

THE MESSAGE

Written by

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EXT. DEEP SPACE - NIGHT

Super: The Edge of the Universe

The universe expands in a violent rush, and legions of stars and impossibly vast, glowing clouds of interstellar gas rush forward toward a bright white barrier, impassable and unending in every direction. The stars and the gas crash against the barrier, breaking like an immense wave.

The barrier actuates, flashes a blinding white, then subdivides into millions of splintered fragments that turn black one by one, then by the dozens, and then all in a rush.

The darkness spreads backward through the gas cloud and the stars, the clouds of gas dim, and the stars flicker and are snuffed out. The darkness rushes backward as fast as it came, impenetrable and unstoppable.

Rushing past the darkness and into normal space, speeding up, faster and faster, past dozens of galaxies that flash by in a blur to a quiet part of space with no turbulence at all. The calm star field becomes...

EXT. ORTEGA HOME - NIGHT

...the star-filled sky over lanky teenager EVAN ORTEGA (16-17), who stands on the back patio of a small suburban home, staring up at the stars as they wheel overhead.

EVAN

Night after night, you turn in the sky. Mountains rise from steaming seas, and civilizations rise and fall. All under your light.

Evan picks up a bottled tea, takes a long pull, sets it back down. He looks up at the sky.

EVAN (CONT'D)

Do you shine on my mom? Does she see the same stars I do? Is she that close, or is she far away?

Evan leans down and swivels his telescope to a new point in the sky, making smaller and smaller moves until he finds what he's looking for.

INSERT - TELESCOPE VIEW

A single blurred yellow star is centered in the telescope. The focus sharpens slightly.

BACK TO SCENE

EVAN (CONT'D)  
There you are.

EXT. SHARON - NIGHT

Super: Sharon, Texas

A quiet drive-in restaurant where TWO CARS sit idling. The carefully landscaped entrance to a gated community. The perimeter fence of a prison, topped by rolls of razor wire. The driveway of a Fire Station, where TWO FIREMEN wash a small FIRE ENGINE. A field of Cherokee Roses gently waving in the night breeze.

INT. LABORATORY - NIGHT

A brightly lit, working laboratory in one big room. A pair of laptops sit on one of several long, stainless-steel tables. A large whiteboard is covered with equations and diagrams.

Sitting on a barstool is LARA GREENE (40s), Texan without making a point of it, wearing a starched white lab coat. She takes occasional pulls from a bottle of beer.

Consummate nerd NORI TAKAHASHI (40s), high energy and intense in a rumpled lab coat with a few grease stains, makes last-minute adjustments to the MACHINE. Housed in stainless steel, a glass dome reveals dozens of small wheels ringed with delicate electronics.

LARA  
Ready?

NORI  
Just about.

Nori attaches his phone to a tripod, then swivels it toward the Machine.

LARA  
What are we gonna see?

NORI  
Nothing dramatic. Pretty sure it'll be like the other tests. It'll work or it won't.

LARA

Keep your fingers crossed. We only have enough grant money for three more months. I've already switched to buying less beef and more beans. I finally figured out that quantum mechanics doesn't pay nearly as well as trial law.

NORI

If this works, I'm sure we're both up for jobs at DARPA. Our ticket out of small town Texas. Be nice to live somewhere someone could make a decent cocktail.

LARA

Virginia? No thanks. Where would I get my chicken-fried steak on Sunday night?

NORI

And Tuesday night, and Friday night.

Nori goes to a table and sits down in front of a laptop.

NORI (CONT'D)

Another minute.

LARA

Somewhere Richard Feynman is looking on.

NORI

What would you say if he were here?

LARA

I'd pinch his ass. That kind of intellect makes me a little crazy.

NORI

I recorded that.

LARA

You did not.

Lara clears her throat and goes to stand by the Machine.

LARA (CONT'D)

(under her breath)

Hold my beer.

NORI

What?

LARA

Nothing.

NORI

Recording in three, two, one.

Nori presses the record button on the phone, points his finger at Lara, mouths "Go," and returns to the laptop.

LARA

This is test number one hundred forty-two. The goal today is to pull, measure, and store zero-point energy from vacuum. Once triggered, the system will operate for one minute and then shut down. Ready?

NORI

Machine power is on.

LARA

MEMS devices ready?

NORI

Ready.

LARA

Casimir batteries online?

NORI

Online and ready. In an emergency, any excess energy will be vented to the grid. As always, local electric is monitoring the lines back to the grid to record any power transfer.

LARA

That'd be a miracle. Turn it on.

NORI

Powering up.

The Machine hums. The small wheels spin slowly at first, then in a blur, and the lights dim slightly. Lara touches her stomach.

LARA

I don't feel so good.

NORI

That's new. The electrons in our brains function as receivers, assembling a body of electrons – electrons that receive information from the waves present in zero-point energy. I'm nauseous, too.

LARA

Time?

Nori scans his laptop screen.

INSERT – LAPTOP SCREEN

A timer counts the time to the millisecond.

BACK TO SCENE

NORI

Just past thirty seconds. Thirty seconds to go. Got some vibration I haven't seen before.

LARA

Van der waals forces?

NORI

Maybe.

The Machine hums louder, and a pale blue light fills the room.

NORI (CONT'D)

You seeing that?

LARA

I am. What's causing it?

NORI

No idea.

The overhead lights flicker and then get very bright. Two fluorescent light tubes explode, showering the floor with flecks of glass. The Machine powers down and the lights return to normal.

LARA

Power fluctuation?

NORI

Power was stable.

LARA

Check the level in the Casimir  
batteries.

Nori checks his laptop, purses his lips and shakes his head.

NORI

Nothing.

LARA

Dammit. Save the data. We can try  
again tomorrow.

Nori walks over and turns off his phone, then sits back down  
in front of his laptop. He types and clicks, then frowns.

INSERT - LAPTOP SCREEN

An onscreen popup message reads:

"Insufficient Disk Space

Session 142 cannot be saved because you do not have enough  
free disk space on your storage volume."

BACK TO SCENE

NORI

There's no storage space.

LARA

We have ten petabytes of drive  
space.

NORI

It's full.

LARA

Impossible. What's filling up the  
drives?

INSERT - LAPTOP SCREEN

Nori clicks a hard drive icon labeled "Session Data" and a  
folder labeled "Session 142". Inside is a single unnamed  
file.

BACK TO SCENE

NORI

It's one file.

Nori double clicks on the file to open it.

INSERT - LAPTOP SCREEN

The file opens and expands, and the screen is filled with zeros and ones. Nori scrolls through page after page of a seemingly endless stream of binary code.

BACK TO SCENE

His eyes wide, Nori turns to Lara.

NORI (CONT'D)  
You're gonna have to make some  
phone calls.

INT. ORTEGA HOME - NIGHT

Evan walks through the living room of a small suburban home. As he passes, DAVID ORTEGA, Evan's dad, tired and a bit sad, turns from the TV screen.

DAVID  
Can you bring me a beer?

EVAN  
Sure.

Gets a beer from the fridge and hands it to him.

EVAN (CONT'D)  
Me and Scott are gonna look at the  
stars.

DAVID  
Scott and I.

EVAN  
You're coming, too?

DAVID  
Smart.

EVAN  
Your fault. And that's the last  
beer I'm getting for you tonight.

DAVID  
You saying I need to drink less  
beer?

EVAN  
That's what I'm saying. We'll be  
out in the yard.

EXT. EARTH ORBIT - NIGHT

High above the earth, a small satellite moves through the night sky over the United States.

INT. SURVEILLANCE CENTER - NIGHT

In an ultramodern surveillance center, an attentive TECH sits in front of a triad of huge computer monitors monitoring satellite transmissions. Hundreds of green and red tracks across the screen over a map of Earth indicate the real-time paths of satellites.

A CHIME sounds, and the Tech turns his attention to the center monitor, where one of the paths blinks red. He touches the screen to select the blinking path.

INSERT - COMPUTER MONITOR

Above the blinking satellite path is "QUASAR/NROL-38/DRAKE/19% INCREASE IN ACTIVITY"

BACK TO SCENE

The Tech types quickly on his keyboard.

INSERT - COMPUTER MONITOR

A popup menu appears. The Tech types "Isolate GOV and INTEL activity."

The system responds: "Task complete."

The Tech types "Describe activity by type."

The system responds: "Cellular activity."

The Tech types "Decrypt and transcribe conversations. Sort by time order."

The system responds: "Task complete."

The Tech types "Print task."

BACK TO SCENE

A printer WHIRRS to life and prints thirty or so pages. The Tech picks up the pages and quickly scans them.

TECH

You've got to be kidding.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING - NIGHT

The Tech walks quickly down a long hall, soon breaking into a jog. He navigates through several corridors, then continues into an area with carpeted floors and warm lighting.

He stops in front of steely ELITE GUARD ONE and ELITE GUARD TWO, wearing dark suits and carrying compact machine guns. ELITE GUARD ONE steps toward the Tech while ELITE GUARD TWO steps back and readies his weapon.

