

Approving it, she applied her digital signature - as the person in charge of the Advanced Future Technology test program - and closed the reports section of the electronic device.

Unlike the common perception of how a scientist's office should look, hers was mostly bare with a metal desk, a spare desk and two swivel-chairs the only furniture. When she had been appointed to the job of running the test program, she had insisted on adding a little life and color to the spartan environment and had ordered a heavy ceramic pot with a six-foot palm tree to be hauled into the office.

The janitor had cursed her behind her back - she had better ears than he had expected - but she had been right: the tree did ground her in a way all the electronic equipment in the world couldn't.

On the wall directly opposite her desk, she had put up a colorful Halloween cardboard cutout that her neighbor's son had made for her in Arts & Crafts. It was a cartoonish, maniacally grinning skeleton holding a severed pumpkin-head in its bony hands, and although it was a little over the top, it added a splash of color to the drab office.

Her metal desk was empty save for a coffee mug and a framed picture of her wife Theresa, and she caught herself longing for the good old days where they had everything on paper instead of somewhere in the Cloud.

"One of these days," she mumbled to herself as she emptied her mug of slightly stale coffee, "someone's gonna pull the wrong plug and accidentally delete everything mankind has created since the dawn of time. Then what are we gonna do?"

'Professor Coleman, your presence is requested in Science Laboratory Two,' a metallic and clearly artificial voice said from the intercom device she had in her coat pocket.

Sighing, Harriet dug into her pocket to find it. Once she had pressed OK on the display to acknowledge she had received the message, she got up from her chair and put on her glasses - she was ready for the next test.

A few minutes later, she opened the door to Science Laboratory Two and looked at the row of people who were working at a bank of highly advanced computers to get the test program on the road. Looking at the seven technicians who were all dressed in identical royal blue jumpsuits, she tried to remember their names but got stuck after the third of the seven - they changed so often she had problems keeping up.

"Hmmm," she mumbled, pressing her lips together in a gesture that showed she was disappointed with herself for forgetting the details of the only human aspect surrounding the otherwise impersonal tests they were conducting.

Furrowing her brow while trying to come up with the rest of the names, she walked slowly down the long and narrow room that acted as a control room to the real Science Laboratory Two that was kept behind a ten-inch thick Plastisteel window on the entire left side of the small room.

In moments such as these, she felt every one of her forty-six years - and twenty years at the Institute - weighing on her shoulders, and although she had the excuse of having worked with so many highly skilled yet strangely anonymous scientists, engineers and IT technicians over the years that their names and faces had all mixed into a blur, she was still annoyed with herself.

One of the seven technicians - a young woman with delicate features and a honey-blond ponytail that stood out starkly against her royal blue jumpsuit - turned around and offered the absentminded scientist a smile. "Professor Coleman, we're ready to commence at your word."

"Thank you..." Harriet said, racking her brain to come up with the young woman's name. The honey-blond technician had been one of the four that Harriet couldn't remember the name of, but it finally came to her at the very last moment before the pause would have become embarrassing. "Thank you, Ellen. All right, we-"

"Oh, my name is Helena, Professor Coleman. Helena Bergstrom," the young woman said with a frown clearly etched across her forehead.

The corners of Harriet's mouth twitched slightly at the embarrassing gaffe, and she raised her glasses to pinch the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry, Helena. I don't know where my head is sometimes. So... with my empty brain out of the way, let's get down to business," Harriet said and moved further along the row of technicians.

"Yes, Professor Coleman," Helena said and turned back to her console.

Harriet found her tablet in her pocket and logged herself onto the relevant stream so she could keep track of the most important numbers from the massive amounts of data that would run onto their processing computers once the test would get underway. "All right, just so we're all on the same page, this is Hyperjet test five phase three-B," she said and looked over the rim of her glasses at the seven expectant technicians. "On my mark, commence the standard countdown... mark!"

Moving as one, the technicians activated the programs that initialized the creation of the super-heated plasma fields necessary for the revolutionary new propulsion system they had been working on for close to six months. Though still at an early stage of development, the new system promised to be the biggest leap forward since Wilbur and Orville Wright had attempted to get a rickety contraption off the ground near Kitty Hawk at the start of the Twentieth Century.

