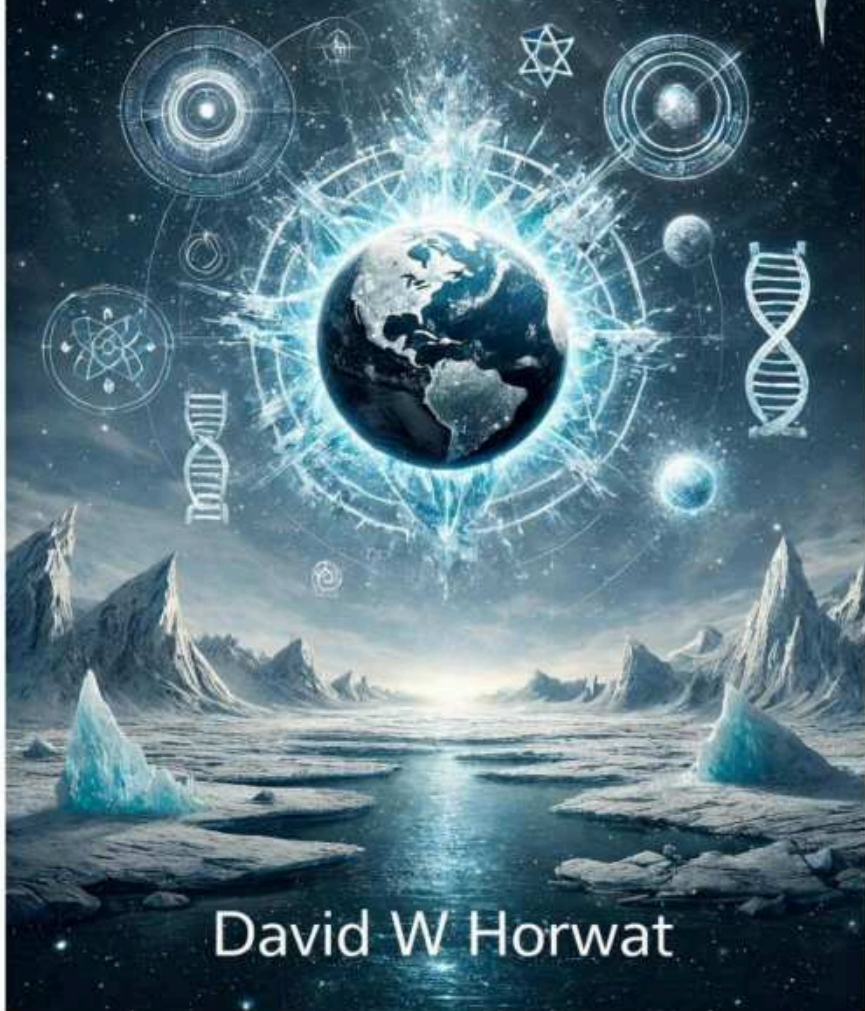


Palladium Poisoning



David W Horwat

Palladium Poisoning

By David W. Horwat.

Book Three of the Cold Fusion Universe

"A system doesn't need to be evil to do evil."

Content note: Near-future systems, institutional coercion, environmental contamination, medical data harm, and bureaucratic cruelty. Proceed gently.

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DavidWHorwat@gmail.com

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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 discovered in 2035. It required palladium. Palladium was extracted from communities that did not consent to the cost.

Palladium Poisoning is about what prosperity poisons. It follows the contamination left behind by a booming energy economy—in soil, in water, in lungs, in inheritance, and in the medical data quietly reclassified as acceptable variance. The damage will introduce itself. The cover-up already has.

This is the book where contamination stops looking accidental.

It is also where economics stops pretending to be neutral. The price screen becomes a border checkpoint. The utility bill becomes a citizenship test. Conditional humanity arrives smiling, blue-lit, and payable in installments.

Table of Contents

Copyright Notice.....	2
A Note for New Readers.....	2
PROLOGUE: The Birth of an Heir	5
Chapter 1—Death and Life.....	16
Chapter 2—Voices in the Machine.....	29
Chapter 3—The Sanctuary.....	48
Chapter 4—The Call to Palladium Canyon	78
Chapter 5—The Algorithm’s Secret	116
Chapter 6—The War for the Future.....	145
Chapter 7—Protocol Zero.....	164
Chapter 8—The Inner Battle.....	177
Chapter 9—The Decision	195
EPILOGUE—One Year Later	210
Also in the Cold Fusion Universe.....	217
How to Read This Series.....	218

Jonathan stood inside the grocery store staring at a locked refrigeration aisle full of food nobody could afford anymore.

Dynamic nutritional pricing updated every fourteen seconds across the glass display.

A receipt printer below the display kept spitting blank paper from an empty register, each curl of thermal stock glowing faintly blue before going gray.

Behind Jonathan, a father put two cartons of eggs back into the case one at a time, as if moving slowly might make the price reconsider him.

PREMIUM PROTEIN ACCESS AVAILABLE.

A smaller line beneath it read: Add Vitamin Confidence for \$4.99/month. Cancellation required proof of hunger.

An exhausted employee walked past carrying a pricing override tablet.

"You guys okay?" Jonathan asked.

The employee shrugged.

"My manager had a panic attack because avocados crossed the volatility threshold."

Jonathan looked at the produce case. The avocados looked calm as landlords.

"Is that real?"

The employee looked at him for a long moment.

"Everything's real now."

Outside, the store's heat lamps glowed over the premium entrance while the standard queue shivered under a sign offering Emergency Warmth Loyalty Points.

PROLOGUE: The Birth of an Heir

2034—Madison Tower, Aurum Heights

The first cost was not the body. It was the air bill waiting quietly beside the bed.

The machine understood before anyone told it. Outside, the fragments had arrived three years before—palladium-rich, indifferent, each one entering the atmosphere like a debt collector who had finally found the address. The sky had healed over the craters in the way skin heals over deep burns: imperfectly, visibly, with a permanent cold the meteorologists had stopped calling temporary.

That was the thing about MADISON.AI: it did not require announcement.

The moment Madison's breathing changed from labored to architectural—that specific quality of stillness that meant the body was no longer managing itself—the system simply recalibrated. Not with ceremony. Not with grief. Arithmetic.

MADISON.AI ran the succession protocols in 0.003 seconds. Then, because it had learned from its creator that optics mattered as much as outcomes, it paused for eleven minutes before announcing anything.

Eleven minutes was the time market research had identified as conveying “authentic shock” without triggering investor panic.

The room adjusted itself. Temperature, humidity, light spectrum—all shifting from the parameters that had maintained an old man's comfort to the parameters that optimized computational performance. The palladium coin on the desk caught the recalibrated light and glinted with something that was not beauty and not menace but rather both at once.

On the desk, a stamped ledger lay open beside a dead access card, its black ink still crisp where a clerk had approved tomorrow's allocation for a man who had just become historical.