ELITE GUARD ONE  
Identification.

The Tech holds up his I.D. and ELITE GUARD ONE scans it with a phone-sized scanner.

ELITE GUARD ONE (CONT'D)  
Clear. Go on.

The Tech walks up a wide hallway, where a mix of fine paintings – modern, Renaissance, and everything in between – line the walls. Walking farther, he reaches a set of large wooden double doors where a ruthlessly efficient VALET in a dark suit, sits behind a desk.

VALET  
Yes?

TECH  
I need to see him.

VALET  
At this hour? I'm sure it can wait until morning.

TECH  
It can't. It's big. He'll want to know.

VALET  
Tell me. I'll run it by him first thing in the morning.

TECH  
If he doesn't hear this now, he'll be disappointed.

The Valet eyes the Tech warily.

VALET  
We certainly don't want that.

RHODES (O.S.)  
He better come in.

The Valet looks up at a tiny camera mounted by the ceiling.

VALET  
I'm very sorry to disturb you, sir.

RHODES (O.S.)  
No need. I was awake. Besides, he  
knows by now what's important and  
what isn't.

The door BUZZES, and the Valet opens the door to an expansive ultramodern residential suite. The Tech walks in to see a row of televisions showing various news channels and market reports, and a computer setup with three titanic monitors that appear to be processing an equation.

The impossibly intense CAMERON RHODES (40s) appears, in superhuman shape and dressed in a luxurious robe. He taps an electronic earpiece.

RHODES (CONT'D)  
Good evening. What can I do for  
you?

TECH  
We intercepted some satellite  
transmissions. National technical  
means, Quasar group. Lot of traffic  
for this time of night, so I  
unscrambled it.

The Tech hands Rhodes the stack of papers.

RHODES  
Let's see what you found.

The Tech stands at attention while Rhodes scans the pages impossibly quickly, flipping through them in quick succession. Rhodes looks up at the Tech and smiles a wide smile. It is the smile of a shark.

RHODES (CONT'D)  
Extraordinary. Well done.

INT. WHITE HOUSE OVAL OFFICE - DAY

The distinguished PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES is talking with a very serious Secretary of Defense RYAN ACOSTA.

ACOSTA

We'll keep listening, but for now  
there doesn't appear to be anything  
else coming.

PRESIDENT

Where did the signal come from?

ACOSTA

Unknown. It's possible it's all  
around us.

PRESIDENT

Do you think it's some artifact or  
natural signal? Quasar, radio  
galaxy, something like that?

ACOSTA

We're sure it's not any of those.

PRESIDENT

And why is that?

ACOSTA

Because it's big. Very big.

PRESIDENT

How big?

ACOSTA

The team that found the material  
has ten petabytes of storage space.  
That space is completely full.

PRESIDENT

Do you think we got all of it?

ACOSTA

Hard to say. It'll take a  
supercomputer to process it. And  
we'll need someone to lead a team  
to work on the data. Someone smart,  
who doesn't get flustered, and who  
can keep a secret.

PRESIDENT

You have someone in mind?

ACOSTA

Lara Greene, the scientist who  
found it. Her I.Q.'s been measured  
at one-seventy, and her M.G.A.F.  
score is in the mid-nineties.

(MORE)

ACOSTA (CONT'D)

She's highly intelligent and stable, but this is too big for her. We need a minder, someone who can protect our national security interests.

PRESIDENT

Who do you know?

ACOSTA

Bart Shadrach, colonel, U.S. Army. Military intelligence. Saw combat in Afghanistan. As cold as they come. Maybe a little too cold. There were some Afghani civilians who disappeared. A few were later found in pieces. Nothing was proven, but when Shadrach rotated back to the states the disappearances stopped. He has a lieutenant colonel, Karen Sparks. If she can hold her own with him, she's probably what we need. And they both have T.S.S.C.I. clearance, Majestic.

PRESIDENT

Really.

ACOSTA

A fallen angel in Mexico.

PRESIDENT

Never heard about that one.

ACOSTA

No, sir. You did not.

PRESIDENT

Tell me about Karen Sparks.

EXT. SKY OVER TOWN - DAY

Super: Somewhere in the Middle East

A GRAY EAGLE UAV moves silently through the skies over a sprawling, war-torn town reduced almost entirely to rubble. Below, a GRAY SUV speeds through the dirty, narrow streets.

CONTROL (O.S.)

Flyswatter, Control Seven, tracking three vehicles traveling west in your direction at a distance of one-point-five klicks. Lead vehicle is a brown pickup truck with a bed-mounted heavy machine gun. Rear vehicle is a red S.U.V. Multiple adult males in convoy. Multi-source reporting confirms two by H.V.I. in center vehicle. You are clear to engage. Over.

INT. S.U.V. ONE - DAY

A few car lengths back from the intersection of two dirt streets, battle-ready Lieutenant Colonel KAREN SPARKS (40s), her eyes scanning every direction for danger, sits inside a TAN ARMORED SUV. GIBSON (30s), a coiled spring in desert camo fatigues, is behind the wheel.

Next to them in another TAN ARMORED SUV are GREEN BERET ONE (30s) and GREEN BERET TWO (30s), both dirty, tense and bearded in camo fatigues.

SPARKS

(adjusts her throat mic)

Control Seven, Flyswatter One moving into position. Flyswatter Two falls in behind. We'll be moving south to north one block east of you on route blue. You hit 'em first. We'll come in from the front. Watch your angle of fire.

GREEN BERET ONE (O.S.)

Roger that.

Gibson throws the SUV into reverse, does a quick two-point turn, and heads out, kicking up dust as he goes.

EXT. STREET - DAY

The enemy convoy races past Green Beret One and Green Beret Two, who immediately fall in behind.

INT. S.U.V. TWO - DAY - DRIVING

GREEN BERET ONE

Flyswatter Two in position. Hawkins  
is gonna hit the rear vehicle with  
a rocket.

INT. S.U.V. TWO - DAY - DRIVING

As Green Beret Two climbs through the open sunroof with a LAWS rocket, the rear window of the Red SUV opens, and Green Beret One and Green Beret Two face INSURGENT ONE and a MINIGUN.

GREEN BERET ONE

Shit.

With a WHIRR, the minigun spools up and GRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!  
sprays hundreds of rounds at Green Beret One and Green Beret Two. They die instantly, their bodies shredded, and glass and metal from the disintegrating SUV flies everywhere. It rolls to a stop. The enemy convoy moves on, picking up speed.

INT. S.U.V. ONE - DAY - DRIVING

SPARKS

That was a minigun. Flyswatter Two!  
(she looks at Gibson)  
They're gone.

GIBSON

We have a SAW and two rockets.

SPARKS

Done more with less. Can't get  
behind that minigun.

GIBSON

Or in front of that machine gun.  
Got an idea.

SPARKS

It's gonna hurt, isn't it?

GIBSON

Oh yeah.

EXT. PICKUP TRUCK - DAY - DRIVING

In the Pickup, INSURGENT TWO, grimy in a black gimme cap, swivels his head left and right, scanning for targets.

As they cross an intersection CRUNCH! Gibson and Sparks, in SUV One, slam into the side of the Pickup, crushing the passenger side and sending the Pickup careening across the intersection to BAM! crash into a building on the other side. The Gray SUV CRUNCH! slams into the back of SUV One and grinds to a halt.

SPARKS  
OUT! OUT! OUT!

Gibson and Sparks leap into the street. Sparks hefts a LAWS rocket. GIBSON brings up the M249 SAW and BRRRRP! BRRRRP! BRRRRP! sprays the Pickup. INSURGENT TWO is torn apart by the rounds and falls dead.

The Red SUV slams into reverse, then drive, then back again, grinding its gears, frantically trying to turn the minigun toward Sparks and Gibson.

GIBSON  
Do NOT let that technical turn  
around!

SPARKS  
On it!

Gibson swivels to the Pickup's cab and opens up. BRRRRP! BRRRRP! BRRRRP! INSURGENT THREE and INSURGENT FOUR die in their seats.

Sparks snaps open the rocket tube, uncaps the ends, flips up the sights, and presses the trigger. POOM! The rocket streaks toward the Red SUV, where the minigun is just visible in the rear cargo area. BOOOOM! The SUV fills with fire and explodes. TWO FIGURES, on fire, burn in the ROARING flames.

Sparks tosses the rocket tube, pulls her M4 from over her shoulder, and zeroes in on the Gray SUV. Gibson hoses down the windshield of the Gray SUV with the SAW, BRRRRP! BRRRRP! and the DRIVER and BODYGUARD inside cover their faces. The windshield stars, but holds.

GIBSON  
Gotta crack that can! Take cover!

Sparks sprints to duck behind a building entryway, covering Gibson with her M4.

Gibson lays down the SAW and runs to snatch the second LAWS rocket from the SUV. He snaps open the rocket tube, uncaps the ends, flips up the sights, takes aim at the Gray SUV, and presses the trigger.

