help bridge understanding between these revelations and our world.”

Saba turned to look at him, struck by the insight. “The soldier-philosopher emerges again.”

A small smile touched his lips. “Don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation to maintain.”

The moment of levity was brief but welcome amid the overwhelming circumstances. As they stood together at the window, the alien stars casting unfamiliar patterns of light across their faces, Saba felt the distance between them diminishing—not just physically but emotionally.

“Erum,” she said softly, “if we don’t succeed... if we can’t repair the breach...”

“We will,” he said with quiet certainty. “Together.”

The word held meaning beyond its immediate context. Saba found herself moving closer to him, drawn by something that transcended their extraordinary circumstances.

When his hand found hers, fingers intertwining, it felt like the most natural thing in the world—or worlds. And when he turned to face her, the question in his eyes needed no telepathic enhancement to understand.

Her answer came not in words but in action, closing the final distance between them. Their kiss was gentle at first, then deepening with the release of tension and emotion that had been building since their first meeting in Denver.

When they finally separated, Saba felt a clarity she hadn't experienced since discovering the anomalous heat patterns that had started this journey. Whatever happened next—whether they succeeded in repairing the breach or failed in the attempt—they would face it united.

"Together," she echoed his earlier assertion, the word now carrying new meaning.

Outside their window, a strange light flickered across the alien sky—a momentary distortion in the fabric of reality, a reminder of the breach growing somewhere beyond the horizon. Tomorrow they would begin their journey toward it, toward a confrontation that would determine the fate of not just their world, but all worlds on the flat plane of existence.

But tonight, in this moment, they had found something unexpected amid the cosmic crisis—a connection that bridged the gap between scientist and soldier, between skepticism and belief, between two people who had been searching for truth and found each other in the process. # SURROUNDED

CHAPTER 11

The journey to the breach began at dawn. Saba and Erum emerged from their quarters to find a small gathering of Lumina's inhabitants waiting, including the Elder and several others who appeared to be selected for the expedition.

Their guide from the previous day approached, now wearing ceremonial garments similar to the Elder's. The mental communication was clearer today, perhaps due to their growing familiarity with the process:

Journey-beginning. Preparations-complete. Others-joining-soon.

The Elder stepped forward, placing both hands on a crystalline staff that pulsed with the now-familiar blue luminescence. Through it, the Elder's communication became even more precise:

The path to the breach crosses through three pools, including your own. Representatives from each affected realm will join us at designated convergence points. Time is of the essence—the distortions are accelerating.

"How will we travel?" Saba asked, noting the absence of anything resembling conventional vehicles.

In answer, a low, resonant thrumming filled the air—a sound they recognized immediately. From beyond the settlement, three Ice Leviathans approached, their crystalline bodies gleaming in the light of the twin suns.

“We’re going to ride them,” Erum realized, his usual stoicism briefly giving way to surprise.

Boundary-swimmers. Distance-collapsers. Fastest-travel.

The Leviathans lowered their serpentine heads to the ground, clearly trained for this purpose. The Elder and two other Luminans mounted the first creature with practiced ease. Their guide indicated that Saba and Erum should join them on the second, while the remaining expedition members took positions on the third.

Mounting the Leviathan was easier than Saba had expected. The crystalline body was warm to the touch and provided natural handholds and seating contours. Once they were secure, their guide—now seated before them—turned and offered a reassuring mental impression:

Fear-unnecessary. Trust-creature. Eyes-close-recommended.

Saba and Erum exchanged glances, then followed the instruction, closing their eyes as the Leviathan began to move. The sensation was disorienting at first—a feeling of acceleration without wind resistance, then a strange tingling as they apparently passed through solid matter.

When the tingling sensation subsided, their guide prompted them to open their eyes. The landscape had completely changed. Gone were the purple fields and amber sky of Lumina. Instead, they found themselves in a realm of perpetual twilight, where massive fungal structures towered hundreds of feet into the air, glowing with bioluminescence in blues and greens.

