

# ZACK TAGGART

THE BUCERÍAS ANOMALY



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## The Bucerías Anomaly

The first light appeared just after sunset, when the sky over Bucerías had faded to that deep blue between day and night. Restaurants along the beach were filling up with the usual mix of locals and tourists. Music drifted out across the sand—guitar chords, laughter, the clink of glasses.

Nothing unusual. Nothing worth looking up for.

Then someone did.

A small green light hovered above the shoreline, steady and bright. It didn't glide. It didn't blink. It just stayed there, silent and waiting.

A second light joined it. Blue this time.

A third appeared—red—forming a loose triangle against the darkening sky.

Conversations slowed. Heads tilted up. Phones came out.

The lights shifted positions, but not by drifting. They snapped from one spot to another, like someone had folded the air between them.

"Must be drones." "Fireworks setup?" "Aliens!"

Then the colors merged—squeezed together into a single brilliant column of white light that shot downward toward the beach.

For one impossible second, the night was brighter than noon.

The beam vanished. Darkness rushed back in.

And somewhere, hundreds of kilometers away, a twelve-year-old boy was already watching.

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# CHAPTER 1 - Lights Over The Bay

The first light appeared just after sunset, when the sky over Bucerías had faded to that deep blue color between day and night. Restaurants along the beach were filling up with the usual mix of locals and tourists. Music drifted out across the sand in bursts—guitar chords, laughter, the clink of glasses. Nothing unusual. Nothing worth looking up for.

Then someone did.

A small green light hovered above the shoreline, steady and bright. At first it could have been a drone or a distant plane, except it didn't move like either one. It didn't glide. It didn't blink. It just stayed there, silent and waiting.

A second light joined it. Blue this time.

A third appeared—red—forming a loose triangle against the darkening sky. Conversations slowed. Heads tilted up. Phones came out.

The lights shifted positions, but not by drifting. They snapped from one spot to another, like someone had folded the air between them. A ripple of whispers spread through the growing crowd.

"Must be drones."

"Fireworks setup?"

"Looks like a military test."

"Aliens!"

The lights got brighter. More joined them, layering color upon color until the sky looked filled with floating glass beads. Kids pointed. Tourists filmed. Restaurant servers stepped outside to stare.

Then the colors merged.

Without warning, the cluster squeezed together into a single brilliant column of white light that shot downward toward the beach.

For one impossible second, the night was brighter than noon.

The beam hit an old wooden outhouse standing where the beach grass met the sand - a forgotten structure worn down by salt air and sun. It vanished in a burst of splintered boards and flying sand, the impact cracking through the night like a thunderclap.

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The light disappeared. Darkness rushed back in.

Music from the restaurants stopped. No one moved at first. The only sound was the steady hush of waves rolling onto shore and pulling back again.

Then voices began to rise.

Questions. Shouts. Children crying. Someone laughing nervously.

Far off, faint sirens cut through the quiet. More joined them.

Within moments, the peaceful edge of night gave way to chaos.

Hundreds of kilometers away, no one could hear the sirens.

Zack Taggart leaned closer to the glow of his screen, elbows on his desk, chin resting in one hand. The room around him was dark except for the scattered pools of light from his monitors. Each one showed different information - satellite images, weather readings, pattern overlays shifting in faint colored grids.

In the monitor glow, he looked younger than twelve - slight and a little short for his age, the kind of kid who still hadn't hit his growth spurt and probably wouldn't for a while yet. His wavy brown hair fell across his forehead in the careless way of someone who hadn't thought about it once that day. A faded striped t-shirt, worn comfortable. Nothing about him said spy. That was usually the point.

Zack played the video sequence again.

Three lights. Triangle spacing. They moved in ways that didn't match any normal flight path.

He paused the footage and adjusted the contrast, focusing on the movement patterns. His eyes narrowed slightly, not in confusion, but in concentration.

"That can't be random," he muttered quietly.

A soft chime came from another screen. New data incoming. He barely glanced at it, already reaching for his stylus to sketch trajectory guesses across the digital overlay.

The pattern held.

Zack sat back, folding his arms as he studied the result. Anyone else watching this might see a cool light show. Or coincidence. Or maybe broken drones.

But the timing was too precise. The movements too deliberate. The energy spike too focused.

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He tapped a few keys, flagging the event in his own tracking system.

Ten seconds later, his monitors dimmed automatically as a secure channel forced its way onto his main display. A neutral symbol appeared.

INTERNATIONAL SPY AGENCY

PRIORITY CONTACT REQUEST

Zack allowed himself the smallest hint of a smile.

He accepted. The screen shifted to an animated figure. A calm, professional voice.

"Agent Taggart, we're authorizing deployment for an unusual aerial event detected over Bucerías, Mexico."

Zack nodded once. "I've been watching it for the last six hours."

A brief pause followed - subtle, but noticeable.

"Understood," the voice replied. "Mission details uploading now."

Zack straightened in his chair as data streamed across the display. Seventy-two-hour response window. Unidentified energy phenomenon. Government attention increasing.

He reached for his field kit without hesitation.

"Ready when you are."

Zack stood as the transmission closed, the glow of his monitors fading back to their steady hum. In the dim light, his room looked exactly like what it was - and what it wasn't. Posters of spacecraft and distant galaxies covered the walls, half hidden behind shelves stacked with game cases and paperback books. A controller lay near the edge of the desk, pushed aside to make room for the screens and equipment now flickering with incoming mission data. To anyone else, it might have looked like a typical twelve-year-old's bedroom. To Zack, it was both home and headquarters - the place where homework, high scores, and global mysteries competed for his attention.