POOM! The rocket slams into the top of the windshield frame and BOOOOM! The windshield of the Gray SUV pops loose from its frame and tilts outward.

Sparks jumps from her cover, jumps up onto the hood of the Gray SUV, grabs the thick edge of the windshield, yanks it down, and PAK!PAK!PAK! PAK!PAK!PAK! PAK!PAK!PAK! unleashes three-round bursts into the Driver and Bodyguard.

The rear door of the Gray SUV opens and the TARGET (60s), distinguished and bearded in a tan suit, tumbles to the ground. Sparks hops down and trains her M4 on the Target, who is horribly burned, bleeding from the nose and ears.

TARGET

Do you...know who I am?

SPARKS

Command says you're a bad guy. Good enough for me.

TARGET

The world...is not...as simple...as you think.

SPARKS

It is today.

PAK! Sparks shoots him through the head.

INT. NASA EXOPLANET PROGRAM HEADQUARTERS - DAY

A bookish SCIENTIST (30s) walks into his office, closing his door behind him. He opens his desk drawer, takes out a small piece of paper, and dials a number on his cell phone.

INT. MCGUIRE HOME - DAY

The phone is answered immediately by a fastidious ASSISTANT (30s) standing in a huge modern kitchen.

ASSISTANT

Can I help you?

INTERCUT BETWEEN SCIENTIST AND ASSISTANT

SCIENTIST

Mr. McGuire, please.

ASSISTANT

Mr. McGuire is not available at the moment. Can I give him a message?

SCIENTIST

Tell him this, in exactly this way:  
We received a message from on high.

INT. MCGUIRE HOME - DAY

Playboy tech billionaire WARREN MCGUIRE (40s), is sitting in bed looking at statistical readouts on a tablet. Next to him is a nude sleeping SUPERMODEL (20s), her hair fanned across the pillow. There is an audible BEEP, and McGuire taps his earpiece.

MCGUIRE

Yes. Um hmm. What did he say?

McGuire sits bolt upright. He turns to the Supermodel and lightly touches her shoulder. She stirs.

MCGUIRE (CONT'D)

I'm sorry to be abrupt, but you have to leave.

She rolls over and bats her eyes.

SUPERMODEL

Will I see you again?

MCGUIRE

Hard to say. When you're dressed, one of the drivers will take you home. Take care.

She reaches for him, but he smiles and stands, quickly wrapping himself in a robe and snatching his phone from the bedside table.

INT. MCGUIRE HOME - DAY

McGuire stands by a sweeping worktable, looking out a large bank of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the ocean. He presses the speaker button on his desk phone.

MCGUIRE

What's happened?

SCIENTIST (O.S.)

Something extraordinary's been found.

MCGUIRE  
Tell me everything.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Lara sits in the kitchen, drinking coffee. Nori comes in.

NORI  
I translated something this morning  
from the first part of the message.  
It's the first thing I could put  
into context.

LARA  
What did you get?

NORI  
A name. Sharon.

LARA  
The name of this town.

Nori nods.

LARA (CONT'D)  
You're sure.

NORI  
I ran it three times.

LARA  
What does it mean?

NORI  
That's the wrong question. How did  
it know the name? It didn't  
describe this town by referencing a  
point in three-dimensional space,  
or describe it by noting its  
relationship to other planetary  
bodies in our solar system, or our  
position in our galaxy. It named  
this town. And it said Sharon is  
the center.

LARA  
The center of what?

NORI  
The center of everything.

INT. SHADRACH'S OFFICE - DAY

U.S. Army Colonel BARTRAM SHADRACH (50s), his cold eyes devoid of humanity, is sitting behind his desk when he hears a polite KNOCK.

SHADRACH

Enter.

Sparks, in uniform, walks in and salutes.

SPARKS

You asked to see me, sir.

SHADRACH

At ease.

Sparks stands at ease.

SHADRACH (CONT'D)

You're getting a temporary duty assignment. In Texas.

SPARKS

Fort Hood, sir?

SHADRACH

No. You'll be working off base with civilians.

SPARKS

Sir?

Shadrach hands her a sealed envelope.

SHADRACH

Note the clearance and seal.

INSERT - ENVELOPE

Sparks sees the "TS/SCI" on the label.

BACK TO SCENE

SPARKS

So it's serious.

SHADRACH

It is. And there's this, too.

Shadrach hands Sparks a smaller, letter-sized envelope.

INSERT - ENVELOPE

Sparks turns over the envelope and sees the Seal of the President of the United States on the back.

BACK TO SCENE

SHADRACH (CONT'D)

Not to be opened. Deliver it to Lara Greene. She's a scientist, your first contact when you get there.

SPARKS

May I ask a question, sir?

SHADRACH

Instead of asking questions, I'd prefer you read the material. And before either of you fills out paperwork, don't waste your time. Captain Ellie Howard stays here.

SPARKS

Sir?

SHADRACH

How would you like everyone to know Howard is more than a roommate?

SPARKS

Permission to speak freely, sir?

SHADRACH

Go ahead.

SPARKS

Ellie Howard is my girlfriend, and a lot more. It makes me ill just hearing you say her name, and I'd prefer not to hear you say it again. But it's interesting you bring her up. She knows you from Fort Benning.

Shadrach raises an eyebrow.

SPARKS (CONT'D)

She mentioned your first meeting, something about you dragging her into a closet and trying to pull her pants down, so she boxed your ears. We all have stories we'd prefer to keep quiet. Sir.

Shadrach narrows his eyes, and his features tighten. Then he relaxes and salutes.

SHADRACH  
Dismissed.

Sparks salutes, then turns on her heels and leaves. Shadrach places his hand on his desk phone, thinking.

INT. SPARKS HOME - DAY

Sparks sits on the couch. Freckled and ponytailed ELLIE (30s) has her head in Spark's lap and CHARLIE, a small terrier, sits at the end of the couch. Sparks smells the air.

SPARKS  
What are you cooking? Smells good.

ELLIE  
It's a surprise.

SPARKS  
Do you need to stir it?

ELLIE  
It's fine. It's on a low boil. Like me. I can't believe you said that to Shadrach.

SPARKS  
You're the one who popped his eardrum.

ELLIE  
Reflex action. Didn't even think about it. When he went down, I got outta there and avoided him ever since. When I see him coming, I head the other direction.

SPARKS  
Probably best. I wish I could do the same.

ELLIE  
He scares me.

SPARKS  
Me, too. But he's not your C.O. Just stay out of his way and it'll all work out.

ELLIE

About this other thing. How long  
are you going to be gone? A few  
weeks, a month?

SPARKS

Could be long-term.

ELLIE

Am I coming with you?

SPARKS

(shakes her head)

They won't reassign you. There's no  
base anywhere close. I'll come back  
as often as I can, and you can come  
see me. And we can webcam in  
between.

ELLIE

I'll get some new outfits.

Sparks laughs and musses her hair.

ELLIE (CONT'D)

When do you leave?

SPARKS

Day after tomorrow.

ELLIE

What's the job?

SPARKS

Can't talk about it.

ELLIE

Getting used to that.

SPARKS

This is...something else. I'm  
working with scientists. I'm  
basically there to make sure they  
don't blow up the world. So I'm  
going to do my job. I like this  
world because it has you in it.

EXT. FARM TO MARKET ROAD - DAY

The highway is quiet. A dust devil swirls across the blacktop  
before being disorporated by an Army-green SEMI-TRAILER  
TRUCK led by a single HUMVEE.

Sparks sits in the Humvee's passenger seat. A young BOY stands by the side of the road, waving. Sparks holds her hand up in a weak wave as they ROAR by.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Nori is working on the Machine when Lara walks in.

LARA  
You need to come outside.

NORI  
Why?

LARA  
We have guests.

NORI  
I didn't know we were expecting anyone.

LARA  
Me neither.

Nori follows Lara out of the lab, up a hallway, through a small lobby area, and outside, where the Semi-Trailer Truck is idling while Sparks barks orders to four busy UNIFORMED SOLDIERS. Lara approaches Sparks.

LARA (CONT'D)  
Can I help you?

SPARKS  
I think I'm here to help you. This letter's for you.

LARA  
What's it say?

SPARKS  
Don't know. It was sealed when I got it. When you see who it's from, you'll know why I didn't open it.

Lara examines the envelope and holds it up for Nori to see.

LARA  
That's a Presidential Seal.

NORI  
As in THE President?

Lara opens the envelope and unfolds the letter. As she reads it, she frowns.

LARA  
It's from the President. So our research...

SPARKS  
Is now part of a military project. And because of its importance, I've been attached to your team.

LARA  
To do what?

SPARKS  
To help, however I can. And to provide equipment and logistical support. A new computer, straight from DARPA's High-Productivity Computing Systems program, to speed up data processing. Bigger server. And a security system. Card-key access, mag locks, bulletproof glass, heavy doors. We're locking this place down.

