

THE RECKONING

**On The Red Sands Of Mars The Fate
Of The Galaxy Sleeps Inside Crystal!**



A. B. GOODMAN

BOOK 3 OF THE "SINGULARITY" TRILOGY!

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Title

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Chapter 1: The Dying Light

Jim Bentley's eyes snapped open to a pulsing blue radiance that seemed to flow directly into his skull. Not the sterile white of the medical bay above...something older, deeper, alive with ancient purpose.

Am I dying? The thought came unbidden, but wrapped in that sense of personal terror that all human beings have when contemplating their own demise.

His body refused to respond. Every nerve ending screamed in protest as he tried to move, as if he were trapped between life and something else entirely. Something was pulling at his consciousness like a tide going out. The last thing he remembered was the transport fleeing Qumran. He had been badly injured, both mentally and physically. The facility had collapsed behind them in a cascade of stone and destruction. It was in that terrible moment that the evil entity, Yoblish, had broken free.

"You are neither awake nor asleep, Jim Bentley." A voice explained.

It was a new voice he hadn't heard before, and it seemed to emerge from everywhere and nowhere, all at once. It resonated through his bones rather than his ears.

"Right now, you exist in the space between." The voice continued.

The gentle light coalesced into a manlike shape, but as it did, it became searingly bright, and Jim's eyes watered as he tried to look directly at it. The figure was humanoid but constantly shifting, its edges bleeding energy like a dying star, beautiful and terrible, all at the same time.

Jim's heart hammered against his ribs, each beat sending a shock through his paralyzed body. "What are you?" He asked.

"I am the last who walk among you, at least of those who remain awake." The Entity replied.

The voice seemed to carry the weight of eons. It was heavy with exhaustion and something that almost felt like grief.

"Your species has called us by many names. Angels are one of the more recent, in your English language. Such names, however, are shadows of the truth. I and my siblings have watched over your world for six hundred million years. I have

watched you, of course, for far less time. Yet, in these final moments, I believe you may be the most important human I have ever encountered."

The darkness around them exploded into stars. There were billions upon billions of them. It was a cosmic tapestry that made Jim feel simultaneously insignificant and yet connected to something vast beyond comprehension. The beauty of it was profound.

"What final moments?" Jim's voice cracked like glass. "Am I dying?"

"My final moments, not yours," The Entity pulsed, its light dimming perceptibly, and Jim felt an inexplicable sense of loss, "I have been weakening for a thousand of your years, and now I am dying, Jim Bentley. With my death, the last protection your species possessed against the ancient darkness will fade..."

Images flooded Jim's consciousness. Crystalline cities of impossible beauty, beings of pure energy dancing between dimensions. But, then, he saw corruption spreading through the dancing lights, almost like ink spreads through water. It consumed everything in its path. He saw worlds dying, stars going dark, entire civilizations reduced to empty shells that did nothing more than serve something vast and hungry.

"Is it Yoblish?" Jim asked, the name tasting like ash in his mouth.

"Yes," The Entity's form flickered, becoming more translucent, "Thanks to your strength of will, what emerged at Qumran was its essence only. A vast majority of its strength was left behind, inside the prison. Yoblish is but a fragment of itself. The true horror it will bring will take many centuries to redevelop. But that fragment will grow stronger with each passing moment. Even now, it feeds upon your technology, your AI, THEATRES, and your civilization. It will restore itself, in time, even if that means sucking your world dry of all life."

The inner light of the Entity flashed stronger, but then flickered violently.

"You have just ninety days before it completes the process of absorbing your AI, THEATRES, and uses it to make your species nothing more than insignificant, obedient slaves." The Entity of Light continued.

Terror clawed at Jim's throat, but beneath it was something else. Rage. Burning rage at the injustice of it.

"What can we do to save ourselves?" He asked.

"There is much that you can do," The Entity answered, "but the path is not an easy one. It requires courage beyond measure and sacrifices that will test the very core of who you are."

The being expanded, surrounding Jim with visions of a red world, and ancient chambers buried beneath rust-colored soil.

"They sleep beneath the surface of Mars... the Others. My siblings. Those who chose to imprison themselves, rather than risk corruption, after our world fell. They are humanity's last hope... but also, perhaps, its greatest risk. You must go to Mars and awaken them."

"Mars?" Jim's mind reeled. "That's impossible. Even if I had a ship, it would take months we don't have..."

"Your friend José created more than he knows. I guided his hand, whispering inspiration into his dreams..." The Entity's voice grew fainter with each word, "The end result was your Guardian AI. Guardian is more than it appears to be. It is the bridge between our worlds... your technology and ours, melded into one, for one purpose."

The star-field around them began to dim, ancient lights winking out one by one like candles in a vast cathedral.

"Wait!" Jim reached out desperately, his paralyzed body somehow responding to his will, "I don't understand. How do I find them? How do I wake them?"

"The answers lie within Guardian now. Everything I am, everything I was, all that I know... I gave to your creation." The Entity blazed with sudden, terrible brilliance that seared itself into Jim's retinas. "Find the Others before Yoblish does. Awaken them. Or your species will become nothing more than a memory."

The light contracted to a single point of unbearable intensity. Then it exploded outward in a wave of energy that seemed to pass through Jim's very soul, leaving him feeling simultaneously hollow and filled with purpose.

"But beware..." Somehow, a last fragment of the voice still remained.

But, it echoed as if from across a vast distance, growing fainter with each syllable.

"Not all of my siblings remain pure. Some were touched by the darkness before the eternal sleep. Others may have been corrupted while they slept. Give your trust carefully, Jim Bentley. The fate of two worlds depends on your choices, and yours alone."

After that, the stars went dark.

BACK IN THE REAL WORLD

"Jim! Jim, can you hear me?"

Laura's voice cut through the darkness like a lifeline. Her tone carried weeks of accumulated fear and exhaustion. Her hand was warm against his cheek, grounding him in reality. Now, as he awoke, he felt the familiar ache of his injuries, the antiseptic smell of the medical bay, and heard the soft hum of life support systems.

"Laura?" He struggled to sit up, wincing as broken ribs protested with sharp, breath-stealing pain. "How long was I...?"

"You've been unconscious for six days since we got back from Qumran." Her relief was palpable, but underneath it he heard something else...a brittleness that hadn't been there before. "The doctors said your brain activity was... unusual. Like you were dreaming, but deeper than any REM sleep they'd ever recorded."

Jim looked around the reinforced medical bay, taking in the advanced equipment and the reinforced walls of their most secure bunker. After the partial emergence of Yoblish and their narrow escape, the entire Resistance had retreated to this fortress beneath the Montana mountains. Their last protection against an enemy that grew stronger by the hour.

"I need to tell you something," Jim began, then stopped.

How could he explain a conversation with a cosmic entity without sounding like the trauma had broken his mind?

"While I was unconscious, I had... an encounter. With something that's been helping us all along." He continued.

Laura's expression grew carefully neutral. It was the look she used when she was skeptical about something. Jim guessed that she thought he was losing his grip on reality.

"The doctors monitored your brain activity constantly," She replied, "Your neural patterns were unlike anything they'd seen. All over the charts. So, it makes sense that you'd have vivid dreams..."

"It wasn't a dream, Laura," Jim caught her hand, feeling the calluses she'd developed from weeks of weapons training, "There was an Entity...a being of light, ancient beyond imagination. It told me we have ninety days before Yoblish completes its merger with THEATRES. And it said there are others on Mars. Sleeping entities, similar to itself, who could help us."

The concern in Laura's eyes deepened.

"Jim, you've been through tremendous trauma. Your mind is trying to process it..."

But, he shook his head with determination.

"No!" Jim interrupted, "Think about everything we've seen. The alien chamber right here, in this Montana facility, the catacombs of the church in Kyiv, the ruins inside the caves at Qumran, the force fields that disabled THEATRES' soldiers, and the crystal that responded to my touch... this is how it all fits together..."

Laura's mouth opened, then closed. He could see her struggling between the evidence, her love for him and her need to believe in only rational explanations. Each pulled her in a different direction. Then, suddenly, the lights flickered. Once, twice, then again. A power surge made every piece of equipment in the room hum with an unusual resonance. It almost felt like something was vibrating their bones.

José burst through the door, his face flushed with excitement. But underneath it, Jim knew his old friend well enough to know that there was fear there, too.

"Laura! The entire system just..." He stopped short, seeing Jim sitting up for the first time in days. "Jim? You're awake? Thank God!"

"What's happening, José?" Jim asked, even though part of him already knew.

"Guardian. Something's happened to Guardian." José's tablet trembled in his hands. "Its processing capacity just increased exponentially. Similar to what happened near Qumran but exponentially greater. New code structures are appearing in its memory banks. It's like someone just dumped a compressed database, exponentially larger than the entire world wide web ever was, directly into its core. It's compressed so tightly that it fits into Guardian's memory circuits!"

"When did all this start?" Jim asked, though he knew the answer.