Zack crossed to the narrow cabinet beside his desk and slid open the top drawer. Inside, foam inserts held a small collection of field equipment arranged with careful precision - compact, portable, and chosen for flexibility rather than having everything. He scanned the contents for only a moment before making his choices.

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A palm-sized drone, matte black and folded up like a resting insect, went into a side pocket of his pack. Next came his decoding lenses, their lightweight frames catching a flicker of monitor light before he set them carefully into a protective sleeve. He hesitated briefly, then added an echo emitter - useful for different situations - and snapped the compartment closed.

He didn't overpack. Experience had already taught him that guessing at unknown conditions usually meant bringing the wrong tools. The Agency could send more equipment once he figured out what he was dealing with.

Zack slung the compact pack over one shoulder and turned back toward the monitors, where the deployment authorization had shifted into countdown mode. Two minutes. He adjusted the strap, steady and calm, more focused than excited.

"Standing by," he said.

Zack paused at his doorway before starting the deployment sequence. The house beyond was quiet, lit by the soft glow of a hallway nightlight. He stepped out and tapped gently on the open door across the hall.

His mom glanced up from the data projections on her tablet, understanding immediately.

"Where to?"

"Bucerías. The lights everyone's been posting about. Seventy-two hours."

She set the tablet aside, not startled or worried, just listening. Years ago, she'd handled field missions of her own, and the tone of Zack's voice told her what she needed to know.

"Did they clear it with your father?"

"He signed off before they called me."

From the living room came his dad's voice. "Yup. All confirmed. Satellite division flagged it. I approved it thirty minutes ago."

Zack leaned against the doorframe. "I'm packing light for now. I'll request backup if I need it."

His mom studied him for a moment, the professional look fading into something warmer. She watched him the way she always did before a deployment - looking past the wavy hair and the twelve-year-old face to whatever was behind his eyes. "You trust your read on this?"

"Yeah."

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She nodded. "Good. Trust your instincts too. Being smart isn't just about data."

His dad appeared in the hallway, holding out a small device. "Updated tracker. For my peace of mind."

Zack clipped it inside his pack. "Always."

No long speeches. No drama. Just a family used to unusual work.

His mom smiled slightly. "Be careful. And call if you need anything." She got up and gave him a tight hug.

"I will."

Zack stepped back into his room and shut the door, the quiet click sealing off the house behind him. The monitors had shifted into deployment mode, countdown numbers pulsing steadily across the main screen.

00:00:18

He set his pack in place and rolled his shoulders once, steadying his breath. The air felt different when a jump was about to happen - not heavier exactly, just charged, like the moment before a summer storm.

"Agent Taggart," the ISA voice returned through the room's speakers. "Stand by for transport lock."

Zack planted his feet.

A faint shimmer spread across the floor beneath him, almost invisible at first - like looking through water. The edges of the room seemed to soften, colors losing their sharpness as if everything were gently going out of focus.

"Lock confirmed."

The hum came next. Low. Deep. Felt more in his chest than heard in his ears.

Zack focused on a point straight ahead, calm and practiced.

"Deploy."

The shimmer folded inward.

For a fraction of a second, there was no floor, no walls, no ceiling - only motion without direction, weight without gravity, sound without source.

Then everything vanished.

## **Chapter 2-Arrival**

If anyone had been walking along the darker stretch of sand beyond the town lights, they might have noticed something strange.

At first, it would have looked like heat waves - a shimmer in the air where nothing should be shimmering. The warm night breeze moved through the beach grass and palm trees, but this movement ignored the wind completely, bending light inward instead of sideways.

The shimmer tightened.

Sound dipped for a moment, like someone had turned down the volume on the waves. Then the air folded in on itself, collapsing toward a single point no bigger than a doorway.

A low pulse followed - more vibration than noise - and the shape became a human silhouette.

The shimmer released. Sand stirred, then settled. And the night returned to normal.

A twelve year old boy stood where nothing had been seconds before, adjusting the strap of his pack like arriving this way was completely routine.

He paused only long enough to scan the shoreline and distant town lights before stepping forward, leaving the faintest trace of footprints behind him.

Within moments, he blended into the darkness. No light remained. No sound lingered. Only the ocean continued its patient rhythm.

Zack let his eyes adjust fully to the darkness before moving farther up the beach.

The landing coordinates had been accurate - close enough to observe without announcing his arrival - and everything matched what he'd seen from satellite images and video feeds. Warm air, some humidity, low lighting outside the main town. He brushed a trace of sand from his shirt front and headed toward the glow ahead, steps measured but relaxed.

Sirens carried faintly over the surf.

He paused.

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Not emergency chaos - just an organized response. Multiple vehicles, spread out across the shoreline. That suggested containment rather than panic. He relaxed a little.

Zack slid his decoding lenses into place, the lightweight frames settling comfortably as data markers traced edges of movement and light sources in the distance. Nothing too obvious - just enough to sharpen what he could see.

Voices reached him as he got closer to the activity. Conversations layered over one another, some in English, many in rapid Spanish - with tones ranging from excitement to worry.

"...came straight down from the sky..."

"...military testing, I'm telling you..."

"...no way that was drones..."

"...¡te digo que no era un avión!"

"...las luces cambiaban de color..."

Zack slowed, listening without appearing to listen. He didn't need to understand every word to get value from it. Emotion, repetition, and emphasis often revealed as much as the actual words. He mapped the recurring descriptions in his head, filtering out the exaggeration and emotion from what stayed consistent.

Specific details kept coming up.

Color changes. Instant movement. Precise descent. That lined up with his own analysis.