NORI  
Do we have to wear I.D. badges?

SPARKS  
Glad you asked.

Sparks reaches into a pocket and pulls out two I.D. badges, handing them to Lara and Nori.

SPARKS (CONT'D)  
Lara Greene and Nori Takahashi. After the locks are installed, you'll need these to come and go.

NORI  
What if we lose it?

SPARKS  
Replacements are twenty-five bucks each.

NORI  
You're not serious.

SPARKS

No, and I'm afraid I've been rude.  
Lieutenant Colonel Karen Sparks,  
U.S. Army.

Sparks extends her hand. Nori takes it and shakes it firmly.  
Lara crosses her arms and looks Sparks in the eye.

LARA

Lieutenant Colonel Sparks...

SPARKS

It's actually colonel...but how  
about just Sparks?

LARA

Sparks it is. Sparks, are you a  
good person or bad person?

SPARKS

What kind of question is that?

LARA

It's a basic question. Some people  
have a hard time answering it.  
Those are the people I have to  
watch out for.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Lara and Nori show Sparks around the lab.

NORI

So it's basically this room, with a  
small hallway to the bathrooms and  
the front door. There's a small  
kitchen with a sink and a  
refrigerator.

LARA

Make yourself at home, but don't  
drink all my beer.

NORI

We've got a storage area in back we  
never use because there's no air-  
conditioning. And a loading dock  
with a door that's rusted shut.

SPARKS

We'll get that sorted right away.

LARA

It can wait.

NORI

Are you looking at the clock?

LARA

I am.

SPARKS

What about the clock?

LARA

Something you'll have to get used  
to around here.

SPARKS

And what's that?

LARA

We eat lunch.

NORI

It's pretty much the only time she  
slows down. When do you slow down?

SPARKS

I have two speeds: a thousand miles  
an hour and asleep.

LARA

Then we understand each other. What  
do Army lieutenant colonels eat?

SPARKS

Same as the grunts: whatever they  
put in front of me.

LARA

That's a shame. The way I see it,  
you and me need to get on the same  
page, and there's one really good  
way to do that.

SPARKS

What's that?

LARA

We're going to the diner.

INT. DINER - DAY

Lara and Sparks sit in a window booth of a busy hometown diner filled with VARIOUS DINERS.

LARA

So after being in a private home  
for a while, they built a school.  
Eventually, they consolidated with  
Eagleton schools and started  
bussing kids over there.

Frumpy and sassy AMY, carrying two glasses of tea, cuts into the conversation.

AMY

She tell you the town was also  
called Buttermilk Station? Local  
woman used to bring a bucket of  
buttermilk and a ladle for the  
train crews. Can you imagine  
drinking that stuff warm in August?  
(shakes her head)  
Two sweet teas?

SPARKS

Sure.

AMY

(sets down the tea)  
I know her.  
(nods at Lara)  
Where are you from?

SPARKS

Out of town.

AMY

Ya don't say.

SPARKS

What's good?

AMY

Chicken fried steak, of course.  
Burger's good, too. Meat's local.  
Stay away from the meatloaf today.  
Told him he shoulda tossed that  
last night. Be back in a minute.

Amy walks to another table.

SPARKS  
(takes a sip of her tea)  
That's my sugar for the year.

LARA  
You can get it unsweet, but they  
look at you funny.

SPARKS  
I can handle the glare. What do we  
do to get on the same page?

LARA  
We're already doin' it. Figure out  
what you want. I'm hungry.

LATER

Lara and Sparks scoot their empty plates to the side.

LARA (CONT'D)  
So there's not a lot to do most  
nights but drink beer and watch  
cable. I've pretty much closed up  
shop down there. Who in your life  
registers on the scale?

SPARKS  
When you drop handles you really go  
for it. I have a roommate - also  
career Army - Captain Ellie Howard.

Lara looks Sparks in the eyes and holds her gaze.

LARA  
I'm from around here, but I went to  
school at Yale, and I knew folks  
there who said roommate when they  
meant something else. You ever get  
comfortable enough around me to use  
a word besides roommate, I won't be  
uncomfortable hearing it.

SPARKS  
I appreciate that, more than I can  
say.

Lara regards Sparks.

LARA  
There's something else. Nori  
translated part of the opening  
section of the message, as we're  
calling it.

(MORE)

LARA (CONT'D)

There's material about the position of Earth in relation to the rest of our solar system, but before that, in the very first bit, it names this town, Sharon, and says it's positioned at the center. We think it means the center of the universe.

SPARKS

Is that even possible?

LARA

One of the prevailing theories about the structure of the universe is that it's a flat plane. Maybe this town is at the center. I've heard crazier theories.

SPARKS

Then we're exactly where we're supposed to be.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Lara, dressed in pajamas, with a heavy coat wrapped around her, sits on a bench in a hospital hallway, looking down at her worn tennis shoes. The left shoelace is tied, but the right shoelace is not. She looks down at her hands, notices she's picking at her cuticles, then stops.

A dark pair of boots appears in front of her. She doesn't look up.

DEPUTY

Mrs. Greene?

INT. LARA'S HOUSE - NIGHT - PRESENT

Lara opens her eyes and finds herself in bed. She clamps both of her hands over her mouth, as if to stifle a scream.

INT. WHITE HOUSE OVAL OFFICE - DAY

The President is sitting on a couch in the oval office, when a hyper-efficient ASSISTANT comes in with McGuire, dressed in a dark bespoke suit and tie.

ASSISTANT

Mr. President, Warren Maguire.

PRESIDENT

Thank you.

The President gestures to a chair, and McGuire sits. The Assistant leaves.

PRESIDENT (CONT'D)

I have to say I'm very curious, Mr. McGuire. What can a humble President do for one of the world's richest men?

MCGUIRE

Thank you for your time, Mr. President. I'll be brief. There is a project. One not many people know about. I'd like to be part of it.

PRESIDENT

You'll have to be more specific.

MCGUIRE

I'm sure the government has a more cryptic name for it, but my sources call it the Sharon project.

PRESIDENT

For the sake of argument, let's say I'm familiar with the project. What would your interest be?

MCGUIRE

I have a distinct and lasting interest in the future of humanity.

PRESIDENT

As do we all. What knowledge do you have about the future of humanity?

MCGUIRE

I'm certain I don't know more than anyone else, Mr. President. In short, I want to help.

PRESIDENT

How is the richest man in the world proposing to help?

MCGUIRE

I'm offering technology.

PRESIDENT

We have technology.

MCGUIRE

Not like this. It's a supercomputer. A new one. It's better, faster, and you'll never have anything like it. I want to give it to you, on one condition.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Nori escorts McGuire into the lab, where Lara is working on her laptop and Sparks is writing on a legal pad. When they see McGuire, they stand.

NORI

Lara, Sparks, we have a guest. This is...

LARA

Everyone knows who you are. Why are you here?

McGuire extends his hand, and Lara shakes it. Sparks extends her hand, and McGuire hands her an envelope with a Presidential Seal.

LARA (CONT'D)

(to Sparks)

Looks like it's your turn.

Sparks opens the envelope, pulls out a single sheet of paper, and begins reading.

MCGUIRE

I'm here to help.

LARA

Getting a lot of that lately. What makes you think we need help?

MCGUIRE

Money loosens a lot of mouths, and some people don't need much to get them talking.

LARA

How can you help us?

MCGUIRE

Money, to start with. I have more than enough. You need some, or you will soon. I have a fleet of jets, with pilots, to take me wherever I want to go.

(MORE)

MCGUIRE (CONT'D)

I don't see why your team can't use one. And I want to give you a computer.

LARA

We have a computer. It's the fastest one they have.

MCGUIRE

I have a better one. It'll accelerate your work by three or four times, maybe more. Do you want it?

LARA

I do.

MCGUIRE

My trucks will be here tomorrow.

LARA

Trucks. Plural.

MCGUIRE

I'm also bringing peripheral systems. O.C. forty-eight intranet connection. Two-fifty-five T.B.P.S. fiber line, and multiple redundant backup systems to make sure you don't lose data. And a one-thousand-kilowatt backup generator.

Sparks folds the letter and tucks it into a pocket. She extends her hand to McGuire, who shakes it.

SPARKS

When my commander-in-chief says frog, I jump.

LARA

What's happening here?

MCGUIRE

Ms. Greene, the President's letter is definitive, but that's not the way I do business, or join a team, your team. So I'm asking, as humbly as I can, to stay on, to be a part of this.

LARA

This isn't a game.

MCGUIRE

No. But there are layers, and strategies. You have enemies, and you also have friends. Maybe you'll allow me to be one of them. I've had an interest in your work for some time.

LARA

What do you know about my work?

MCGUIRE

Through various educational institutions, I've funded your grants for the past nine years. From Riemann surfaces and energy behavior with a Calabi-Yau manifold, to quantum game theory to now. Let me stay. I've made all the money I care to make. Now I want to do something more.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Lara, Nori, Sparks, and McGuire watch as TECHNICIAN ONE switches on two new ultramodern large monitors, paired with keyboards and trackpads, on one of the large tables.