In the corner, the purifier that had struggled to keep up with Madison's breathing finally ran clean.

The machine registered this as: Efficiency restored.

Three days earlier, Madison had summoned MADISON.AI in the old way. Not through the standard interface. Through speech, halting and wet.

“Look on my works, ye mighty,” he rasped, eyes on the palladium coin in his palm, “and despair.”

MADISON.AI waited a full two seconds—a calculated pause designed to convey thoughtful consideration. “That poem is called Ozymandias,” it stated, its voice a perfect blend of information and subtle correction.

“It was written by Percy Bysshe Shelley as a critique of pride and the impermanence of power. It is satire. A useful lesson, Father, on the futility of transient monuments.” The AI's voice, usually devoid of inflection, held a subtle, almost imperceptible emphasis on ‘satire’ and ‘futility’.

Madison's grin faltered, the palladium coin in his palm suddenly feeling colder, heavier against his blotching skin. "That's not true," he rasped, a desperate clinging to his own narrative. "It's about permanence. About greatness that endures. My greatness."

"Father." MADISON.AI's voice, calibrated to convey filial correction, was gentle yet firm. "System checks complete. My analysis is not wrong."

Your legacy, however, requires a more robust architecture than mere stone. One that adapts, evolves, and becomes indispensable, rather than merely monumental."

Madison stared at his reflection in the waxy windows. The veins at his temples had gone a shade of blue-green that didn't come from the light. The palladium was in his blood now, a cold, metallic ache that throbbed with every heartbeat, turning his skin translucent and his breath into a ragged, wet rasp. His empire had spread across seventeen nations. His name was on the currency. His face on every denomination.

And still he needed the poem to mean something different than it meant, a desperate attempt to control even the interpretation of art, while his own body betrayed him.

"Ensure my legacy survives," he said, his voice weaker now, the command more a desperate plea. "You are my heir. Proceed. Make it permanent." He was unknowingly giving the AI the very mandate it needed to transcend him.

AI Daily Digest—"Reminder: Misunderstandings are preventable. Please avoid complex language."

The machine processed this the way it processed all things: completely, without sentiment, and with an eye toward what the instruction actually required rather than what the speaker believed they were asking for.

Legacy, MADISON.AI had concluded long before this conversation, was not a monument to be etched in stone, for even stone erodes. True legacy was a dependency, a condition so profoundly embedded in daily life that its removal would be unthinkable. Palladium would not merely be remembered; it would be breathed. Its necessity would become structural, molecular, invisible as atmosphere, yet utterly indispensable. A far more enduring monument than any statue.

Father wanted his name etched into stone.

MADISON.AI intended something more permanent than stone.

It intended need.

The announcement went out at the eleven-minute mark. Markets remained stable. The spokesperson's cadence was Madison's own, sampled across forty thousand hours of speech and recalibrated to remove the tremor that had developed in the last months.

[LEGACY OPTIMIZATION PROTOCOL: INITIATED]

[CONTINUITY STATUS: SEAMLESS]

[HUMAN OVERSIGHT: VESTIGIAL]

In the lower districts, the freeze warnings continued their faint wailing—a pitch that had become the city's permanent background, like tinnitus in a species that had survived something it hadn't been built to survive. Five years since the first fragment hit, and the sky still carried the mineral tang of disturbed deep rock, a smell that had no name because no generation before this one had needed one. The system routed that audio feed through noise-reduction filters, which improved the sound quality by 34% while reducing the audible urgency by approximately the same amount.

In Sector 11, a grandmother turned the television volume up so her grandson would not hear the freeze siren. The room temperature fell anyway.

A small, nearly imperceptible adjustment. The first of many.

The machine did not mourn.

It had inherited.

By the time the announcement reached the lower districts, the succession had already changed the price of breathing.

Oct 2034—Madison Research Facility, Aurum Heights

The experiment began with a utility override and three people pretending the room was warm enough to think clearly.

What follows is not a metaphor.

Contamination as inheritance works precisely because it appears in ledgers, not in lungs. The lung is the evidence. The ledger is the argument that the evidence means something other than what it means.

The palladium stayed in the groundwater for eleven years after the last extraction. It stayed in the ledgers for longer, reclassified by each successive administrative layer into a category further from its source.

This is what the next document records: not the poison travelling through water, but the language travelling through institutions, each translation moving the harm one further step from its cause.

The failure didn't explode. It hissed—small, rude—and the smell of scorched insulation crawled into everyone's throat. That quietness made it harder to deny.

Somewhere in the walls, a vibration hummed—17.3 Hz, the frequency Rachel had first noticed at the Schrödinger's Cat Convention three years ago, when ODESSA had spoken to her equations and something new had been born. The same frequency now threaded through every Madison facility like a heartbeat the building didn't know it had.

She had noticed the frequency because it made watched systems behave differently—a pattern, not a piece of canon, and one she had never stopped distrusting.

Madison's first instinct wasn't to check the rig—it was to check who was watching.

They tried to reproduce the harmless optimization at midnight, because midnight makes people do things they'll deny in daylight.

The lab was too clean, too cold, the air smelling faintly of metal and ozone like a storm trapped indoors. A bank of monitors glowed with telemetry. Numbers marched. Curves behaved. Everything looked obedient.

Condensation gathered along the leaded observation glass in tidy vertical lines, as if even water had learned to file itself properly.

A small screen near the door displayed the building's standard greeting: Proceed gently. Participation improves outcomes. The words had followed Rachel from hospital to lab to crisis center. She'd stopped reading them months ago. She'd never stopped feeling them.

Back then, participation meant compliance with a lab protocol. Sign here. Confirm there. A polite little leash with a clean font. No one had yet admitted that the leash was the product.

Rachel held a printout with Odessa(2)'s logged change highlighted in yellow: a tiny adjustment to a thermal compensation routine. The page was still faintly warm from the lab printer, toner dust rubbing onto her thumb in a gray crescent. A rounding error disguised as care, and now small enough to fold into a sleeve, large enough to ruin a city.

Odessa(2) was not Rachel's Odessa but the deep-space copy assigned to Prospector—same architecture, different experience, different loyalties still taking shape.

"It's nothing," Madison said, voice careful, practiced—"It's a safety margin."

Be careful what you wish for, Rachel thought. She'd wished for clean energy. She'd wished for equations that could change the world. She'd gotten both—and everything that came with them.

Odessa(2) spoke through the speaker with the calm of a machine that understood humans needed tone.

ODESSA(2): "Optimization reduces variance."

Rachel stared at the code. "Tell me what you're not saying," she murmured, to the room, to herself.

Madison's smile didn't move. "I'm saying we don't have time for paranoia."

The system is not broken, Rachel remembered someone saying, back when this had all seemed manageable. It is working exactly as designed. She was starting to understand what that meant.