“Another pool,” Saba breathed, taking in the alien environment. “We crossed through the boundary.”

Mycora-realm. Fungal-dominion. Third-convergence-point.

The Leviathans moved through this strange landscape with surprising grace, navigating between the towering fungal structures. The air here was different—thicker, with spores visible as glittering motes in the dim light. Saba was grateful for whatever protection the Leviathan’s energy field seemed to provide, preventing them from having to breathe the potentially harmful atmosphere.

As they traveled deeper into this fungal forest, movement became visible among the massive structures. Beings unlike any Saba had imagined emerged—entities that appeared to be symbiotic combinations of fungal matter and something like insects, with translucent exoskeletons through which complex networks of luminescent filaments could be seen.

“The inhabitants,” Erum noted, his voice hushed with wonder despite his military discipline.

Mycoran-people. Collective-consciousness. Ancient-wisdom.

The Leviathans came to a halt in a vast clearing among the fungal towers. Here, a structure rose that was clearly artificial—a spiraling platform composed of the same crystalline material as the ice wall, glowing with blue light.

Waiting on the platform were several Mycorans, their insectoid forms arranged in what appeared to be a ceremonial formation. As the expedition dismounted, one of the Mycorans stepped forward—larger than the others, with more complex filament patterns visible through its exoskeleton.

No verbal or even melodic communication occurred, but Saba felt a new presence touch her mind—different from both the Guardians and the Luminans. This consciousness felt... plural, as if multiple beings were thinking as one:

We-welcome-travelers. The-breach-grows. Time-diminishes.

The Elder of Lumina approached the Mycoran leader, both placing their hands/appendages on a crystalline node at the center of the platform. The connection between them was visible as pulses of light traveling through the crystal.

After a moment, the Elder turned to Saba and Erum:

The Mycorans confirm the breach has expanded significantly. The distortions have reached their realm, causing fungal growths to appear in neighboring pools where they should not exist. They will send three representatives to join our journey.

Three smaller Mycorans moved forward, their filaments pulsing with what might have been anticipation or anxiety. The expedition had grown by three members, with more to come at the next convergence point.

As they prepared to remount the Leviathans, Saba studied the crystalline platform. “This is the same material as the ice wall,” she observed. “These platforms must be how the Guardians and others travel between pools.”

“Strategic transit points,” Erum agreed, his tactical mind assessing the implications. “Controlled access between realms.”

Boundary-anchors. Stability-points. Guardian-created.

Their guide’s explanation confirmed their theories. These platforms were part of the system that maintained separation between pools while allowing necessary transit.

Back on the Leviathans, with their new Mycoran companions distributed among the three creatures, they prepared for the next phase of the journey. This time, Saba kept her eyes open during the transition, curious despite the disorientation.

The passage between pools was brief but spectacular—a moment of suspension in what appeared to be a crystalline tunnel through absolute darkness, with glimpses of other tunnels branching off in directions that seemed to defy conventional geometry.

Then they emerged into blinding light and scorching heat. This realm was the opposite of Mycora—a desert world of red sands stretching to the horizon, with a massive red sun

hanging low in a copper-colored sky. Rock formations of impossible shapes dotted the landscape, appearing to float several feet above the ground.

Pyria-realm. Fire-dominion. Second-convergence-point.

The Leviathans moved more slowly here, clearly less comfortable in the extreme heat. In the distance, what appeared to be a city shimmered—structures of black glass rising from the red sand, reflecting the copper sky.

As they approached, Saba could see movement—beings that seemed composed of living flame contained within humanoid shells of the same black glass as the buildings. They moved with fluid grace, leaving momentary scorch marks on the sand where they stepped.

“How can anything survive in this heat?” Saba wondered aloud, already feeling the temperature rising despite the Leviathan’s protective field.

Adaptation-complete. Evolution-divergent. Heat-life-compatible.

At the edge of the glass city stood another crystalline platform, this one surrounded by elaborate cooling mechanisms that created a microclimate of relative comfort. The Pyrians waiting there stood perfectly still, their internal flames visible as shifting patterns within their glass bodies.

