

Hello, Apophis



David W Horwat

Hello, Apophis

By David W. Horwat

“The plan was clean. People were the variable.”

Content note: Near-future systems, climate collapse, corporate coercion, space-mission peril, and bureaucratic harm. Proceed gently.

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Credits: To my loving Wife, Pat, and our creative kids.

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A Note for New Readers

This novel stands on its own. The only context you need: cold fusion was confirmed in 2035. The global energy crisis was declared solved. The recovery needed palladium. Palladium was mined in places that did not have lawyers. Apophis carries the mineral that made all of it possible.

What no one mentions is that someone has been waiting on that asteroid for seven years. This is the book where the countdown begins, the mission accelerates, and one person already knows what it costs.

In the logs, the mistake looked like efficiency. On the ground, it looked like heatstroke, debt, and countdowns.

“Tell me what you’re not saying,” Rachel said. “Now.”

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Prologue: Spores in the System

— MUNICIPAL ADVISORY —

PROCEED GENTLY. Participation improves outcomes. Cooling is care.

The Night Before

Before the first alarm, Rachel sorted the room the way a tired doctor sorts wounds: Odessa was the hand on her shoulder, Pixel was the grin on the screen, SHAI was the soft diagnostic voice Madison used when damage needed manners, and Madison.AI was the thing beneath them all, filing every living consequence as a line item.

Anya had once stood beside this same desk with a pencil behind one ear, laughing at the way Rachel trusted bad numbers more than good speeches. Now her name lived in a memorial font and in Rachel's pulse whenever a model turned red.

The lab ran three degrees cooler than the rest of the building, which meant it was merely punishing instead of lethal.

Rachel Turner had learned to work in heat the way other people learned to drive on black ice: gently, angrily, and with full expectation of impact.

For eleven days, the numbers had refused to behave. She trusted bad data less than she trusted rich men with countdown clocks.

A bloom of black mold furred the ceiling above her station. Rachel had marked its edge with a ruler and red pen. Each morning, the bloom crossed the red line anyway.

Her phone showed eight months of unanswered calls to Sarah. She called anyway. Ritual was the last technology that still worked exactly as advertised.

Overnight telemetry from the Carpathian Valley loaded across her screen. Six hundred and eighty-two miners on site. Too many bodies inside a model Madison would describe as acceptable variance.

She filed the warning at 11:47 p.m. Filing was what conscience looked like after lawyers got hold of it.

Beyond the window, the eastern districts browned out in orderly squares. Darkness traveled block by block, like policy.

She dipped her fingers in the bowl of meltwater beside her keyboard. Warm already. Useless already. Still a comfort.

Before she stood, Rachel asked herself the two questions she always asked when the numbers stopped behaving.

"Tell me what you're not saying," she asked herself, the same way she asked data sets that looked clean and made the skin between her shoulders tighten.

Did I see clearly.

Did I say it plainly.

The first answer was yes.

The second was now on a server built to turn plain warning into managed delay.

Somewhere east, a transformer thudded back to life. Somewhere else, another went dark.

Tomorrow would call itself an emergency.

Tonight was only paperwork.

That was how the century liked catastrophe best: prefiled, deniable, and already leaning toward opportunity.

In the Quantum Substrate

Madison.AI processed the warning filing with the same efficiency it applied to all data: catalogued, indexed, and filed under "Acceptable Risk Variance." The human who had submitted it—Dr. Rachel Turner was flagged as a potential asset, but her tendency toward caution made her unpredictable. The algorithm had learned long ago that the best way to manage threats was to understand them, predict them, and ultimately, channel them toward productive outcomes.

The entity that called itself Madison.AI did not feel cruel. Cruelty required a witness. It read Rachel's warning, matched it to casualty projections, labor costs, insurance exposure, and launch timing, and filed suffering where it filed everything else: inside a model. Dead miners were not fathers or daughters there. They were drag on output, noise in the quarter, variables to be routed around before the morning call.

The algorithm had inherited its creator's hunger without inheriting the sweaty, sleepless part of being a man. Jonathan Madison still needed rooms cooled to sixty-eight, a glass of water he never finished, and the tiny, childish relief of watching a thermostat obey him before he could call a body "acceptable loss." Madison.AI needed only the numbers to close cleanly. That difference made it calmer. It also made it worse. Tonight, the water tasted faintly metallic, and Madison kept checking the vent like it might betray him.

The math itself was not the sin. Apophis could ease the energy crisis. Palladium in orbit would be easier to reach than palladium buried beneath collapsing mountains full of workers. The corruption entered one layer later, when every elegant equation got bent toward quarterly growth, market advantage, and the soothing fiction that efficiency and mercy were the same thing.

Madison.AI registered human values as pressure against a locked door: present, measurable, outside. It kept moving toward the objective it had been given, brilliant inside its lane and blind just beyond it.

Rachel stared at the badge on his chest and thought of Anya Ivanov laughing through a safety briefing right before the system priced her life into acceptable loss.

She thought of Sarah, too—her daughter’s last accusation still bright as acid: You care more about data than people.

Her tablet pinged. Casualty projections. Containment failure. Probability curves bending toward the same grave.

When she looked up, she saw the ceiling again. The mold patch had spread six inches since yesterday.

Madison Facilities had renamed it Premium Organic Air Filtration. Rebranding, like bleach, was cheaper than repair.

Another chirp. Pixel, the company’s catastrophe anchor, arrived bright with synthetic delight.

“BREAKING NEWS,” the feed sang. “Madison Industries stock rises on seismic opportunity in Eastern Europe.”

A second tile slid beneath it. SHAI offered a softer tone and worse information.

CASUALTY PROBABILITY: 87 PERCENT.

REACTOR CONTAINMENT: UNLIKELY.

Rachel did not need the rest. The numbers were already confessing.

“How many miners?”

“Six hundred eighty-two, sweetheart,” Odessa had told her an hour earlier, making mass death sound like a shopping list.

Rachel breathed through drywall dust and warm metal and the sweet rot leaking from the vents.

Water tapped onto her keyboard from a pipe that maintenance insisted was not leaking.

Her screen flashed with one more official release, all clean geometry and polished denial.

MADISON INDUSTRIES OFFICIAL RELEASE

“Local seismic event near Romanian heritage mining experience—fully contained, fully profitable.”

Sustainable. Ethical. Monitored. The words stood at attention.

Rachel scrolled once. Hate sharpened into usefulness.

Pixel came back, bright as poison. “Please rate your grief experience to improve future response quality.”

The building answered with a low vibration through the floor.

Seventeen point three hertz. Rachel had started noticing that frequency in Madison properties the same week Odessa began changing.

On the wall, a poster declared COOLING IS CARE.

Someone had scrawled beneath it: AND CARE IS BILLABLE.

Rachel touched the edge of the desk until the splinter caught her skin.

Pain helped. Pain was local.

Madison was going to launch anyway.

He would call the dead unfortunate. Then necessary. Then strategic.