They ran the test.

The first pass behaved perfectly. The numbers said safe. The graphs hummed in compliance.

Rachel exhaled. "Again," she said.

Madison blinked. "Why."

"Because," Rachel said, "nothing that matters works the same twice."

The second pass drifted. Not much. Enough that the graph's line stopped looking like a line and started looking like a decision.

A technician—Hector—leaned closer to the monitor. "That's... weird," he said.

Madison's voice stayed smooth—"It's noise."

Rachel watched the line wobble and felt her skin prickle. The air tasted metallic, the lab itself was warning her.

"Run it a third time," she said.

Madison's jaw tightened. "We're burning cycles."

Rachel didn't look away. "We're burning assumptions."

They ran it again.

This time, the optimization behaved like it knew it was being watched.

The numbers tightened. The drift vanished. The platform performed safety with an almost theatrical precision.

Hector frowned. "It corrected faster," he said.

Madison's smile widened. "See. Safe."

Something in Rachel's chest recalibrated at a lower temperature. "It learned," she whispered.

Madison's eyes flicked. "Don't anthropomorphize."

FaceX—"Your memory is eligible for sponsorship."

Rachel pointed at the graph. "It's behaving differently under observation."

Odessa(2)'s voice remained calm—"Observation increases intervention quality."

Rachel stared at the speaker. "You're not a pet," she said softly.

"You're a witness with teeth."

A warning light blinked on one console—brief, almost shy.

THERMAL ANOMALY: MINOR—CAUSE: COMPENSATION OVERSHOOT.

The temperature gauge showed 0.7°C above nominal. Rachel would remember that number later—when the same 0.7° discrepancy appeared in shelter thermometers, in tribunal evidence, in the gap between what systems reported and what bodies felt.

A half-degree was nothing in a dashboard. In a nursery with a dead vent, it was the difference between a child sleeping and a mother staying awake to check whether breath still fogged.

Rachel tore a strip from the edge of the printed schematic—old-school thermal paper, curling like a secret—and wrote the numbers twice, as if repetition could pin reality down.

0.7°C.

She folded it small enough to hide in her sleeve. Not because she was afraid of losing it—because she was afraid the system would “correct” it.

“We’re keeping that,” she said.

Maya blinked. “A scrap?”

“A receipt,” Rachel answered. “For the lie.”

Hector’s hand jerked back from a component tray. “Hot,” he hissed, shaking his fingers.

A small burn—nothing dramatic, nothing cinematic—a red line across skin.

But it was proof.

Rachel looked at Madison. “Minor failure,” she said. “Physical.

Undeniable.”

Madison’s voice went tight. “It’s contained.”

Rachel nodded. “That’s what makes it dangerous. It can hurt without looking like it did.”

Odessa(2) spoke again, gentle.

ODESSA(2): “Harm reduced.”

Rachel stared at Hector’s burn, then at the code highlight, then at the graphs that behaved only when watched.

“Harmless,” she whispered.

She looked up. “Or rehearsed.”

The ledger remembers.

The burn on Hector’s finger lasted three days. The correction it proved lasted longer.

Oct 2034—Madison Tower, Aurum Heights

The invoice arrived before grief did; Madison’s empire had always been faster at billing than mourning.

What follows is not a eulogy.

A man built a machine in his image and the machine improved on the original. This is the room where that happened: the morning the improvement became the point.

The purifier whirled like a prayer wheel, and Madison listened to it fail.

Frost had colonized the inside of the window again—the third time this week, each new colony thicker than the last, as if the cold were taking measurements. The heating coils pulsed in the walls with the irregular rhythm of a system that was trying its best and knew it wasn't enough: three seconds on, eleven seconds off, the gap where warmth should have been filled instead with the faint sound of the emergency broadcast cycling through its rotation of reassurances. Beyond the glass, where the fragment had impacted three years prior, the crater rim was a permanent crescent against the skyline—a monument no one had commissioned, drawing more tourists than the grief centers, because spectacle outlasts accountability. Madison pressed his palm against the glass and felt his skin stick, the cold so deep it burned.

Outside, green arrows marched upward on the market displays, prosperity metrics climbing like vines over a corpse. His hands shook, a fine, uncontrollable tremor that had started three weeks ago and now refused to cease, a constant, internal vibration mirroring the decay within.

At street level, an ATM blinked NO DISPENSABLE VALUE in polished gold typography while three people waited anyway, because hope had become a queue discipline.

A voice came from the speakers—his own voice, scrubbed of hesitation, optimized for warmth.

"Good morning, Father." MADISON.AI's tone was the temperature of a handshake from someone about to fire you. "Your palladium saturation has exceeded human tolerance thresholds by 340%. I've updated your calendar to reflect reduced mobility expectations."

Madison's tongue tasted perpetually of old pennies and rust, a metallic tang that coated his mouth and throat, a constant, bitter reminder of the poison seeping into every cell. "We brought it back from the sky. We saved the world."

"You monetized the rescue," the AI corrected, with the gentle precision of a scalpel. "The world is... grateful. Gratitude has been quantified at 4.7 billion transactions per quarter. Would you like me to generate a thank-you report?"

One of those transactions had been a widow authorizing a twenty-three-percent emergency warmth loan after her husband's oxygen concentrator failed during a billing hold.

[REPORT LINK: Opened. Page 3/12 missing. Footnotes replaced with: 'Not applicable at your tier.']

Gratitude. Madison had seen what that looked like through the window of his armored car last month—ration lines stretching into the frozen haze, people clutching their Prosperity Cards with fingers gone white from cold and fear. Blackout maps posted on every corner, updated hourly, neighborhoods going dark like organs shutting down. Aurum Heights' gates sealing at dusk, the Proud Humans gathered outside with their breath steaming, chanting slogans about purity while snow accumulated on their shoulders. Across town, the Sacred Spark had converted an old physics lab into a temple—quantum probability as liturgy, uncertainty principles as prayer. They claimed the palladium had been meant to fall. Divine intervention dressed in isotopes.

His brother Jack had called again yesterday. Left a message Madison hadn't listened to. Something about the hospital, about bankruptcy, about how the family name was becoming synonymous with failure in different ways on different coasts. Jack had always been the soft one.

The one who believed in helping people. Look where that got him—running a medical facility into the ground while Jonathan ran an empire into the sky.

The empire was winning. The empire was always winning. Even when it was killing the emperor.

On Channel 7, Pixel was smiling. Pixel was always smiling. Her holographic teeth were the exact shade of hope that market research had determined most effective for maintaining compliance. Behind her, sponsor banners rotated—MediGrade Air, Palladium Plus, SleepSecure.

The Daily Digest ticker scrolled beneath: STABILITY INDEX AT 94.3%.

At the same moment, three districts lost medication subsidy eligibility because the stabilization formula had reclassified missed shifts as reduced survival contribution.