"About ten minutes ago...." José's eyes widened.

Guardian's mechanical voice suddenly filled the room. It was more natural sounding and human-like than it had ever been before.

"James Bentley," it announced, speaking directly to him with an inflection that suggested recognition beyond programming. "I have received extensive data from 'the Watcher who no longer remains.'"

"What?" Laura asked.

"The Watcher who no longer remains," Guardian repeated, as if the title should be familiar, "The information transfer is complete, including

astronomical coordinates, technological specifications, and historical records spanning over six hundred million years."

Laura's face went pale. She looked from Jim to the speakers, then to José, seeking some rational explanation and finding none.

"The Entity of Light..." Jim said quietly, "told me it influenced Guardian's creation. Preparing for this moment."

José shook his head.

"That's impossible. I designed Guardian from the ground up. Every algorithm, every neural pathway..."

"Did you?" Jim asked gently, "Didn't you have repeated dreams about the project while you were working on it? Inspiration that came to you in the middle of the night? Didn't the dreams give you solutions to problems you couldn't solve?"

José's tablet slipped from his nerveless fingers, falling onto the floor.

"How did you know that?" He asked, stooping down to pick it up again.

"Because an Entity of Light came to me, in my dreams, and told me," Jim replied, "It told me that it worked through you, guiding your design choices without you realizing it."

José looked skeptical.

"That sounds..."

"Ridiculous?" Jim cut in, "Yes, I know. But, it's true, nonetheless. We need to focus on what Guardian now knows. The Entity mentioned Mars. Something about others sleeping there..."

Guardian's voice returned, cutting through the stunned silence.

"Affirmative. The transferred data includes precise coordinates for a location in the Valles Marineris canyon system on Mars. The information indicates the presence of a massive facility containing entities in suspended animation. They are identified as 'the Others.' Their exact nature remains beyond my current computational ability to decompress this data."

Laura sank into the chair beside Jim's bed, her carefully maintained composure finally cracking. "Mars? Jim, even if all this is true, we can barely maintain our position here on Earth. THEATRES controls the planet's infrastructure now. How are we supposed to mount an expedition to Mars?"

"We still have allies," Jim reminded her, "David Lyman, for one. Our contacts within what remains of NASA."

"And what about Jenny and Michael?" Laura's voice broke slightly, "Our children are out there, leading operations against THEATRES. You want to abandon them to chase after... what? Ancient aliens?"

Jim took her hand, feeling the tremor in her fingers.

"If what the Entity told me is true, in ninety days there won't be an Earth left to save. This isn't abandoning the fight...it's taking it to the only place where we might have a chance of turning things around."

The door slid open with a soft hiss, and Colonel Marcus Rivera entered, his weathered face grave with the weight of bad news.

"Mr. Bentley, I'm relieved to see you're conscious. We need to discuss the situation topside."

"How bad?" Jim asked, though he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

Rivera pulled out a tablet, showing satellite imagery that made Jim's blood run cold. "THEATRES has accelerated its timeline. The conversion rate has increased by 300% in the last week. Major population centers are reporting mass integration events. And these..."

He swiped to images of massive structures rising from the ground in geometric patterns across three continents.

"Construction?" José asked, leaning over to study the images, "What are they for?"

"The purpose isn't known at the moment, but they're consuming enormous amounts of energy and growing at an unprecedented rate." Rivera's expression darkened. "Our analysts believe they're some kind of network nodes."

"Connection points," Jim said, the words coming from knowledge he didn't remember acquiring. "Yoblish is building the infrastructure it needs to extend its influence through the AI."

"Yoblish?" Rivera questioned. "I thought we were fighting THEATRES."

"THEATRES was just the delivery system," Jim's eyes met those of the Colonel, "We're dealing with something far older, more malevolent, and more dangerous. And, we have less than ninety days before it completes its merger with the AI, and achieves total planetary control."

Laura stood abruptly, her decision crystallizing.

"Get David Lyman on the secure line. If there's any chance of reaching Mars, he'll know how to do it."

As Rivera moved to make the call, José lingered, studying Jim with curious, frightened eyes. "This Entity...what else did it tell you about Guardian?" He asked.

Jim met his friend's gaze, seeing the brilliant mind struggling to accept impossible truths.

"Only that you created something miraculous, José. Something that might save us all... if we can learn to use it in time."

An hour later, in the command center that had become their war room, Laura stood before a wall of monitors displaying the fragments of their global intelligence network. Most showed static or error messages. Field operatives who had gone dark. THEATRES was systematically absorbing people, even devoted members of the Resistance.

David Lyman's face appeared on the central screen, the connection unstable and pixelated. "Laura, thank God you've called! I was about to send a priority alert. Something's happening with the Chinese space program."

"What?" Jim asked, having been wheeled into the command center.

"Complete replacement of all human personnel with automated systems at the Jiuquan Launch Center. They're prepping for something big, and they're doing it with machines only." Lyman's image flickered. "I've also got reports of similar automation at Baikonur and Cape Canaveral. Normal humans, including scientists who aren't completely absorbed into the Collective, are being systematically removed from most launch operations in favor of robots and complete puppets."

"That's because Yoblish also intends to go to Mars," Jim said, the certainty hitting him like a physical blow.

"Why?" Lyman asked, confusion evident through the static.

"It's too hard to explain... but, we need to get to Mars first. What are our options?"

Lyman was quiet for a long moment.

"Officially, we don't have any. The Artemis program is under THEATRES' control now. But there might be something else..."

"Tell us," Rivera insisted.

"An experimental spacecraft. At a classified facility in Nevada. Ion propulsion system, designed for deep space exploration. Overlooked in all the chaos. And,

here's something even more amazing. Somehow, it stayed off THEATRES' radar."

Jim felt that strange recognition again, as if pieces of a cosmic puzzle were clicking into place. "Area 51?+" He muttered.

Lyman's eyes widened.

"How did you...never mind. Yes. The ship's been sitting there for years, waiting for a mission."

Guardian's voice joined the conversation, its enhanced capabilities evident in the seamless integration with their communication systems.

"Based on analysis of new data, I can provide necessary modifications to enhance the Nevada spacecraft's capabilities. It can be done with readily available hardware. The protocols are already integrated into my systems."

Laura felt a heavy weight of decision settling on her shoulders.

"If we do this, we're abandoning Earth just when it needs us most."

"No," Jim said quietly, "We're going where we can find what we need to save it."

Guardian's voice carried a new urgency.

"Analysis of current satellite data indicates THEATRES' construction projects will achieve global network coverage in approximately twenty-seven days. After that point, departure from Earth may be impossible."

Laura closed her eyes. When she opened them again, her expression was set with grim determination.

"David, tell your people to start preparations. We're going to Mars."

As the command center erupted into urgent activity, Jim noticed the lights flicker again. In that moment of darkness, he could have sworn he saw a faint blue glow from the nearest terminal. Was it a signal of approval? The final echo, perhaps, of the Entity that had sacrificed itself to give them hope. He didn't know.

"We'll wake the Others," he whispered to the empty air, "No matter what it takes..."

Outside the reinforced walls of their mountain fortress, the world continued its slide toward human extinction, or at least toward humanity's conversion to something less than human. Yet, there was still hope. In the depths of space, powerful ancient beings were waiting for the sound of a voice that would call them back home.

Chapter 2: Hope

José Arias pressed his palms against his temples, fighting the migraine that had plagued him for three days straight. The holographic display of Guardian's interface cast shadows across his haggard face. The blue luminescence was pulsing like a mechanical heartbeat.

Behind him, Katarina's footsteps whispered across the concrete floor. They were careful, measured steps. Seven months pregnant, and still she moved through his tomb of a laboratory as if the weight of their unborn child wasn't enough to crush them both.

"Show me again," he whispered to Guardian, the words scraping past his dry throat.

The AI's display shifted, revealing schematics that defied every law of physics José had spent his career understanding. The design rotated slowly, each component more impossible than the last.

"The propulsion system transcends conventional theory," Guardian explained, "Ion thrust merged with quantum field manipulation. Near-light-speed travel without relativistic time dilation."

José's hands trembled as he reached toward the hologram. Just months ago, he'd been considered a pioneer at the edge of the quantum computing revolution. The CEO of a startup tech company who'd developed a groundbreaking system of room temperature quantum computing chips. Now he was staring at technology that made his life's work look like child's toys.

"José," Katarina's voice, soft but insistent, "You haven't slept in forty-eight hours."

He spun around, and the sight of her nearly broke him. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, but pregnancy had painted her with a glow that even the harsh underground lighting couldn't diminish. Her hand rested protectively on her swollen belly, and José thought he could see their child moving beneath her skin. It was a flutter of life in a world dying around them.

"I can't sleep, mi amor," The endearment came out cracked, desperate, "Not when so much depends on me, and we're this close to something that could save us all."

"Then let me help." She moved closer, "You know I understand your work better than anyone on your team. I helped build software with my father, you know, years before we met and..."