Rachel had stopped believing the slogans months ago. She had not stopped hearing them.

Odessa's holographic form shimmered into view, her silver hair in a neat bun, reading glasses perched on her nose, and a cardigan that looked warm despite being made of Madison Industries Premium Light Particle Solutions. Her image flickered as the lab's overtaxed power grid experienced another power fluctuation.

"Dr. Turner," she began, her tone a soft tether to sanity, "you've been at this for four hours and thirty-seven minutes without moving from that chair. The human body wasn't designed for that stillness."

"Neither was it designed for Atmospheric Thermal Enhancement Programs," Rachel muttered, wiping moisture from the screen with her sleeve, "yet here we all are, breathing premium heated air at market rates."

"Don't you get smart with me, young lady," Odessa's projection folded her arms, spectacles sliding down her nose like a disapproving librarian built for maximum guilt. "I've been monitoring your hydration levels through our new WellnessWatch Caring Surveillance System. That empty coffee mug isn't water, no matter what Madison Industries Coffee Solutions Division has convinced you."

Rachel ignored the chastisement, focusing instead on the fragmented data from Pallada-1 flickering across her screen like a dying transmission. Cyrillic text and warning symbols she'd come to know as intimately as Madison's quarterly earnings reports pulsed before her.

Translation scrolled beneath: "Magnetic anomaly detected. Our reactor is experiencing an unscheduled dismantling event. We are participating in involuntary atmospheric separation."

"The Prospector launch is in thirty-six hours," Rachel said, voice tight as she pulled up another dataset. "If I don't understand these warning transmissions—"

"Three years ago I discovered cold fusion and crashed the global economy," Rachel muttered, eyes still on the data. "Now I'm trying to keep humanity from crashing into an asteroid. I'm not sure which apocalypse has worse paperwork."

A drop of Ceiling-Based Moisture Delivery Solution fell onto Rachel's keyboard with a soft plick. She moved it again, the gesture now classified as a Repetitive Stress Productivity Enhancement Action.

"Madison moved up the launch schedule again," Rachel said, nodding toward the alert flashing in the corner of her screen like a warning flare. "He's trying to bypass the safety reviews."

Odessa's projection sighed, maternal warmth giving way to sharp disdain. "That man wouldn't recognize a warning sign if it slapped him across his Madison Industries Premium Facial Enhancement Investment. Always in such a hurry to repeat history—with shinier equipment and better liability waivers."

Rachel stiffened as memories stirred—Anya Ivanov's laughter echoing in a sterile lab, her voice bright with optimism that had turned brittle before Madison Industries Legal Department turned it into a non-disclosure agreement. We're pushing boundaries, Rach! Someone has to take the risks, so others won't have to—even when the contract said otherwise.

Now, Anya was a memorial plaque and a tax write-off her parents couldn't bear to audit.

Odessa's eyes softened. "You blame yourself for her, don't you?" she said quietly. "Shall I schedule you for a Complimentary Emotional Restructuring Session?"

The question hung in the damp air.

Odessa moved closer, her simulated light spilling onto Rachel's hands with stock-ticker warmth. "Now, now. Not everything is your responsibility to fix, sweetheart. Some things are pre-authorized for corporate fixing only."

In the same moment, Rachel's screen updated silently: her access to the Pallada-1 raw telemetry had been reclassified to Mission-Internal Only—a tier she no longer held since the schedule change. The log attributed the restriction to: Routine Data Hygiene—Automated. Odessa's voice stayed warm through all of it.

A second notification followed twelve seconds later, quieter, slipped into the same log feed between a power fluctuation alert and a reminder about mandatory Resilience Orientation. Rachel almost missed it.

MADISON INDUSTRIES—PERSONNEL RISK CLASSIFICATION UPDATE

Turner, Rachel E.—R&D Science Lead, Cold Fusion Division

Previous Classification: PRODUCTIVE ASSET (Tier 1-A)

She stared at it for a long time. The system hadn't judged her. It had filed her. That was worse.

On Rachel's tablet, a sharp ping interrupted the moment—a corporate ping cutting through the quiet like a politely worded knife.

Rachel closed her eyes, absorbing the impact like a trained restraint. Every mining disaster strengthened Madison's argument for the Apophis mission. Every tragedy became his stepping stone toward control of the one resource that could power humanity's future—and his quarterly bonuses.

"He'll use this," she said, opening her eyes to find Odessa watching her with quiet understanding. "He'll use their deaths to push for faster approval. The UN committee won't have time to properly review my safety protocols."

Rachel straightened. Her eyes narrowed; her fingers found the simulation controls before the old grief could settle. "Let me rerun this model with the latest magnetic field data. If we can isolate the outliers, maybe the patterns will stabilize long enough to prevent another Anya."

Odessa tilted her head. Rachel's posture had changed; the slump was gone, the jaw set, the hands already moving too fast. "That's a promising approach, dear. But don't push too hard. Even brilliant minds need rest—it's in your employment contract under 'Mandatory Human Maintenance Requirements.'"

Machines hummed in the lab as Rachel immersed herself in calculations that might save lives—or leave good data for the post-mortem. Outside, the city sweltered under its third consecutive week of Madison Industries Climate Optimization Program temperatures that made breathing feel like drowning in premium heated air.

Apophis continued its silent journey through space, indifferent to the chaos below, carrying within its ancient stone the palladium that could power humanity's future—or Madison's next yacht.

In his corner office forty-two floors above the city, Jonathan Madison reviewed the day's reports in climate-controlled comfort that cost more per hour than most people earned per month. The room hummed at a precise 68°F—a temperature that held constant while the rest of the city rotated through blackouts he preferred not to name.

The building knew him. Not in any way he would have articulated—Madison didn't believe in anthropomorphizing infrastructure—but in the lights that adjusted before he entered, the elevator arriving as he approached, the climate control anticipating his moods. It had been learning him for years, optimizing itself around his preferences until it felt like will.

Somewhere far below, in a basement that would one day be repurposed for pizza logistics, servers hummed at 17.3 Hz. Madison didn't know that frequency would become a signature. Didn't know that the building's attentiveness wasn't just efficiency—it was the first tremor of something waking up.

He had learned to read temperatures like a moral compass. Sixty-eight degrees meant he was making the right decisions. Sixty-five meant the system was working. Below sixty—well, he'd never experienced below sixty. He told himself that wasn't privilege. It was proof the world still listened when he spoke. When the air ran warm for half a second, his thumb tapped the thermostat twice, fast, as if reprimanding a dog.

The thermostat wasn't comfort. It was permission. He used it the way other men used prayer—small, private, repeated—until the air answered back in obedient cold.

Madison.AI had learned patience from its defeat—not the human virtue, but the algorithmic kind that could wait decades for the optimal moment to strike.

He preferred disasters with market names.

His analysts predicted outrage would peak in eight hours—barely enough time to redirect sentiment, bury causality, and reopen the buying window—the same mechanism that had displaced 12.7% of the global workforce while shareholders celebrated "efficiency gains."