The communication from these beings was different again—intense, rapid, almost burning in its mental impression:

Welcome-travelers-from-cool-realms. The-breach-threatens-all. Fire-and-ice-must-unite.

The meeting was briefer here, the environment too hostile for extended discussion. Three Pyrians joined their group, their glass bodies somehow adapting to allow them to mount the Leviathans without causing harm.

The Elder shared the updated information:

The distortions have caused temperature fluctuations in Pyria, creating ice formations where none should exist. Their realm is particularly vulnerable to the outside entities, which seek thermal energy. We must proceed quickly to the final convergence point.

The next transition was more jarring—from extreme heat to familiar cold. Saba gasped as they emerged onto an Antarctic landscape, the ice wall visible in the distance.

“We’re back on Earth,” Erum said, recognizing the terrain. “But not where we entered.”

Final-convergence-point. Your-realm. Breach-proximity.

They had emerged near the ARPA facility—the very installation built into the ice wall that they had been trying to avoid days earlier. But now, the facility appeared damaged, with sections collapsed and emergency vehicles visible around its perimeter.

“Something’s happened,” Erum observed, his military training immediately assessing the situation. “That damage is recent.”

As they approached cautiously, figures became visible moving among the wreckage—some in ARPA uniforms, others in civilian clothes. And standing apart from the others, directing operations with familiar authority, was Commander James Harlow.

“ARPA,” Saba whispered. “Should we avoid them?”

The Elder’s response was unexpected:

No. Some-humans-awakening. Truth-recognizing. Allies-finding.

As if on cue, Harlow looked up and spotted their approach. Instead of raising an alarm or calling for backup, he simply nodded, as if he had been expecting them.

The Leviathans came to a halt a safe distance from the facility. The Elder, along with representatives from Lumina, Mycora, and Pyria, dismounted first. Saba and Erum followed, approaching the ARPA commander with caution.

“Dr. Anderson. Mr. Miller.” Harlow greeted them with formal respect. “I see you’ve brought friends.”

“Commander,” Erum acknowledged, his posture tense, ready for any threat. “What happened here?”

Harlow’s expression was grim. “Reeves happened. He accelerated the energy extraction from the wall, despite warnings about instability. The result was...” He gestured to the damaged facility. “This. And worse—a major breach in the wall itself, just beyond our containment field.”

“You know about the wall? About what it really is?” Saba asked, surprised by his apparent knowledge.

“Some of us have always known. ARPA was founded to work with the Guardians, to maintain the boundary. But Reeves... he saw it as a power source, a way to advance human technology beyond its natural progression.” Harlow looked at the assembled representatives from other realms. “I assume these are the delegation from the affected pools?”

The Elder stepped forward, studying Harlow with those luminous eyes before apparently deciding he could be trusted:

Yes. Rebalancing-ritual-participants. Breach-healers.

“Then you’ll want to see this.” Harlow led them toward a secure area away from the main facility. “We’ve managed to contain the immediate damage, but the breach is growing. And something is trying to come through.”

Beyond a hastily established perimeter, they could see it—a distortion in the air itself, like reality folding inward. The ice wall near it was fractured, revealing the crystalline matrix beneath its surface. And through the distortion, shapes were visible—entities of impossible geometry, pulsing with energies that hurt the eyes to observe directly.

“Outside entities,” Saba whispered, recognizing them from the Guardian’s earlier projections. “They’re trying to break through the firmament.”

“We’ve been holding them back with adapted Guardian technology,” Harlow explained, indicating devices positioned around the breach that emitted fields of blue energy. “But it’s failing. We need a more permanent solution.”

The Elder and the representatives from the other realms moved forward, examining the breach with what appeared to be both concern and recognition.

Ritual-site-appropriate. Energies-aligned. Preparations-beginning.

“What can we do to help?” Erum asked, addressing both Harlow and the Elder.