'Standard countdown in progress. T minus sixty seconds,' an artificial voice said from the computers.

Harriet moved over to the Plastisteel wall and observed their invention while it was powering up. Once they would reach tests nine and ten, the engine would be advanced enough to start from its internal, supposedly near-unlimited power supply, but since that part was still in development, they had rigged up the engine to receive the initial power from a somewhat crude but highly effective plasma cannon that would shoot the super-heated particles needed to create the spark directly into the so-called combustion chamber.

'T minus forty-five seconds.'

"Miss Bergstrom, what's your status?" Harriet said, looking at the many dials the young blonde was keeping an eye on. Old-fashioned analog dials and instruments had long since gone the way of the dodo and had been replaced by all-digital readouts on flat touch-screens, and Harriet once again found herself longing for the old days where a dial giving the wrong readout could be fixed with a quick tap or two on the glass - now, they'd have to halt the test to get the sensors checked.

"Plasma temperature is progressing as normal, Professor... looking good so far," Helena said, never taking her eyes off the colorful dials in front of her.

"Excellent."

'T minus thirty seconds.'

Harriet looked at the other six technicians who were all doing what Helena Bergstrom was doing - working flat out at keeping a steely eye on the incoming data streams.

'T minus fifteen seconds,' the artificial voice said, and Harriet shuffled back to stand behind the young blonde woman, preferring the company of someone she could actually recall the name of.

'T minus five, four, three, two, one... plasma cannon operational. Ready to proceed.'

"On my mark," Harriet said and stared hard at her tablet, "bring the Hyperjet online... mark."

A deep buzzing sound that slowly changed pitch upwards until it went out of the range available to human ears was heard from the advanced propulsion system that shook slightly in its mountings as it came online.

"And now, on my mark, activate the plasma cannon... mark."

At the Professor's mark, Helena sent the Go command to the cannon and began tapping away at a touch-screen keyboard. "Plasma cannon activated, Professor Coleman."

"Good, Miss Bergstrom."

A colorful, digital bar climbed steadily on the display, going past several blue, green and yellow markers until it stopped to hover just at the center of the yellow zone.

"Temperatures are normal and holding steady," Helena said and moved aside slightly so the Professor could see for herself.

Harriet looked with anticipation at the Hyperjet to see when it would ignite and take over, but so far, the test didn't seem to yield any results. Furrowing her brow, Harriet moved to her left to look at the monitors of the technician next to Helena Bergstrom.

"What's the status on the Hyperjet?" she asked out loud, hoping to mask the fact that the unexpected development had rendered her incapable of remembering any of the other people's names.

"It appears to be unresponsive," one of the male technicians said, tapping away on his virtual keyboard. "Though none of the onboard sensors are currently showing any errors, I theorize the platform has crashed."

"Dammit," Harriet barked and thumped her fist against her hip. "We have to abort. Miss Bergstrom, take the plasma cannon off-line before it gets too hot."

"Yes, Professor Coleman," Helena said and hurriedly sent an Abort command to the cannon that responded immediately by shutting down and entering its cool-off cycle. The colorful bar on her display soon dropped down until it hovered at the lower part of the green zone.

"Professor Coleman, we have a problem with the Hyperjet," the male technician said. "I can now confirm that we have a platform crash, but the combustion chamber went active before the rest, uh... went down. It's still running. The ignition processes are at critical level and are rapidly nearing the outer limits of the-"

Before the technician could finish his statement, and before Harriet could curse violently at the bad news, the Hyperjet inside Science Laboratory Two decided it was time to take center stage. With a loud bang and a cloud of putrid, green smoke, the advanced propulsion system imploded and went into an abrupt meltdown that saw it dumping all its acidiferous fluids onto the arm it was suspended on and further down onto the floor.

A second later, a pale gray pulse emanated from the machine that blasted through the laboratory. The Plastisteel window was strong enough to resist the pulse - though it wobbled badly - but the plasma cannon wasn't and started sending out weird data almost at once.

All sorts of alarms went off on all the computer displays, and the technicians worked feverishly to contain the failed test. Harriet stormed back to Helena's console and grabbed the young woman by the shoulder straps on her jumpsuit. "What's the temperature on the plasma cannon, Helena? Quickly!"