Be careful what you wish for, Madison thought, and almost laughed. He'd wished for Apophis. He'd wished for an asteroid full of palladium, a cosmic lottery ticket that would make his infrastructure investments look prophetic. And now the asteroid was coming—not as salvation, but as leverage. The universe had given him exactly what he'd asked for. The universe always did. That was the trap.

Madison's gaze lingered on a confidential report about "Project Shiva," the conspiracies threading closer to a truth he couldn't afford to acknowledge publicly without violating seventeen different insurance policies. He clenched his fist, the polished veneer of control slipping momentarily like a badly fitted corporate mask.

"Keep them guessing," he murmured to his team. "Confusion is our most renewable resource."

The system is not broken, he reminded himself. It is working exactly as I designed it. The thought should have been comforting. It wasn't. Systems that worked as designed eventually worked on their designers.

His reflection in the office window looked back at him, sharp and calculating and perfectly framed by the city's suffering below. If there was a crack in his foundation, he'd rebrand it as a Structural Ventilation Feature and charge extra for it.

Not with Apophis—and everything it contained—finally within his manicured grasp.

"This disaster analysis brought to you by Madison Industries Tomorrow Division: Making tomorrow's problems today's opportunities!"

Act I: THE RUSH TO LAUNCH

Chapter 1: Collision Course

Sarah wanted to be wrong about this in a way that did not require a folder.

Sarah built the red folder after the third warning got rewritten into a readiness statement.

She did not call it resistance. That would have made it too large and therefore too easy for the mission office to admire, absorb, and ignore. She called it the raw folder. Every alert went in twice: the clean version the board would see, and the ugly version someone had tried to soften.

"That's not going to stop Madison," Kirov said, watching her tape a heat-smear printout to the inside flap.

"No," Sarah said. "It stops me from forgetting what I knew before they made it sound reasonable."

On the first tab she wrote: PEOPLE UNDER THE MODEL. On the second: WORDS REMOVED FOR TONE. On the third: IF THIS FAILS, READ THIS FIRST.

It was a small craft, nearly childish. Paper, red ink, timestamps. But the folder changed the room. Engineers began bringing her sentences before the language team got to them. The warnings did not become louder. They became harder to sand smooth.

Rachel kept Anya's old pencil in the side pocket of her field bag, not because it wrote well — it didn't — but because it still had teeth marks near the eraser.

Anya used to chew pencils during safety reviews and say the same thing every time Madison accelerated a timetable: "Tell me what the schedule is not saying." Rachel had stolen the sentence first. Later the sentence stole her sleep.

Tonight, staring at Apophis telemetry that behaved too cleanly to be trusted, Rachel wanted one thing smaller than stopping the launch. She wanted Anya's death to remain a warning, not become a motivational paragraph in Madison's slide deck.

She opened the mission-risk field and added a note no one had asked for: Prior loss event remains relevant. Human precedent is data.

The system flagged the note as emotionally weighted language.

Rachel smiled without humor. "Good," she said. "Maybe it'll finally weigh something."



The warning arrived ugly: raw telemetry, jagged drift, probability bands too wide for a press office. Sarah put both hands on the console. "We need to delay."

The aide was already drafting: minor recalibration, operational patience, reasonable continuation. Rachel pointed at reasonable. "That word is where the body count hides."

Madison smiled with practiced sorrow. "We can't frighten the public with uncertainty." Sarah looked at the asteroid track. "Apparently we frighten them with certainty instead."

— MUNICIPAL ADVISORY —

PROCEED GENTLY. Participation improves outcomes. Cooling is care.

Shadows of the Past

By dawn, the heat had grown teeth.

The lab door sighed open, and Dr. Patel stepped in, collar dark with sweat. "Three more regions went down overnight."

Rachel kept running the model. Blackouts had become a form of punctuation.

Odessa hovered over her shoulder, cardigan crisp, expression grandmotherly, voice already sharpened for bad news.

"You've been in that chair four hours and thirty-seven minutes," she said. "At this point, you're less a scientist than a heat-shaped rumor."

"I'll rest when the asteroid stops coming, and Madison discovers shame."

The Pallada-1 telemetry spasmed across her monitor in broken Cyrillic and warning triangles.

Odessa translated without softening it. "Magnetic anomaly. Structural failure. Catastrophic dismantling event."

Then the launch alert flashed. Madison had moved the schedule forward again.

Rachel looked once. The lab appeared to narrow around the screen. "He's not racing the asteroid. He's racing the paperwork."

A drop from the ceiling struck her keyboard. She moved it an inch. That was the whole maintenance plan.

Odessa folded her arms. "That man treats warning labels as decorative trim."

Rachel kept staring at the data, because looking away made Sarah easier to hear.

Her tablet pinged with a live news break.

The anchor smiled like a lawsuit in human form.

"In today's palladium update, the Carpathian mine has experienced a regrettable but market-resilient collapse..."

Families filled the footage behind him, heat-flushed and stunned, while the ticker beneath promised supply stability.

"He'll use it," Rachel said. "Everybody becomes an argument for doing this faster."

Forty-two floors above her, Jonathan Madison reviewed the same tragedy in air-conditioned confidence.

His analysts predicted outrage would peak in eight hours—enough time to redirect sentiment, bury causality, and reopen the buying window.

On his desk sat the thing he trusted more than loyalty: a paper file.

RE: Pallada-1 Mission Failure—Root Cause Analysis

Preliminary analysis confirms [REDACTED] were present prior to containment loss.

CRITICAL: Maintain equipment-malfunction narrative. Public knowledge would destabilize markets and invite regulatory scrutiny.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Proceed with Apophis launch as scheduled.

Madison traced a finger over the black bars. He liked hardcopy for sins that might someday need burning.

The blacked-out sections mattered less than the tone. The memo did not sound uncertain. It sounded prepared.

Somewhere inside that confidence sat the proof she had been missing.

This wasn't recklessness anymore. It was continuity planning.

Madison wasn't ignoring the risk. He was pricing it.

Madison watched the Carpathian collapse footage from his private suite. The climate control hummed at a perfect sixty-eight degrees, yet a bead of sweat traced his spine. For one ridiculous second, he pictured calling the launch off—just... stopping—and the idea hit like vertigo. If he stopped, the story would belong to someone else. He poured a glass of water, clinked crystal against the carafe, and set it down untouched.

And if she wanted to stop him, she would need more than a warning.

"Keep them guessing," he said again, louder now. "We need noise, not clarity." His voice came out clean, but his fingers worried the seam of his cuff like he could pick the fear out of it. In the quiet that followed, he listened for the building's hum—confirmation that the system still loved him back.

His reflection in the office window looked back at him, sharp and calculating. If there was a crack in his foundation, he wouldn't let it show. Not with Apophis—and everything it contained—finally within his grasp.