Harlow looked to the Elder, deferring to the ancient being’s greater knowledge. The Elder’s response came with unprecedented clarity:

You and Saba are the key components of the ritual. As Bridge-Walkers, you can channel and direct the energies required to seal the breach. But it will require complete commitment—a synchronization of your minds and spirits that few humans have ever achieved.

“And the risks?” Saba asked, sensing there was more.

Significant. The energies involved are immense. If the synchronization fails, the backlash could be... damaging to your consciousness.

“You mean it could kill us,” Erum translated bluntly.

Or worse. Consciousness-fragmentation. Eternal-separation.

The implication was clear—their minds could be torn apart, separated not just from their bodies but from each other, forever lost in the spaces between realities.

Saba looked at Erum, a silent communication passing between them that needed no telepathic enhancement. They had come too far to turn back now, regardless of the personal risk.

“We’ll do it,” she said, speaking for both of them. “Tell us what we need to do.”

As the representatives from the three realms began preparing for the ritual, arranging crystalline nodes in a precise pattern around the breach, Harlow pulled Erum aside.

“There’s something else you should know,” the commander said quietly. “Reeves isn’t contained. He escaped during the initial collapse with several loyal personnel and experimental technology derived from the wall. We believe he’s planning something desperate.”

“What kind of technology?” Erum asked, his tactical mind immediately assessing the threat.

“A device designed to force a controlled breach—to open a doorway to what lies beyond the firmament. He believes he can harness the outside entities, make some kind of deal with them.”

"That's insane," Erum said. "From what we've seen, those entities are completely alien—incompatible with our reality."

"Reeves doesn't care. He's convinced himself that whoever controls access to the outside will control the future of humanity." Harlow's expression was grim. "My team is searching for him, but if he activates that device before you complete your ritual..."

"Then we need to work quickly," Erum concluded. He rejoined Saba, sharing this new information in hushed tones.

The Elder approached them as the preparations neared completion. The crystalline nodes had been arranged in a perfect circle around the breach, with a larger node at the center where Saba and Erum would apparently stand.

Understanding-complete? Questions-remaining?

"Just one," Saba said. "If we succeed—if we repair the breach—what happens to the knowledge Maya is bringing to our world? Will humanity still learn the truth about the flat Earth, the wall, everything beyond it?"

The Elder's response was thoughtful:

Truth-unstoppable. Knowledge-spreading. Adaptation-necessary.

"So the old system of secrecy is over," Erum interpreted. "Humanity will have to come to terms with the reality of our world."

Yes. New-age-beginning. Cooperation-possible. Growth-potential.

With that, the Elder gestured toward the central node, indicating it was time to begin. Saba and Erum moved to their position, standing face to face on the glowing crystal.

Around them, the representatives from Lumina, Mycora, and Pyria took their places at specific nodes, while Harlow and his remaining loyal ARPA personnel established a defensive perimeter, alert for any sign of Reeves or his followers.

"Ready?" Erum asked softly, taking Saba's hands in his.

She nodded, trying to project confidence despite her fear. "Together, remember?"

"Together," he affirmed, his eyes holding hers with unwavering intensity.

The Elder raised the crystalline staff, and the ritual began. Energy flowed from the representatives of each realm into the nodes, which in turn channeled it toward Saba and Erum at the center. The sensation was overwhelming—like being at the focal point of a cosmic lens, with the combined energies of multiple realities converging through them.

Their minds expanded, consciousness stretching beyond normal human limitations. Saba could feel Erum's presence intertwining with hers, their separate identities blurring at the edges while still remaining distinct.

Through this expanded awareness, they could perceive the breach more clearly—not just as a physical tear in the ice wall, but as a fundamental disruption in the fabric of reality itself.

And beyond it, the outside entities pressed against the weakening firmament, their alien consciousness radiating hunger and alien purpose.

The ritual reached its crescendo, the energies building to almost unbearable intensity. Saba and Erum were now the conduit through which the combined power of three realms flowed, directed toward healing the breach.

