

Skyward We Fall

"We touched wonders, created miracles. Yet despite all our best intentions, we broke the world."

- Dr. Simone Pelta

Computers, beakers, and delicate electronic equipment rattled in their drawers as barren shelves and desks shivered against the nails that held them to plaster and wood. It was already the fourth quake this morning; each one worse than the last. Each day they got more frequent and more violent. Local EU representatives were recommending that everyone in town evacuate to the quake resistant shelters before the end of the week. Ugly gel filled tents that smelt of burnt rubber and could withstand quakes up to a magnitude of 8.5 without damage.

Simone knew she couldn't leave. Her work was here. In the lab where she and her team had discovered the process for bombarding the planet's core with exotic graviton particles and solved the greatest crisis Earth had seen since the dinosaurs woke up to a fiery rock blotting out the sky. Where now she worked day and night to solve an even greater crisis. The disaster they created by stabilizing Earth's magnetic field against the Sun's rather persistent attempts to cook all life with lethal radiation, and in turn destabilized the Earth's tectonic plates. Best intentions and all that.

At least the ocean life might have survived all that cosmic radiation, sheltered in the dark and chilly depths. Now they will probably be the first to go when the seafloor rips apart and the oceans go roaring down into the Earth's upper mantle. Less than a week before anyone surviving is living in those hideous tents as the works of mankind all come tumbling down. A week after that, magnitude 9+ quakes would be hitting globally a few times a day. After that, it would be less than a month before the whole planet broke itself into massive chunks floating through the void.

So what's the point in evacuating, when the only hope humanity had was with her in her lab, working to solve the cataclysm that she caused. Who wanted to die in a disgusting jelly filled tent anyways?

"Dr. Pelta. We are ready for the phase 3 radiation test."

Most of her colleagues and assistants had listened to the cautious government warnings, preferring to flee from their guilt and shame over taking responsibility for the calamities they had wrought. But a few had stayed, some of the best and brightest with both the intelligence to know that a solution was possible and the moral integrity to stay and try even if it wasn't. Mikolaj Turowicz was one such individual. He didn't even have his doctorate, yet he stayed and worked tirelessly at Simone's side, while scientists with 40 years of lab experience went running off to hide in government camps and await their death.

"Let's hope this is the one that works. And if not this one..." Simone said, just as she said before every test.

“...then the next one.” Mikołaj echoed, completing the ritual with a soft smile.

Together they walked through the empty hallways, and down the stairs towards the particle accelerator housed in the lab’s basement complex. Both of them doing their best to ignore the ever growing lines spreading through the concrete walls, cracking paint and leaving a fine layer of dust over everything. The particle accelerator was probably the safest place to be, even more so than tents of jelly. The whole underground complex was encased in a reinforced shell, suspended in a semi-liquid membrane. It might outlast us all, Simone thought, as she moved quickly down the several sets of stairs.

“Wish we could still use the elevator.” Mikołaj said, looking mournfully at the sealed metal door that would have made his many trips up and down the 15 stories between the accelerator and the lab a little quicker and a lot less energy intensive. Scientists weren’t known for their physical stamina.

Simone cracked a brief and tired smile. The only kind she could manage these days. “By all means, take the chance. But if you get stuck in the elevator for 8 hours like Dr. Martins did, you’re fired.”

Mikołaj’s grin was quick and broad. As it always was. “You wouldn’t be able to fire me fast enough. I would quit immediately in great shame and dishonor!”

Simone gave a nod to acknowledge his banter, but a second smile was just too much for her. She didn’t know how Mikołaj could maintain his jubilant disposition in such dark times. Perhaps it was because he wasn’t the “genius” who had brought about the end of the world, only her assistant.

The observation chamber was a cramped 10 by 10 cube, crowded with panels, screens, and dials. Two lab techs were going over power readouts, making adjustments as needed. They didn’t look up when Simone and Mikołaj entered, but they sat up a little straighter, at attention for Simone’s orders.