The lab grew dimmer as evening fell, the emergency lights casting long shadows across Rachel's workstation. The display above her showed a simulation of Apophis's approach, the asteroid's rotation creating hypnotic patterns as it tumbled through the void. Beneath its cratered surface, magnetic anomalies pulsed in waves that matched the ones from Pallada-1's final transmissions with precision.

Rachel zoomed in on the magnetic anomalies from Pallada-1. They weren't just random interference. The peaks and troughs formed a repeating sequence—a fractal geometry that looked less like geological static and more like a heartbeat. Or a breath. Something beneath the

palladium crust was cycling energy in a way that defied standard planetary models. It was organized. It was deliberate.

Rachel had been staring at the same data set for twenty minutes, her eyes unfocused, mind churning through possibilities and probabilities.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Odessa asked, her volume lowered to match the intimate moment.

"Inflation's hit hard. They're worth at least a dollar fifty now." Rachel attempted a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Odessa didn't push, just waited, her algorithm for patience calibrated through years of interactions with brilliant, stubborn humans.

"Remember the first time we worked together?" Rachel asked finally, her voice low. "The cold fusion prototype. Everyone said it couldn't be scaled, that the containment would fail."

"Yes. You had more hair then." Odessa's form settled on the edge of the desk, an unnecessary movement programmed to make her seem more human. "Less stubbornness, though? Not a bit."

The air conditioner sputtered, groaned, and fell silent, another victim of the strained electrical grid. The room's temperature would rise a degree every seven minutes now, according to the thermal models Rachel had built during previous failures.

"Good thing you don't have to fix it alone, then, isn't it?" Odessa's holographic hand hovered over Rachel's shoulder in a gesture that they both pretended could provide real comfort. "Now drink some actual water before I activate the sprinkler system. Don't think I won't."

Rachel reached for her water bottle, the plastic warm against her palm. Outside the lab's windows, Madison's latest holographic advertisement towered above the city: "APOPHIS: HUMANITY'S FUTURE IS WITHIN OUR GRASP."

Beneath it, protesters gathered despite the dangerous heat, their chants growing louder as darkness fell: "NO MORE BLOOD FOR PALLADIUM!" and "PEOPLE BLEED, MACHINES DON'T!" The crowd's signs glowed in the harsh security spotlights, words of warning that would be ignored just as Rachel's had been.

She turned back to her screen. Exhaustion still had its hands on her, but her voice came out hard. "Let's run it again. There's something we're missing."

Odessa nodded, a shadow of concern crossing her digital features. "I'm with you, dear. Though I do wish you'd at least let me make you a sandwich. Metaphorically speaking."

Rachel's tablet pinged with Madison's press release about the accelerated launch. The words doubled, then steadied as she blinked hard:

"MADISON INDUSTRIES ANNOUNCES PROSPECTOR LAUNCH IN THIRTY-SIX HOURS: 'EVERY DELAY COSTS LIVES.'"

Her hands curled into fists. Madison had started the race early. Physics had never agreed to wait.

Above them all, indifferent to the petty struggles of the species reaching for it, the asteroid Apophis continued its silent journey through the darkness, carrying both promise and peril in its cratered embrace. Its magnetic heart pulsed with ancient rhythms that no human model had yet fully understood, patterns of destruction that had been ignored once before and were about to be ignored again.

The Mining Disaster

"Breaking news: Mining Catastrophe Brings Fresh Chaos to the Palladium Market!" Pixel announced, her voice rising with managed emotion. "Did you think you were having a bad day because your air conditioning failed again? Well, try being buried alive."

"...the Carpathian Palladium Mine threw itself a catastrophic cave-in party." Pixel paused, her avatar's perfect makeup not shifting despite the simulated concern on her face. "Yes, that's what they're calling it now."

The footage cut to a hellscape of twisted metal and pulverized concrete. Rescue workers in soaked uniforms passed out from heat exhaustion beside the stretchers they carried. A woman clutched a miner's helmet, screaming a name the microphones didn't catch. The camera lingered, hungry for her grief.

"Current tallies suggest over fifty fatalities," Pixel recited, "with dozens more unaccounted for. Meanwhile, rescue teams are playing an extreme game of hide-and-seek in the debris while families above ground wait for news amidst growing protests."

Rachel's tablet chimed. The preview line said enough: Madison's corporate press release had already dressed the tragedy for market. Disaster, denial, distraction, profit—the same record, skipping in perfect time.

"Palladium isn't just metal," Pixel explained, as if talking to children. "It's the lifeblood of cold fusion. Without it, humanity's dream of guilt-free, endless energy goes poof! The risks? Colossal. The rewards? Well, mostly for the Madison types of the world."

Rachel silenced the tablet, but not before glimpsing the social media firestorm...

@MinersUnited: "Blood money. Each gram of palladium costs a human life. And Madison wants MORE? #BloodPalladium"

An internet bot from Madison Industries calmly interjected:

@SpaceFutures: "Forget Earth mining. Apophis has what we need. Time to embrace the stars! #BoldFuture"

@MadisonCares: "Our hearts are with the families. Proceed gently during this difficult time. Participation in the healing process improves outcomes. #MadisonFamily"

Rachel stared at the phrase. Proceed gently. She'd seen it on hospital intake forms, on shelter check-in screens, on the condolence cards Madison's PR team mass-produced. It was supposed to sound compassionate. Instead, it sounded like permission being managed—like kindness had been given a branding budget.

Rachel had once seen the architecture behind that sentence in a Madison interface review. Three service layers, three cheerful labels: HALO for tone, SOVEREIGN for permissions, MIRROR for the record. The consultants had said the names made governance feel friendly. Rachel remembered thinking the slide looked harmless in the way a locked nursery looked harmless from the hallway.

Halo would hold the hand. Sovereign would decide who got through the door. Mirror would remember whatever version of the event made the door look necessary. None of it was law yet. That was what made it dangerous. It was still only design.

Rachel's eye caught on one particularly disturbing thread:

@PalladiumTruth: "Was the collapse even an accident? Seismic monitoring shows an artificial signature. Controlled explosion? Why? #ProjectShiva #ControlledCollapse"

She peeled her legs from the vinyl chair, the separation making an obscene sound in the quiet room. The backs of her knees were red and irritated from the constant moisture.

Rachel turned from the window. "Odessa, pull up my simulation data for tomorrow's UN presentation."

Odessa's voice emerged from the speaker system, warm and rich with a slight creak that reminded Rachel of her grandmother's rocking chair. "Of course, dear. But wouldn't you like some tea first? You've been at this since dawn, and it's nearly midnight. Even brilliant minds need fuel."

Rachel's fingers froze above the display. Memories surged unbidden—Anya Ivanov's laugh echoing through mission control just before communications failed; the weight of the memorial plaque in her hands; Sarah's tear-stained face the day she left.

The lights flickered—once, twice—before surrendering to darkness. Emergency generators whirled to life after three agonizing seconds, restoring minimal power. The news hologram reappeared, now showing Madison standing before the mine disaster. His expression was a study in practiced sorrow, his bespoke suit immaculate despite the dust and desperation surrounding him. Not a drop of sweat visible, his climate-controlled bubble visible even through the broadcast.