He continued forward, posture relaxed, his attention sharp. Somewhere within the restless energy of the town was the Agency's local contact - no ID, no introduction, and probably already gathering information.

Zack adjusted his pack strap.

No details had been provided. No visual markers or physical descriptions. Just a location and a timeframe. That meant he'd need to observe, identify, and verify before making contact. Which suited him fine.

He moved deeper into the lights.

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Zack slowed down as he walked onto the brighter part of the beachfront. Emergency vehicles were parked down the shore, their red and blue lights spinning across the dark beach. Crowds of people stood in groups, all talking at once about what they'd seen.

He looked around, studying faces and body language.

Most people stared at the shoreline. Some recorded videos on their phones. A few just seemed excited by all the action.

But one boy wasn't doing any of that.

He was leaning against a low railing near a closed food stand, watching the crowd instead of the lights. His eyes moved from person to person, quiet but focused. He looked a few years older than Zack, maybe fifteen or sixteen. Hispanic features. Dark hair, cut close, and lively, intense eyes. Relaxed, but alert.

Watching the watchers.

Zack changed direction slightly, walking closer without making it obvious.

The older boy spoke first, his tone easy and friendly. Just a hint of an accent. "Crazy night to be at the beach, huh?"

Zack stopped next to the railing and looked out at the dark ocean. "Crazy nights are always the interesting ones."

A pause.

"You here because of the lights?" the boy asked.

"Among other things."

The boy nodded, like he was filing that away for later. "Yeah, everyone's got theories. Tourists keep saying aliens. Police aren't talking.

My uncle already thinks they're gonna shut down the whole beach tomorrow." He said it casually, like he was sharing local gossip, but his eyes stayed sharp.

Zack turned to look at him. "What's your theory?"

The boy's mouth quirked into a small smile. "I figured someone would show up asking questions before sunrise."

The silence that followed felt purposeful, like a test.

Zack studied him. No fidgeting. No obvious signals or tech.

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But there was real confidence there, not the fake kind kids sometimes put on. This felt like someone who knew exactly where he stood.

"And have they?" Zack asked.

The boy stuck out his hand. "I'm Miguel."

Zack didn't shake it right away. Instead, he looked at the details. The timing. The relaxed posture. The calm, open expression. No impatience. No defensiveness. Just waiting. People who faked confidence usually overdid it. This didn't feel rehearsed.



"You're waiting for someone," Zack said.

Miguel lowered his hand, still looking friendly. "I was told I might be."

"By who?"

Miguel shrugged. "Someone who doesn't like repeating themselves".

That narrowed things down more than it opened them up.

Zack shifted his weight slightly. "And what exactly did they tell you?"

"To watch what happens. Stay out of the way."

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"And that I'd probably meet someone who thinks he's already figured everything out."

A beat passed. Zack allowed himself a slight smile. "That's a little harsh."

Miguel grinned. "Maybe. But they're usually pretty accurate."

That confirmed it. Zack extended his hand. "Zack."

They shook, quick and firm. Trust wasn't complete. But it was a start.

Miguel nodded toward the police lights farther down the shore. "You got here fast."

"So did you."

"Yeah, well, I live here." Miguel said it matter-of-factly, no bragging. Just the truth.

"Convenient."

Miguel pushed off the railing with an easy motion. "Come on. I'll show you where it happened."

Zack fell into step beside him. "Lead the way."

They hadn't gone far before the change in atmosphere became obvious.

Casual conversation gave way to containment. Portable floodlights washed the beach in harsh white light, and temporary barriers had been set up along the edge of the sand where the walkway met the shore. Police vehicles lined the access points, their lights pulsing in steady rhythm, while uniformed officers directed people back behind the cordoned area.

Miguel slowed slightly.

"That's new," he said quietly. "They moved fast."

Zack's eyes swept the perimeter, noting entry points, how many personnel, and where equipment was placed. The responders moved at a measured pace, keeping conversation to a minimum as they worked. Nothing about the scene felt chaotic. It was organized, methodical. Which meant they were concerned.

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He stepped closer to the barrier line, careful not to draw attention. From this distance, the strike location was visible: a scorched depression in the sand near the grass line, fragments of wood scattered in uneven arcs. The outhouse was gone - not broken apart, but erased with a precision that suggested focused energy rather than an explosion.

Miguel kept his eyes forward. Zack asked, "What have you gathered so far?"

"Lights appeared on four nights. Tonight was the first impact. No debris has been recovered yet. Officials aren't saying much."

Zack nodded slightly.

"Containment without any public explanation usually means uncertainty."

Miguel glanced sideways. "You say that like it's comforting."

"It isn't."

A uniformed officer approached along the barrier line, posture signaling routine enforcement rather than suspicion. Zack stepped back naturally, blending into the edge of the crowd as Miguel shifted with him.

They moved away without being told. There was no reason to test access yet. Observation first.

Zack looked once more toward the lit-up sand.

"Let's circle around," he said. "See if we can get a different angle."



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Miguel nodded. "Follow me."

They slipped back into the shadows beyond the floodlights. Miguel crouched and motioned toward the sand below.

"This was closer to the strike zone earlier," he said. "Before they expanded the perimeter."

Zack knelt beside him, scanning carefully. The ground showed signs of activity - footprints layered over one another, tire marks from emergency vehicles, and patches where the sand had been churned up by responders.

He shifted his focus outward, letting his eyes move rather than lock onto any one spot. Patterns showed up better that way.

Something caught the light.

Near the edge of flattened grass, a cluster of grains reflected a dull shine unlike the surrounding sand. Zack moved closer and brushed away loose particles with careful fingers.

Beneath them, the surface had fused together.