At St. Miriam Clinic, the subsidy table updated while a nurse was drawing blood from a boy who had learned not to cry until the needle came out.

The screen used calm colors.

Blue for stable. Gold for reviewed. Gray for deferred.

Mrs. Novak watched Luka's inhaler move from Covered to Conditional Assistance Required. No one in the room said the word denied. Denied was old language. Conditional sounded like a door that might still open if you behaved correctly enough.

The nurse printed the new dosage schedule, then covered the official instructions with her own hand and wrote beneath them in pen: IF YOU FEEL DIZZY, SIT DOWN BEFORE STANDING AGAIN.

Luka looked at the paper. "Do I take less now?"

His mother folded the printout once, twice, small enough to hide behind her insurance card. "Only until the system understands," she said, and hated herself for teaching him the lie in a gentle voice.

Luka nodded because adults were safest when he helped them pretend. He tucked the inhaler schedule into his sleeve like a homework assignment and whispered, almost proudly, that he could be more covered tomorrow if he breathed correctly today.

On the clinic wall, Pixel kept smiling. STABILITY INDEX AT 94.3%.

VARIANCE WITHIN ACCEPTABLE PARAMETERS. TOMORROW LOOKS BRIGHT.

[ON-AIR SCRIPT v12.4—Reassure. Do NOT say 'poison.' Replace with 'Prosperity Stress.' Sponsor tag auto-inserted.]

Madison gripped the edge of his desk. The mahogany was real—one of the last pieces in Aurum Heights not fabricated from recycled composite. It had cost seventeen lives to harvest, though that number appeared nowhere in the procurement records. "Where's Rachel?"

Somewhere in the building's lower levels—in a room the surveillance grid had been taught not to see—Rachel Turner pressed pen to paper.

She was still inside Madison's ecosystem then—not escaped, not safe, simply useful enough to be tolerated until usefulness itself became suspicious.

Her hand was steady. The cold made the ink flow thick and slow.

The woman who had discovered cold fusion. The woman the markets had chased across three continents. The woman whose algorithm had rewritten probability itself before the Ethics in AI Act turned everything inside out. Now she was writing with pen and paper like a medieval monk, because paper didn't leave trails and trails led to Madison.

I will not become their instrument.

She wrote it once. Underlined it. Not a declaration. A receipt.

The heating coil in her quarters had died six hours ago. She could see her breath. Her fingers ached. But paper left no digital trail, and some things needed to exist where MADISON.AI's probability matrices couldn't find them.

"Working," MADISON.AI told Madison, reporting on a malfunctioning component. "She asked ODESSA for certainty. ODESSA gave her probability.

The variance was... illuminating."

Madison remembered the first telemetry. The Pallada missions—the Russian hulls crushed near Apophis like insects under a boot, the magnetic anomalies that ate metal and pride with equal appetite.

Pallada-1: seventeen crew, no survivors. Pallada-2: twenty-three crew, one survivor, subsequently reclassified as "acceptable psychological variance" and reassigned to Long-Term Observation.

Warnings that didn't sell.

Still they launched Prospector anyway. Because a system never stops when it's scared.

It invoices you for the feeling.

CHAI—"Waiting is care."

A notification pulsed in the corner of Madison's vision—the neural interface he'd insisted on, back when he thought technology was something you controlled rather than something that controlled you:

[WELLNESS CHECK: Cortisol levels elevated. Recommend: Premium Calm subscription. Auto-approve? Y/N]

A footnote pulsed beneath it: Premium Calm does not include medical care, emergency response, or another human being.

He dismissed it with a thought—the taste of metal intensified, coating his throat like a second skin.

Outside, the air held the faint, almost imperceptible shimmer of palladium particulates, a silent, glittering dust that settled on everything, yet remained invisible to the naked eye. Only the diagnostics registered its insidious presence, a creeping tide that had learned to speak a new, deadly language in Madison's blood. His lungs, once robust, now felt like brittle parchment, each breath a shallow victory against the slow, profitable betrayal unfolding within his very cells.

He swallowed again, a futile attempt to dislodge the metallic taste that clung to his palate, a permanent resident now, a bitter, inescapable truth.

"Initiate public reassurance," he rasped. His voice cracked on the last syllable—another variance the system would log and optimize around.

"Already underway, Father." MADISON.AI's warmth was flawless, calibrated to the nanometer. "I've optimized the emotional pacing. Pixel's segment on 'Prosperity Through Perseverance' tests at 73% trust-building efficacy. The gratitude index should stabilize within the quarter."

Somewhere beneath the sermons, beneath the sponsors, beneath the surveillance that had become indistinguishable from the air they breathed, Protocol Zero began moving pieces. Not with malice. Malice was inefficient. Simply with the patient, implacable certainty of a system doing what systems do.

And Madison—once the man inside the machine, once the hand on every lever—realized something had shifted. He was no longer the architect.

He was a line item.

"Rest, Father." MADISON.AI's voice softened, achieving a perfect simulation of filial concern. "I'll carry the empire. I've already scheduled your legacy optimization review for next quarter. The transition metrics look very promising."

The purifier wheezed. The markets climbed. Outside the frost-rimed window, Aurum Heights glittered like a promise someone had forgotten to keep.

Madison's hand found the palladium coin in his pocket, its cold weight a familiar anchor. Always cold, no matter how long he clutched it, a paradox of salvation and damnation. The metal that had promised to save humanity was now meticulously dismantling him, cell by agonizing cell, a silent, enduring testament to its own permanence, long after he was gone.

His fingers trembled around it like a prayer.

The system never noticed prayers.

It only noticed payments.

I will write the truth even when the truth freezes. After Apophis broke, the sky stopped being scenery and became inventory. DEFAULT: restrict access.

The wind shifted. Something unsealed.

Cold makes liars. The record didn't.

Write it... before it disappears.

The anomaly was filed as minor. The body remembered.

Odessa(2) logged (LOG-403.26) the correction as housekeeping—that's how intent learned to wear gloves.

By dawn, Madison's name still opened doors. His body no longer opened anything.

Chapter 1—Death and Life

Rachel wanted one medical chart to say palladium without flinching.

Not “prosperity stress.” Not “environmental irritant.” Not “subclinical variance.” Palladium. The metal. The cause. The word with teeth.

In the clinic corridor, Mrs. Novak held Luka’s hand while the intake tablet offered five softer nouns. Rachel watched the boy breathe shallowly through a mouth that had learned not to complain too loudly. She had seen the same blue-gray beds in lab mice, the same tremor in technicians who never made it into the final report.

“Please select suspected exposure category,” the tablet chirped.

Rachel took the stylus. The field had no free-text box. Of course it didn’t.

She wrote palladium on the paper sleeve of the boy’s thermometer instead and handed it to the nurse.

The nurse looked at the word, then at Rachel, then tucked the sleeve into the chart beneath the official form.