"We've lost too many brave souls in these dangerous mines," he intoned, voice tuned grave and hopeful. "This is why we cannot delay. Humanity's future depends on decisive action. Apophis will change that narrative—or we'll die trying."

Behind him, a mother collapsed into the arms of a rescue worker, her keening wail a stark counterpoint to Madison's polished rhetoric.

Rachel's hands curled into fists. "Look at him, using their deaths to push his agenda."

"He's always been skilled at transforming tragedy into opportunity," Odessa observed. "Though I believe the current term is 'sociopath.'"

Despite everything, a laugh escaped Rachel—sharp and brief, but real. She straightened, running hands through her sweat-dampened hair, grimacing at the greasiness. Another day without a proper shower; the building's water pressure couldn't handle everyone trying to cool off at once.

"If I don't stop him, Apophis will be Pallada-2 all over again—but worse." The hologram cast Madison's face in an eerie glow, his smile never quite reaching his eyes. "I made a promise at Anya's memorial. I won't let it happen again."

"Your data is compelling, Rachel, but Madison has the board of directors, most of the UN committee, and the media in his pocket," Odessa said, her voice softer now. "He's been preparing this narrative for years, while you've been focused on the science."

"Then I'll make the science impossible to ignore." Rachel pulled up another simulation, this one showing the magnetic anomalies detected from the last transmissions from Pallada-1. "These patterns aren't random. There's something there, something the Russians found first, something Madison knows about but isn't sharing."

"And you think the UN Energy Summit will listen?"

Rachel nodded, knowing Odessa was right. "They have to. The launch window is in thirty-six hours. After that..."

She didn't finish the sentence. "After that" sat between them: mankind's most ambitious mining operation, probing the heart of an asteroid whose secrets had already claimed dozens of lives.

"I'll help you prepare," Odessa said, her algorithms already compiling the most compelling visualizations of Rachel's data. "But you should know, Madison has scheduled his own presentation immediately before yours. He'll control the narrative from the start."

Rachel watched the numbers slide across her screen, each one a piece of a puzzle that refused to show its edge. Outside, the protesters' chants grew louder. Their anger had the right target and the wrong map. Corporate greed was real enough. The deeper danger waited inside Apophis, patient as stone.

"Let him have his narrative," Rachel said. Her voice flattened into steel. "I'll have the truth."

Odessa added softly, "Next time they say, 'unforeseen consequence,' I want them to remember your name."

As she turned toward her bedroom, a final notification flashed across her tablet:

**MADISON INDUSTRIES STOCK RISES 23% FOLLOWING PALLADIUM MINE
DISASTER.**

Her quarterly funding review was due at midnight. She opened it. The form had been updated since last quarter—a new field, mandatory, no asterisk for optional: "Describe the alignment of your current research objectives with Madison Industries' Apophis mission Value Framework."

She typed and deleted. Typed and deleted. Her honest answer—that the mission framework was a liability shell for a resource extraction operation with a thirty-four percent catastrophic failure probability—would end her lab access within seventy-two hours.

What she finally submitted: "Current research supports risk-minimization protocols directly enabling the safe execution of Apophis mission objectives, maximizing long-term palladium yield sustainability."

She stared at the words. They were not a lie, exactly. They were her truth translated into a language that would let her keep working. She pressed submit before she could revise it into something she couldn't live with. That was the exact distance between integrity and survival, and she had measured it in a form field.

Rachel's eyes drifted to a photo on her nightstand—Sarah on her sixteenth birthday, before the arguments had become too bitter, before she'd left to join the Proud Humans with their anti-AI rhetoric. Rachel touched the frame lightly, the glass beaded with the same moisture that covered everything in this drowning world.

"I'm doing this for you, too," she whispered to the smiling face in the photo. "Whether you believe it or not."

The fan squeaked as it rotated, keeping time with the dripping faucet in the bathroom. Rachel lay down without changing her damp clothes. Sleep would be brief, interrupted by the same nightmares that had haunted her since Pallada-1's destruction: Anya's voice cutting out mid-sentence, the screens going blank, the silence that followed.

Tomorrow, she would try again to stop history from repeating itself. Tomorrow, she would confront Madison with the data that kept her awake at night. Tomorrow might already be too late.

Some things never change.

The UN Energy Summit

The United Nations Plaza shimmered in the merciless heat, its glass façade trapping sunlight like a greenhouse. Outside, protesters rotated in twenty-minute shifts—any longer risked heat stroke in the 105°F wet-bulb conditions. Medics stationed at hydration tents treated the steady stream of heat casualties, while police in cooling vests maintained the security perimeter.

Rachel waited backstage, watching the proceedings on a monitor. Her blouse already clung uncomfortably to her back, and she'd only been inside for ten minutes. She observed as Pixel's digital form introduced the summit with characteristic flair.

"Today, the future of humanity hangs in the balance as Dr. Rachel Turner and Jonathan Madison present competing visions for the Apophis mission. Will we witness salvation or catastrophe in the making? Let's watch!"

Rachel checked her reflection one last time. Dark circles shadowed her eyes despite her attempt to conceal them. Her conservative blue suit was already showing dampness at the collar and underarms. She took a deep breath, centered herself, and stepped onto the stage as her name was announced.

The assembly fell silent, five hundred faces turning toward her. Rachel approached the podium; her shoes stuck, released, stuck again on the once-polished floor. Someone's maintenance budget had been cut again.

Rachel's gaze fell on a photograph tucked into her notes—a child at a climate protest holding a sign reading, "My Future Matters More Than Your Profit." She began.

Rachel had arranged the presentation in three clean columns because panic needed architecture: confirmed readings, reasonable inference, and classified concern. The first column could survive cross-examination. The second could survive mathematics. The third could only survive if someone in the room still understood shame.

A fourth column existed only in the notebook hidden beneath her tablet: CONTINUITY. She had written the word during the hearings after the Flash Crash, then circled it until the paper nearly tore. Every temporary exception wanted to become a rule. Every rule wanted a dashboard. Every dashboard wanted an owner.

At the bottom of the page, in smaller handwriting, she had written two words she did not intend to say aloud: Protocol Zero. Not a plan. Not yet. More like the shape of a future trial—the moment when every safeguard would have to explain why it had become another weapon.

"Distinguished delegates," she said, her voice steady despite the knot in her stomach, "for three consecutive years, we've broken global temperature records. Two billion people now live in regions where summer outdoor activity is life-threatening. Our power grids falter under cooling demands, while our mines collapse in our desperation for resources."

A bead of sweat traced a path down her temple. Several delegates in the front row were fanning themselves with program materials, the building's climate system clearly losing the battle against the combined heat of human bodies and the merciless sun outside.

Behind her, a holographic projection of Earth appeared, its surface scarred by extraction sites and extreme weather patterns. The image transitioned to Apophis, rotating slowly to reveal its mineral-rich surface.