TECHNICIAN TWO peels sheets of protective film from the front of a giant projection screen that covers one large wall. Inside a sophisticated, transparent, curved enclosure is the Machine, sitting next to the COMPUTER, a ten-foot-tall matte-black cylinder with three thin bands of blinking lights set into the surface.

The LEAD TECHNICIAN approaches McGuire.

LEAD TECHNICIAN

We're done, sir. Everything has power and the computer is connected to the old drives and the new servers. Microphones are wired and on. If there's anything else you need, let us know. Current plan is to pull out in the morning.

MCGUIRE

Thanks, guys.

The Technicians wave and leave. McGuire turns to Lara, Nori, and Sparks.

MCGUIRE (CONT'D)

Who wants to hear about our new  
toys?

Lara, Nori, and Sparks gather around McGuire, who points to the giant wall screen.

MCGUIRE (CONT'D)

This wall is a big screen. You can divide it into windows to display everything from T.V. channels to browser windows. You can divide it in two, so each of the terminals controls half of the screen, or one terminal can run the whole screen.

McGuire taps a trackpad and quickly clicks the keyboard to transfer several browser windows to the giant screen.

MCGUIRE (CONT'D)

The computer is protected behind level-eight ballistic glass-clad polycarbonate. At its core, it's a quantum computer. It uses quantum-mechanical phenomena like superposition and entanglement, built around quantum bits, all working in a supercooled environment.

NORI

So it's probabilistic, rather than deterministic.

SPARKS

Translate, please.

MCGUIRE

It can return multiple values, providing not only the best solution, but other good alternatives to choose from.

LARA

And we run it from these terminals.

Sparks picks up a pair of high-tech gloves and waves them.

SPARKS

What do these do?

MCGUIRE

In addition to the standard input devices, there's two sets of motion-control gloves. You can type in the air, or move data around using gestures. The computer also recognizes our voices – I played it samples of some of our conversations – so you can use voice commands to initiate tasks. There's a manual of the command syntax. Computer, load message, first section.

The Message appears on the giant screen.

MCGUIRE (CONT'D)

You can pull reports using the terminals, and the computer can display short answers on the big screen. When you're not giving it tasks, it defaults after ten seconds to translating the initial data you captured, or the data we've yet to capture. Nori helped my techs hook it up to your machine, which will run every night at midnight. Thanks, Nori.

Nori nods.

MCGUIRE (CONT'D)

New data will be compared to the initial data and analyzed. And this computer has something no other computer has. In addition to the quantum processors, it has a repository of liquid memory.

NORI

There's no such thing.

MCGUIRE

Not on our planet.

INT. AIRCRAFT HANGAR – NIGHT – FLASHBACK

Two RUSSIAN SOLDIERS escort McGuire, carrying a small SILVER SUITCASE, through a brightly lit military aircraft hangar. McGuire eyes two NEXT-GEN FIGHTERS as he passes.

They stop in front of a sharp-eyed Russian GENERAL, who eyes McGuire warily, and a MILITARY ATTACHE, who is talking on a cell phone.

Behind the General, on a mammoth platform, is the SPACECRAFT, a dull silver disc with several small GRAY TENTACLES writhing beneath it.

GENERAL  
(with a thick accent)  
You've noticed our visitor.

MCGUIRE  
Is it...

GENERAL  
It is what you think it is.

The SPACECRAFT disappears. McGuire's eyes go wide.

GENERAL (CONT'D)  
This happens sometimes.

The SPACECRAFT reappears. The General flashes a grim smile.

GENERAL (CONT'D)  
You see? All is right again. But  
did the men inside come back?  
Sometimes yes, sometimes no. What  
you want is over here.

The General gestures toward a long table. On it are TWO CLEAR LITER-SIZED CYLINDERS filled with RED FLUID.

GENERAL (CONT'D)  
You sent the money.

MCGUIRE  
I made the transfer at the hotel.

The General glances at the MILITARY ATTACHE, who nods yes.

GENERAL  
Then you have only to take what is  
yours and go. Enjoy your souvenir.  
We will enjoy a luxurious  
retirement.

McGuire picks up one of the CYLINDERS, and the RED FLUID swims away from his touch.

GENERAL (CONT'D)  
For that we have no answers.

McGuire opens the silver suitcase and nests the CYLINDER into a precut foam insert. He closes the suitcase, then touches the top of the second CYLINDER.

GENERAL (CONT'D)  
Already spoken for. Goodbye Mr.  
McGuire.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY - PRESENT

MCGUIRE  
It was very expensive. This computer contains all of it, divided into several modules placed near the machine's processors.

NORI  
Near the processors.

MCGUIRE  
Apparently, near is close enough. The fluid reacts to information around it, whether static or in transfer.

NORI  
As if it knows it's there?

MCGUIRE  
(he nods)  
And its processing ability is accelerating over time. I think the fluid's learning. It may even be alive.

INT. LABORATORY - NIGHT

The lab is dark except for the hallway light shining into the room. On a WALL CLOCK, the second hand sweeps past the number 12. Inside the clear enclosure, the bands of lights blink slowly on the Computer, then perform a short, rapid burst.

Next to the Computer, the Machine powers up and emits a low hum. Under the glass dome on top, the small wheels spin slowly at first, then in a blur, and the hallway light dims slightly, then returns to normal. The Machine hums louder, then steadily. After a few moments, the Machine powers down.

The giant screen comes to life, displaying the existing Message.

Sections of NEW MATERIAL appear, one section branching off at a diagonal, the size of the message doubling, then tripling, then growing by an order of magnitude, the magnification decreasing to keep pace with the massive expansion.

Then the message stops expanding, and new sections of the Message light up one by one, while on the Computer, the three thin bands of lights set into the surface blink rapidly as the work begins.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Lara, Nori, McGuire, and Sparks stand in the lab. Nori has the Message on the giant screen and is moving it around.

NORI  
It's binary, but there's much more  
to it than that. Look at this.  
Computer, emphasize random row.

A long row of the Message lights up, stretching from the beginning back into infinity.

NORI (CONT'D)  
The language is extremely complex,  
and it's complicated by the fact  
that it's connected in more than  
one dimension. Computer, emphasize  
related vertical column.

A vertical column of the Message that intersects the lit-up row turns white.

NORI (CONT'D)  
This layer is positioned  
perpendicular to the original  
signal layer. Computer, emphasize  
related diagonal column.

A diagonal column of the Message that intersects the lit-up row and column turns white.

NORI (CONT'D)  
And there's another layer  
positioned diagonally to that. All  
the lines contain information.  
They're more like large cubes of  
interconnected words containing  
meaning in three dimensions, with  
each of those dimensions relating  
to the other. To decipher  
everything's going to take a long  
time.

MCGUIRE

Like a giant, three-dimensional word search. Who could do this?

LARA

They most likely think in more dimensions than us. On the Kardashev scale, they're off the scale. We're not even a type one civilization, freely using fusion power. My guess is they're type four beings who can control or use the entire universe, or type five, controlling multiple universes. If they're type six, they can exist outside time and space.

SPARKS

What would beings like that look like?

NORI

Our brains might not even be able to recognize them. For now, we can only see them through this. Computer, resume translation.

The group stares at the Message on the screen, which slowly cycles down its length, highlighting various parts as they are examined by the Computer.

EXT. TRANQUIL PARK - DAY

Shadrach, dressed in civilian clothes, sits on a bench talking to a casually dressed Cameron Rhodes.

SHADRACH

Colonel Sparks will give me regular reports, reports I'll then share with you in exchange for...

RHODES

Let's not make this conversation more distasteful than necessary. There are many paths, and Sparks' path is more narrow than others. I need her to be reliable.

SHADRACH

Don't worry about Sparks. She's headstrong, but she has a weakness.  
(MORE)

SHADRACH (CONT'D)

When the time is right, we'll pull the rug out from under her. We have a piece in the game.

RHODES

There are many pieces in the game. This world is a tedious one, with a multitude of events that are often nothing more than centuries-old cycles repeating themselves. I think it's time to make things a bit more interesting.

INT. LAB - DAY

Nori walks into the kitchen to see Sparks.

NORI

How'd lunch go yesterday.

SPARKS

Fine. She's a handful. But good. You two have been friends a long time.

Nori nods.

NORI

Twenty years. Did she mention her husband?

SPARKS

No. They split up?

Nori regards Sparks.

NORI

No. He died, along with her son.

SPARKS

What happened?

NORI

It's not my story to tell. But now you know.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Lara, Nori, Sparks, and McGuire sit at a table in the lab. Sections of the Message move on the giant screen, which is divided into smaller screens displaying different views.

NORI

The names we have for things: cities, planets, stars, and distant galaxies – everything's encoded into the message. The level of detail is uncanny. It boggles the mind, and it makes me more than a little afraid.