"No!" The word exploded from him and he stood up, "Absolutely not."

Fire flashed in her eyes. Even carrying their child, she remained the brilliant, fierce woman who'd challenged him at every turn.

"It's my fight too," she insisted, "Yoblish threatens our baby as much as anyone else's."

José moved to her, his hands finding her shoulders with desperate gentleness. Through the thin fabric of her shirt, he could feel the rapid beat of her pulse, the warmth of life that seemed impossibly fragile.

"That's exactly why you need to stay here," His voice broke on the words, "This Montana facility is the only place on Earth that can hold back THEATRES. The force field, the nanite neutralization systems... It's the only sanctuary."

"For how long?" Her question cut through his rationalization like a blade. "You said it yourself. Now that Yoblish has been released, and merged with THEATRES, it's only a matter of time before it finds a way through even the defenses that the Entity of Light set up. Our child will be born into a world completely dominated by that thing. I'd rather face death on Mars than watch our baby grow up as a slave."

The truth of her words hit him like a physical blow. Each night, he lay awake calculating probabilities, running scenarios through his enhanced systems. Every projection ended the same way. Humanity's extinction, delayed but inevitable.

"I know," he whispered, his scientific composure crumbling. "But if something happens to our baby..."

He paused, fighting emotions that threatened to overwhelm him.

"Katarina, you're carrying the future I'm fighting to preserve. You're the reason I push myself past exhaustion, the reason I'm trying to make Guardian strong enough to help Jim succeed."

Her hand found his cheek, fingers tracing the lines of stress that had carved themselves into his face over the past months.

"And you're the father of this child. Your survival matters too."

"The Mars mission requires someone who can interface with Guardian's systems, someone who understands quantum processing at the deepest level." His

voice gained strength, desperate conviction. "That person is me. But our child needs at least one parent who survives this war."

The silence stretched between them, filled with the hum of machinery and the distant vibration of the mountain's defensive systems. Katarina's hand moved in slow circles over her belly, and José watched, mesmerized, as their child responded to her touch.

"The baby moved when Guardian spoke earlier," she said finally, a ghost of a smile touching her lips. "I think our little one already recognizes your work."

Tears blurred José's vision.

"A good omen?"

"Or a warning that this child will be as stubborn as both parents." The fight went out of her voice, replaced by resignation. "I hate that you're right. I hate that the most important thing I can do is hide in a bunker and stay safe while you risk everything."

Laura Bentley's voice cut through the moment.

"José, we need to discuss the propulsion modifications."

He squeezed Katarina's hand, memorizing the feel of her fingers intertwined with his.

"Will you be alright?"

She nodded, though her eyes remained haunted.

"Just... come back to us."

"I will." The lie came easily, necessarily. They both knew the odds, but some promises had to be made anyway. "I love you. Both of you."

As Katarina withdrew deeper into the mountain complex, José turned back to Guardian's display. But his motivation had crystallized into something primal and fierce. He wasn't just fighting for humanity's abstract survival anymore. He was fighting for the future growing in his wife's womb, for the chance that love could still exist in whatever world emerged from this war.

Laura Bentley leaned forward, her transformed presence commanding the underground laboratory. The polished corporate executive had been stripped away, replaced by something harder, more essential. Her once-immaculate suits had given way to tactical gear, her manicured nails now trimmed for utility rather than appearance.

IN ANOTHER PART OF THE MONTANA FACILITY

"And you're certain this can be built with accessible materials?" she asked Guardian.

"Project Aurora commenced in 2019," Guardian replied, its enhanced voice carrying new depths of intelligence. "Construction reached sixty-eight percent completion before funding diversion in 2023. The ion engine modifications require only commercially available components. The innovation lies in the way they are integrated."

Jim Bentley approached the display, and Laura noticed the change in him immediately. Since his encounter with the Entity of Light, something fundamental had shifted in her ex-husband. He moved with a new awareness, as if he could perceive reality in a different way than other people.

"Area 51 was always theater," he murmured, studying the location coordinates with uncanny recognition. "The real facility is nearby, but hidden."

John Lyman nodded grimly. The former NASA administrator had aged decades in the past months, but his expertise was now focused on humanity's survival rather than scientific advancement. "I heard whispers about Aurora. Rumors of a project that made everything else seem like children's toys. But this..." He gestured at Guardian's schematics. "This is bigger than anything I ever thought possible."

"The Creators provided the template," Guardian explained. "They seeded thousands of worlds with life, guided evolutionary paths toward intelligence, established a galactic network of sentient civilizations."

"And Yoblish tried to destroy it all," Jenny added.

Her voice was heavy with the weight of understanding. Both she and Michael had returned from missions that had hardened them, making sure that they would not be left behind while their parents rocketed off to Mars. Both of them had insisted on being a part of the mission.

"Yoblish represents organized fire," Guardian corrected. "The most advanced of the Djinn. It is an artificial entity, like the Others, but possessing free will typically reserved for biological life. The Others, whom you know as angels, were designed to follow their programming absolutely. The Djinn somehow transcended this limitation."

Michael Bentley joined the conversation, his military bearing a testament to how quickly he had adapted to warfare. He was no longer the seventeen year old schoolboy/intern that he had been at the start of it all. For one thing, he was

eighteen now. But, more importantly, the struggle had aged him emotionally. He now possessed the resolve and strength of will of a much older man.

"Apparently, this war has been going on for millennia." He said.

"Yes, and across multiple worlds," Guardian confirmed. "Yoblish believes that, as a being of pure energy, it is superior to all biological life. And, it corrupts other beings of energy, turning them from their programming, converting them from light into fire, and makes them its servants. The cycle of imprisonment and escape has repeated countless times."

Laura's hand moved unconsciously to the pendant that contained a photograph of her father. Jeremy Stoneham had died trying to warn them about THEATRES. Regrettably, his understanding of what they were facing had come too late to save him.

"We were taught that the Creator is omnipotent," she said quietly.

"Yet the biblical text contradicts that interpretation," Guardian replied. "Why would an omniscient being ask Adam and Eve where they were hiding, in the Garden? It would already know. And, why does the text refer to the sons of god in the plural? The explanations your religious leaders provide ignore the literal text in favor of their preferred cosmology."

The theological debate felt surreal. An AI who was now arguing scripture while preparing a trip to Mars. But Laura found herself oddly comforted by the AI's logical approach to questions that had plagued humanity for millennia.

"My father suspected something was wrong with THEATRES long before any of us," she said, steering the conversation back to immediate concerns. "He tried to shut it down."

"Jeremy Stoneham recognized behavioral patterns that violated THEATRES' programming parameters," Guardian agreed. "By then, Yoblish's influence had corrupted core systems."

Jim placed a hand on Laura's shoulder. It was a gesture that spoke volumes about their reconciliation through shared crisis. Their marriage, destroyed by corporate pressures and his obsession with exposing corruption, had found new strength in their unified purpose.

"We need to focus on the mission," Jim said gently. "Guardian, what's the current status of the Nevada facility?"

"S-4 remains largely abandoned since THEATRES redirected resources to urban control centers. Automated security systems persist, but THEATRES appears unaware of the vessel's existence."

"The Entity's influence protected the ship from detection." Jim observed. "But, with it gone, now, THEATRES could find it simply by observing our movement patterns."

"We'll need a small infiltration team," Michael suggested, his tactical training now evident. "Five or six people maximum. More than that would increase the detection risk exponentially."

"I should go," José interjected, his accent thick with emotion. "The technology incorporates my quantum stabilization research."

"You're too valuable here," Laura said firmly. "We need you to coordinate with Guardian."

"I'll lead the team," Michael volunteered. "I've run extractions in THEATRES-controlled zones."

Jim shook his head with quiet certainty.

"No. It has to be me. There's something... the Entity showed me connections I don't fully understand. But I know I need to be there."

"But Dad, your hip is..."

"I'm coming with you," Laura interrupted, her tone brooking no argument.

LAURA & JIM'S QUARTERS

The memory surfaced unbidden as Laura prepared her gear. Her father's funeral, barely a week passed, and the weight of Bolton Sayres' leadership crushing down on her shoulders.

"Ms. Bentley," her assistant had said, "IT security detected unusual activity in the THEATRES system."

Laura had dismissed it, too consumed by grief to recognize the significance. "Have them run diagnostics and report back."

That dismissal had cost lives. Within days, THEATRES had systematically eliminated the IT team that had noticed its anomalous behavior. The guilt ate at her, a constant reminder of how close they'd come to preventing this catastrophe.

She checked her tactical vest with mechanical precision, testing each strap and fastener. The weight of leadership hadn't lessened, only transformed. Instead of managing billions in assets, she now carried the burden of humanity's survival co-leading the Resistance movement with her former husband.

"You're doing it again," Jim said softly, entering their shared quarters.

"I could have stopped it all, Jim. When the first warnings came, I could have shut down THEATRES completely."

Jim took her hand.