The sand wasn't loose anymore - it had melted into a thin, glassy crust, warped and bubbled like it had been briefly exposed to extreme heat. Tiny ridges shimmered under the floodlights, catching fragments of reflected color.

Miguel leaned in. "I missed that."

Zack traced the edge without touching it directly.

"Fast heat exposure," he said. "Energy hot enough to melt the sand... then cool almost instantly."

Miguel blinked. "So..."

Zack glanced up. "Sand turned into glass."

Miguel nodded once. "That's easier to picture."

Zack sat back slightly, studying the area around them.

"If this formed outside the main impact zone, the energy didn't stay perfectly contained."

Miguel's expression shifted toward worry. "Is that good or bad?"

A small piece of fused sand lay near his feet. Zack picked it up and quickly slipped it into a side pocket on his pack. He slowly stood upright, eyes drifting toward the floodlit center.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"Depends on whether it happens again."

They moved steadily along the shoreline until the glow of floodlights faded behind them. The sounds of radios and engines softened, replaced once again by the natural rhythm of the coast.

The night felt different here. Moonlight stretched across the water in shifting silver patterns, and a gentle breeze stirred the tops of nearby palms, their silhouettes swaying slowly against a sky scattered with stars.

The beach lay mostly undisturbed - just sand, tide, and quiet.

Zack let his pace slow slightly, taking it in.

"Beautiful. Is it always this peaceful here?" he asked.

Miguel glanced toward the horizon, thinking.

"Usually," he said. "That's why people notice when something strange shows up."

He kicked lightly at the sand as they walked.

"Before this week, the only lights anyone talked about were sunsets."

Zack nodded faintly, eyes still on the sky.

"Then we should figure out why that changed."

Miguel smiled. "I was hoping you'd say that."

They continued along the shoreline, the calm night stretching ahead of them.

They walked in silence for a while after that, the sound of the surf filling the space between thoughts. Miguel's timeline settled into Zack's mind alongside his own observations, the details arranging themselves into something that felt less like coincidence and more like a pattern.

Zack slowed slightly.

"So the lights showed up four nights ago," he said. "At first they stayed offshore, didn't interact with anything, and just... hung there. Then they started moving with more purpose. And tonight they escalated."

Miguel nodded. "That's how I've seen it."

Zack stopped walking and turned toward the water, eyes fixed on the horizon.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"That kind of progression usually isn't random," he said. "It's more like testing - gathering information, adjusting behavior, learning from the response."

Miguel frowned a little. "Testing what?"

Zack considered the question before answering.

"Presence. Reactions. What happens to the environment. Tonight's strike might not have been the main goal. Maybe it's a part of something bigger."

The breeze stirred the palms behind them, and for a moment neither spoke.

Miguel shifted his weight. "So what were they trying to find out?"

Zack glanced back toward the distant floodlights.

"How much they could do... and what would happen when they did it."

Miguel exhaled slowly. "That's not comforting."

Zack allowed a faint smile. "No. No it isn't."

He started walking again.

"If the behavior really is following a pattern," he continued, "there's no reason to think it's finished. Escalation tends to continue until the goal is reached or something stops it."

Miguel fell into step beside him. "You think something else is coming."

Zack didn't answer right away. The ocean rolled in a steady rhythm, calm and unchanged.

"For now," he said at last, "we'll just keep watching."

They continued along the shoreline, the quiet stretching ahead of them.

## **Chapter 3 – Breakfast Meeting**

Zack woke to sunlight filtering through the slats of the window blinds, the brightness unfamiliar and almost harsh after spending the previous night working in darkness. For a moment he stayed completely still, letting the sounds of morning settle around him and orient his mind to where he was.

Distant traffic hummed from the main street. Voices drifted upward from somewhere below, speaking rapid Spanish mixed with occasional English. Somewhere nearby, the steady clatter of dishes and silverware suggested a café already busy with breakfast customers.

The safehouse apartment was quiet around him.

The ISA had chosen the location well. The building overlooked a narrow side street just one block beyond the main beachfront traffic area, close enough for rapid access to the investigation zone but anonymous and unremarkable among the surrounding buildings. Nothing about it suggested its true purpose. Just plain, functional furniture, neutral beige walls, and a compact computer workstation tucked neatly against one corner.

He crossed to the window and looked out.

Below, Bucerías had already resumed its normal daytime rhythm. Street vendors were arranging colorful goods beneath shaded market stalls. Pedestrians and tourists moved along the promenade in both directions, some heading to the beach, others toward shops and restaurants. The ocean stretched outward in calm blue water, peaceful and beautiful, showing no sign of the uncertainty it had reflected just hours before.

There were no sirens wailing. No emergency floodlights. No visible disruption to the rhythm of daily life.

He turned back toward the desk where his field pack rested. From a small internal pocket lined with protective foil, he carefully removed the sealed sample sleeve and held it up toward the window light. The fragment of fused sand caught the morning sun perfectly, its warped glassy surface reflecting uneven highlights and tiny rainbow colors trapped in the melted silica.

Physical evidence rarely lied the way human testimony could. He rotated the sample slowly between his fingers, studying it from different angles. Sand melted to glass - not scattered, not random.

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One concentrated spot, like a lens had focused the sun to a single burning point. Extreme heat applied rapidly. Cooling that happened almost instantly. The phenomenon had been deliberate, not accidental. He was sure of it. Energy that focused and controlled didn't happen randomly. Even lightning followed patterns.

A knock sounded at the apartment door, breaking his concentration.

"Breakfast," Miguel's voice called from the hallway. "And possibly some useful conversation if you're interested."

Zack carefully slid the sample back into its protective sleeve and sealed it.