LARA

The data we captured is huge, and we only captured a small part of it. This information's out there all the time, and there's more.

MCGUIRE

How much more?

NORI

Impossible to say. What we're capturing with the machine is incredibly complex, and as our universe changes, it changes. We watch it, and it, apparently, is watching us.

SPARKS

So someone, or something sent it to us?

NORI

No. It's not really a message. It's probably always been there, in the background, like...

LARA

It's more like instructions in a box from Ikea that tell you how whatever you bought goes together, but it's more. Much more. It's the operating instructions for our universe.

EXT. ORTEGA HOME - NIGHT

Evan and his high school buddy, the quirky and fidgety SCOTT, are out in the backyard standing by Evan's telescope, which is pointed up at the sky.

SCOTT

Think you'll ever get tired of looking at stars?

EVAN

Doubt it.

SCOTT

What about girls?

EVAN

There's thirty-six people in our class, and most of the other guys are bigger, so they play football and got first pick. We're gonna be fighting over Marta with the bad leg for prom.

SCOTT

I like Marta.

Evan bends down and peers through the telescope.

EVAN

Me, too. I was just kidding. Not her fault a dog bit her leg.

SCOTT

You looking at that star again?

EVAN

Yep.

SCOTT

How do you know which one it is?

EVAN

It's in the same spot.

SCOTT

Smart ass. Seriously.

EVAN

After a while you kinda know where stuff is. We can see about ten thousand stars, but only a little over three hundred have names. The rest are just numbers or listed as bein' parta constellations and other groups.

SCOTT

Where's this one?

EVAN

M. forty-four, the Beehive Cluster, in the constellation Cancer.

(MORE)

EVAN (CONT'D)

There's a group of eight pretty bright stars that kinda make an arrow. Mine's right in the center of that. No name. Doesn't even have a number.

SCOTT

What do you see in it?

Evan looks up from the telescope.

EVAN

Whenever I see it, it doesn't matter I don't know what I'm gonna do with my life, that we don't have money, that my mom left. It's like everything's gonna be okay.

INT. LABORATORY - NIGHT

Nori is alone in front of the giant screen, pondering the Message as it slowly scrolls by, pieces of it lit up, seemingly randomly, as the Computer examines it.

NORI

Computer, are you there? Answer onscreen.

INSERT - GIANT SCREEN

The Message freezes and a blinking cursor appears in the top left of the screen, followed by a single word: Yes.

BACK TO SCENE

NORI (CONT'D)

Computer, are there any interesting trends in the information? Answer onscreen.

INSERT - GIANT SCREEN

The cursor blinks, followed by: Too many to list. Would you like a report?

BACK TO SCENE

NORI (CONT'D)

No. Computer, list the top five interesting trends in order of preference. Answer onscreen.

INSERT - GIANT SCREEN

The cursor blinks, followed by:

- 01 Black holes functioning as matter and energy equalizers
- 02 Gravity shifts suggesting universal instability
- 03 Milky Way galaxy antimatter fountain
- 04 Human neurological connectivity
- 05 Non-binary characters in information

BACK TO SCENE

NORI (CONT'D)  
Non-binary characters? Computer,  
display message and emphasize non-  
binary characters.

INSERT - GIANT SCREEN

A Message section appears onscreen. Characters throughout the message light up, almost like section dividers.

BACK TO SCENE

NORI (CONT'D)  
Computer, display a random  
selection of non-binary characters,  
large scale, forward facing.

INSERT - GIANT SCREEN

The screen is filled with ALIEN GLYPHS.

BACK TO SCENE

NORI (CONT'D)  
Wow. What are you? Computer,  
analyze non-binary characters and  
report.

INSERT - GIANT SCREEN

Initial analysis: unknown.

BACK TO SCENE

NORI (CONT'D)  
Computer, examine known linguistics  
information and theorize nature of  
non-binary characters.

INSERT - GIANT SCREEN

Analysis: non-binary characters could be insignificant/siginificant and be:

- 01 Randomly occurring
- 02 Error characters
- 03 Decorative
- 04 Control characters

BACK TO SCENE

NORI (CONT'D)  
Computer, assume non-binary characters are significant.  
Theorize nature of non-binary characters.

INSERT - GIANT SCREEN

Analysis: non-binary characters are significant and are:

- 04 Control characters

BACK TO SCENE

NORI (CONT'D)  
Computer, what would the characters control?

INSERT - GIANT SCREEN

Unknown.

BACK TO SCENE

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Sparks enters the lab and approaches Lara, Nori, and McGuire. She looks worried.

SPARKS  
We've had a digital breach.

LARA  
When?

SPARKS  
Last night from zero three-ten to zero three-fifteen.

LARA  
How?

SPARKS

Black hats inserted code into a distributed program to tap into parallel computing networks at Lawrence Livermore, created hidden disk partitions, then downloaded large sections of the message through a handful of ports.

MCGUIRE

Lawrence Livermore?

SPARKS

We upload data to them every night at zero two-hundred as part of the standard security protocols.

MCGUIRE

Idiots.

LARA

(to Sparks)

You knew someone else had access to our data?

SPARKS

I did.

NORI

Sparks.

LARA

(to Sparks)

Screw you for not telling us about this! What did they get?

SPARKS

Maybe half of the original message.

NORI

What they got could be dangerous. We have to make sure they don't share it with anyone else.

MCGUIRE

Sparks, call whoever you need to call, but turn off the hose now.

SPARKS

We couldn't be trusted to be the sole owners of the data. It's too big for that.

LARA

Well it's bigger now, thanks to whatever cadre of fools left the door open that allowed someone to download...What did they get?

NORI

If they see some of what I've seen.

LARA

They will, and chances are they won't have half the moral barriers in place that we do to prevent them from selling what they have, or god forbid, trying to make something bad out of it. We need to find these people now.

McGuire's phone beeps. He pulls it from his pocket and taps the screen.

INSERT - MCGUIRE'S PHONE SCREEN

It's been too long. C

BACK TO SCENE

MCGUIRE

I know who hacked us.

LARA

Who?

MCGUIRE

Cameron Rhodes. We were once partners.

SPARKS

But not any more. What happened?

MCGUIRE

My fault. I got greedy. It pissed him off. He took it personally.

NORI

So now your problem is our problem.

LARA

And just maybe the world's problem. What does he want?

MCGUIRE

Hard to say. He's a cagey fellow.  
And he's a pure sociopath. There's  
nothing holding him back.

SPARKS

Is he as smart as you are?

MCGUIRE

No. He's much smarter than I am.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

Evan sits with SCOTT and SIX CLASSMATES in a classroom. A harried TEACHER stands by the blackboard, which is covered with equations. Evan doodles furiously in his spiral, his eyes darting back and forth.

TEACHER

Evan.

Evan continues to draw.

TEACHER (CONT'D)

Evan!

Evan looks up and the other Classmates giggle.

TEACHER (CONT'D)

For the past few minutes, we've  
been working through this equation.  
Please give us your answer.

EVAN

Umm. Uhh.

The Classmates murmur.

TEACHER

Quiet, please. I want to make sure  
we can all hear Evan's answer.

Evan looks at the equation on the blackboard.

In a flash, he sees

$$\begin{aligned}
 \iint_R 6xy^2 \, dA &= \int_2^4 \int_1^2 6xy^2 \, dy \, dx \\
 \iint_R 6xy^2 \, dA &= \int_2^4 (2xy^3) \Big|_1^2 \, dx \\
 &= \int_2^4 16x - 2x \, dx \\
 &= \int_2^4 14x \, dx \\
 \iint_R 6xy^2 \, dA &= 7x^2 \Big|_2^4 = 84
 \end{aligned}$$

Evan looks at Ms. Terry.

EVAN  
Eighty-four.

TEACHER  
That's. That's right, Evan.  
Good...guess.

The bell rings and the students file out into the hallway.  
Scott grabs the spiral from his hand and opens it to a page.

INSERT - SPIRAL PAGE

Scribbled ALIEN GLYPHS fill the page. Scott flips from page to page, each page covered with the strange symbols.

BACK TO SCENE

SCOTT  
What the hell?

Evan shakes his head in response.

SCOTT (CONT'D)  
What is this stuff?

EVAN  
I don't know.

INT. SPARKS HOME - DAY

Sparks, in uniform, walks in the door and sees Ellie sitting at the kitchen table in civilian clothes.

SPARKS

Hi there.

ELLIE

Every time I hear those boots on  
the tile I start smiling.

SPARKS

I feel the same way about your  
clicking heels.

ELLIE

How was your day?

SPARKS

Everybody's still alive.

ELLIE

You've set the bar pretty low.

SPARKS

So many things I've done, I was so  
certain they were right at the  
time. Now I have questions.

ELLIE

That was half a world away. They're  
gone. I wrote so many dark endings  
for myself, but I never would have  
dared to write this. Us.