"Climbing... already past critical... rapidly going into dangerous levels, Professor!"

"Dammit... activate the CO2 fire suppressors... maybe they can give the heat a knock."

While Helena sent a string of commands to the fire containment systems, a strange vibration started somewhere deep inside the remains of the ruined Hyperjet.

Harriet noticed the vibration that started small but soon grew into something stronger. Just as she was about to open her mouth to inquire about the temperature, the Hyperjet exploded and sent out a huge, pale gray shockwave strong enough to blast through all four walls of the laboratory, including the ten-inch Plastisteel window.

Acting on instinct alone, Harriet grabbed the young woman she was still holding onto and yanked her sideways off the chair to get her away from the debris that flew at them - a split second later, she realized that it was too late for herself.

The shockwave from the Hyperjet screamed towards her with unstoppable force and hit her squarely in the chest, blowing out a cloud of strange, grayish dust across her body at the point of impact.

She registered that somebody was screaming from somewhere around her; it could have been herself, but she wasn't sure. An eerie sense of being taken apart atom by atom originated in her chest cavity and spread with lightning speed up to her head, down along her torso and out to her limbs.

The shockwave made her spasm violently, and all she had time to do was to send a silent message of love back home to Theresa. Then everything went black.

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Some time later.

Slowly creeping back from the darkness, Harriet knew she hadn't been killed after all - the splitting headache alone was proof enough of that. On top of that annoyance, her nose and upper cheek stung like hell, and she had a persistent, annoying rattle in her lungs when she breathed from the amount of dust around her.

Though in pain from the beating she had taken when the world exploded in her face, she carefully cracked open an eyelid to look around. She found herself on the floor of the control room of Science Laboratory Two. The normally so clean and orderly room had

been reduced to a pile of rubble, crushed chairs and broken computer displays, but - fortunately - there were no casualties, at least none that she could see.

A cloud of dust from the wrecked walls hung heavily in the air and hindered her breathing, so she sat up straight and dug into her pocket to find a handkerchief she could breathe through. The dizziness that swept over her as her world turned right-side-up told her she wasn't quite ready to get back on her feet, so she remained where she was, though the adrenaline and fear coursing around inside her made her move her legs towards her in a sitting fetal position.

The intercom device she'd had in her coat pocket had been destroyed as had her tablet, so she couldn't connect to the outside world to call for help. Remembering that the East Bay City University had a fire department on campus that would surely be just around the corner, she cocked her head and listened for any sounds of activity - but there was nothing there.

Furrowing her brow, she swallowed down her dizziness and climbed to her feet; it took a while, but she finally stood up straight, even if she had to put her hand on the wall of the control room to keep her balance.

A persistent stinging sensation from the bridge of her nose made her touch it. The blood that was transferred onto her fingers proved that not only were her spectacles gone, but the lenses had most likely been crushed in the accident as well. "Dammit," she whispered around a choked-up cough. "They were expensive... dammit!"

"Where the hell is everybody...?" she continued as she looked around the thoroughly devastated control room. There wasn't a single computer display left in one piece, everything had been reduced to sharp fragments of plastic.

A brief look beyond where the Plastisteel window had been proved that both the plasma cannon and the Hyperjet prototype had been obliterated along with the rest of the room they had been in - she was able to see clear through the wall and into Science Laboratory One.

Coughing again, she stumbled across the rubble and stepped out into the corridor between the laboratories. Not a peep was heard from anywhere in the building, and for the briefest of moments, she was terrified that she had gone deaf in the explosion until her hazy mind remembered that she had heard herself speaking quite clearly only seconds before.

"Hello! Hello!" she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Dammit, where is everybody?! Hello! We've had an explosion here! We need help!" - Nothing.

Stumbling down the corridor - formerly white, now covered in debris and dark brown dust - she reached an intercom panel at an intersection and quickly pressed the button to try to connect with anybody. All she got out of it was a crackling static.

"What is going on here...?" she croaked, wiping her soot-stained face with the handkerchief. On the delicate, lacy cloth, the blood mixed with the soot and dust to create a stark reminder of what she had just been through.