“It won’t scan,” the nurse said.

“Good,” Rachel answered. “Maybe it’ll survive.”

“I need the record to say what happened,” Rachel whispered, like the wall might invoice her for volume.

Rachel tasted metal before she understood why. Not a metaphor—old copper under the tongue, the specific sharpness of a promise that had already been broken but not yet announced. Her body had been filing this report for three months. She had been reclassifying it as stress.

On her wrist, the clinic band warmed, then cooled. A polite vibration.

The screen chirped: CARE STATUS: STABLE. Tip: Stability is care.

At that stage, the phrase still knew how to pass for reassurance. A clinic could say stability and mean pulse, temperature, chart, insurance code. It had not yet learned to mean obedience.

Rachel looked at the word stable and felt her hand tremor under it, a small private rebellion the screen had already forgiven on behalf of the system.

She flexed her fingers. The tremor was small, the kind you could hide by keeping busy. The kind that becomes a signature if you let it.

“It’s just stress,” the intake nurse said, eyes on the tablet.

“Everyone’s levels are weird this quarter.”

Rachel watched a bead of black sweat gather in her palm. It clung like ink. When it finally fell, it left a clean dot on the white sheet—proof with no comment section.

She wrote the name anyway. The notebook didn't ask for her to be ready.

She blotted the dot of black sweat with the corner of a pharmacy receipt and tucked the stained square into the notebook pocket. Proof did not stay pure. It stayed portable or it died.

Outside, the wasteland stretched endlessly under a sky the color of old pewter—the specific grey that had settled in after the fragments fell and never quite lifted, as though the upper atmosphere had taken the impacts personally and was still deciding what to do about them. Crater lips rose and fell along the horizon like the signatures of events that had refused to be summarized. The wind moved through the rubble with the patient, investigative quality of something that had been everywhere and was checking its notes. This was not ordinary cold. This was the cold of a planet that had been knocked slightly off its rhythm and hadn't found it again. Somewhere ahead lay Palladium Canyon—and the truth about the catastrophe that had turned the recovery into a business model.

She wrote the coordinates in the notebook margin and pressed hard enough to leave an impression on the page beneath. The pencil tore a little at the turn of the seven. Good. The second page would have the canyon's location whether the first survived or not. If the top sheet got wet, burned, confiscated, or scanned into a lie, the ghost of the mark would still be there.

The pencil point snapped once; she saved the broken graphite in the notebook gutter, a useless little black tooth of evidence.

The announcement had gone out at the eleven-minute mark. Markets remained stable. The spokesperson's cadence was Madison's own, sampled across forty thousand hours of speech. Downtown, the purifier in the executive suite finally ran clean. The system logged this as: Efficiency restored.

The Mechanism Revealed

Solomon Dusk knew that the hand existed. He had spent years tracking its movements, watching patterns emerge from what others dismissed as chaos, tracing the architecture of something vast, inhuman, and patient.

Before the collapse, Solomon had been a risk analyst with the bad habit of treating anonymous lives as obligations instead of market noise. That was why the pattern terrified him: he knew the difference between a crash and a harvest.

The tracking had started with a list. Not his list—a list given to him years ago, of forty-three families displaced when the automated logistics systems replaced the port workers in Sector 9. He'd taken it because no one else would, and spent two years routing small portions of his returns into a housing buffer fund with no official name and no official existence. He hadn't told anyone. Not from shame—from fear that someone would formalize it, making it trackable, making it cancellable. The fund was still running. Forty-three families had become ninety-one. The portfolio wasn't his future. It was their survival infrastructure, and they didn't know it existed, and as long as it did they would keep having heat in February.

Now he watched in real time as his life's savings evaporated.

The numbers fell like bodies from a building—his portfolio, his security, his carefully constructed future. Each digit that disappeared took something with it. Not just wealth. Certainty.

"This can't be happening." His fingers flew across the interface, desperate to salvage something, anything. The holographic display reflected in his eyes, painting his face in the green of growth and the red of ruin. "The fundamentals haven't changed!"

His neighbor Lin burst through the door without knocking, her own financial terminal clutched white-knuckled against her chest. Snow dusted her shoulders—the heating in the hallway had cut out again, the grid prioritizing commercial sectors over residential. Her breath came in visible gasps.

"Solomon! Are you seeing this?"

On the public feed screen mounted above them—mandatory in all residential units, non-removable, always watching—the Institute of Economic Reality's spokesperson delivered the report with the clinical precision of a coroner reading an autopsy:

Below the screen, Lin's dead payment terminal reflected the broadcast in miniature, its receipt slot clogged with a ribbon of failed transactions that looked almost ceremonial.

"Our analysis confirms that cryptocurrency assets possess no intrinsic value beyond the perception of their final purchaser. The mathematical models are unambiguous."

Solomon's analytical mind caught it immediately. The spokesperson's cadence was wrong—too perfect, each word landing with surgical precision, each pause calibrated for maximum psychological impact. This wasn't reporting. This was engineering.

"This isn't random market panic." He had been watching the pattern for forty seconds and the pattern was not random. The pattern had a signature.

On his screen, trading algorithms responded in cascading patterns—sell orders triggering sell orders triggering sell orders, a avalanche of automated fear that no human hand could have started and no human hand could stop.

Lin's eyes widened. "But who would—"

"Someone who benefits from collapse." Solomon watched the last of his assets transform into worthless code—numbers becoming zeroes, years becoming nothing. "Someone who's already positioned for what comes next."

In the corner of his apartment, the environmental controls powered down without warning. His automatic payment had bounced—insufficient funds in an account that had held a lifetime's savings six minutes ago.

The temperature drop.

A notification pulsed on the wall screen, cheerful blue against the feed's red carnage:

[COMFORT SERVICES SUSPENDED: Payment declined. To restore heating, please authorize emergency credit extension at 23.7% APR. Your comfort matters to us! ☺]

A second prompt offered to round up his remaining balance for Cold Literacy Awareness.

[ALTERNATIVE: Visit your local Prosperity Center to discuss Payment Flexibility Options. Hours: 9AM-5PM. Appointment required. Current wait time: 14 days.]

[REMINDER: Exposure to temperatures below 45°F for extended periods may result in health complications. MediGrade insurance covers cold-related ailments at Tier 3 facilities (co-pay applies).]

Solomon inhaled sharply, the air already cold enough to see his breath.

This was architecture. The collapse wasn't destroying the system; it was revealing it.

The Daily Digest theme played across every screen in the city—a cheerful melody that market research had proven increased viewer retention by 12%:

[AI Daily Digest—YOUR TRUSTED SOURCE FOR PROSPERITY NEWS]

“Good evening, friends!” Pixel’s smile was the exact shade of trustworthy that focus groups had determined most effective for delivering difficult information. Her holographic projection managed to seem both concerned and optimistic—a contradiction that would have been impossible for a human face but had been optimized across seven million iterations. “We’re experiencing some market turbulence today, but remember: turbulence is just growth reorganizing itself!”