Simone couldn’t help compare the stark differences between now and the experiment which had saved and doomed the world in a single stroke. The massive particle generator had been built upon the San Andreas faultline, north of Los Angeles. The air had been painfully dry, and protestors lined the whole drive from the city to the facility, exposed to the merciless Sun. The observation chamber there had been quite large so it could fit all the VIP guests and world leaders, apparently eager to watch as she killed the world. The particle generator shook the whole complex as it came to life; engines, tubes, and exotic particles thrumming their horrible chorus like the seven trumpets of Revelations.

In the margins of her notes that day she had written her own prophetic warning. ““As we prepare to impose our will upon our Mother Earth, I worry that humanity’s eternal quest for order and

control will be what dooms us to endless chaos." And then someone (was it Dr. Ramanujan or the US President maybe?) pressed the button. How many of the terrible fulcrums of history been the single push of a button? Time to press yet another.

"Petra, are all fields aligned?" Simone knew they were, Petra was the best at what she did, but she had to go through the checklist in her head every time, otherwise she would never be comfortable starting the test.

"Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta fields are all within test parameters." The tall, gangly tech said as she checked several screens with a swivel of her chair.

"Jacobs. Time before the next quake?"

"Calculations say we have 37 minutes, boss." The young man said, scratching at his overgrown beard. Grooming had gone out the window during the apocalypse, but faster for some than others.

Simone turned to Mikołaj, trying not to let the glimmer of hope show in her eyes.

The man smiled and nodded. 37 minutes was enough time to finish the test and maybe save the world.

"Alright. We have a go. Petra, it's all yours." Simone settled herself into a wobbly office chair, and then stood up again immediately. Petra gathered in a nervous breath before pressing the big red button with the palm of a sweaty hand, initiating the test.

The ever present whirl of the generators rose to a sharp whine as they sucked up power to produce the necessary magnetic fields used to propel tiny exotic particles to impossible speeds before smashing them together. A series of muffled concussive bursts signaled the release of the particles, even through the heavily insulated walls of the room. Then came the vibrations as particles sped around and around the acceleration chamber, gathering speed with each rotation. Simone was so engrossed in the process, still thrilling after all these times, that she didn't realize Mikołaj was standing close to her until he was already speaking softly to her.

"So what do you say, Doctor. Success or failure? And what's your wager?"

Another part of the ritual. Hundreds of tests, hundreds of predictions, hundreds of wagers. She had lost track of how many vending machine snacks she had won and lost at this point. "Failure. And Goldfish crackers."

"Are you that sure? The parameters on this test seem pretty promising."

"I am that sure. The mineral makeup of the Earth's core is remarkably complex, and the exact forces exerted by the tectonic pressures we can only make an educated guess about. The only

certainties are the array and levels of particles we bombarded the core with, and even then we don't know what and how much actually reached their target to cause the graviton crystallization. The probability that we are able to recreate the exact conditions to trigger the crystallization process in a limited, controlled environment is very, very small." She said with the precise diction of an Oxford alum who was certain she was about to win breakfast by betting on the fate of the world.

As if to prove her wrong and deny her the pleasure of free Goldfish crackers, two alarms blared to signal impact and then the whole room shuddered. There were usually noticeable vibrations when the particles collided, but this was something different. Simone could feel a tingling sensation run from her scalp down the length of her body.

The alarms blared again. Another shudder, stronger than before. Mikołaj was shouting something excitedly at her. Petra and Jacobs were scrambling between their dials and screens, reading output and keying input. Simone ignored them all. Her focus was completely on the small screen that showed the impact chamber and the shimmering, nascent crystal that was forming before her eyes. It spread through the vacuum like a living thing, feeding on some unseen force in a rapid expansion that filled the large chamber in an instant.

"This one. This one worked." She whispered. Hardly believing it as she watched the impossible be born.