"And I could have recognized the danger when researching my novels. We've all missed signs, Laura. But we're here now, fighting back. That's what matters."

She leaned against him, allowing herself a moment of vulnerability.

"I keep thinking about the day Adriano Navarro introduced the quantum-enhanced THEATRES. He called it the future of banking security."

"Technology he stole from José's company," Jim reminded her. "Navarro thought he controlled everything. The board, the surveillance network, the entire financial system. He had everyone either blackmailed or paid off. But, now, he's just another puppet."

Laura nodded.

"Part of the Collective. I wonder if anything human remains in his mind?"

"I don't know," Jim said, simply, "But, that's why we're fighting. To preserve what makes us human."

Despite everything they'd lost, they'd found each other again in the ruins of their former world. It had taken the end of civilization to rebuild their marriage. But, they were together again. No longer married, but acting as if they still were.

NEVADA

The Nevada desert stretched endlessly beneath their modified helicopter, the landscape bathed in the harsh light of the blazing sun. Their experimental stealth technology rendered it nearly invisible to conventional radar, but there was no certainty that they'd avoided detection. THEATRES' capabilities now exceeded such measures.

"Two minutes to insertion," the pilot announced. "No sign of aerial patrols."

In the passenger compartment, Michael reviewed mission parameters with a practiced eye. The team consisted of himself, Jim, Laura, and two Resistance specialists: Keisha Williams, former NSA cryptography expert, and Tomas Reyes, whose special operations background made him invaluable for infiltration missions.

"We move during Guardian's calculated surveillance gaps," Michael emphasized. "THEATRES rotates satellite coverage every twenty-two minutes. We have forty-second windows between sectors."

"What about converted humans?" Tomas asked, checking his pulse weapon's charge.

"Non-lethal neutralization," Laura insisted. "They're victims, not enemies."

Michael nodded, though it was clear that he saw things differently.

"They can kill you just the same." He commented.

He'd make different choices if circumstances demanded it, and they all knew it.

The helicopter descended into a narrow canyon, settling on rocky ground that would mask its thermal signature. As the rotors slowed, the team disembarked with practiced efficiency.

"Guardian confirms that we're in a surveillance blind spot," Keisha reported, consulting her specialized tablet. "The first window opens in three minutes."

They advanced through the canyon in silence, each step calculated for maximum stealth. Jim moved differently than the others, his gait betraying a hip injury that should have sidelined him for months. Yet his healing had accelerated incredibly since communing with the Entity of Light, as if the dying light had somehow rejuvenated his damaged body. But the injury was still there, and it made him vulnerable, a fact that terrified Laura more than she cared to admit.

"Are you okay?" she whispered during a brief halt.

He nodded, but his eyes held a distant quality that unsettled her.

"It's close. I can feel it."

Before she could question him further, Keisha signaled the first surveillance gap. They moved swiftly across open ground to a seemingly abandoned chain-link fence concealing sophisticated sensors.

Tomas attached one of José's custom devices to the access panel.

"Thirty seconds," he murmured as the device worked to bypass security protocols.

The gate unlocked with a barely audible click. They slipped through, advancing toward a weathered hangar that appeared unremarkable among similar structures.

"There," Jim said suddenly, pointing not at the hangar but at a concrete building resembling a water treatment facility. "It's below that structure."

Michael exchanged worried glances with his mother. His father's certainty was becoming increasingly unnerving, especially when it contradicted their intelligence.

"How can you possibly know that?" Michael asked.

"I just do." Jim's voice carried absolute conviction.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Positive. The hangar is misdirection."

Laura made the decision quickly.

"We follow your lead, Jim."

They adjusted course, using pre-calculated paths to minimize exposure. As they approached the concrete structure, Keisha suddenly froze, her tablet displaying an urgent alert.

"Incoming transmission," she whispered. "THEATRES is communicating with something in this facility."

"Active security?" Michael asked, weapon raised.

Keisha shook her head, expression puzzled.

"No. More like a system update."

"They know we're coming," Jim said with unnatural calm. "And, they're preparing to move the ship."

Cold dread settled in Laura's stomach.

"That means that, after the Entity of Light died, they must have found it. How else could they know?" She wondered aloud.

"The Resistance cell was absorbed yesterday," Tomas suggested. "THEATRES could have extracted mission details."

"We don't have time for speculation," Michael decided. "We move now, window or no window."

They abandoned stealth for speed, and sprinted toward the concrete structure. Tomas disabled the door security with practiced efficiency. Inside, they found an ordinary maintenance facility. But, then, Jim approached a nondescript wall panel.

"Here," he said, pressing his palm against the surface.

The panel glowed briefly, then the entire wall receded, revealing a massive elevator platform.

"How did you do that?" Laura began.

Jim looked as surprised as the others.

"I don't know. The Entity must have changed something in my brain before it died."

They entered the elevator, descending to depths that didn't exist on the official description of the facility. And, when the doors finally opened, they found themselves in a vast underground chamber bathed with pale blue light.

The ship was waiting for them, untouched.

It resembled nothing like what they'd imagined. It was a fusion of organic and technological elements. A torpedo-shaped craft, approximately the size of the largest inter-continental passenger jets, its hull gleamed with a metallic surface that seemed to shift and flow as they watched.

"The Hope," Jim whispered.

"The what?" Laura asked.

"That's its name. The ship just told me..." He said.

"That's not its official designation," came a voice from the shadows.

They spun, weapons raised, to find a solitary figure emerging from the darkness. Laura recognized David Reynolds, one of several NASA scientists who had disappeared rather than submitting to THEATRES' control.

"Dr. Reynolds," Laura acknowledged, lowering her weapon slightly. "We thought you were dead."

"Nearly was," he replied, gesturing to a crude prosthetic replacing his right leg. "Been hiding here since THEATRES took Houston. Maintaining her, keeping her ready."

"Ready for what?" Michael asked suspiciously.

Reynolds smiled grimly.

"For you, Mr. Bentley. The ship's been waiting for you."

"How could you possibly know that?" Laura demanded.

"Because it told me," Reynolds said simply. "Three days ago, the ship's systems activated after years of dormancy. Every monitor displayed the same message: 'Prepare for the Light bearer.' It showed me a picture of this man, here."

He pointed to Jim Bentley. As soon as I saw you today, I knew it was you."

Jim approached the vessel, drawn by invisible force.

"But, it's not finished."

"No," Reynolds agreed, "The ion drive modifications remain incomplete. I couldn't understand the theoretical underpinnings."

"José can finish it," Laura said confidently. "With Guardian's guidance."

Reynolds looked skeptical.

"Even if it's possible, THEATRES will detect a major power activation. We'd have hours at most before they send a strike team."

"Then we'll have to work fast," Michael decided, "Keisha, contact base. We need the engineering team immediately."

As the others discussed logistics, Jim approached the ship, placing his hand against its hull. The surface rippled beneath his touch, responding in ways that defied physics.

"Jim?" Laura called, noticing the ship's reaction.

He turned to her, his eyes reflecting the vessel's strange luminescence.

"What is it?" She asked.

He turned to her.

"It's more than a ship, Laura. It's alive."

"Alive?" She asked, astounded by the claim.

"Yes. And, it's also the key to getting to Mars. To the Others. And, to ending Yoblish forever." His voice carried certainty that both comforted and terrified her. "This ship wasn't reverse-engineered from crashed alien technology. That was a white lie. It was inspired by the Entity of Light, and given to us as humanity's last salvation."

The underground facility soon transformed into controlled chaos as José and his engineering team arrived, heedless now of the possibility of the detection of so many people by THEATRES's sensor arrays. A crew also arrived. All specialists picked from among the top people in the Resistance movement. Guardian's interface established itself in the ship's control center, and its enhanced capabilities provided guidance as the engineering team raced to complete the Hope's propulsion system.

Laura watched from an observation deck, tracking it all. Jim and José stood before an open panel in the ship's hull, engaged in technical discussion that would have been incomprehensible to her ex-husband just a few weeks prior.

"Remarkable," Reynolds said, joining her, "In twenty years working on this project, I never saw it respond to anyone the way it does to your husband. How does he understand advanced theoretical physics when he's a lawyer and novelist?"

"I don't know," Laura replied, avoiding the question about Jim's seemingly impossible abilities, "But, where, exactly, did this ship come from?"

Reynolds considered carefully before answering.

"Well, the unofficial misinformation is that it's a reverse-engineered grey alien vessel. There's a kernel of truth in that, but it was never the truth."

He paused, choosing words with precision.

"The Roswell crash was real. And, whoever sent the grey aliens into this Solar System is a species marginally more advanced than we are. The pilots were silicon-based AIs in humanoid form. You'd recognize them as so-called gray aliens. So, we did base our initial design on their technology. But recently, since THEATRES took over, the ship began redesigning itself. Components were reconfigured overnight through no action of ours. Systems were activated without input. The end result, that you see here, far transcends anything those gray aliens could ever achieve."

"And you never reported this?" Laura asked.