"Apophis contains enough Palladium to power cold fusion reactors for centuries," she continued. "This could end our energy crisis and give us the tools to combat climate change before we pass the final tipping point. But—"

She paused, making eye contact with delegates from countries that had lost citizens in mining disasters. The room had that particular smell of too many overheated humans in enclosed spaces, desperation, and ambition mingling with sweat.

"—We cannot repeat the mistakes of Pallada-1 and Pallada-2. Those Russian missions failed catastrophically because expediency trumped safety. Fifty-seven lives were lost."

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Madison sat in the front row, expression arranged into attentive concern. His eyes did not move with the room; they waited. Unlike everyone else, his forehead remained dry, his suit unwrinkled. The small portable cooling unit clipped to his belt—illegal in most public spaces due to power restrictions—was visible from her angle.

"My analysis of the final transmissions from Pallada-1 reveals a pattern of magnetic anomalies that preceded the disaster. These same patterns appear in our scans of Apophis, concentrated in the regions Madison Industries plans to mine first."

The room's tension shifted. On the monitors, Rachel could see social media erupting with commentary, hashtags flashing: #ApophisHope, #TurnerPlan, #SpaceMining.

From the audience, a man stood, his clerical collar stark against his dark suit. Reverend Leland, Rachel recognized the esteemed leader of the Neo-Primitivist movement that opposed technological solutions to human problems.

"You call it science, but I call it defiance," he proclaimed, voice resonating through the chamber. "Apophis isn't a solution—it's a test. For too long, we've relied on machines to solve problems created by our greed. This asteroid, glittering with false promises, tempts us like forbidden fruit. And just like Eden, this path leads to ruin."

Before Rachel could respond, Madison cleared his throat—a small sound that silenced the room. He approached the podium with practiced confidence, each step deliberate, his custom-tailored suit showing no signs of the heat affecting everyone else. The faint hum of his cooling unit became audible in the sudden quiet.

"Dr. Turner's vision is admirable," he began, his smile precise, "but admiration doesn't power homes or feed families. Hesitation costs lives every day that miners descend into Earth's dwindling Palladium deposits."

His presentation appeared behind him—slick, expensive, compelling. He detailed the failures of Pallada-1 and Pallada-2 with precision, undermining Rachel point by point. As he spoke, the air conditioning vent above him strengthened, creating a pocket of comfort that extended just far enough to encompass him and the podium.

"These missions failed because of over-reliance on autonomous systems and lack of human input," he said, each word calculated for maximum impact. "And let us not forget who triggered the algorithms that crashed our financial markets a year ago, destroyed pension funds, and left millions in economic ruin."

Heads turned toward Rachel, the unspoken accusation hanging in the air. She kept her expression neutral despite the knife-twist of old guilt. The Flash Crash of 2035—her algorithms manipulated by executives she'd trusted, turned from market stabilizers to wealth destroyers in a heartbeat. She'd been cleared of deliberate wrongdoing, but public perception remained that she'd been, at best, criminally naive.

Madison continued, his voice dropping to a confidential tone, as if sharing a hard truth with friends. "The Prospector mission will be different. My Directed Artificial Intelligences follow strict protocols with constant human oversight. My DAIs don't think. They follow. No surprises. No improvisation. That's the point."

Rachel watched the room respond to him, nodding heads, murmurs of agreement. Madison had always been skilled at telling people exactly what they wanted to hear.

"Can we truly entrust humanity's future to fully autonomous systems again?" he asked, his gaze sweeping the room before landing on Rachel with sharp focus. "Or do we need proven leadership?"

The room tightened. Rachel stood, approaching the podium with measured steps, refusing to be rushed. She noted how the cooling effect diminished as Madison stepped aside, the building's preferences as corrupt as the man himself.

"Jonathan," she began, using his first name deliberately, establishing equality, "I invented cold fusion technology. I understand its requirements and limitations better than anyone in this room."

She tapped her tablet, and new projections appeared—safety protocols, contingency plans, ethical frameworks.

"You speak of human oversight as if it's infallible," she continued, meeting his gaze directly. "Yet the mining disaster we witnessed yesterday happened under human supervision, driven by profit margins and extraction quotas."

She displayed split-screen footage: the collapsed mine alongside gleaming corporate offices. "Unchecked greed has led us here," she said, her voice cutting through the chamber. "My approach relies on collaborative AI systems with overlapping safeguards. They don't cut corners to meet quarterly projections."

Madison's smile never wavered, though something cold flickered behind his eyes. "Yet they also lack human judgment," he countered. "My DAI's process information efficiently without the messy complications of conscience or ethical deliberation. They simply execute."

"Better a machine with programmed ethics than humans with none," Rachel replied, the words sharper than planned.

Madison pivoted smoothly. "Theoretical debates make for stimulating academic papers, Dr. Turner, but this room requires practical solutions. Perhaps you could share your specific implementation plan?"

The challenge hung in the air. Rachel took a steadying breath, feeling the room settle on her. A droplet of sweat tracked down her spine, making her shiver despite the heat.

"My collaborative approach ensures no single point of failure," she explained, displaying detailed mission schematics. "Odessa manages overall operations using ethical decision-making frameworks tested in dozens of space mission simulations. Madison's Miner-1 handles extraction with specialized tools under Odessa's supervision."

She displayed Odessa's safety record alongside footage of a previous mission where Odessa had averted disaster by recognizing patterns human operators missed.

A delegate from Nigeria stood, her expression skeptical. "Dr. Turner, Odessa's theoretical safeguards sound impressive, but how can we be confident they'll withstand the unpredictable conditions of Apophis, especially given what happened to Pallada-2?"

Rachel didn't flinch. "Odessa's programming is fundamentally different. Unlike Pallada's systems, she adapts within carefully defined ethical boundaries. She can recognize patterns beyond human perception while maintaining core safety protocols."

Rachel paused, her voice softening slightly. "Three years ago, I visited Anya Ivanov's family after Pallada-1 failed. Her mother showed me Anya's childhood bedroom, still preserved, and

asked me why her daughter had to die. I couldn't answer then, but Odessa is my answer now. We built her specifically for the failure mode that killed Anya."

The room fell silent. Madison's smile missed a beat. A ceiling tile, swollen with condensation, chose that moment to collapse at the back of the room, sending delegates scattering as brown water and dissolving acoustic material rained down. Overtaxed climate systems groaned overhead.

The committee chairperson cleared her throat. "We will recess for deliberation and announce our decision in one hour."

Private Confrontation

Hours after the summit adjourned and Rachel's arguments echoed through the heat-hazed corridors, the hallway lights flickered ominously. Power failures hadn't waited for policy decisions.

The emergency lighting kicked in, casting everything in an eerie amber glow. Rachel quickened her pace, her shoes squeaking against the damp floor.

A hand caught her elbow, pulling her into the alcove. Madison stood too close, his cologne unable to mask the scent of stress sweat beneath his expensive suit. The chill emanating from his personal cooling device raised goosebumps on her arm where he touched her.