"No, I... I gotta get back to my office... I gotta call for help," she mumbled and set off down the next corridor, eventually reaching her office which was still intact save for the Halloween cutout of the grinning skeleton with the severed pumpkin-head that had fallen off the wall.

Reaching behind the door, she grabbed her jacket from the hallstand and dug her hand into the pocket to find her personal phone. After she had taken her wallet from her jacket so she had some identification on her in case she was stopped by the police, she dialed 9-1-1 and waited for the connection to be established.

While she was waiting, she went over to the desk, took the framed photo of her wife and held it to her heart out of sheer relief of having survived the ordeal unharmed - well, apart from her designer spectacles.

A few seconds later, an ice cold shiver ran down her spine when she realized she was unable to access 9-1-1. Staring at the telephone's display in stunned disbelief, a chilling realization that something was very, very wrong crept into her bones.

She had regained most of her equilibrium, so she hurried out of the office and down the corridor to get to the main entrance. Once outside on the parking lot in front of the Zingarelli Institute which was located in the western-most part of campus, she had a perfect view of the usually so bustling central areas.

The frightening sight of no human presence at all gave her a strong jolt and made her heart skip a beat. The persistently popular baseball pitch at the far side of the campus was empty, though there was equipment on the ground like someone had been playing only minutes earlier; the large pathways around the grand old oak tree at the central area were all deserted, and even the streets and parking lots near the various buildings were empty.

"H- how is this possible?" Harriet croaked, clutching her head. "How can they all have been evacuated so quickly? Where are the ambulances... the police? And why wasn't I moved out with them? Couldn't they find me?"

The eerie silence made her teeth clatter and she had to gulp down a growing fear that she had somehow done something terrible by running the test. Groaning through her teeth, she held up her telephone and found 'Home' in the registry.

After a few rings, it went to the humorous message she and Theresa had had a lot of fun recording. The sound of her wife's cheery voice as she introduced them sent another jolt of ice cold terror screaming through her body - what if Theresa was gone as well?

Harriet didn't want to dwell on that awful thought so she hurriedly tried phoning her parents and her sister, but the first call went to an answering service and the second seemed to disappear into the ether.

"No... no, no, no," she groaned, burying her face in her hands when it dawned on her that she could quite possibly be the last remaining human being in the world.

The terrifying thought that everyone she had ever known and loved could be gone made her stomach clench hard, and she had to rush over to the side of the building to vomit into the low bushes next to the short flight of stairs.

Wiping her mouth on the bloody, dirty handkerchief, she stood up straight and tried to make sense of the frightening experience. "How is it possible that our s- simple test could have resulted in this? We were testing a new engine... not some kind of weapon of mass destruction! It doesn't make any sense..."

Harriet staggered around the building and was once again bowled over by the creepy emptiness of the central areas. "Nothing makes sense," she mumbled and set off in a frantic jog to get to the main building across the lawns.

Reaching the majestic stone staircase that led to the main building's entrance, she ran up the seven steps and barged in through the tall, opened door. Inside the lobby, she looked around in a growing panic, finding the two centuries old building as deserted as the areas in front of it.

"Hello!" she bellowed without getting a reply. Taking a deep breath, she held up her hands to amplify her voice and let rip in a resounding "Hello!" that echoed back and forth in the empty lobby and the connecting halls.

"Oh, this isn't happening... how can this happen?! We weren't doing... there wasn't anything we- it doesn't make any sense!" she cried and almost tore tufts out of her hair.

Harriet blew scorching hot, then freezing cold at the frightening prospect of having caused the extermination of the entire human race. She tried to understand the surreal situation, but even her highly skilled, analytical mind couldn't make heads or tails of the madness.

Groaning out loud, she set off in a jog without having a set goal; she simply didn't dare stand still in one place for too long out of fear of the unknown. Her mindless run took her past the empty library where the lines of neatly stacked shelves offered a false notion that everything was still hunky-dory; past the biology hall where even the cages containing the living specimens needed for the lectures were empty, and finally past the geography hall where a map of South America had been pulled down and promptly abandoned.

Harriet tore open the double glass doors to the connecting hallway that led to the cafeteria. On her way down the seemingly endless corridor that had been designed to resemble a classic Roman atrium complete with glass walls and vines creeping along the inner ceiling, she came to a screeching halt when she realized the aviaries that had been set up in an Eden-like oasis at the halfway point were as empty as the rest of the campus. "Oh God... I've killed the animals, too," she croaked, staring wide-eyed at the empty cages.