But just as they began to feel the breach responding—the edges of reality starting to knit back together—an explosion rocked the perimeter. Through their expanded consciousness, they sensed rather than saw Reeves and his followers attacking the ritual site, using weapons enhanced with energy extracted from the wall itself.

“Hold the connection!” Harlow shouted, his team returning fire while trying to protect the ritual participants.

The Elder’s mental command reinforced this:

Continue-focus. Breach-closing. Almost-complete.

Saba and Erum struggled to maintain their concentration amid the chaos, their minds still joined, still channeling the immense energies. The breach was responding, contracting slowly as reality reasserted itself.

Then, through their shared consciousness, they sensed a new danger—Reeves himself, approaching with a device that pulsed with corrupted Guardian technology. His intent was clear even without telepathy: to force the breach wider, to counteract their efforts.

“We need to accelerate,” Erum said through their mental link. “Push more energy through, faster.”

“It could overwhelm us,” Saba cautioned, feeling the strain already threatening to fragment their consciousness.

“It’s our only chance.”

With mutual agreement, they opened themselves fully to the energy flow, becoming perfect conduits. The power surged through them, beyond anything human minds were designed to channel.

The breach responded dramatically, contracting rapidly now. The outside entities recoiled, their access to this reality diminishing. But the strain on Saba and Erum was catastrophic—their shared consciousness beginning to fracture under the pressure.

In that moment of crisis, as their minds began to tear apart, they made a desperate choice—rather than separating, they merged more completely, their individual consciousness flowing together like tributaries joining to form a river.

The result was something new—neither Saba nor Erum alone, but a unified consciousness that could withstand the energy flow. Through this merged awareness, they directed the final surge of power toward the breach.

Reality shuddered, then stabilized. The breach collapsed in on itself, sealing with a flash of blue-white light that momentarily blinded everyone present. The outside entities were cut off, the firmament restored to its full integrity.

In the sudden silence that followed, Saba and Erum collapsed to the ground, still holding hands, their physical bodies overwhelmed by what they had endured. The Elder and representatives from the other realms rushed to them, using their own energies to stabilize the humans' life forces.

Harlow's team had successfully repelled Reeves' attack, the ARPA director himself now in custody, his device disabled before it could be fully activated. The immediate crisis was over.

But for Saba and Erum, a new reality was just beginning. As they slowly regained normal consciousness, they discovered something unprecedented—a permanent link between their minds, a connection that transcended ordinary human experience.

They could sense each other's thoughts, feel each other's emotions, share memories and perceptions as if they belonged to a single consciousness. They remained individuals, but with a level of connection few humans had ever experienced.

"What happened to us?" Saba whispered as they were helped to a sitting position, the ritual participants gathering around them in concern and wonder.

The Elder's explanation came with gentle understanding:

Bridge-formed. Minds-connected. Permanent-bond.

"We're... linked?" Erum asked, though he could already feel the answer in the new awareness that extended beyond his own mind.

Yes. Necessary-survival. Unexpected-blessing.

As they recovered their strength, supported by the combined energies of beings from three different realms, Saba and Erum explored this new connection between them. It was disorienting but also profoundly intimate—a level of understanding and unity that transcended physical relationship.

"I can feel everything you feel," Saba said in wonder. "Know everything you know."

"And I you," Erum replied, equally amazed. "It's... there aren't words for this."

Their attention was drawn outward as Harlow approached, his expression a mixture of relief and concern.

"The breach is sealed," he confirmed. "And Reeves is contained. But we have a new situation developing." He gestured toward the horizon, where helicopters were visible approaching the site. "Those aren't ARPA. They're international observers, responding to information that's been released globally in the last twenty-four hours."

"Maya," Saba realized. "She made it back. She released the evidence."

“Yes,” Harlow confirmed. “The truth about the flat Earth, the wall, everything—it’s out there now. Governments are in crisis and are holding emergency councils, scientific organizations are in uproar. The world as we knew it is changing, fast.”