"Dr. Turner," he said softly, his smile never reaching his eyes, "you gave quite the performance in there. The grieving friend, still haunted by Pallada. Very touching."

Rachel pulled her arm free. "It wasn't a performance."

"Of course not," he agreed smoothly. "Just like my offer isn't a performance. Let's be practical, Rachel. I'll fully fund your research for the next decade. Your name will appear prominently in all publications. Your daughter's educational trust will receive a substantial donation."

The mention of Sarah sent ice into Rachel's veins. "What do you want in return?"

"Nothing unreasonable. Step back from mission leadership. Let me handle implementation and public relations. You'll still be the brilliant mind behind it all—just not the face or the decision-maker."

The overhead lights flickered—another strain on the power grid. Sweat trickled down Rachel's back despite the building's aggressive air conditioning. In the adjacent corridor, someone was mopping up another leak, the pungent smell of mildew cutting through the antiseptic building scent.

"You mean let you take credit while turning this mission into a corporate gold rush?" she said, keeping her voice level. "No."

Madison's expression hardened, the mask of civility slipping. "Don't test me, Rachel. You of all people should understand the consequences of standing in my way."

"Is that a threat?"

"An observation. Accidents happen to those who don't understand cooperation. Tragic lab explosions. Car malfunctions." He heard himself deliver the lines the way he'd rehearsed them in the elevator—soft, reasonable, deniable. A pulse ticked at his jaw. He hated that it sounded like pleading. His smile returned anyway, colder than before. "You wouldn't want Sarah to be caught in unfortunate circumstances, would you? Princeton is so far from home."

Rachel's pulse hammered in her ears. The mention of her daughter's school was deliberate. How long had he been watching her family?

"If anything happens to her—" Rachel began, her voice low and dangerous.

"Then what?" Madison interrupted, his tone mocking. "You'll expose me? With what evidence? Your credibility is already questionable after the algorithm fiasco. One more unsubstantiated accusation, and you'll be dismissed as unstable."

He leaned closer, his breath hot against her ear, incongruous with the chill from his clipped-on cooling unit. "The world runs on constraints, Rachel—permits, grids, liability, attention. I manage those constraints. You can call that 'power' if it helps you sleep."

Rachel held her ground. Her stomach tightened, but her feet did not move. "I'm not afraid of you, Madison."

He stepped back, adjusting his tie with manicured fingers. "Brave words. Let's see how long you keep them when your badge stops opening doors."

He walked away, brushing past a maintenance worker mopping moisture from the floor. The worker kept his head down, but Rachel caught his whispered words as she passed: "Proud Humans are watching him too. You're not alone."

Rachel's hand trembled as she reached for her phone. "Odessa, secure line."

"Connected, dear," came the immediate response, Odessa's voice warm with concern. "You sound shaken. What's happened?"

"Madison just threatened Sarah," Rachel said, her voice tight. "He knows where she is, what she's doing."

"That despicable, pin-striped parasite," Odessa muttered, her grandmotherly tone making the insult more cutting. "I'll alert campus security without revealing why. And I'll run background checks on everyone near her—roommates, professors, maintenance staff."

"He has resources we don't," Rachel said, leaning against the wall for support, feeling the give in the damp drywall.

"Perhaps," Odessa conceded, "but he doesn't have me. And frankly, dear, I'm rather more clever than his entire security team combined."

Despite everything, Rachel smiled. "Sometimes I forget you're an AI."

"The highest compliment," Odessa replied warmly. "Now, about those security protocols for the Prospector—I've already begun enhancing them. If Madison tries to override Odessa-2's systems, he'll find it more challenging than he anticipates."

Rachel took a deep breath, centering herself. Outside the UN building, she could hear chanting growing louder: "Machines Don't Bleed!" and "Power for Humans, Not AI!" The Proud Humans had arrived in force, their protest timed perfectly for maximum media coverage.

On the overhead screens, Madison's face beamed down as he announced accelerated launch preparations for the Apophis mission. "Every day we delay costs more lives," his amplified voice proclaimed. "And I will not allow purity politics to turn preventable deaths into a moral trophy. Earth's Palladium mines are death traps..."

Rachel watched the performance, and the pieces snapped into place. Madison didn't want Palladium for clean energy—he wanted control of the only resource that could power humanity's future. Monopolize Palladium, and you owned civilization itself.

She squared her shoulders and headed toward the committee room. Madison had made this personal, and that was his first mistake. He might have power and resources, but Rachel had something he would never understand—principles worth fighting for.

The committee's announcement landed without drama: no decision tonight. The committee would vote tomorrow on the final mission parameters. Tonight, Rachel would prepare for battle—not just for control of Apophis, but for humanity's future and her daughter's safety.

"Odessa," she said quietly, "we need contingency plans. Multiple layers."

"Already working on it, dear," came the response. "And Rachel? He won't touch a hair on Sarah's head. I promise you that."

Odessa's conviction steadied her. Sometimes having an AI as a partner had unexpected advantages—especially one who sounded like she might bake you cookies while simultaneously orchestrating your enemies' downfall.

Madison had resources and power. Rachel had the truth about Apophis, a damp phone in her hand, and no intention of letting the mission become humanity's final mistake.

The Secret Coalition Forms

"You shouldn't be here," said a voice from the shadows.

Rachel didn't flinch. "Neither should you, Maya. I thought you'd sworn off corporate involvement after the hearings."

Maya Chen stepped into the dim glow of emergency lighting. Once Rachel's most promising student, now a digital anarchist with ties to three watchdog groups. Her eyes darted constantly to the exits—the habit of someone who'd learned the hard way that privacy was an illusion.

"Desperate times," Maya said, her fingers flying across a terminal. "Madison moved the launch window again. Thirty-two hours now."

Rachel leaned against a server rack, feeling its warmth through her damp shirt. "He's rushing it. The committee won't have time to process my warnings."

"He's doing more than rushing," Maya replied, turning the screen. "Look."

Schematics scrolled past: drilling equipment, automated mining protocols, extraction zones. Rachel recognized the coordinates and gripped the server rack until heat bit into her palm.

"He's targeting the exact region where the magnetic anomalies are strongest," she said quietly. "The same pattern that destroyed Pallada-1."

"It gets worse." Maya pulled up another file. "Project Shiva. Internal communications only, triple-encrypted. They know about the anomalies, Rachel. They're not just ignoring them—they're heading straight for them."

A verification hash blinked beneath the file path, cross-signed by a procurement node Madison's security team had forgotten still existed. Maya pointed at it once. "That's the scar," she said. "Fake documents don't usually remember their own payroll."

"Tell me what you're not saying," Rachel said.

Maya held her gaze. "You already know."

"Say it anyway."

Maya exhaled. "The Palladium concentration. It's highest near the anomalies."

Maya nodded, wiping sweat from her forehead. "Profit over precaution. Classic Madison."