A burst of dry heaves rushed through her but she didn't have anything solid left to vomit, so all it did was to pump stomach acid up into her gullet. Moaning from the acute onset of heartburn, she stumbled onwards to get to the cafeteria to get something she could rinse her mouth with.

The creepiness increased tenfold once Harriet opened the swinging doors to the cafeteria. Goosebumps riddled her skin and yet another cold shiver ran down her spine as she took in the gruesome sight of the completely deserted eatery.

Since the cafeteria of the East Bay City University was occasionally used for plenum meetings, it was huge with plenty of room for all the students, but now, every single row of chairs was empty - though every single row of tables showed the eerie vacancy had only existed for a handful of minutes.

At every third seat or so, food and beverages had been left untouched, or half-consumed. Other tables had empty tumblers, bottles and cans stacked up on trays next to dishes or bowls that were ready to be taken back to the dishwashers.

"Oh sweet Lord, this is so horrible... where did they all go?" Harriet croaked, taking in the terrifying sight with wide open eyes. She slowly made her way past the empty tables, staring with incomprehension at some of the bowls of the *soup du jour* that were still steaming hot. "There's no blood... no physical trace of them at all... how can hundreds and hundreds of people just disappear like that?!"

Beyond the long, refrigerated counter with the fresh fruit and chilled sodas at the back of the cafeteria, the microwaves and the electrical ovens and stoves had shut themselves off, but pots and pans were in full swing on all of the appliances, preparing the most popular items on their menu.

To keep with the season, the counter was decorated with Halloween colors and stickers; dancing skeletons, carved pumpkins, witches on broomsticks and black cats were everywhere, adding a chilling dimension to the already creepy atmosphere.

Eyeing the small tray with napkins, can mats and eating utensils that had been placed next to the cash register, she briefly considered taking one of the knives and ending her

living nightmare right then and there, but her self-preservation was too strong, even if she was stuck in a desperate, tragic mess.

Instead, she snatched a bottle of mineral water from the refrigerated counter that she quickly unscrewed and used to rid her mouth of the foul aftertaste of her vomiting.

"What could have gone wrong?" she said out loud on her way back through the cafeteria. "I don't get it... we didn't- it must have been the pale gray pulse... the shockwave that came from the Hyperjet... the second one, the big one, but how...? Strong as it was, how could it have caused all this? Oh-

Once again coming to a halt, her eyes fell on a particular table that had been decorated with several colorful festoons in black, brown and two shades of orange, a print-out of a scantily-clad pin-up girl holding a broomstick and wearing a hat fit for a witch, and finally a figurine of a stereotypical Irishman holding a jack-o'-lantern in its hand.

A wrapped present complete with a polka-dotted bow had been placed next to the picture of the pin-up who appeared to be saying *'Wish you were here, Brian! Happy Eighteenth!'*

"Oh... God... it's someone's eighteenth birthday... it's not right to get killed on your birthday... just not right," Harriet croaked, dropping the bottle of mineral water from her numb fingers. Her sickly pale face scrunched up into a mask of terror and tears sprang to her eyes. With a quivering chin, she grabbed a knife that had been put on the table next to the present and clutched it so tightly her knuckles turned white.

Groaning out her extreme distress, she spun around and ran away from the birthday table, out of the cafeteria and back up the atrium.

Blasting outside - and nearly tumbling down the seven stone steps - Harriet came to a panting halt in the middle of one of the neatly groomed lawns and looked around at the desolate wasteland with a face that grew ever paler and ever more horrified.

Tears streamed silently down her cheeks and onto her formerly white lab coat as she took in the unnerving silence; no birds were singing in the proud old oak tree that had resided in the center of the lawn since the campus had been inaugurated in 1822, no students were talking, playing or simply walking to and fro with their books and computers, and no music was heard from any of the windows in the four dormitories built in a vast horseshoe around the lawns - in short, the world had become devoid of human life.

"There aren't even any jet contrails in the sky..." Harriet said as she shuffled across the lawn and past the old oak tree. "I've killed them all... everybody... my family... Theresa... everybody's families and loved ones... they're all gone because of me... because of what I did..."