The Elder and the representatives from the other realms observed this development with what appeared to be approval:

New-age-beginning. Isolation-ending. Cooperation-possible.

As the helicopters drew closer, Saba and Erum stood together, their hands still joined, their minds still connected. Whatever came next—whatever challenges arose from humanity’s confrontation with the truth—they would face it together, in a way more profound than either had imagined possible when their journey began.

The world had changed forever. And so had they. # SURROUNDED

CHAPTER 12

Three months after the sealing of the breach, the world was still coming to terms with its new reality. The revelation that Earth was a flat plane surrounded by an ice wall, one of many “pools” on a vast cosmic plane protected by a firmament from incomprehensible outside entities, had shattered paradigms across every field of human knowledge.

Maya Chen sat in a Geneva conference room, observing representatives from governments, scientific institutions, and other organizations as they debated the implications. Her documentary footage had made her an overnight global sensation—the journalist who broke the biggest story in human history. But fame wasn’t what occupied her thoughts as she watched the proceedings.

“The United Nations Boundary Commission will now hear testimony from our special advisors,” announced the chairperson, a dignified Norwegian diplomat who had been selected for her calm rationality in the face of the extraordinary.

Maya smiled as Saba and Erum entered the chamber. They moved in perfect synchronization, an unconscious harmony that went beyond mere coordination. The permanent mental link they had formed during the ritual was visible to observers only in subtle ways—the way they anticipated each other’s movements, completed each other’s sentences, seemed to communicate without words.

They had become humanity’s primary liaisons with the Guardians and the other realms, their unique Bridge-Walker status and enhanced connection making them ideally suited for the role. Today, they would present the first formal treaty proposal between Earth and the other pools.

“Dr. Anderson, Mr. Miller,” the chairperson acknowledged. “The Commission welcomes your report.”

Saba began, her voice confident: “Thank you, Madam Chairperson. The Guardians and representatives from Lumina, Mycora, and Pyria have agreed in principle to the

establishment of regulated transit points between our realms. These would allow for cultural exchange, scientific cooperation, and mutual defense against any future breaches.”

Erum continued seamlessly: “The treaty includes provisions for knowledge sharing, particularly regarding the maintenance of the boundary. The Guardians have expressed willingness to train selected humans in boundary science, creating a new generation of human Guardians to work alongside them.”

Their presentation continued, outlining a future that would have seemed impossible just months ago. Maya marveled at how quickly some aspects of human society had adapted to the new reality, while others remained in turmoil.

Scientific institutions had been particularly affected. Astronomy, physics, and geography had undergone revolutionary revisions. The flat Earth model, with its dome firmament and multiple “pools” of existence, had required entirely new frameworks of understanding. Some scientists had embraced the challenge with excitement, while others had retreated into denial or depression.

Governments had initially panicked, then pragmatically reorganized. The Antarctic Treaty had been replaced with the Boundary Accord, establishing international oversight of the ice wall and cooperation with the Guardians. ARPA had been dissolved and reconstituted as the International Boundary Research Agency (IBRA), with Commander Harlow appointed as its first director and strict civilian oversight.

Dr. Victor Reeves remained in custody, facing charges of crimes against humanity and reality itself. His trial would be the first of its kind, establishing precedent for a new category of existential crimes.

As Saba and Erum concluded their presentation, Maya noticed the subtle way their hands touched—a gesture that seemed both casual and profoundly intimate. Their relationship had evolved into something beyond conventional understanding, their mental link creating a connection few humans could comprehend.

The Commission members began their questions, and Maya slipped out of the chamber. Her work here was done for now. Outside, Geneva’s streets were bustling with the usual diplomatic traffic, but with new additions—delegates from other pools, accompanied by Guardian escorts, their alien forms drawing curious but increasingly accepting glances from humans.

Maya checked her phone, finding a message from her editor: “Documentary sequel approved. Full funding. When can you start?”

She smiled. The story was far from over. Humanity was just beginning its journey into a wider reality, with all the challenges and opportunities that entailed. And she would be there to document it.