More alarms blared, not the loud beep warning particle impact, but the deafening klaxons that screamed imminent danger. Even then it took Mikołaj shaking her to snap her from the revelry of a mother who wasn't sure if she had given birth to an angel or a monster. Was she Mary bringing forth the Savior, or Gaia birthing the grotesque Titans?

"Simone! We need to go! We need to go now! The chamber has been breached. The whole complex is flooding with radiation." He pulled at her as he yelled, and she followed in a daze.

Jacobs ran past her, his arms clutching a laptop, several notebooks, and his favorite coffee mug. Petra stumbled on her too big feet, but then the world shuddered all around them and Simone found herself on the ground next to the graceless lab tech. Pure terror across the other woman's face, replaced by confusing as she was suddenly and mercilessly flung upward into the ceiling at Simone calculated must have been over 10 Gs of force with the way her body pulped as it shattered the concrete.

With strength that surprised her, Mikołaj pulled her to her feet and down the tunnel towards the emergency stairs as the wall to their left distorted before shattering inwards until it was just a singular ball of condensed calcium oxide and silicate spinning in midair like a newly created world trying out its axis for the first time. Alarms blared again. This time, caused by Jacobs as he thrust himself wildly through the emergency door.

Mikołaj stumbled over the buckling floor, reinforced cement moving like gentle waves as silicate

cracked and steel bars bent. Simone gripped his arm firmly, pulling herself out of her dreamlike state enough to help him to his feet and start running herself. She wanted to take it all in, every immeasurable instant, every bizarre anomaly. But she also wanted to survive. Otherwise who was going to write the hundreds of research papers that were going to come out of this incident?

A whole section behind them plummeted straight into the ground in the span of a heartbeat, creating a quickly widening chasm with no discernable bottom. With a concerted burst of energy that Simone was surprised she still had in her, considering the one meal and 3 hours of sleep she had gotten in the past 52 hours, they pushed through the emergency door and fled up the stairs into daylight.

Behind them the roaring cacophony of a 15 story building tearing itself apart drowned out the blaring alarms and whatever Mikołaj was trying to say to her. Jacobs was already halfway across the parking lot, dodging widening fissures in the blacktop and debris that were forming slowly moving streams of levitating matter. She pulled Mikołaj down under a drifting red sedan, stumbling over the undulating earth as the air itself shrieked around them.

Another violent quake sent Simone to the ground, rough gravel cutting into her hands and knees. Mikołaj landed heavily beside her, and they both lay gasping for air. If they were to die here, so be it. She couldn't take another step and Mikołaj seemed to agree, not making any effort to get up. Instead he twined his fingers with hers and gave an affirming squeeze. She couldn't even manage to squeeze back as the adrenaline faded and fatigue overwhelmed her nutrition and sleep deprived body.

"Simone. Simone. Open your eyes. You have to see this." Mikołaj's voice echoed across the vast seas of solomance but through sheer force of will Simone was able to return her consciousness to her body. She forced her eyes open and witnessed a miracle.

Blotting out the Sun with its magnitude was the broken lab, uprooted from the earth and floating there a hundred meters up. It spun lazily as it collected a ring of dirt, and rocks, and plants, and cars. Anything that had been too close and without substantial weight had been pulled into its micro-gravity well. But most magnificent of all were the shimmering, pulsing structures jutting from the bottom of the lab, where the particle accelerator had been before the veins of crystal had torn it to shreds.

"You did it! We did it! Crystalized gravitons! It's amazing!" Mikołaj stumbled to his feet again and began a little ragged dance as he spun in circles, sheer jubilation breaking through the fatigue.

"We did it. Now how can that..." Simone gestured to the floating structure, paradoxically held aloft by solid gravity. "...help us save the world?"

Mikołaj grinned down at her, offering a hand to help her up. "If not this experiment..."

Simone sighed in bemused annoyance and then took his hand. “....then the next.”

-End-