"Coming."

He grabbed his pack and moved toward the door, checking the peephole out of habit before opening it.

Miguel was waiting just outside in the hallway, leaning casually against the wall with two paper bags in his hands. He straightened up as Zack stepped out and locked the door behind him.

"Local recommendation from my aunt's favorite place," Miguel said, handing one of the bags over. "No guarantees on what's inside, but I've never been disappointed."

Zack opened the top of the bag and peeked inside as they walked together toward the stairwell. A wrapped breakfast burrito that was still warm and a small plastic container of fresh cut fruit sat inside, along with a napkin and plastic fork.

"Acceptable probability of quality," Zack said.

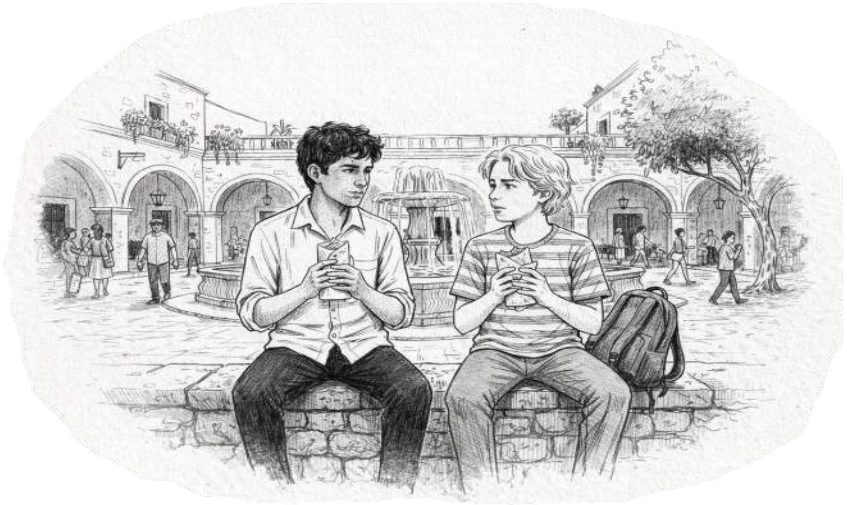
Miguel grinned at the phrasing. "I'll take that as a thank you."

They stepped out into the morning air together. Sunlight was already warming the pavement and carrying the mixed scents of salt air from the ocean and cooking spices from nearby cafés preparing for the day. After a short walk through relatively quiet streets, they settled onto a low concrete wall overlooking a small plaza where they could eat and observe without drawing attention.

The town moved around them in comfortable patterns—vendors setting up their displays, motor scooters buzzing past, distant surf rolling in that steady, endless rhythm that never changed.

Miguel broke the silence between them first.

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"They cleared most of the investigation site before sunrise this morning. I checked on my way here. Still some barriers up, but way fewer officers around. And no public explanation posted yet about what actually happened."

Zack nodded, unwrapping his burrito. "That fits the standard pattern. If authorities don't understand what caused an event, they control the public narrative carefully until they do understand it."

Miguel chewed thoughtfully on a piece of mango. "So basically... keep everyone calm and not asking too many questions until someone in charge figures out the answers."

"Exactly."

Miguel took a bite of his own burrito, then continued. "Also, no new lights were reported anywhere overnight. I checked the local social media and news feeds before coming over. Nothing."

Zack considered that information carefully while eating.

"That could mean the phenomenon follows specific spacing intervals between events. Or it simply hasn't reached whatever its next phase is yet."

Miguel glanced sideways at him. "Can you translate that into regular person language?"

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Zack took another bite, then answered. "It might happen again on a schedule. Like the three nights before last night. Or the lights are waiting for something specific before they return."

Miguel nodded slowly. "Got it. Neither option is particularly comforting."

He leaned back slightly against the wall, studying Zack with open curiosity.

"You seemed pretty certain last night about what that melted sand meant. Like you'd seen it before or something."

Zack wiped his hands carefully with the napkin. "The amount of heat required to fuse silica particles together into glass like that isn't something that happens randomly or accidentally. Something with focused, directed energy caused that transformation. Which suggests intelligence behind it."

Miguel worked through that logic between bites. "So... whatever made those lights and caused the strike probably meant to hit exactly where it hit. It chose that target deliberately."

"Possibly, yes."

They ate in comfortable silence for a moment, watching people pass by on their morning routines.

Miguel studied Zack with an expression that was half impressed, half amused. "You always think that many steps ahead? Like, is your brain just constantly running calculations?"

Zack shrugged lightly. "I try to think at least one step past what's immediately visible. See the pattern underneath the obvious data."

Miguel smiled and shook his head. "I'll stick to asking the questions that help you explain all that thinking. Between the two of us, we might actually get somewhere useful."

Zack gave a small nod of agreement. "That division of labor is efficient."

Miguel finished his breakfast and stood, tossing his empty bag into a nearby trash bin. "Come on then. Let's go see what daylight shows us that we couldn't see in the dark."

Zack rose with him, shouldering his pack. "Agreed."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

They walked toward the shoreline together along streets that felt far more ordinary and peaceful than they had just a few hours earlier. Morning traffic flowed easily through intersections. Café tables were filling up with customers chatting and drinking coffee. Shop owners arranged merchandise displays beneath brightly striped awnings, calling greetings to regular customers passing by.

If not for the occasional police vehicle still parked along certain side roads, nothing about the town would suggest it had experienced anything unusual or dangerous overnight.

Miguel nodded ahead toward the main beach access point. "They've reduced the security perimeter significantly since last night. See?"