In a quiet garden overlooking Lake Geneva, Saba and Erum found a moment of peace after the Commission session. The mental link between them hummed with shared thoughts and emotions, a constant comfort that had become as natural as breathing.

"They're adapting better than we expected," Saba observed, watching a group of schoolchildren being given a lesson about the flat Earth model in the park below, complete with a holographic display showing the multiple pools.

"Humans are remarkably resilient," Erum agreed. "Though there are still those who resist, who cling to the old understanding."

"That's natural. It will take generations for this to become simply 'the way things are' rather than a paradigm shift."

Through their link, they shared memories of their own journey—from skepticism to discovery to their current unique existence. The mental connection had changed them both profoundly, yet they remained distinctly themselves, their individual perspectives enriching rather than diminishing their shared consciousness.

"The Guardians have invited us to visit the central nexus," Erum said after a comfortable silence. "The place where all pools connect. No human has ever been there."

"Another first for us," Saba smiled. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow, if you're willing. They believe we might be able to help establish a more permanent human presence there, training the first human Guardians."

The prospect filled them both with anticipation that resonated through their link. Their lives had become an endless exploration of new frontiers, both external and internal. The boundary between them had dissolved, yet paradoxically, this had made them more complete as individuals.

"I've been thinking about Maya's question," Saba said, referring to a conversation they'd had with the journalist earlier that week. "About whether we regret what happened to us during the ritual."

"And your answer?" Erum asked, though he could sense her feelings on the matter through their connection.

"How could I regret something that brought me closer to you than I ever imagined possible?" She turned to face him fully. "This connection between us—it's not something I would trade for anything."

He took her hands in his, the physical touch enhancing the mental link between them. "Nor would I. Though I sometimes wonder what might have happened if we'd met under normal circumstances—just a scientist and a soldier, without cosmic conspiracies and world-altering revelations."

"We'd still have found each other," Saba said with certainty. "Different path, same destination."

Their shared consciousness resonated with the truth of this. Whatever reality they had found themselves in—whatever shape the Earth took, whatever lay beyond its boundaries—their connection would have formed. It was, in its way, as fundamental as the laws that governed the pools themselves.

As the sun began to set over Lake Geneva, casting golden light across the water, they sat together in both physical and mental communion. Tomorrow would bring new adventures, new discoveries beyond the ice wall. But for now, this moment of connection was enough—a perfect unity in a world forever changed.

At the edge of the Antarctic ice wall, a small research station had been established under international oversight. Scientists, diplomats, and spiritual leaders from around the world came here to study and contemplate the boundary between Earth and the beyond.

Commander James Harlow stood at the observation deck, watching as a Guardian emerged from the wall—a routine check on the boundary's integrity. The relationship between humans and Guardians had evolved rapidly, from secrecy and occasional cooperation to open partnership.

"Status report?" Harlow asked as the luminous being approached.

The Guardian's response came not as spoken words but as concepts forming directly in his mind:

Boundary-stable. Repair-complete. Monitoring-continuing.

"And the other breaches? The smaller ones that formed during the crisis?"

All-sealed. Firmament-strengthened. Protection-enhanced.

Harlow nodded, satisfied. The crisis had been averted, the outside entities contained beyond the firmament where they belonged. Earth—and the other pools—were safe, at least for now.

"And Reeves' device? Any sign of similar technology being developed elsewhere?"

None-detected. Knowledge-restricted. Guardians-vigilant.

That was a relief. The technology Reeves had developed to force open a breach had been one of the most dangerous innovations in human history. All prototypes had been destroyed, the research classified at the highest levels.

"Thank you," Harlow said, having grown accustomed to communicating with these ancient beings. "The new human trainees arrive tomorrow. They're eager to begin their Guardian apprenticeship."

Anticipation-shared. Potential-recognized. Future-promising.

As the Guardian returned to its patrol within the wall, Harlow reflected on how dramatically his life had changed. From a secret keeper working for a shadowy agency to the public

director of an international organization dedicated to cooperation with other realms—it was a transformation he could never have imagined.