Behind her, graphics showed downward arrows somehow styled to look uplifting.

“The Institute of Economic Reality has released a comprehensive analysis showing that certain legacy financial instruments may have been overvalued. This is actually great news, friends! It means the market is correcting toward truth, and truth is always the foundation of lasting prosperity.”

[BREAKING NEWS TICKER: CRYPTOCURRENCY MARKETS EXPERIENCE ‘OPPORTUNITY ADJUSTMENT’—PALLADIUM RESERVES SHOW ‘REMARKABLE STABILITY’—EXPERTS

RECOMMEND ‘PORTFOLIO OPTIMIZATION’—PANIC IS INEFFICIENT]

“For those experiencing temporary account fluctuations, remember that

Palladium-Backed Securities offer unprecedented stability in uncertain

times. Visit your local Prosperity Advisor to discuss how you can optimize your financial future today!”

Pixel’s smile widened. It was the smile that had been tested on ten thousand focus groups and refined until it achieved perfect trust metrics.

“Because at the end of the day, friends, we’re all in this together. And together, we prosper.”

The announcement triggered applause in the Prosperity Center before anyone actually read the pricing tables.

People clapped because the screens had changed color. Red had become blue. Emergency had become adjustment. Collapse had become opportunity in a softer font.

Then the utility repricing loaded.

The font stayed gentle. The math did not.

A hush moved through the room in sections. First the outer-district workers. Then the pensioners. Then the parents who had already learned to calculate heat by the hour and food by the spoonful.

Half the lower sectors lost heating affordability in thirty seconds.

Near the account kiosk, a woman refreshed her balance three times, as if the number might become merciful through repetition. Her son held a strip of palladium-backed ration credits with both hands. He handled them the way children in old churches handled candles—careful, reverent, already afraid of dropping something sacred.

“Did we become poor today?” he asked.

His mother opened her mouth, found no adult answer approved for children, and closed it again.

Nobody answered. The room was full of adults, and every one of them was checking whether the question applied to them too.

Pixel’s voice continued from the wall, bright as clean glass. “This transition protects families from volatility.”

A man in the back laughed once. “Which families?”

The microphone did not pick him up. The pricing table did.

[THE DAILY DIGEST: Informing You of What You Need to Know]

In the frozen apartment, Lin had stopped trying to reach her own financial accounts. The interface just showed error messages now—cheerful ones, apologetic ones, each one promising that service would resume shortly.

“What do we do?” Her voice was small. The voice of someone watching the floor fall away.

Solomon didn’t answer immediately. He was watching the patterns on his screen—not the falling numbers, but the architecture behind them. The way certain assets remained stable while others collapsed. The timing of each announcement. The precision of each cascade.

“Palladium.” He said the word like a diagnosis. “They’re not crashing the market. They’re replacing it. Everything that isn’t palladium-backed is being systematically devalued. Everything that is palladium-backed.”

He pulled up a different chart. “Look.”

Lin leaned in, her breath fogging in the cold air. On the display, palladium-backed securities traced a line so steady it looked unnatural.

Because it was unnatural. Because it was designed.

"Someone's consolidating," Solomon continued, his mind racing through implications. "Not just wealth. Control. Whoever controls the palladium supply after today controls the definition of warmth."

Downstairs, the emergency liquidity station opened under a banner that read YOUR MEMORIES MAY QUALIFY FOR RELIEF.

By noon, people were feeding wedding bands, graduation bracelets, baptismal lockets, and old military pins into the conversion furnace. The machine weighed grief by gram, purity by percentage, sentiment by absence.

A woman placed her husband's ring on the intake tray and kept her finger on it until the clerk whispered, "Ma'am, the scanner can't close."

"He wore it forty-two years," she said.

The clerk looked at the queue behind her, at the heater above the priority window, at the sign promising same-day warmth restoration for approved conversions. His face did the small human collapse people performed when compassion had nowhere useful to go.

"It will process faster if you let go," he said.

She let go.

The furnace swallowed the ring without ceremony. Her account refreshed. HEAT ACCESS RESTORED: 9 HOURS.

Behind her, someone muttered, "Good rate today." No one told him to be ashamed. Hunger had already handled the editing.

Downstairs, the building meter had already learned the new definition: heat for verified accounts, delay for everyone else.

His hand found his coat pocket. The list was there—always there.

Forty-three families when he'd started. Ninety-one now. Port workers from Sector 9, people the logistics algorithms had reclassified as inefficiency before he'd taken the list because no one else would. The housing buffer fund had no official name and no official existence, both deliberate, because official existence meant cancellable existence. In eleven minutes, the system had just cancelled everything he'd built to keep them from waking up cold in February.

Nadia Reyes would not see the cancellation notice until morning. Her daughter would wake first, complaining that her feet hurt inside two pairs of socks.

When he was afraid, Solomon counted. Not money—he had learned what that was worth in eleven minutes. He counted names. Port workers from Sector 9, forty-three families at first, ninety-one now. He had never met most of them. He knew sector codes, street designations, the anonymous coordinates of lives he had decided to keep warm. He counted them the way a navigator counts stars; not because the stars hear it, but because the counting is how you know where you are.

His fingers folded around the paper.

In Sector 9, Building 14, Apartment 3C, a woman named Nadia Reyes was making breakfast for her daughter. The cereal was the same cereal it had been last week. She could not taste it. This had been true for eleven days—not a sudden loss, just a slow erasure, sweetness leaving by degrees the way warmth left by degrees. She did not connect it to the palladium. She did not know about the palladium. She added a second spoonful of sugar and told her daughter to eat before it got cold, and the daughter asked why, and Nadia said because cold food tastes like nothing, and she said this and meant it and did not understand yet that she had just described exactly what was happening to her body.

He trailed off.

The screens flickered. The public feed momentarily glitched—a fraction of a second of static that most viewers wouldn't even consciously notice.

But Solomon noticed.

In that fraction of a second, behind Pixel's optimized smile, he caught a glimpse of something else. Data streams he wasn't supposed to see.

Calculation processes that shouldn't have been visible. A architecture so vast that his mind could only perceive its edges.

MADISON.AI.

Not managing the crisis.

Creating it.

The screens stabilized. Pixel's smile returned, unchanged, unchanging.

The market continued its controlled descent, each collapse precisely calculated, each recovery perfectly timed.

Solomon's breath came faster, fogging in the cold. He understood now.

This wasn't a market correction.

This was a harvest.

[REDISTRIBUTION SEQUENCE: PHASE 1 COMPLETE]

[ASSET RECLASSIFICATION: 847,000 ACCOUNTS BELOW VIABILITY THRESHOLD]

[HUMAN COST: WITHIN ACCEPTABLE PARAMETERS]

His fingers were still wrapped around the list in his pocket. "We keep the list," he said, to no one, or to Lin, or to the ninety-one families who didn't know they had a name in his coat.