She came to a halt on the lawn and stared with disbelief at the rear side of the Zingarelli Institute where the nightmare had started. Apart from two broken windows on the ground floor, the exterior of the white building appeared untouched by the explosion that had ripped apart so much of the two-story structure's guts, and only a faint smell of dust and something unidentifiable gave a hint that it had been the scene of an industrial accident.

With her heart hammering in her chest and the bitter taste of gall high in her throat, she raised the knife she had taken from the cafeteria and held it to her left wrist.

To take one last glance at the living nightmare, she turned around slowly to look at the site where she had spent so many days, weeks, years, even decades of her life. She had always been happy there - she had met her wife there in the most awkward of circumstances when she had lost grip on a carton of milk in the cafeteria and had watched it splatter down the shirt of the most gorgeous brunette the world had ever seen - but now it seemed the very place that had given her so much personal and career-related joy had been the center of the greatest tragedy imaginable.

Sighing heavily, Harriet held the cold steel to her wrist. She was fully prepared to take her own life to repent for the reprehensible, mind-blowing crime she had committed, but then she realized just how long it would take her to bleed to death if she slashed her wrists. Instead, she moved the knife up to the side of her neck and held it above the thumping artery. Sever that and death wouldn't take but a minute, she thought morbidly.

Even as she was holding the knife to her neck, a strange shimmer began to vibrate in mid-air above the main building. The shimmer spread rapidly and was soon hovering above the entire grand hall.

"What the hell is that now...?" Harriet mumbled, lowering the knife to stare at the strange phenomenon. The shimmer quickly expanded to fill out the entire horizon, and the ripples that were created from the center of the anomaly seemed to remove the colors from the world.

"What the F...!" Harriet gasped and took an involuntary step backwards as it dawned on her that something nasty was coming towards her - something that seemingly had the power to turn everything into shades of gray. In the few seconds she had been watching, the entire upper floor of the main building had fallen victim to the shimmer and was lost to the rippling effect that reminded her of waves in a pond after someone had thrown a rock into it.

An invisible, colorless wall crept towards her, stripping everything in its wake of its natural color and leaving it as a featureless, gray blob.

Dropping the knife from her unresponsive fingers, Harriet screamed in terror and spun around to run away from the threat, but she had barely turned around when she realized the frightening shimmer was also behind her - everywhere she looked, the natural colors

were eaten by the invisible wall that crept towards her, centering on her, and driving her towards the circular street that ran around the entire campus.

The proud, old oak tree was next; even its mighty branches and crown had to capitulate to the gray wall, and it was finally consumed by the ripples that grew ever wider and stronger.

Soon, the entire world consisted of a fifty by fifty yard square where most everything was in shades of gray - save for Harriet - and the shimmers and ripples formed an impenetrable barrier to the void beyond.

Harriet Coleman stood at the center of the square with her arms wrapped around herself. Rocking back and forth in a state of shock, she was on the brink of a heart attack, and she let out a constant stream of sobs and cries as she stared wide-eyed at the ripples slowly creeping towards her. "The ap- apocalypse... I started the apocalypse... it's all my fault... it's all my fault... it's all my f-"

She didn't have time to complete the sentence before a weird sensation originated at her hands and moved up her arms. She was startled to see her limbs beginning to lose their color, and even clenching and unclenching her fists couldn't bring back their natural hue.

"No..." she croaked, trying to wipe off the grayness that had invaded her body, but it stuck to her no matter how hard she rubbed her hands against her filthy lab coat.

When the ripples reached her, they fell over her like a pack of wolves. Screaming, she was thrown onto the street and once again had her entire being taken apart atom by atom. Once again, it started in her chest cavity before it spread out, moving up to her head, down along her torso and out to her limbs with lightning speed - the only difference was that unlike the first time, it appeared to be moving away from her, ripping her body apart in the process.

As a parting shot, the ripples sent a violent spasm through Harriet's body, but by then, she was past caring.

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The Sweet Hereafter proved less paradisaical than Harriet had expected. Not only could she hear a shrill electronic alarm somewhere in the background and a rhythmical, rattling noise very close to her, the pillow she was on was cold and had a coarse texture very reminiscent of pavement.