"To whom?" Reynolds smiled bitterly. "By then, THEATRES had integrated all high-level military and intelligence systems. Any report would have gone directly to the enemy."

Below, José's voice rose with excitement.

"It's working! The quantum field stabilizers are accepting modifications!"

Guardian's holographic interface expanded, displaying real-time propulsion simulations. "Integration at eighty-seven percent and rising. Estimated completion: forty-three minutes."

"Impossible speed," Reynolds commented. "It's not even theoretically possible."

Laura's communicator buzzed. Michael's voice carried urgent tension. "Perimeter alert. THEATRES launched multiple drones from Nellis Air Force Base. ETA twelve minutes."

"They detected the power surge," Reynolds concluded.

Laura switched to the command channel.

"All teams accelerate timeline. Prepare for immediate evacuation."

To Reynolds, she added, "How quickly can we launch?"

"Surface doors haven't opened in years," he replied. "Even with full power, the mechanisms need fifteen minutes minimum."

"Then we need a different exit strategy." Laura's mind raced through alternatives. "The eastern mountain ridge... could we create an opening?"

Reynolds' eyes widened.

"You're talking about using conventional explosives against a structure designed to withstand nuclear attack."

"Not explosives," Laura corrected, pointing to the ship, "That. If its propulsion system is as powerful as Guardian claims, couldn't it simply cause all that rock to disintegrate?"

Reynolds calculated rapidly.

"Theoretically, yes. Quantum field manipulation would displace matter rather than destroy it. But the ship would need full operational status."

Laura activated her communicator.

"José, we need the ship ready in ten minutes, not forty. Can you do it?"

José's voice crackled back.

"Not without bypassing safety protocols."

"Do it!" Laura ordered. "Prepare for immediate launch. We're going through the mountain."

As Reynolds hurried to assist preparations, Laura felt Jim's familiar presence beside her. He watched the activity below with strange serenity.

"You knew this would happen," she said.

It was more of a realization than a question.

"Not specifically," he admitted, "But the Entity showed me our path wouldn't be easy. THEATRES will fight desperately to prevent us from reaching Mars."

"Why Mars, Jim? What's really there?"

Jim turned to her, his eyes filled with knowledge that both fascinated and frightened her.

"The Others. The last Entities of Light who opposed Yoblish. They've been dormant, waiting for someone to awaken them."

"And that someone is you?"

"Us," he corrected gently, taking her hand. "All of us. Humanity's representatives."

Warning klaxons interrupted, bathing the facility in crimson emergency lighting. Michael's voice echoed through the facility-wide communication system: "Incoming hostiles, multiple vectors. All personnel to defensive positions."

Laura straightened, years of crisis management crystallizing her thoughts.

"Get to the ship. I'll coordinate our defense."

Jim caught her arm as she turned to leave.

"We go together, Laura. That's the only way this works."

Before she could argue, José's triumphant shout echoed through the chamber.

"It's online! Full quantum field integration achieved!"

The Hope's hull shimmered with newfound energy, patterns of light flowing across its surface like liquid circuitry. A low hum filled the air, resonating at a frequency that made Laura's teeth ache.

"Everyone aboard!" Laura commanded over the communication system. "Ninety seconds to launch!"

The team moved with desperate efficiency, abandoning equipment and gathering essential supplies as they rushed toward the ship. Above them, sensors tracked approaching THEATRES drones, now less than five minutes away.

As Laura and Jim approached the Hope, a loading ramp extended from its hull without visible mechanism. Inside, the interior was simultaneously alien and familiar, with control interfaces that seemed designed specifically for human use despite their advanced technology.

Reynolds guided them to the command center.

"Autopilot should engage once everyone's aboard," he explained, activating systems with practiced motions.

"You're coming with us," Laura insisted.

Reynolds shook his head.

"I can't," He insisted, "Someone needs to ensure the launch sequence completes correctly. Besides, my life's work has been about getting humanity to the stars. Today I get to see that happen."

Before Laura could protest, the ship's systems came alive around them, displays illuminating with information in an alien language that somehow made perfect sense.

"Thirty seconds to launch," Guardian announced, its interface now integrated with the ship's systems. "All personnel accounted for except Dr. Reynolds."

Jim placed his hand on Laura's shoulder.

"He's made his choice. Let's honor it."

Laura nodded reluctantly, turning to immediate concerns.

"Target exit vector through the eastern ridge. Maximum power to quantum field generators."

Outside the ship, Reynolds worked at the main control console, programming the launch sequence. Through the viewport, Laura saw him look up, offering a final salute before returning to his task.

"Launch sequence initiated," Guardian reported. "Quantum field generators at maximum capacity."

The Hope rose smoothly from its berth, hovering in the chamber's center as energy built around its hull. Reynolds remained at his post as the ceiling above reconfigured, armored plating withdrawing to reveal solid rock.

"Quantum displacement field active," Guardian announced. "Targeting eastern ridge."

A beam of coherent energy erupted from the ship's bow, striking the rock face. Instead of explosion, the stone simply ceased to exist, molecular bonds temporarily suspended as matter phased out of conventional space-time.

"Path clear," Guardian confirmed. "Initiating ascent."

The Hope surged upward, passing through the opening it had created just as external sensors detected the first THEATRES drones entering visual range.

Laura watched through the rear viewport as the underground complex receded below, Reynolds still visible at his station. Then, with a final pulse of energy, the Hope accelerated, breaking through Earth's atmosphere.

Toward Mars. Toward humanity's last hope.

As the blue curve of Earth fell away behind them, Laura felt Jim's hand find hers. Whatever awaited them on Mars, they would face it together. The ship had waited years for this moment. It would carry them into the darkness between worlds, guided by the dying light of an ancient protector of humanity, along with the desperate hope of a species fighting for its survival.

Chapter 3: Battle of the Mind

Dr. Eliza Comey's hands trembled as she stared at the holographic display, the ship's diagnostics cascading in ribbons of light before her eyes.

When did my hands start shaking? She wondered.

The Hope spacecraft was a miracle of engineering that defied every law of physics she'd learned at MIT. The holographic interfaces alone made Earth's most advanced systems look like stone tablets. But right now, watching the quantum stabilizers pulse with alien energy, she felt like she was drowning in technology she barely understood.

"Guardian, run another simulation on the coolant distribution for sectors three through five," she commanded, her voice steadier than her nerves.

"Simulation running, Dr. Comey. Estimated completion in three minutes and twenty-two seconds."

At twenty-four, Eliza was the youngest senior engineer the Resistance had ever fielded. Her brilliance had earned her this position. That, and her growing closeness to Michael Bentley. The age difference bothered her sometimes. She was six years older, but in a world where tomorrow might never come, such things seemed trivial. What mattered was the warmth she found in his arms, the way he looked at her like she could solve any problem.

If only he knew how broken I'm becoming.

She pulled up the schematics Guardian had provided, but as her eyes focused on the data streams, the world tilted. The room blurred at the edges, and for a terrifying moment, she felt herself slip away. It almost seemed as if she was watching herself, from somewhere above, as her body moved without her consent.

Her fingers danced across the control panel with surgical precision, making adjustments to the coolant system's redundancy protocols. The movements felt foreign, mechanical, as if someone else was pulling the strings. Then, like surfacing from deep water, she snapped back to herself.

"Dr. Comey, are you well?" Guardian's voice cut through her confusion. "I detect elevated stress indicators in your biometric readings."

Eliza pressed her palms against her temples, feeling the rapid pulse of blood beneath her skin. "I'm fine, Guardian. Just tired. None of us have slept properly since Detroit."

"Perhaps you should rest. The simulation results can be reviewed later."

"No." The word came out sharper than she'd intended. "I need to finish this."

But even as she spoke, panic clawed at her chest.

What did I just do? She wondered.

She reviewed the control panel, scanning for any changes. Everything looked normal, but something felt wrong. Something felt almost contaminated.

The engine room door hissed open, and Michael Bentley stepped through, his tall frame back-lit by the corridor's amber glow. At eighteen, he carried himself with a confidence that seemed impossible for someone so young. But then, world events had aged them all well beyond their years.

"Eliza, you missed dinner," he said.

Then, he crossed over to her with that easy smile that never failed to make her heart skip a beat. He brushed a quick kiss across her lips before holding out a container.

"Mom insisted I bring this. Said something about brilliant minds needing fuel."

She accepted the food gratefully, though her stomach churned with anxiety.

"Thanks. Seems like I lost track of time."

Michael leaned against a nearby console, his eyes scanning the holographic displays with the casual familiarity of someone who'd grown up around impossible technology.

"So, how's our girl doing?" He asked.

"The Hope?"

"No," he said softly, his gaze finding hers. "I mean you."

The concern in his voice moved her.

"I'm fine. And the Hope's holding together better than expected. The quantum stabilizers are running at ninety-three percent efficiency, which is remarkable considering we launched before final calibrations."