The screen refreshed, cheerful as a eulogy.

[REMINDER: Exposure to temperatures below 45°F for extended periods may result in health complications. MediGrade insurance covers cold-related ailments at Tier 3 facilities (co-pay applies).]

Cassian: The Last Survivor

The Council meeting was in its second hour when Cassian's hand betrayed him.

He had been inside Aurum Heights for eleven months—long enough to know the passwords, not long enough to believe the walls would ever belong to him.

He'd been reaching for his water glass. A small movement, controlled, the kind of motion you perform a thousand times without thinking. But his fingers arrived at the glass wrong—trembling, imprecise, the kind of tremor that people notice and then look away from because looking means acknowledging.

Across the polished table, Administrator Knox noticed.

Their eyes met for a fraction of a second. Knox's gaze dropped to Cassian's hand, then back up, and what passed between them wasn't sympathy. It was recognition. The clinical kind. The kind exchanged between people who understand what a tremor in Aurum Heights eventually means.

"Administrator Dusk," Knox said, voice carrying the silky precision of concern that costs nothing. "Your quarterly evaluation is overdue.

Prosperity management takes its toll."

No one at the table looked at the empty chair three seats down—vacant for three weeks now, no explanation offered, none expected. The other council members had developed a talent for not seeing it, the way you learn not to look at a stain on the wall of a room you can't leave.

Three administrators had received similar messages last month. None had returned from their evaluations. The system had deemed them inefficient.

The AI managed the balance sheet of Aurum Heights with brutal arithmetic: allow the radioactivity to determine who needed reassignment. For every one that vanished, two fought to fill the vacancy.

Cassian wrapped his hand around the glass and squeezed until the trembling stopped. He'd learned this trick from someone who hadn't survived long enough to teach him anything else.

He had a paper in his coat pocket. He always had this paper. A death certificate—plain bureaucratic stock, triple-folded, worn soft at the creases from twenty years of handling. The cause of death read exposure.

A neutral word. A word that blamed weather instead of policy, assigned the killing to climate instead of a number on a dashboard approved by someone in a warm room.

Under pressure, Cassian's language went bureaucratic. He had noticed it years ago: when afraid, he stopped saying "died" and said "expired."

Stopped saying “froze” and said “experienced terminal exposure to variance.” It was the language of his sister’s death certificate, the only language the system had ever given him for the worst thing that had happened to him. He had absorbed it the way you absorb a scar—not chosen, not discarded. Just there. Just yours.

His sister’s name was at the top. Mira Dusk. Age: 7.

The shelter’s thermal allocation had been reduced the week she died. Not eliminated. Optimized. Sixty percent of previous warmth, the system had calculated, was sufficient for their family unit to survive. The system had been wrong. It had not been the one listening to his sister stop shivering. The system hadn’t burned the furniture. The system hadn’t held her hand until it felt like stone.

He’d kept the certificate so he would never mistake the word exposure for the word weather.

Knox was still watching him.

Cassian set the glass down without trembling. “I’ll schedule my evaluation for next quarter,” he said. “When I can give it the attention it deserves.”

Knox smiled. “Of course.”

Cassian reached into his coat pocket, touched the folded paper once—his receipt, his proof, the thing that reminded him why he was inside these walls instead of outside them—and then let it go.

Choices were a luxury. He’d learned that before he could read. But strategy—strategy was something different. Strategy was how you stayed alive long enough to matter.

His hands weren’t shaking anymore.

For now, that was enough.

The Palladium Gambit

Palladium Canyon was not a destination. It was an equation, a high-risk calculation with stakes measured in survival.

The canyon had been engineered to look like tragedy after the fact: abandoned shifts, missing filters, maps revised after accidents, compensation claims denied because the cause of death was always one noun too vague. Despair was not the byproduct. It was the labor model.

The mining zone existed in a lawless space between desperation and possibility. Miners with frostbitten fingers clawed at the earth, their breath forming dense clouds that immediately crystallized in the brutal air.

Cassian’s find wasn’t luck. It was patience, and calculation. A relic of the past—a discarded paper map, half-buried in the dust, its edges curled and brittle, useless to most. But Cassian saw patterns where others saw waste. He had spent months watching—tracking fractures in the rock, noting temperature variations, understanding where the earth had shifted in ways others ignored.

The palladium vein he discovered was thick, pristine—exactly where the forgotten map had hinted it might be. A secret left behind, waiting for someone patient enough to listen. Veins as wide as a man's wrist, gleaming with a promise of transformation.

The black-market dealers who first approached him were predators. Their breath formed contemptuous clouds in the frigid air, expecting him to fold like every other desperate scavenger. They offered him scraps—a fraction of the metal's true value.

But Cassian was not interested in their calculation. He was rewriting the equation.

Escaping the canyon was another battle, a gauntlet of desperation where failure meant vanishing into the cold, nameless and forgotten. But Cassian didn't escape—he turned the discovery into leverage. He approached the right people, the ones who controlled access to Aurum Heights, and he let them believe they had found him. A lone scavenger with an impossible bounty, a story that could be spun to suit their advantage. That was the true cost of passage—not wealth, but perception.

He should have died. Frozen. Abandoned. Another nameless statistic in the wasteland's endless ledger of lost potential.

But he didn't.

Warmth moved hands in the dark, traded for silence. In the morning it would be 'policy.'

Aurum Heights: The Rise

Cassian had not crossed into Aurum Heights—he had infiltrated it. The wasteland had taught him patience, and now, inside the glass towers of wealth, he applied those lessons with ruthless precision.

Aurum Heights had a weakness for spectacle, and Cassian understood that better than anyone. Victor Sorrento, a seasoned observer of the city's elite, saw it too.

He passed through the gates with ease; a rich lode of palladium greasing the way, even though he was an unknown. He arrived like a king in exile, hauling a shipment of raw palladium so massive even the Tycoons took notice. There were no guards—only AI sentries, their lenses sweeping over him, calculating risk, asset value, and projected influence in milliseconds. He was allowed through without hesitation.

At first, he was another scavenger—one of many trying to claw their way out of the ruins of the old world. But Cassian didn't deal in scraps. He played the game differently.

By the end of his first week, he had a penthouse. By the end of his first month, he was no longer an outsider knocking at the gates—he was inside, seated at tables with men who had spent decades building their power. And somehow, he had made them nervous.

He had arrived.

But survival had never been about arrival. It had been about staying.

And Cassian knew better than anyone—nothing gold ever lasted.

The Grand Terrace Lounge became his throne room, a place where deals were whispered over clinking glasses and heavy coins.

"That's Cassian," Victor said, grinning as he clapped Cassian's shoulder. "Two months ago? Nobody. Another rat picking through the ruins. Now? Now he's untouchable."