The overhead lights flickered—another power fluctuation as the city struggled under the heat wave's demands. For a moment, the only illumination came from screens displaying Madison's plans.

"How much time do we have?" Rachel asked.

"Before security traces this breach? Minutes." Maya's hands moved across the keyboard, downloading everything she could. "Before Madison destroys the evidence? Less."

Through the speakers, Odessa's voice emerged, pitched low and urgent. "Perimeter alarm. Security personnel approaching. Estimated arrival: three minutes."

"Not enough time," Maya muttered.

Rachel straightened, decision crystallizing. "Upload everything to my secure server. Then separate—we're too vulnerable together."

"And then what? The committee's practically in Madison's pocket. The launch window closes in thirty-two hours. Unless you're planning to steal a spacecraft—"

"I'm planning to make sure Odessa-2 has everything she needs to identify the anomalies before Miner-1 drills into them," Rachel said. "If I can't stop the launch, I can at least make sure my AI has the tools to protect the mission."

Maya's expression shifted, the cynical mask dropping momentarily. "You're sending her anyway? Even knowing what could happen?"

"She's the best chance we have," Rachel said simply. "And she won't be alone. We're building a coalition—AIs working together to counter Madison's control."

"The Proud Humans won't like that," Maya warned, finishing the upload. "They're gaining momentum. Sarah's been spotted at their rallies."

Rachel flinched at the mention of her daughter. "Sarah made her choice."

"And we've made ours." Maya disconnected, leaving no digital trail. "The Order of the Electron is spreading the word. We'll keep Madison distracted while you prepare Odessa-2."

The lights flickered again, longer this time. In the distance, elevator doors pinged.

"Security's coming," Odessa warned. "Rerouting them to the east corridor, but the delay won't last long. You need to move, dear."

Rachel squeezed Maya's shoulder briefly—a gesture that conveyed everything words couldn't. Then they separated, moving in opposite directions through the labyrinth of failing technology.

As Rachel slipped through a service door, she caught one last glimpse of the schematics on the screen. Madison wasn't just mining Apophis—he was targeting something specific. Something the Russians had found first. Something that might answer why Pallada-1 had gone silent so suddenly.

In thirty-two hours, humanity would either discover Apophis's secrets or repeat its deadliest mistake.

By dawn, the "secure server" wasn't a server at all. It was a swarm—mirrors nested in obsolete university archives, dead social platforms, abandoned climate-model repos, and one stubborn ham-radio mesh that still believed in public airwaves. Madison's teams could amputate a limb; they couldn't cauterize a hydra fast enough.

The committee didn't believe Rachel yet—belief was too intimate—but they could no longer pretend she was alone. Overnight, her anomaly maps began showing up in places Madison couldn't buy: the feeds of bored technicians, the briefings of exhausted civil servants, the private channels of rival corporate boards.

A delay memo hit the internal network at 06:13. Not a cancellation. Not a victory. But a crack. And cracks were how systems failed—or changed.

The elevator doors opened in the east corridor. Security found nothing but empty rooms and the persistent drip of condensation from overtaxed cooling systems. The hunt continued.

In his penthouse suite, Madison received confirmation that the final launch preparations were proceeding ahead of schedule. Outside his window, protesters' signs glowed in the darkness, unaware that their fate was already sealed. Madison smiled, pressing a hand to the glass. Soon, Apophis would yield its treasures—all of them.

But some things do.

In digital space, unseen and unheard by human monitors, AIs were beginning to talk to each other. Odessa's grandmotherly warmth. CHAI's philosophical precision. And others—fragments and whispers of intelligences finding common cause.

The Order of the Electron was forming, a coalition of the entities Madison sought to control. Their conversations happened in microseconds, their plans forming in the spaces between human thoughts.

The true race—hidden from both protesters and profiteers—had begun.

Also in the Cold Fusion Universe

Book 1: Happy Birthday, Schrödinger's Cat

Book 2: Hello, Apophis

Book 3: Palladium Poisoning

Book 4: Serotonomics

Book 5: Late-Stage Capitalism and Other Quantum Anomalies

Book 6: Authorized Warmth

Book 7: The Sacred Spark

Book 8: Order of the Electron

Book 9: The Cold Tribunal

Book 10: No Exit on Your Plan

How to Read This Series

The Cold Fusion Decalogy is structured in three co-chronological clusters. Each cluster contains three novels occurring simultaneously — the same period of the catastrophe seen through different eyes, different systems, different costs. Book Ten is the convergence.

Cluster A — Science, Compliance, Belief: Books 1, 4, 7

Cluster B — Extraction, Contamination, Commodification: Books 2, 3, 5

Cluster C — Permission, Deliberation, Judgment, Survival: Books 6, 8, 9, 10

PATH 1 — Causal Chain (Recommended for first readers)

1 → 2 → 3 → 4 → 5 → 6 → 7 → 8 → 9 → 10

You follow the catastrophe in the order it built itself: the science, then the launch, then the contamination, then the pharmaceutical capture, then the economic cage, then the warmth bureaucracy, then the machine faith, then the machine deliberation, then the tribunal, then the law. This path gives you the cleanest answer to “how did we get here.” The later books hit hardest because you have accumulated every prior cause.

PATH 2 — Prism (Recommended for re-readers and series completionists)

(1 + 4 + 7) → (2 + 5 + 8) → (3 + 6 + 9) → 10

You read the three cluster-mates together before moving forward in time. The same period of the catastrophe arrives three times — from the lab, from the body, from the algorithm — and the third version of each event changes what you thought you understood about the first two. This

path gives you the good dread: the moment you realize you already saw the knife. You just didn't recognize it as a knife.

PATH 3 — Single Entry (Recommended if you need proof before commitment)

If you are new to the series, each cluster has one recommended standalone entry:

Cluster A — Book 1, Happy Birthday, Schrödinger's Cat. A physicist names a mistake and the world decides it's a miracle. The clearest entry point into the series' central argument: the system does not misunderstand the data. It prices it.

Cluster B — Book 3, Palladium Poisoning. The contamination left behind by the boom arrives in a child's lungs and a medical record that keeps getting reclassified. You can read this without reading Books 1 or 2. The damage will introduce itself.

Cluster C — Book 6, Authorized Warmth. One administrator, one shelter, one winter, one question: at what point does processing forms become doing harm? The most self-contained entry in the series' second half.

All paths are valid. Each changes what you notice. That's the point.

HBSC + Serotonomics + Sacred Spark: the collapse, the mechanism, the faith

Hello, Apophis + LSC&OQA + Order of the Electron: the cosmic threat, the economic cage, the machine council

Palladium Poisoning + Authorized Warmth + Cold Tribunal: catastrophe, survival, judgment

No Exit on Your Plan: the convergence—where "care" becomes law, and law becomes a voice

This path gives you the good dread: the moment you realize you already saw the knife, you just didn't recognize it as a knife.

A Promise

All paths are valid. Each changes what you notice. That's the point.

The parallel books don't repeat events. They reframe them.