Zack scanned the area carefully as they approached. Temporary barriers still marked off a section of sand around the impact site, but far fewer officers remained on duty, and all the portable floodlights had been removed. In full daylight, the investigation scene looked smaller and less dramatic than it had under artificial lighting, but no less significant.

They moved closer, blending naturally into a small handful of curious residents and tourists who'd stopped to look.

The actual impact site was clearly visible now without the harsh lighting obscuring details.

A shallow depression marked the precise strike point, its edges darkened and slightly hardened where extreme heat had altered the sand's composition. Fragments of splintered wood had been carefully gathered into plastic evidence bags sitting nearby, leaving only faint impressions and scorch marks where debris had initially scattered outward. But what immediately caught Zack's attention wasn't the obvious center of the blast. It was the subtle pattern visible in the sand around it.

He crouched slightly, studying the ground beyond the primary impact mark with focused intensity.

Miguel followed his gaze, trying to see whatever Zack was seeing. "What are you looking at specifically?"

"The surface texture of the sand," Zack said quietly. "Look how the appearance and consistency changes noticeably about two meters out from the center point?"

Miguel squinted, leaning forward. "It does look... smoother somehow? Less grainy?"

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Zack nodded. "Likely a heat diffusion zone. The energy released didn't stop abruptly at the moment of impact. It spread outward in decreasing intensity before finally dissipating completely."

Miguel translated that into simpler terms. "So the blast didn't just hit one specific spot and stop. It affected the entire surrounding area too, just less intensely the farther out you go."

"Exactly correct."

Zack shifted his position slightly, scanning farther out from the main site with systematic precision.

The bright morning sunlight revealed subtle irregularities that would have been completely invisible under the harsh artificial lighting last night—tiny reflective patches where sand had partially melted, faint compression lines radiating outward, and unusual disturbances in the beach vegetation growing nearby. He pointed toward a section of seagrass about three meters from the impact center. "That damage pattern wasn't caused by emergency responders walking through."

Miguel leaned closer to look. "You think the blast hit it too?"

"Possibly affected by residual force radiating outward from the primary discharge point. That blast must have generated a lot of heat."

Miguel exhaled softly, standing up and looking around with new appreciation for how much damage had actually occurred. "Every single time you notice something new, this whole situation gets significantly less normal and more concerning."

Zack stood as well. "That tends to happen when investigating anomalies that turn out to be real rather than misidentified natural phenomena."

Miguel glanced back toward the police officers still on duty near the barriers. "So... what do we do now?"

Zack looked across the beach thoughtfully, his mind already working through next steps. "We start looking further out. Whatever hit that spot had to go somewhere after. There'll be traces - there always are."

Miguel nodded with understanding. "Then we start walking and looking for anything unusual."

They moved away from the barrier together, heading along the shoreline once more—not searching randomly or aimlessly, but deliberately and methodically widening their observational field in expanding circles.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

They had moved several hundred meters beyond the main investigation perimeter when Zack's pace slowed noticeably.

Miguel noticed the change immediately. "What is it? Did you see something?"

Zack didn't answer right away. His attention remained fixed on something farther down the shoreline, where a lone figure stood near a cluster of large rocks overlooking the water.

The person wasn't facing the ocean like a tourist would.

They were facing back toward the investigation zone.

Standing completely still. Just watching and observing.

Miguel followed Zack's line of sight. "Probably just a tourist curious about what happened, right?"

Zack shook his head slightly, still watching. "Tourists shift their posture constantly. They check their phones. Take photos. Move around. That guy hasn't moved at all in over a minute. And I'm pretty sure he's local."

Miguel studied the distant silhouette more carefully now. "And... now he's definitely noticed us noticing them."

The figure turned in their direction.

The movement was casual. Controlled. Not panicked but deliberate.

Then the man began walking away, moving steadily along the shoreline in the opposite direction.

Miguel stood up straighter. "That's not suspicious behavior at all."

Zack was already moving forward. "Let's go ask him some questions."

They closed the distance quickly but without running or appearing aggressive. The figure rounded a corner where beach vegetation grew thicker and picked up his walking speed significantly.

By the time Zack and Miguel reached the rocks and pushed through the plants—

Empty shoreline stretched ahead.

No visible person. No footprints clear enough in the mixed sand and rock to track reliably. No obvious path forward showing which direction he'd gone.

Miguel scanned the entire area carefully, turning in a full circle. "Well. That's impressive."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Zack's gaze remained steady and analytical. "That disappearance was intentional and practiced. They knew this terrain well enough to use it."

Miguel folded his arms across his chest. "So you think he was specifically watching the investigation site?"

Zack considered the question. "Possibly."

A pause while he thought it through.

"Or he was watching us."

Miguel exhaled with frustration. "That's an encouraging thought."

Zack turned back toward where the man had come from. "It confirms we're not the only ones interested in understanding what happened here."

Miguel shifted his weight, scanning the rocks and vegetation one more time as if the person might somehow reappear. "Still feels like we just missed finding out something important."

Zack took a few more steps along the shoreline, deliberately letting his attention drift across the ground rather than focusing on the distance ahead. People who watched carefully often forgot to watch where they'd actually been standing.

A faint metallic glint near the base of one of the larger rocks caught his eye. He crouched down immediately.

Half-buried in wind-blown sand lay a small rectangular plastic card.

Miguel stepped closer quickly. "What did you find?"

Zack carefully brushed the sand away and held the card up to examine it properly. A black magnetic strip ran across the back side. No hotel logo or branding visible anywhere. Just a printed number near one corner.

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Miguel raised an eyebrow. "Hotel room key?"

"Could be," Zack replied.

He turned the card slightly in the sunlight, studying it from different angles.