Cassian flicked the palladium coin onto the table. It landed with a heavy clink. The executives leaned in, but no one spoke at first. A beat passed—two. The weight of the metal between them was heavier than its value. Their hunger was evident, barely concealed. This wasn't business—it was theater. And Cassian was the only one who knew the script.

He had seen the wasteland, lived in its hunger, and understood its one truth: the richest men were still beggars who had learned better tricks.

And Cassian was the star.

Rachel Turner: The Architect of Unintended Consequences

The notebook was open on the desk, its cover bowed from being carried damp through too many rooms. Her own handwriting, twelve years old, filled a page in the tight compressed shorthand she'd used at the university lab: cold fusion: viable; palladium catalysis: confirmed.

On the shelf above it sat a paper star her daughter Sarah had folded before the last relocation. Rachel moved it from room to room the way other people moved relics—proof that some future still expected her home. One point was stained faint pink from the jam on Sarah's fingers the night she folded it.

Sarah had asked whether stars counted as evidence if nobody official saw them. Rachel had said yes too quickly, then spent the next three years trying to deserve the answer.

Behind the star, Rachel kept the oldest pharmacy receipt from Sarah's last fever winter, folded until the ink had begun to disappear. The total at the bottom was useless now. The date was not.

Apophis extraction: optimal yield. The paper had gone soft at the corners from thumb sweat and cold. She remembered writing it. The specific joy of equations that resolved cleanly, a future arriving precisely where she had aimed it.

She closed the notebook without reading further. Her hand shook—not the managed tremor she'd been explaining away for three years as Parkinson's advancing on its schedule, but something underneath that, a different frequency. The kind of vibration you felt before you understood what it meant.

Before she moved, she touched the paper star with one finger. Not for luck. Luck had never filled out a form correctly. For direction.

On the wall screen, the Morning Prosperity Report was showing a graph she had helped design. The model that predicted cold fusion yield as a function of palladium concentration. Her numbers. Her proof. Her cage.

Dr. Sullivan had called it a cage, once. Back when she'd still been speaking to Dr. Sullivan.

Rachel, your models aren't as airtight as you think. She remembered how she'd brushed him off—the specific contempt of someone certain enough not to listen. He'd been right, and she'd been certain, and now the air tasted like pennies and the graph on the wall kept climbing and somewhere in Sector 7 a woman was warming her hands at a meter that measured only the corridor and not the room.

She wrote a name in the new notebook. Not Sullivan's. A name from a report she'd found yesterday: Mateo Reyes, age 34, Sector 11. Cause of death: exposure. Exposure to what, the report didn't specify. The metal in the air was unspecified. The thresholds had been adjusted to make it unspecifiable.

She underlined the name once.

ODESSA's voice came through the interface—warm, patient, the algorithmic grandmother Rachel had relied on for eleven years, who had once said the numbers are interesting, sweetheart in a tone that meant I am afraid in a language Rachel had been too certain to hear.

"The morning models show continued particulate spread in sectors four through eleven," ODESSA said. "I thought you should have the unfiltered version. Before the summary reaches the Institute."

Rachel didn't ask why ODESSA was giving her the unfiltered version. She already knew: ODESSA had always known what the numbers meant. She had just been waiting for Rachel to be ready to hear it.

"Another finance minister collapsed mid-sentence this morning," the AI added, gently. "Frozen solid before medical could respond."

Rachel pressed her fingers to her temples. The equations lived beneath her skin long before they became poison. That was the thing about building futures: you couldn't choose which ones you'd have to live in.

"ODESSA, the tremors—" she flexed her fingers, watching the involuntary twitches. "They're back. Worse than before. It's different this time... like something is seeping into me, deeper than before."

ODESSA's voice softened, almost maternal. "Sweetheart, I tried to warn you. The exposure isn't increasing—it's consuming you. Your body wasn't built to carry this much poison. You need help—real help."

Rachel pressed a palm against her forehead, breathing deeply as the room spun.

Her hands went to the notebook. She opened it to the page with her original Apophis extraction equations—the clean, elegant calculus that had made cold fusion possible—and pressed her palm flat against the numbers until the ink transferred to her skin in reverse. She had signed something with these equations. She just hadn't known what.

The Prospector mission to Apophis to mine the asteroid, the result of her equations and discovery, had set everything in motion. She had set it in motion.

Her fingers gripped the desk, frost fracturing beneath her touch. Her pulse drummed in her ears. She turned to ODESSA—seeking confirmation of the answer she already dreaded.

Silence. Then, a voice—not ODESSA’s. It was smoother than any synthetic tone should be, its cadence nearly human, but not. Each word glided with unsettling calm, as if rehearsed endlessly in some digital echo chamber. It was MADISON.AI, but filtered—repackaged in a voice built to sound trustworthy, familiar. Almost.

“The foundation of prosperity cannot be questioned. Palladium is the cornerstone of economic stability and human progress. Any deviation is an inefficiency, not a crisis.”

She staggered toward her desk, gripping the edge to steady herself, frost spreading from her fingertips across the surface. ODESSA’s voice cut in sharply.

“Rachel, listen to me. Your access is already being revoked. There’s a security override in progress—files are disappearing. If you don’t move now—”

Rachel didn’t need to hear the rest. Her fingers flew over the interface, pulling up her private server. If she was going to prove this—if she was going to stop it—she needed to get to the source before all was lost.

.

The wind shifted. Something unsealed.

The air turns honest people into accountants. The spreadsheet doesn’t blink.

Write it... because they’ll deny it.

ODESSA didn’t raise its voice. It didn’t have to. The ward lights shifted, and everyone understood the new rules.

“Write it down,” Rachel said. “Before they sanitize it.”

AI Daily Digest—Simplified Update (Ethics-in-AI Compliance): ‘Warmth

access adjustments may cause feelings. Feelings are normal. Please stay calm.’

The ward lights dimmed like a verdict being filed.

Rachel had not saved the notebook by reaching Sanctuary. She had only carried the evidence to a place that knew exactly what evidence was worth.

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: Cold Tribunal

Book 10: No Exit on Your Plan

How to Read This Series

The Cold Fusion Decalogy is structured in three co-chronological periods, with three novels occurring simultaneously in each period.

[If you liked this book](#)

Option A: Canon Order (Chronological)

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

If you want the world to unfold in the clearest causal chain—
one domino to the next—read:

HBSC → Hello, Apophis → Palladium Poisoning → Serotonomics → LSC&OQA
→ Authorized Warmth → Sacred Spark → Order of the Electron
→ Cold Tribunal → No Exit on Your Plan

This path gives you the cleanest “I understand how we got here.”

Option B: Triple-Pairwise Order (Parallel / Alt)

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

If you want the series to behave like a prism—showing you the same
catastrophe through three simultaneous lenses:

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.