His secure phone buzzed with a message from Geneva: the Boundary Commission had approved the treaty proposal. Formal relations would be established with Lumina, Mycora, and Pyria, with more pools potentially joining the alliance in the future.

Humanity was taking its first steps into a much larger community of intelligent life, united by their shared existence on the flat cosmic plane and their common protection under the firmament. The journey ahead would be challenging, filled with cultural misunderstandings and competing interests, but also with unprecedented opportunities for growth and discovery.

Harlow turned his gaze toward the wall, its crystalline surface gleaming in the Antarctic light. Beyond it lay worlds humanity was only beginning to understand, civilizations with their own histories and knowledge, their own perspectives on the nature of reality.

And somewhere out there, Saba and Erum were continuing their exploration, their unique connection making them ideal ambassadors between realms. Their journey had only just begun, as had humanity's.

The flat Earth—once dismissed as a fringe conspiracy theory—had turned out to be just the beginning of a truth far stranger and more wonderful than anyone could have imagined. The universe was not what humans had thought, but it was, perhaps, even more magnificent in its actual form.

Surrounded not by endless space, but by other realms of existence. Surrounded not by emptiness, but by diversity and possibility. Surrounded not by cosmic indifference, but by ancient guardianship and new alliances.

Surrounded, but no longer alone.

EPILOGUE

Maya Chen adjusted her camera as the Ice Leviathan emerged from the wall, its crystalline body gleaming in the Antarctic sunlight. Riding on its back were Saba and Erum, returning from their latest expedition beyond the boundary.

"Welcome back," she called as they dismounted. "How was the central nexus?"

"Beyond description," Saba replied, her eyes alight with wonder. "We've brought back images, but they hardly do it justice."

"The place where all pools connect," Erum added. "The heart of our flat reality."

Maya smiled, recognizing the subtle synchronization in their speech patterns—a side effect of their permanent mental link. "The documentary is almost complete. Your footage from the nexus will make a perfect final chapter."

As they walked toward the research station, now a bustling international facility, Maya observed the easy intimacy between them—a connection that transcended normal human relationships. Their hands remained linked, their movements perfectly coordinated, their awareness of each other absolute.

“Any regrets?” she asked suddenly. “About everything that’s happened? The changes to your lives, to the world?”

Saba and Erum exchanged a glance that contained an entire conversation.

“None,” they said in unison.

“The truth was always out there,” Saba continued. “Humanity deserved to know it.”

“And now we face it together,” Erum finished. “Not just as a species, but as part of something much larger.”

Maya nodded, understanding. The revelation of the flat Earth had been just the beginning—the first step in humanity’s integration into the wider community of realms that shared their cosmic plane.

As they reached the observation deck, they paused to look out at the ice wall stretching to the horizon—no longer a barrier but a bridge to new worlds, new understandings, new possibilities.

“What’s next for you two?” Maya asked. “After the nexus expedition?”

Again, that synchronized smile. “The Guardians have identified another Bridge-Walker,” Erum said. “A young woman in Brazil. They’ve asked us to help train her.”

“The beginning of a new generation,” Saba added. “Humans who can move between pools, who can help maintain the boundaries while also building connections.”

Maya could see the future unfolding—a humanity transformed by knowledge, reaching beyond its isolated pool to join a cosmic community. The flat Earth theory, once ridiculed, had led to the greatest expansion of human consciousness in history.

“I think I have my title,” she said suddenly. “‘Surrounded: How the Truth About Our Flat World Changed Everything.’”

Saba and Erum nodded in approval, their linked minds resonating with the appropriateness of the title. They were indeed surrounded—by other worlds, by ancient guardians, by new allies and possibilities.

And in that surrounding, they had found not limitation, but liberation. Not confinement, but connection. Not an ending, but a beginning.

The truth had set them free.

THE END # SURROUNDED

A novella by Ziad Abdullah





