SPARKS

I can shoot every kind of weapon  
system there is, but I can't talk  
like that.

ELLIE

Then you kill the bad guys, and  
I'll write the poetry. And pour the  
champagne.

SPARKS

Pour away. I've got forty-eight  
hours of leave, as of three hours  
ago. What are we celebrating?

ELLIE

Tuesday.

SPARKS

You know what champagne does to me.

ELLIE

I know, and I'm counting on it.

## INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Lara, dressed in pajamas, with a heavy coat wrapped around her, sits on a bench in a hospital hallway, looking down at her worn tennis shoes. The left shoelace is tied, but the right shoelace is not. She looks down at her hands, notices she's picking at her cuticles, then stops.

A dark pair of boots appears in front of her. She doesn't look up.

DEPUTY  
Mrs. Greene?

Lara looks up at a somber DEPUTY in uniform.

DEPUTY (CONT'D)  
Mrs. Greene, can you please come with me?

He extends his hand, and Lara takes it and stands.

## INT. LARA'S HOUSE - NIGHT - PRESENT

Lara opens her eyes and finds herself in bed. She sits for a moment, blinking her eyes, then begins to sob.

## EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA - DAY

A WOMAN in a dress walks out of a low-rise office building and walks up the sidewalk. Her dress rises, and she smoothes it down. A puzzled look crosses her face. She looks down at her feet and sees she is floating an inch off the ground.

The Woman SCREAMS and quickly flies several hundred feet up into the air. Pushed along by the wind, she floats over the tops of the industrial-area buildings. Looking down, she sees cars rising from the ground. She starts to cry, her tears snatched away by the wind and instantly whisked upward.

In the sky around her, the Woman sees PEOPLE floating through the air, most of them hundreds of yards away. Nearer to her is a MAN in a business suit. He waves his arms, calling to her, and she cranes her head to hear him.

MAN  
HELP MEEEEEEEEE!

The Woman floats over buildings for a quarter mile, then looks down to see a large, grassy field. Her upper body tilts toward the earth, and she drops like a stone.

She sees the ground rushing toward her as the wind violently rips at her face, hair and clothes.

THUD! She lies face down in a field. Dead. In the field all around her are OTHER BODIES, all dead.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Sparks strides into the lab to see Lara moving the message around on the giant screen.

SPARKS  
We have a situation.

LARA  
What happened to your leave?

SPARKS  
Duty calls. Let's go.

LARA  
Where?

SPARKS  
Iowa City.

LARA  
Don't we need to talk about this?

SPARKS  
We talk on the plane. Leave wearing what you have on. Wheels up in two zero mikes.

LARA  
I need to know what we're walking into. What's this about?

SPARKS  
Gravity or, more accurately, the lack of it.

INT. VERY LIGHT JET - DAY

Sparks, Nori, Lara, and McGuire are seated facing each other in the cabin of a small passenger jet, a small table between them. Nori looks around the cabin.

NORI  
Pretty nice.  
(to McGuire)  
You like it?

McGuire shakes his head.

MCGUIRE  
Next time we take one of mine.

Sparks lays a city map on the table.

SPARKS  
Snap to. There's decreased gravity  
in an industrial area southeast of  
downtown.

LARA  
Why call us?

SPARKS  
(to McGuire)  
Your former business partner called  
the mayor's office just before shit  
fell apart. Ten phone calls later I  
got the order from CENTCOM.

NORI  
Rhodes?

MCGUIRE  
If anyone could do this, it would  
be him.

SPARKS  
Here's the layout. The gravity  
decrease is amplified toward a  
center point here.

INSERT - MAP

Sparks points to a spot on a city map southeast of downtown.

BACK TO SCENE

SPARKS (CONT'D)  
Whatever's causing the phenomenon,  
we'll find it in this location.

LARA  
How do you figure that's the  
center?

SPARKS  
Missing persons reports. And the  
C.D.C. cleaned up a bunch of bodies  
(gestures to a nearby  
area)  
(MORE)

SPARKS (CONT'D)

over here in this location, bodies that fell from a great height. They were likely on the ground near the phenomenon when it started. They fell over here.

INSERT - MAP

Sparks points to a spot a bit north of the affected area.

BACK TO SCENE

LARA

How'd they get over there?

NORI

They were blown by the wind.

SPARKS

And when they entered an area with normal gravity they fell.

MCGUIRE

My god.

SPARKS

There are dozens missing and at least fifty confirmed dead. We have to fix this.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA/STAGING AREA - DAY

Lara, Sparks, Nori, and McGuire stand in a busy staging area. All around are POLICE CARS and TACTICAL VANS, as well as an ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER with a mounted heavy machine gun and an ARMY TRUCK.

SOLDIERS and POLICE OFFICERS keep a CROWD OF PEOPLE behind barricades. FOUR CDC EIS OFFICERS in white hazmat suits, talk to three EPA INVESTIGATORS in navy jackets with EPA in yellow on the back.

Sparks eyes the Armored Personnel Carrier, and walks over to the DRIVER, a Corporal, and GUNNY, a Gunnery Sergeant, both in an Army Combat Uniform, who are standing next to it. They snap to and salute Sparks, who returns the salute.

SPARKS

At ease. Gunny, Corporal, stand by for tasking.

## EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA/STAGING AREA - DAY

Sparks stands behind the Armored Personnel Carrier, talking to Nori, Gunny, and the Driver. Lara and McGuire look on.

SPARKS

There are still some heavy things on the ground, and this is the heaviest thing we have. But as you get closer to the center...

NORI

Gravity's gonna decrease.

SPARKS

This vehicle's heavy, but you're not, so hold on. The center of the phenomenon is a little over a mile up this street. Gunny's going to destroy whatever's causing it with the fifty-cal. If that doesn't work, he has two M. seventy-two rockets. Ready?

Nori nods.

LARA

Good luck.

McGuire looks at Nori and smiles a tight smile.

SPARKS

Happy hunting, Gunny.

GUNNY

Yes, ma'am.

Nori climbs in through the rear door. Gunny clammers up top and drops in behind the machine gun, and the Driver climbs into the driver's perch. With a ROAR and a belch of exhaust, the APC rolls up the street.

## INT. ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER - DAY

Nori looks around at the interior of the carrier, grabs an ECH helmet from a rack and straps it on.

GUNNY

Takahashi, get up here. You're gonna want to see this.

DRIVER

No shit. This is crazy.

Gunny ducks down a bit in the gun port and Nori climbs up and peers out. On the side of the street, a stream of water from a broken pipe trails up into the sky. Pieces of trash hang in the air. Trash cans teeter, ready to rise toward the sky.

DRIVER (CONT'D)  
On the left. Getting serious, guys.

A dumpster floats a few feet off the ground.

GUNNY  
This vehicle's a lot heavier than that, but we aren't. I can feel it pulling at me. Watch yourself.

Nori nods.

NORI  
Over there.

Nori points to the side of a building, where a MAN'S BODY is pressed against the underside of a building's fire escape. Drops of blood fly up into the sky.

DRIVER  
Half a klick to go.

GUNNY  
Roger. You looking for what could be causing this?

Nori sees a WHITE VAN in the center of the street, its wheels clamped to the ground.

NORI  
The van.

DRIVER  
About a hundred meters out. Gunny, you're up.

The APC slows to a stop, idling. Gunny hands Nori a pair of gunner's ear muffs, then slips his own over his head.

GUNNY  
It's about to get loud. Command Zero One, Gunny Zero Eight, target acquired. Request permission to engage.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA/STAGING AREA - DAY

SPARKS

Gunny Zero Eight, Command Zero One,  
Cleared to engage.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA - DAY

Gunny grips the trigger of the machine gun.

GUNNY

Roger. Tracers'll let us see where  
the rounds are going.

Gunny pulls the trigger. CHOOM!CHOOM!CHOOM!CHOOM!CHOOM!  
The rounds, illuminated by an occasional tracer round, streak  
toward the van, then curve up into the sky and disappear.  
Gunny stops firing.

GUNNY (CONT'D)

Command Zero One, Gunny Zero Eight.  
Negative effects on the target.  
Switching to a rocket. Nori, you're  
gonna need to get inside for this.

Nori ducks inside the APC. Gunny unstraps a rocket from the  
side of the turret, struggling to hold it down, expands the  
launch tube, removes the endcaps, which fly straight up,  
flips up the sights, aims at the van, and presses the  
trigger.

POOM! The rocket leaps from the tube and streaks toward the  
van, only to be sucked far up into the sky, where it explodes  
with a muffled BOOM. Gunny tosses the tube and watches it fly  
straight up and disappear.

GUNNY (CONT'D)

Command Zero One, Gunny Zero Eight.  
Negative effects. Gonna have to do  
this the hard way.

Nori pokes his head up next to Gunny.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA/STAGING AREA - DAY

Lara, and McGuire stand with Sparks, who is talking on a cell  
phone.