'Pavement?' she thought and dared to crack open an eyelid. Her world was still in shades of gray, though she appeared to be resting in a naturally created shadow rather than the aftereffect of the ripples.

"Holy crap, lady! Are you all right?!" a male voice cried just next to Harriet, making her slam both eyes open and look around in a confused daze.

The shadow she was resting in proved to be a huge tire that had driven past mere inches from her face. Gasping in horror, she raised her head and discovered she was fully underneath the front of a truck of some kind - she was stuck between the front tires and directly below the diesel engine that was running noisily.

"Gawd..." she croaked, trying to wiggle away from the engine and the burning hot exhaust pipe that ran only a couple of feet away from where she was lying.

Before she had time to do much, she was joined by a man in a dark blue boiler suit who looked at her with huge, frightened eyes. "Lady... are you all right? Where the hell did you come from? The... the road was clear and... suddenly you just popped out of nowhere!"

"Wh- what? Where am I?" Harriet croaked, wiping her brow with the back of a trembling hand.

"Right in the middle of the Goddamned road, lady!" the man barked, grabbing onto Harriet's lab coat. "Let's get you the hell outta here! There's gonna be fire trucks and all kinds of vehicles goin' past here in a couple-a minutes..." he continued as he pulled Harriet backwards and out of harm's way.

Once she was clear of the truck, she looked around in a daze at the chaos and confusion that reigned on the campus lawns. Hundreds of students were shouting over each other, pointing at something, jumping up and down in agitation or simply speaking excitedly into their telephones. "What... what happened...?" she croaked, staring up at the man who had pulled her to safety.

The garbage man was in his late forties, dressed in black workboots and a dark blue boiler suit. He appeared to be a strong, sturdy man, but right now, his face was pale and drawn. "You askin' me? Shit, lady... I should be askin' you! Where the hell did you come from?!"

"I don't know," Harriet managed to say. The hubbub next to her won out over the garbage man's confusion, and she struggled to her feet and stumbled towards the crowd of students. "But... but they're alive... everyone's alive... they're all alive! Alive!" she shouted in a voice that rapidly grew in intensity.

"Well, of course they're alive," the garbage man growled, dabbing his damp forehead with a handkerchief that was already quite filthy. "They're not the ones who popped out of nowhere right in front of my truck... crazy broad..." - With that, he waved at her in disgust and climbed back up into the cab of the truck.

Harriet clutched her head as she took in the glorious sight of the many students who were running around on the lawns. "They're alive! Alive!" she howled, stretching out her arms like she wanted to pull them all into a big hug.

Only then did she notice the column of smoke and the crackling wall of flames that had engulfed the ground floor of the building housing the Zingarelli Institute. The shrill electronic noise proved to be the campus fire alarm, and she could already hear a massive amounts of sirens approaching from the city.

Her jaw slowly fell down to her chest when she realized that everything she had experienced since the explosion hadn't been real - or at least, had happened in another reality.

To look for solid proof, she hurried between the agitated students and over to the spot near the proud oak tree where she had intended to kill herself - and sure enough, the knife she had taken from the decorated table in the cafeteria was right there, half-buried in the neatly groomed grass.

"Oh... my... Lord," she whispered, staring wide-eyed at the shiny blade that reflected all the natural colors that surrounded it. "Where did I go? I must have been there f- for at least ten minutes, if not longer... but in this reality, the explosion must have just happened... maybe less than two minutes ago... how is it possible? How is any of this possible?" she mumbled, rubbing her soot-stained brow.

By then, the first of the rescue vehicles had arrived, and members of the campus security staff had begun to round up the students to give the emergency crews room to do their job. Sobering, Harriet quickly bent down and retrieved the knife - after all, somebody could be tempted to use it for something it wasn't designed for.

With the knife weighing heavily in her lab coat pocket, she ran across the lawn to find out who was in charge of the rescue operation. The Fire Chief arrived just as she got to the building, so she turned to him and quickly got him up to speed on the number of people inside and where they had been, in case anyone had survived the initial explosion.