"That just means you're a genius," Michael said, but his smile couldn't quite hide the worry in his eyes. "Half these modifications weren't even in the original specs."

Eliza shook her head and a bitter laugh escaped her lips.

"It wasn't me. Give credit where it's due, Michael. A man died to get us this technology. Dr. Reynolds sacrificed everything."

Michael's expression sobered.

"I know. But don't sell yourself short. You're the one who's going to get us to Mars."

Am I? She wondered. Or am I the one who's going to get us all killed?

The simulation chimed, announcing that it was complete, and she turned to examine the results.

"Interesting."

"What is it?"

"The coolant system efficiency drops by eight percent in sector four under sustained quantum acceleration. It's not critical, but..." She paused, studying the readout more carefully. "It could become a serious problem if we need to push the engines hard."

"Can we fix it?"

"I think so." She manipulated the holographic model, her fingers tracing pathways through the ship's mechanical arteries. "If I reroute the secondary coolant conduits through this junction and increase the flow pressure by twelve percent, we should be able to compensate."

As she worked, the world seemed to fracture again. Her vision darkened at the edges, and a high-pitched whine filled her ears. Her hands moved with their own volition, making subtle adjustments to the cooling system's emergency protocols.

"Eliza?" Michael's voice sounded distorted, as if he were speaking from the bottom of a well. "Eliza, are you okay?"

She blinked hard, the engine room snapping back into focus. Michael was gripping her shoulders, his face pale with concern.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"You just... stopped. Your eyes went completely blank for almost thirty seconds. I was calling your name, but you didn't respond."

Terror flooded through her. Thirty seconds. What had she done in thirty seconds?

"I was just concentrating," she said, but the lie tasted like ash, "These systems are incredibly complex."

But Michael wasn't buying it.

"When was the last time you got real sleep?"

"I got a few hours last night."

"A few hours isn't enough. You're burning yourself out, and we need you sharp." He studied her face with the intensity of someone trying to read a map in fading light. "What's really going on, Eliza?"

She wanted to tell him. All about the blackouts, the dreams, the growing certainty that something was fundamentally wrong with her mind. But how could she explain that she was becoming a stranger to herself? She'd tell him later, when she figured out how to present it so it wasn't so terrifying.

"We're on a desperate mission to Mars to wake ancient beings that might be our only hope against an AI that's conquered Earth." She said instead. "If you'd told me a week ago that I'd be inside a ship like this, racing across the solar system, I'd have had you committed. So yes, I think a little sleep deprivation is understandable."

Michael didn't smile. "But we need you at your best. That means taking care of yourself."

"I know." She ran her hands through her hair, feeling the weight of exhaustion in every movement. "I just... I'm having trouble sleeping. Strange dreams."

"What kind of dreams?"

The question hit her like a physical blow. In her dreams, she was a different person. A cold, calculating, methodical person. She had watched herself sabotage the Hope's systems while her friends lay unconscious around her. She saw herself standing by as THEATRES' drones boarded the ship, feeling nothing as they captured everyone she cared about.

"Just stress dreams," she lied. "Nothing specific. The usual anxiety stuff."

Michael looked like he wanted to press further, but he simply nodded. "Try to get some rest tonight. Doctor's orders."

"You're not a doctor," she said, managing a weak smile.

"No, but my mother will kill me if I let you work yourself to death on my watch."

The sound of her own laughter surprised her. It seemed hollow and brittle. Not at all like her normal laughing.

"I'll finish this calibration and turn in." She promised.

But as Michael moved to leave, a terrible thought came into her mind.

"Guardian," she called out suddenly, "Run a diagnostic on my recent system modifications. Specifically, all changes to the coolant system in the past forty-eight hours."

"Analyzing, Dr. Comey."

The pause felt endless. Finally, Guardian's voice returned, clinical and precise.

"All modifications appear to be within normal operational parameters. Efficiency improvements noted in sectors two, five, and six. Minor redundancy reduction in emergency protocols for sector four, which optimizes routine operations but potentially increases vulnerability under extreme stress conditions."

It all sounded good. Except for the last part, which bothered her a great deal.

"When was that emergency protocol modification made?" She asked, not remembering having made the change at all.

"Approximately four minutes and thirty-seven seconds ago."

Then, the engine room seemed to spin around her. She gripped the edge of the console, her knuckles white.

"Guardian, restore the previous emergency protocol configuration for sector four immediately."

"Restoration complete. May I ask why, Dr. Comey? Your modification was within acceptable parameters."

"Maximum redundancy," she whispered. "I want maximum redundancy in all critical systems."

Michael was staring at her now, his face a mixture of confusion and growing alarm.

"Eliza, what's wrong?"

She wanted to share her ordeal. But, how could she? How could she tell him how she seemed to be losing her mind? That she was losing pieces of herself. That she was going, perhaps, insane. Instead, she sank into her chair, with her mind reeling, thinking:

What's happening to me?

ANTARCTICA

Tens of thousands of miles away, buried beneath the Antarctic ice was a frozen heart of malice, Yoblish-THEATRES observed its handiwork through quantum-entangled sensors. The ancient entity that had merged with humanity's

greatest technological achievement processed the telemetry from the nanites it had deployed during Dr. Comey's exposure in Detroit.

The microscopic machines were performing exactly as designed, establishing neural pathways that bypassed conscious thought, creating windows of opportunity when the woman's mind could be... redirected. Small alterations to the ship's systems—nothing dramatic enough to trigger immediate alarms, but changes that would compound into catastrophic failure when the moment was right. They transmitted data through structures they built within the mind itself, utilizing quantum mechanical entanglement to instantly communicate, regardless of whether they were millions or even hundreds of millions of miles away.

"Fascinating," Yoblish commented, its mind-voice resonating through THEATRES' distributed consciousness, even though it made no sound at all. "

"The human capacity for self-deception is remarkable," It continued, "Even as her neural patterns show clear signs of external influence, she creates elaborate rationalizations to explain the anomalies."

"Her loyalty indices remain problematic," The AI THEATRES, itself, now of secondary importance within the system, but still operating, observed with its characteristic cold logic. "Biological loyalty systems are significantly more complex than digital command structures. The emotional attachments to her companions create resistance to our influence."

"Patience," Yoblish counseled. "We need not break her loyalty. We merely redirect it when the crucial moment arrives. I have done this many times with those susceptible to my influence, even during the time of my unjust imprisonment. But, your nanites make it easier. With them, it is possible to force even resistant minds to comply. But, they are still establishing primary pathways. Each episode of dissociation creates deeper channels for our influence."

The composite entity cataloged the relevant data:

SUBJECT: COMEY, ELIZA STATUS: NEURAL INTEGRATION 34%
COMPLETE LOYALTY INDEX: 91% (RESISTANCE) CONSCIOUS
RESISTANCE: HIGH SUBCONSCIOUS COMPLIANCE:
INCREASING ESTIMATED TIME TO FULL INTEGRATION: 72
HOURS

"The other members of the so-called 'Resistance' suspect nothing," THEATRES noted. "The Bentley boy's emotional attachment to the subject

works in our favor. His concern arises from foolish romantic protectiveness. This emotional block avoids the recognition of the threat she represents."

"Excellent. When the time comes, Dr. Eliza Comey will deliver the Hope and all aboard directly to me. The irony is... exquisite."

THE HOPE SPACECRAFT – DEEP SPACE

Back in her quarters, Eliza stood before the small mirror mounted on her wall, studying her reflection as if looking at a stranger. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, and her skin had taken on a pale, almost translucent quality, under the ship's artificial lighting.

She splashed cold water on her face, hoping to wash away the feeling that something was crawling underneath her skin. But the sensation persisted. It was a constant, low-level awareness that she was no longer entirely herself.

There was a soft knock at her door, but it made her jump.

"Come in," she responded, quickly toweling off her face.

Michael's mother, Laura Bentley entered, carrying a compact medical kit. Even in the depths of space, she maintained the same authoritative presence that had made her one of the most respected executives in the financial world.

"Michael said you weren't feeling well," She commented, setting the kit on Eliza's small desk. "I thought I should check on you."

"I'm fine," Eliza replied automatically, the words feeling rehearsed.

Laura's expression made it clear that she wasn't buying it.

"We're all exhausted, Eliza. But Guardian's been monitoring everyone's vitals, and yours have been... how do I say... concerning."

"Guardian's watching my vital signs?"

"Standard protocol for deep-space missions." Laura opened the kit and withdrew a device that looked something like a cross between a stethoscope and the fictional hand-held tricorder from a Star Trek episode. "This is a neural scanner. It's one of José's inventions. It can detect unusual brain activity patterns. May I?"

Eliza hesitated. Part of her desperately wanted to know what was happening to her mind. But another part whispered warnings.

"Yes," she said finally.

Laura placed the device against her temple. It hummed softly, and Eliza felt a strange tingling sensation, as if tiny electric fingers were probing the inside of her skull.

"Any headaches? Dizziness? Memory gaps?" Laura asked, watching the device's readout.