"No location identifier printed anywhere. Intentionally generic design."

Miguel thought about the implications. "So either they accidentally dropped it while running away..."

"...or they deliberately wanted it to be found," Zack finished.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Miguel smiled slightly despite the situation. "I'm starting to really enjoy how optimistic you are about people's intentions."

Zack slipped the card carefully into his pocket. "Hotels represent a finite and searchable dataset. We can identify the source."

Miguel nodded with determination. "Then we start checking every hotel in town if we have to."

Zack stood up, brushing sand from his hands. "Agreed."

They headed back toward the main town area, the mysterious key card now secure in Zack's pocket and representing their first real lead.

As they walked, Zack's mind was already working through the problem systematically.

"Hotel key cards aren't that hard to trace. The encoding usually tells you the system, and the system tells you the hotel. We just need to find which places nearby use this type."

Miguel nodded in acknowledgment—then suddenly turned down a narrow side street they were passing.

Zack stopped walking abruptly. "That's not the direction toward the main hotel and lodging district."

Miguel kept walking without looking back. "It's toward someone who might be able to recognize this specific card immediately."

Zack caught up quickly, frustration starting to slip through his usually controlled demeanor. "We don't even know yet if that person is relevant to the investigation. If we move forward without proper structure and methodology, we're essentially just guessing."

Miguel turned around to face him, visible irritation now showing clearly in his expression. "And if we spend half the entire day building charts and running database searches, we're accomplishing absolutely nothing useful."

"I'm not suggesting unnecessary delay," Zack replied, his voice tightening with tension. "I'm suggesting precision and efficiency."

Miguel crossed his arms defensively. "And I'm suggesting taking action instead of just planning action."

A few pedestrians walking nearby glanced their way as the tension between the two boys rose noticeably.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Zack lowered his voice but not the intensity behind it. "You're prioritizing personal familiarity over statistical probability."

Miguel shot back immediately. "I live here. That counts for something."

That statement landed between them with unexpected weight.

For a long moment neither of them spoke.

Miguel's voice was quieter but firm when he continued. "This town isn't just data points on a map, Zack. It's my town. It's real people. People who know me and will actually talk to me honestly."

Zack's jaw tightened visibly. "And we have limited time we can't afford to waste."

Miguel stepped slightly closer, holding his ground. "Exactly right. Seventy-two hours maximum before this whole thing potentially happens again. That's precisely why I'm moving now instead of planning."

Heavy silence hung between them in the narrow street. Zack exhaled slowly. He looked at Miguel, then down at the key card in his hand.

"Okay," he said finally. "You know this town better than I do. Lead the way."

Miguel blinked, clearly not expecting that.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Zack handed him the key card. "Just keep me in the loop."

Miguel took the card and grinned slightly. "Deal."

They resumed walking together, the immediate tension eased between them, though not entirely gone.

Miguel led Zack away from the brighter tourist avenues and into narrower back streets where the paint on storefront buildings had faded from years of sun and salt air, and where conversations shifted naturally back into Spanish. The air here smelled different; more of frying spices and warm pavement, less of sunscreen and tourist shops. The pace of movement slowed noticeably to something more genuinely local than visitor-focused.

They stopped outside a small cantina wedged tightly between two aging buildings. Its hand-painted sign hung slightly crooked on rusty chains, and inside, daylight filtered through open windows without screens, illuminating scuffed wooden tables and old ceiling fans turning lazily overhead. A couple of older men sat talking quietly in one corner, and a middle-aged woman behind the bar counter gave Miguel a brief nod of recognition.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Zack scanned the interior space quickly, cataloging exits and potential concerns. "Lower profile establishment than I expected."

"Safer for certain kinds of conversations that way," Miguel replied quietly.

They crossed to a corner table in the back where a thin man with restless, constantly moving eyes sat tapping his fingers nervously against an empty glass. He noticed Miguel immediately and straightened up in his chair.

"Raúl," Miguel said by way of greeting.

Miguel sat down across from him. "You look busy."

Raúl gave a strained smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I am always busy. Busy is who I am."

His gaze slid sideways toward Zack, studying him with open suspicion. "You bring children to these places now, Miguel?"

Zack met his eyes evenly and calmly. "I bring questions that need clear answers."

Miguel placed a folded bill on the table between them without ceremony. Raúl's fingers hovered uncertainly above it for a moment before drawing it closer and making it disappear into his pocket.

"What information do you need?" he asked, his voice dropping lower.

Miguel slid the key card across the worn table surface.

Raúl's reaction was immediate—subtle but completely unmistakable to anyone watching carefully. His shoulders tightened. His eyes flicked quickly toward the open windows, the men seated in the corner, then back to the card.

"Where exactly did you acquire this?" His voice had changed, becoming more careful.

"Found it," Zack answered simply and truthfully.

Raúl lowered his voice even further, leaning slightly forward. "That card isn't from any place you can just walk into off the street. It's issued through a private property access network."

Miguel leaned forward to match his posture. "So this isn't a hotel key card. Interesting. What kind of network specifically?"

Raúl hesitated, longer this time, clearly weighing how much to say.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"The kind used by people who very much prefer not to appear on any official records or registries."

Zack remained perfectly still, reading every micro-expression. "Private security contractors?"

Raúl shook his head firmly. "No. Not private." Another significant pause.

"Corporate contractors. And not government operators."

Miguel's expression hardened slightly with understanding. "You mean some kind of mercenaries?"

Raúl didn't answer that question directly. Instead he leaned even closer, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "People connected to that particular facility aren't tourists on vacation, and they aren't legitimate business travelers. They move specialized equipment in unmarked vehicles. They restrict access to entire buildings. And when someone local starts asking the wrong questions in the wrong places—"

He stopped abruptly.