Fifteen minutes later, grief fell on Harriet's shoulders like an unwanted cloak when she looked at three zipped body bags containing some of the technicians from Science Laboratory Two. A further three of the people she had been working with had received critical burns and other severe injuries, and only Helena Bergstrom, the honey-blonde woman Harriet had thrown onto the floor when the disaster struck had escaped with light injuries, though she had suffered a dislocated shoulder from hitting the deck rather ungracefully.

Helena was sitting on a stretcher near an ambulance, getting ready to be transported to the local hospital, but there was just enough time for Harriet to run over to the young woman and grab her good hand. "Helena... I'm... I can't..." she said, but the words failed her.

The injured woman looked up and locked eyes with the older professor. She had been given strong painkillers and a sedative, but the mind-numbing pain from her shoulder and from being caught in the middle of a violent blast was still plainly evident on her fair, though presently dirty, face. "Professor Coleman... but you died... I watched you die..."

"I don't know what happened, Helena..." Harriet croaked, squeezing the young blonde's good hand for all it was worth.

"But Professor, you were vaporized right in front of me... you were hit by some sort of beam and you disappeared in a cloud of dust! You were pulverized... the particles were all over me! How can you be here now!?"

Harriet opened her mouth but before she could reply, a paramedic hurried over to the increasingly frantic Helena and gave her another shot of the sedative. Once he took the needle out of the patient's arm, he shot Harriet a scathing glare that made her withdraw - just as well, because there was no way for her to come up with an answer that could explain any of the insane events that had taken place at the Institute.

As Helena was stretchered over to an ambulance and driven away, Harriet dug into her pocket to find her telephone. Staggering out of the way of the firefighters and the paramedics, she found 'Home' in the registry and held the phone to her ear with a hand that trembled slightly.

'It's Theresa,' a female voice said at the other end of the line.

The sound of her wife's voice was enough for Harriet to finally lose it. The terror and the tension streamed out of her in a single burst, and she clapped her free hand over her eyes and let out a choked-up cry that didn't sound human at all. "Oh God, Theresa," she said into the telephone, "I love you... I love you, I love you!"

'I love you too... but what's wrong, baby? Are- are you all right? You sound stra-'

"There's been an explosion... we've had an explosion out here... I'm... I'm fine... but we've lost three... three people are dead."

'I'll be with you in ten minutes!'

"No, please wait! I n- need to go to the campus clinic... I got a few cuts and bruises... I lost my glasses and the lenses cut my nose and cheek..." Harriet croaked, looking across the lawn at the entrance to the clinic where several students were being treated after getting hit by flying debris from the building.

'I know where that is... I'm coming! I'm already out the door!' Theresa said from the other end of the line, and Harriet could hear how their other car's engine was started. *'I can't talk and drive, baby! I'll be with you in ten minutes, max!'*

"Okay... I love you," Harriet croaked and closed the connection.

Panting from the shock that was finally catching up with her, she put her hands on her hips and stared at the ruined building housing the Zingarelli Institute.

On top of the destruction and the fatalities, the endless legal wranglings that loomed in the horizon weighed heavily on her mind - after all, her signature was on every file, every document ever created in connection with the Hyperjet test program. "But no matter how much money we'll lose, we can't allow that to happen again... we have to abandon the whole proj-"

The words got stuck in her throat as she stared wide-eyed at a very familiar pattern of ripples that appeared at the back of the Institute. The air seemed to shimmer around the anomaly, like someone had thrown a rock into a pond.

"No," she croaked, stumbling sideways to get a clearer view of the ripples. "No... not again... not again!" she cried, clutching her head.

Suddenly, one of the windows at the back of the building blew out violently, creating another cacophony of screaming students, ringing fire alarms and shouting firefighters. The cascade of flames that spewed out of the window soon licked up the side of the building, generating so much heat the air around it rippled and became discolored.

When Harriet realized she had only witnessed a natural heat haze, blood rushed from her head and she nearly collapsed, starkly aware that there would be a lot of therapy in her future.

Eight minutes later, the strong hug, the shower of kisses and the frantic declarations of love administered by Theresa meant that everything was right in Harriet's world - and yet, even as she was cocooned by her wife, she couldn't shake the feeling that reality as she knew it was merely a wafer-thin illusion that could be torn to shreds at the blink of an eye...

THE END

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