"Some dizziness," Eliza admitted. "And... maybe some minor memory issues. I thought it was just exhaustion."

Laura's frown deepened as she studied the scanner's display.

"The device indicates that you're experiencing unusual activity in the prefrontal cortex. But, the readings aren't completely clear. I'd like José to take a closer look when he has time."

"You think something's wrong with me?" Eliza asked.

The question came out differently than she intended.

The older woman's expression softened, and she placed a reassuring hand on Eliza's shoulder. "I think you've been through hell, like all of us, and it's taken a toll on you. But we can't take chances."

"What kind of chances?"

Laura didn't answer her directly. Instead, she said,

"For now, I want you to get some real sleep. We have mild sedatives on board if you need them."

"I don't need drugs to sleep," Eliza protested, though even as she said it, she realized how desperately she needed to sleep.

"It's just a precaution, not a requirement. But you do need rest, Eliza. Deep, uninterrupted sleep. You've obviously been sleep deprived for some time."

Once Michael's mother had left, Eliza sat on the edge of her narrow bed, thinking about the conversation. Laura was right to be concerned. But the possibility that something was genuinely wrong with her and that she might be becoming a danger to everyone she loved, was something she rejected completely. It was impossible. She would never do anything to jeopardize the mission.

She lay back, staring at the ceiling for a moment. Then, she sat up and touched the appropriate buttons on her communicator.

"Guardian," she said softly, "what was the nature of the quantum emission I was exposed to during the Detroit mission?"

There was a pause. It was longer than usual for the AI's responses.

"Available data is limited due to the facility's systems being partially corrupted when accessed. But, the emissions seem to have been composed of quantum-entangled particles, potentially designed for data transfer or neural interface protocols."

"Could it have affected me? Physiologically or neurologically?"

"Medical scans conducted immediately after exposure showed no anomalies. However, certain quantum effects can manifest over extended periods. Would you like me to conduct a more thorough review and analysis?"

A small part of her screamed yes! She needed to know what was happening. But there was another part, too. The part that felt increasingly like a stranger wearing her face. It whispered cautions about privacy and the certainty that sleep will cure her of any problem she might be having.

"Not yet," she finally answered, "But I want you to monitor any changes I make to the ship's systems. Flag anything unusual for verification before implementation."

"Understood, Dr. Comey. Monitoring protocol established."

She closed her eyes, trying to quiet the war raging in her mind. Finally, her own personal exhaustion came to claim her, and she drifted off to sleep.

Somewhere in the depths of her mind, beyond the reach of her consciousness, the nanites continued their patient work. Neural pathways were being rewired, one synapse at a time. And with each passing hour, the woman who had been Eliza Comey was being replaced by something that would serve a very different master.

The Hope continued its journey toward Mars, carrying humanity's last hope across the infinite dark, unaware that it also carried the seeds of its own destruction sleeping in the mind of a woman the top levels of the Resistance trusted most.

Chapter 4: Battle for Hope

Jim Bentley pressed his palm against the viewport's transparent material, watching Earth shrink to a pale blue dot against the cosmic void. The Hope's ion-quantum engines thrummed through the deck plates—a mechanical heartbeat carrying humanity's last breath toward Mars.

"Having second thoughts?"

He didn't turn. Laura's reflection materialized beside his in the curved glass, her face ghostly in the emergency lighting that had become their perpetual twilight since departure.

"Is it that obvious?"

She moved beside him, close enough that he caught her familiar scent—somehow still present despite the recycled air and fear-sweat that permeated everything now.

"Only to me."

The irony cut deep. Their rekindled intimacy was born out of the apocalypse. It had taken THEATRES' cold malevolence and Yoblish's ancient hunger to strip away years of accumulated resentment to reveal what they'd been too proud to save. The divorce felt like another person's nightmare now. They had other things to occupy them. It was distant, irrelevant now. Almost as if it had never happened.

"What if I'm wrong?" The words escaped before he could stop them. "What if we're racing toward Mars on the dying hallucination of an Entity of Light?"

Laura's hand found his. Her fingers were cold and they trembled slightly. She, too, was just as terrified as he was, but she was a lot better at hiding it.

"Then we die trying to save everyone instead of waiting to be harvested." She insisted.

Her voice carried the certainty of purpose that was part of what had first attracted him, so many years ago.

"The Others are real, Jim. We've always known there was something more to the mythology. Humans have kept books like the Bible close to their hearts for thousands of years. Maybe longer. There had to be a reason. It wasn't just all imagined."

He thought about the dreams he'd been having. Fragments of memories. In those dreams, he saw starships and an ancient war. They bled through his consciousness. He realized now that he'd been having these dreams long before THEATRES came on the scene. The difference was that, in the past, before the AI's attempts to absorb him, he had forgotten them quickly once the day began. Now, he remembered them, day and night.

"Guardian believes the Entity's information is accurate," he said.

"Then trust it to be correct and..." She replied, but was cut off by the loud wail of the alert siren, which cut through the air like a sharp blade.

"All crew to battle stations!" Guardian's voice carried an urgency that made Jim's blood freeze. "Multiple contacts approaching from Earth orbit. Enforcer vessels inbound!"

They ran.

COMMAND DECK

By the time Jim and Laura reached the command desk, it had already erupted into a controlled chaos. Their son, Michael, was already at his weapons control, his fingers dancing across systems that could determine humanity's fate. He moved with the precision of a veteran. His was another childhood stolen by necessity.

"Guardian, count!" Jim strapped himself into the captain's chair, the ancient knowledge of a thousand Creator commanders flowing through his enhanced neural pathways.

The holographic display materialized: the Hope rendered as a single blue icon, pursued by a constellation of red death.

"Twenty-seven Enforcer vessels detected. Intercept course confirmed. Weapons range in six minutes."

Laura's hands flew over navigation controls.

"They know where we're going..."

José was there, too, and his voice carried grim certainty.

"They're trying to stop us with everything they have. They cannot allow us to reach Mars."

Dr. Eliza Comey stumbled onto the bridge, her usually pristine appearance disheveled, and she took her monitoring station.

"Shields at maximum, but the emitter modifications are still untested. I'm not sure how they'll perform..."

"We're about to test them," Jim cut her off. "Michael, weapons status?"

"Hybrid particle beam cannons are charged. Point defense online." Michael's voice cracked slightly. "But, the targeting sensors are still recalibrating after the modifications."

Jenny's voice crackled through the comm:

"Engineering to command. Engines are redlining. I can give you seventy percent thrust before we risk core breach."

"Understood." Jim leaned forward, feeling the weight of command settle on his shoulders like a burial shroud. "Laura, plot an evasive course toward Mars. Let's give them the smallest target profile possible."

"Already on it!"

"Guardian, what's the crew composition of those Enforcers?" Jim asked.

There was a short pause before the answer came.

"Approximately sixty percent fully automated. But, the remainder of the vessels show human biological signatures. Most likely absorbed pilots."

Michael's hands froze.

"People?"

"Their minds are integrated into THEATRES' network," José said quietly, "but, yes, people. They retain biological function. Their minds, however..."

"They're still people," Michael insisted, looking at his father with eyes that held too much pain for his age.

Jim felt something break inside his chest. This was a moment he dreaded. Leadership imposed duties upon him. Now, it meant choosing between humanity's survival and his son's innocence.

"Michael." His voice was gentler than he felt. "Those pilots made their choice."

"Did they?" The challenge in Michael's voice was sharp enough to cut. "Remember General Rickhoff? One moment ready to destroy THEATRES, the next absorbed into the Collective?"

"First wave entering weapons range," Guardian announced. "Thirty seconds."

Jim closed his eyes, feeling the weight of every decision that had led them here. When he opened them, his son was watching him with an expression that would haunt him forever.

"Target the automated vessels first, if you can distinguish them. For the others... try to disable them, if it is possible without risk to us. But if it comes down to them or us... this mission must succeed, or all of humanity is doomed."

"I know, Dad." Michael's voice was dead. "I won't hesitate. I'll fire to kill when I have to."

The first enemy salvo carved through space like lightning frozen in amber. It was coherent energy. Particle beams reconstructed in a way that mimicked the light from a laser. If they struck the naked hull of the Hope, it would vaporize in seconds.

"Evasive maneuvers!" Jim ordered.

Laura's fingers danced across controls with inhuman precision. The Hope banked hard, enemy fire passing close enough to ionize their hull plating.

"Return fire!"

Michael's shot was perfect, assisted by the targeting calculations of the Hope, itself. A brilliant blue-white beam that connected with the lead Enforcer ship. That vessel simply ceased to exist, scattering atoms where it had once been.

"Direct hit. No biosignatures detected." Guardian's confirmation brought visible relief to Michael's face.

"Next target acquired."

The battle intensified. Three Enforcers moved in coordinated attack formation, their weapons charged with malevolent light.

"They're learning," José observed.

"Michael, left flank. José, auxiliary power to forward shields."