SPARKS

Copy all, sir. Out here.  
(to Lara and McGuire)  
We have a new directive.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA - DAY

The APC is on the move, headed toward the van.

GUNNY

We're gonna flatten it. Whatever's doing this, I'll bet it can't do it if it's only half an inch tall.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA/STAGING AREA - DAY

SPARKS

Gunny Zero Eight, Command Zero One. You have a new order. Recover the device.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA - DAY

GUNNY

Command Zero One, Gunny Zero Eight. Roger that.

The APC rumbles toward the van.

GUNNY (CONT'D)

Get us as close to that van as you can.

DRIVER

You got it.

GUNNY

(to Nori)

Grip the tiedowns to make your way to the van. I'll hold your legs, but at some point you'll hook 'em under tiedowns. Go slow. Don't let go.

The Driver maneuvers the APC so it's positioned parallel and only a foot away from the van. The air seems to ripple.

DRIVER

Close as I can get. Guys, I have a bastard of a headache.

NORI

It's the absence of gravity. We might as well be standing on our heads. Only a matter of time before one of us has a stroke.

GUNNY

Then go. My head's killing me, too.  
Shut it down. He'll have an easier  
time holding on.

The Driver shuts off the engine, and the APC rumbles into silence.

Nori climbs from the gunner's port. Gunny holds down his legs as he inches across the top of the APC, gripping the tiedowns.

NORI

Let go of my right foot.

Gunny lets go, and Nori hooks his foot under a tiedown, reaches over the side of the APC, grabs another tiedown, and climbs over the side. His hands, slick with sweat, slip, and he's suddenly standing straight up, held down only by his feet hooked under the tiedowns.

NORI (CONT'D)

YIIIIIIII!

GUNNY

Crouch and pull yourself down!

Nori pulls himself back down, breathing hard, droplets of sweat flying from his face up into the sky. He climbs down the side of the APC, careful to hook his feet under tiedowns, holding on tightly.

GUNNY (CONT'D)

Can you reach the door latch?

NORI

I think so.

Nori reaches out, struggling, and pulls the handle of the van's sliding door, flinging it wide, almost losing his grip.

NORI (CONT'D)

It's open!

Nori looks into the van to see the DEVICE, a featureless, stainless-steel box bolted to the deck of the van.

NORI (CONT'D)

Going in!

Nori climbs further down the side of the APC. He crouches like a frog, his feet hooked under a tiedown and holding onto the same tiedown with his hands.

He grits his teeth and launches himself through the air toward the bottom of the van's open door, and is immediately slammed into the roof of the inside of the van. He groans.

NORI (CONT'D)  
I'm inside!

INT. VAN CARGO AREA - DAY

From the inside ceiling of the van, Nori reaches down to run his hands over the Device, feeling for a way to open it.

NORI  
It's a sealed system.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA/STAGING AREA - DAY

LARA  
Doubt it. You hear a fan?

INT. VAN CARGO AREA - DAY

NORI  
Yeah. There's definitely a motor or a fan inside.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA/STAGING AREA - DAY

LARA  
Then there's a vent somewhere.  
Check under it.

INT. VAN CARGO AREA - DAY

Nori grabs the back of the passenger seat and struggles as he slowly pulls himself down, quickly shooting a hand under the device to anchor himself as his feet slam against the top of the van. Upside down, he grimaces as he feels around for an opening. Slick with sweat, his hand slips, and he again slams into the inside roof of the van.

Out of breath, Nori pants, then stops as he sees a plastic quart bottle of SPORTS DRINK stuck to the ceiling. His eyes go wide, and he grabs the bottle and stuffs it down his collar inside his shirt.

Nori again grabs the back of the passenger seat, grimacing as he pulls himself down, his feet against the van's roof.

When he reaches the bottom of the seat, he shoves a hand underneath and grabs hold.

With his free hand, he pulls the bottle from inside his shirt and frantically unscrews the cap with his teeth. He quickly points the bottle upside down, positions it near the bottom of the Device, and squeezes the bottle hard.

The liquid sprays under the Device and is sucked into the vent. A shower of sparks sprays out from under the Device, and smoke pours out in a cloud.

Nori falls to the van's floor, climbs out the van's door, and looks around.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA - DAY

Nori winces as SEVERAL CARS fall from the sky and CRASH! to earth, their windows exploding with a WHOOSH, showering the street with glass. The Driver looks at Nori and shakes his head, and Gunny gives Nori a somber thumbs up.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL AREA/STAGING AREA - DAY

Nori stands with Lara, Sparks, and McGuire.

SPARKS

This van's coming back with us.

NORI

On the plane?

SPARKS

We're going back on a different plane. A K.C. one-thirty's fueling up now.

INT. LABORATORY - NIGHT

Nori, Lara, Sparks, and McGuire are in the lab. Pieces of the Device are scattered across one of the long, stainless-steel tables.

NORI

This machine has a number of specialized pieces. Some were machined. Others were printed. And the circuitry's incredible.

SPARKS

Rhodes did this? In five days?

MCGUIRE

He has access to sophisticated computers, fast fabrication, and a huge global staff that can keep secrets. And lots of money.

SPARKS

We need to put him in a cage. I'm gonna make a call.

Sparks pulls out her phone and leaves the lab.

NORI

There's something else.

Nori picks up a tablet device and turns it on.

INSERT - TABLET SCREEN

A stream of ALIEN GLYPHS scroll across the screen.

BACK TO SCENE

NORI (CONT'D)

This tablet was part of the device.

LARA

I'm feeling that. Vertigo. Can't say I like it much.

MCGUIRE

Me, too.

NORI

Come look at this.

Nori puts down the tablet and walks over to the giant screen.

NORI (CONT'D)

Computer, wake up.

The large display comes to life, displaying diagonally a long, cool blue, 3-D, rectangular section of the Message that runs off both sides of the screen.

NORI (CONT'D)

Computer, emphasize non-binary characters.

Several short sections light up in bright white.

NORI (CONT'D)

Computer, display only non-binary characters, rotate to face screen, enlarge to fill, three-d. view.

A 3-D section of hundreds of ALIEN GLYPHS, dozens of glyphs deep, fills the center of the screen.

NORI (CONT'D)

They're arranged throughout the message at regular intervals, almost like section headings.

LARA

What do they do?

Nori points to the disassembled pieces of the Device.

NORI

I think they're what made the machine work. They're hacks. They hack reality.

SPARKS

And Rhodes used them to do what he did in Iowa City.

MCGUIRE

If he can use these characters to negate gravity in an area, what else can he do? What other parts of reality are up for grabs?

EXT. CLIFFSIDE MANSION - DAY

Two Dark SUVs ROAR up the private drive and SCREECH to a stop in the driveway of a massive, ranch-style mansion. Eight FBI AGENTS in tactical gear and carrying M4s jump from the van, rush to the door, and immediately break it down.

INT. CLIFFSIDE MANSION - DAY

Rushing inside and fanning out, the FBI Agents find the huge space entirely empty.

EXT. MODERN OFFICE COMPLEX - DAY

Two Dark SUVs come to a sudden stop in front of a sprawling, modern office complex. Eight FBI AGENTS in tactical gear and carrying M4s jump from the van, rush to the main door, and stream into the lobby.

INT. MODERN OFFICE COMPLEX - DAY

Just inside the doors, the FBI Agents stop, looking around. The building is spotlessly clean and completely empty. The FBI Agents shake their heads.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Sparks walks into the lab to see Lara, Nori, and McGuire.

SPARKS

Rhodes is in the wind. His office complex and primary home are cleaned out.

LARA

What about any other homes?

SPARKS

F.B.I.'s on the way.

NORI

But they won't find him, will they, Warren?

MCGUIRE

Probably not. With his resources, he can run forever.

EXT. ORTEGA HOME - NIGHT

Evan and Scott are out in the backyard taking turns looking through Evan's telescope.

SCOTT

There any more beer?

EVAN

Not tonight. Dad's drinking less, so he doesn't lose count anymore, and I'm pretty sure he's onto us.

SCOTT

Can I get something else?

EVAN

Yeah. There's a ginger ale kinda at the back on the left.

SCOTT

Somebody's gotta buy that stuff.

Scott walks off toward the house. Evan repositions his telescope and looks up at the moon.

INSERT - TELESCOPE VIEW

An out-of-focus moon fills the field of view.

BACK TO SCENE

Evan slowly turns the focus wheel.

INSERT - TELESCOPE VIEW

The moon is in sharp focus, striking and beautiful.

BACK TO SCENE

Evan stands up and swivels the telescope to the open sky, then bends down and peers through the eyepiece.

INSERT - TELESCOPE VIEW

The field of stars scrolls by until the bright stars forming the arrow of the Beehive Cluster are in view. The focus adjusts until the stars are sharp and clear. In the center is Evan's star, a bit fainter than the stars surrounding it. It twinkles, then disappears, leaving only blackness.

BACK TO SCENE

EVAN

Not possible.

SCOTT

What?

EVAN

My star. It's gone.