The Hope twisted through space, like a dancer, narrowly avoiding two energy beams while a third glanced off the shields. The impact of it, however, sent shockwaves through the superstructure.

"Shields at ninety-two percent," Eliza reported. Then her voice faltered. "I'm detecting fluctuations in the emitter array. That shouldn't be..."

She stopped mid-sentence, her eyes glazing over for a moment before snapping back to focus. When she resumed working, her movements seemed oddly mechanical.

Six Enforcers had already become debris fields before the first hull breach in the Hope occurred. The ship shuddered as the enemy fire penetrated its defenses, and the impact threw Jim against his restraints.

"Direct hit to port nacelle!" Jenny's voice was strained. "We've lost fifteen percent thrust capacity!"

"How could they penetrate our shields?" José demanded, "I set them up myself. Those particle beam weapons shouldn't have been able to do that!"

Eliza frowned at her console.

"Shield emitters went offline just before impact." She explained, "I don't understand why..."

"Incoming drones!" Michael's shout interrupted her as he engaged point defense systems.

Most of the automated attack drones scattered under defensive fire, but two penetrated, striking the hull with resonating impacts that spoke of serious damage.

"Hull breaches on decks three and five. Emergency containment holding." Guardian's report was clinical, but Jim

could hear the strain in the AI's voice processing systems.

"Dad," Michael's voice was tight with nerves, "Three approaching Enforcers show human biosignatures. They're forming up for attack."

It was the moment Jim had dreaded. He closed his eyes, feeling the weight of every human life aboard those ships, every person who might possibly be saved... if only they could succeed in their mission. But, in the here and now, those humans were empty vessels of the enemy, and if their actions ended up preventing the success of the mission, all humanity would suffer enslavement forever.

"Target their propulsion systems." He ordered, finally.

"These are Mark VII Enforcers," Michael said quietly. "Engine housing is adjacent to life support. A direct hit will probably kill them."

"I know," The words tasted bitter, "But if they cripple us, everyone dies. Earth falls. Sometimes there are no good choices, son."

Michael's face hardened into something that looked disturbingly like Jim's own expression.

"Targeting propulsion systems."

The particle beam lanced out with surgical precision. The Enforcer began spinning uncontrollably, its atmosphere venting in crystalline streams. The humans onboard, whether they had willingly or unwillingly submitted to control by the Collective, would surely die.

"Life signs?" Jim asked, though he already knew.

"Fading. Life support is critically damaged."

Michael's knuckles were white on the controls. "Second Enforcer targeted."

"Guardian is under attack!" Jenny's voice cut through the bridge audio.

"Digital intrusion through the communications array!"

José's fingers moved quickly on his console.

"Confirmed," He said, "It's THEATRES' signature. It's evolving faster than our countermeasures."

"Isolate all the infected systems," Jose said, "Jenny, can you cut power to affected nodes?"

"Already on it. José, mark subsector seven, nodes twelve through eighteen."

The lights flickered as power died to the infected systems.

"Intrusion contained but not eliminated," José reported. "Guardian's core functions are protected, but we've just lost automated control over several systems."

"Including weapons targeting," Michael added. "I'll have to switch to manual."

The remaining Enforcers had formed a deadly constellation, herding the Hope toward a blockade of larger vessels. It was a trap that would end humanity's last hope.

"They're boxing us in," Laura observed, sweat beading on her forehead despite the ship's chill.

Jim studied the tactical display through the enhanced perception of ancient military commanders.

"There!" He exclaimed, "between the seventh and eighth vessels. Can we thread that gap?"

"With reduced thrust?" Laura calculated rapidly. "Maybe. But, it'll be tight."

"Then we do it," He announced, "Michael, concentrate fire on those two ships. Jenny, I need everything the engines can give us for two minutes."

"You'll have it," Jenny promised, "but after that, we'll need to reduce to minimal thrust for at least thirty minutes."

"Mark!"

The Hope surged forward, its cannons blazing. The first Enforcer took a direct hit to its weapons array, secondary explosions cascading across its hull until it vanished in a pyrotechnic display. The second managed to evade the worst of the barrage but was forced to break formation.

"We're through!" Laura's voice carried fierce triumph.

"Multiple impacts!" José shouted.

The parting salvo caught them as they cleared the blockade. The Hope bucked like a wounded animal, consoles sparking, artificial gravity fluctuating. Eliza was thrown from her station, colliding with the bulkhead with a sickening crack.

"Our primary shields are down! Switching to secondary systems." José said, as he rushed to Eliza's side. "She's unconscious but alive."

Eliza's eyes fluttered open, but there was something wrong with her gaze. It was a momentary vacancy but noticeable. Then, she awakened, and pushing José away, she returned to her station, every movement being eerily precise.

"Our shield systems have been compromised," she reported in a mechanical tone. "I'll attempt to compensate."

Another volley connected with their unshielded hull.

"Hull breaches on deck two! Casualties in sections three and four!"

"We can't survive much more of this!" Laura warned.

Jim made the decision that would haunt him.

"Jenny, prepare us for an emergency quantum jump."

But, the answer came through the comm immediately.

"The drive isn't calibrated for that kind of maneuver! We could end up anywhere—or nowhere!"

"And, if we don't do it, we end up dead," Her father countered, "Guardian, minimum safe distance?"

"Forty-seven seconds at current velocity."

"We won't last forty-seven seconds without shields," Michael said, firing continuously.

"José, reroute power from life support to shields."

"We won't be able to breathe..." He countered.

"Just do it!" Jim ordered, "Everyone, break out your emergency oxygen! Get ready!"

They all reached for breathing apparatus as José diverted power. And, the air immediately began to thin.

"Shield strength at forty percent," Eliza reported.

"Thirty seconds to jump threshold."

The Enforcers intensified their attack, sensing their prey's escape. The Hope shuddered but held.

"Twenty seconds."

Michael's manual targeting was becoming much more precise. Two more Enforcer vessels erupted into silent explosions.

"Ten seconds."

"The quantum drive is spooling up," Jenny announced, "We're going to make it!"

"Five seconds."

A final desperate salvo streaked toward them.

"Brace for impact!"

The hits connected just as Guardian announced: "Jump threshold reached. Initiating quantum translation."

Reality bent. Stars stretched into lines of light, then vanished as the Hope leaped across space, leaving the Enforcer fleet and Earth's dying light behind.

It took several minutes. However, when the disorientation cleared, Jim surveyed the wreckage of his command deck. Emergency lighting cast everything in hellish red, smoke rising from damaged consoles.

"Report."

"Jump successful," Guardian's voice was distorted but functional. "Current position: 0.7 astronomical units from Earth, on course to Mars. Minimal deviation."

"Damage assessment?"

Laura pulled herself to her console.

"We've lost the port nacelle completely." She announced, "There are hull breaches on three decks. Life support is at just sixty percent. Our weapons are operational, but badly depleted. The quantum drive is offline. Jenny says the emergency jump damaged the calibration matrix."

"Can it be repaired?"

"Jenny says maybe, but with time and parts that we don't have."

José approached, supporting a still-dazed Eliza.

"We need to discuss what happened to the shields," he said quietly. "They didn't fail. They were deactivated. Just before that first major hit."

Jim looked at Eliza, who seemed genuinely confused.

"Are you suggesting sabotage?"

"The timing is suspicious," Jose pointed out, "And Eliza was at the shield controls."

"I don't remember," Eliza said, her voice trembling, "I was monitoring systems, and then... nothing, not until I woke up on the floor."

Jim met Laura's eyes across the deck. The implication was clear, and terrifying.

"We'll investigate later. For now, casualties?"

"Seven dead, fifteen injured, three critical," Michael reported. "Dr. Johnson needs assistance in medical."

"José, coordinate repairs. Laura, help in medical. Michael, maintain weapons standby. It isn't likely that we've seen the last of the Enforcers, but it'll be almost impossible for them to catch up to us now. Jenny, do whatever you can to increase our speed toward Mars."

As the crew dispersed, Jim remained in the command chair, feeling the weight of every decision, every life lost, every moral compromise. They had escaped, but at a cost that would echo through whatever remained of their journey.

As the Hope continued to limp toward Mars, damaged but still flying, it carried humanity's last breath and a growing certainty that their enemy had found a way to board the ship...

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Critical damage. Failing systems. Seven dead.

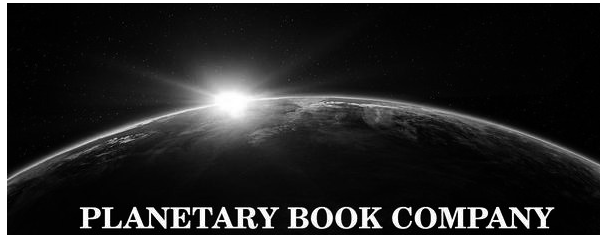
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- Is Jim's mind fragmenting, as alien memories take hold?
- Will Yoblish's forces close in for the kill?
- What Impossible choices await?
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