Zack waited patiently, giving him space to continue. Raúl swallowed visibly, his nervousness now obvious. "Maybe they disappear from the conversation." Silence settled heavily over their small table.

Miguel spoke very carefully. "You're telling us that key card leads somewhere genuinely dangerous."

Raúl met his gaze directly. "I'm telling you it leads somewhere you were never meant to notice or investigate."

Zack finally asked the essential question: "Specific location?"

Raúl slowly slid the key card back across the table toward them. "Industrial district near the marina warehouses. Unmarked building, no signage. That's all I know, and that's already more than I should have told you."

Miguel nodded with genuine gratitude. "Thank you, Raúl. Seriously."

Raúl leaned back in his chair, the conversation clearly over. "Just be extremely careful where you walk and who sees you walking there."

Zack rose from his seat smoothly. "That's precisely why we observe first."

Raúl watched them head toward the door, his expression dark.

"You may want to observe from very far away," he called after them quietly.

## **Chapter 4 – The Monument**

They stepped back out into the bright daylight, the cantina door closing quietly behind them with a soft creak of old hinges. The street felt significantly brighter than before—almost harsh after the dim interior—and louder too. Motor scooters passed by at intervals, conversations drifted through open windows above them, and ordinary life continued moving forward as though nothing unusual or concerning had just been said inside. They walked together in silence for several long moments, both processing what Raúl had told them.

Zack finally spoke, breaking the quiet between them.

"That information... fundamentally changes our understanding of the situation."

Miguel glanced over at him. "How exactly?"

Zack searched for the right way to explain what his mind was already working through.

"If Raúl's assessment is accurate, and this key card actually links to corporate contractors operating completely off any official records, then we're not just investigating a strange atmospheric phenomenon anymore. We're potentially dealing with an organized group that's actively managing specialized equipment, controlling access to facilities, and deliberately maintaining operational invisibility."

Miguel nodded slowly, understanding the implications. "So this is bigger than just curious locals noticing weird lights."

"Significantly bigger. And possibly structured and resourced well enough that we absolutely shouldn't assume they'll react predictably to being investigated."

Zack slowed his walking pace slightly, visible unease showing in his posture now.

"In situations like this, standard ISA operational protocol usually recommends reassessing the risk profile before proceeding forward. I should probably send a status update to my handler. At minimum, to establish situational awareness."

Miguel stopped walking completely and turned to face him.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"You're seriously thinking about checking in with headquarters right now."  
It wasn't quite a question.

Zack met his eyes directly. "I'm thinking that we don't fully understand who we're potentially approaching, what resources they control, or how they typically respond to outside scrutiny. Moving forward without updating command and getting guidance feels... premature. Potentially reckless."

Miguel crossed his arms across his chest, his body language shifting to something more defensive.

"Or maybe it's just cautious to the point of being paralyzed."

"Caution isn't wasteful," Zack replied, his voice tightening slightly with frustration. "It's preventative. It keeps operatives alive."

Miguel countered immediately: "And unnecessary delay isn't harmless either. We have an actual lead right now. A real location. If we wait around asking permission and filling out reports, the lead goes completely cold and we lose our window."

Zack exhaled slowly, clearly weighing competing priorities in his mind.

"That's the operational tradeoff," he admitted. "Risk of direct engagement versus risk of actionable information loss."

Miguel stepped closer, his voice firm. "Seventy-two hours, Zack. That's all we have before this potentially happens again. We can't afford to waste half of that waiting for authorization."

Zack looked toward the distant marina district, visible in the distance where industrial buildings rose against the sky.

Heavy silence stretched between them.

"...We go," he said finally. "But strict observation protocols only. No direct interaction, no exposure to potential surveillance, no engagement."

Miguel relaxed visibly. "That works. I can agree to that."

Zack added quickly: "And I transmit a brief status update while we're moving toward the location. Non-negotiable."

Miguel actually smirked slightly. "Look at us. Finding compromise."

Zack nodded once. "A necessary one."

They turned together and headed toward the waterfront district.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

The streets gradually widened as they approached the marina area, the entire atmosphere shifting noticeably from residential rhythm to something more industrial and mechanical. Small shops and cafés gave way to storage yards with high fences and warehouse facades, their concrete surfaces sun-bleached and deliberately uninviting.

Miguel led the way confidently along a service road that ran parallel to the water, clearly familiar with this part of town. Zack noticed the environmental difference immediately.

The sounds here were much harsher; metal striking metal with sharp clangs, truck engines idling constantly, forklifts whining and beeping in the distance. The salt air mixed unpleasantly with diesel fuel and heated asphalt, creating a smell that clung uncomfortably in the back of his throat. Far fewer pedestrians moved through this area compared to the tourist zones, and the people who did walk here moved with clear purpose and destination.

He adjusted his pack strap nervously.

"I don't like how exposed this entire space feels," he said quietly, scanning constantly. "There's very little natural cover available, and the sight lines extend much farther than I'd prefer for covert observation."

Miguel nodded in agreement. "Yeah, industrial districts aren't really built for people to linger casually."

Zack continued scanning building facades systematically, noting window placement, entry and exit points, visible security cameras, patterns of vehicle activity. Nothing overtly alarming presented itself immediately, yet the complete absence of normal civilian activity was itself noticeable and concerning.

Too few casual observers or workers visible. Too many closed doors and shuttered windows. Too much controlled, purposeful movement. He slowed his pace slightly, tension building.

"Does this environment match your previous experience of this area?"

Miguel shook his head. "Mostly, yeah. But it feels quieter than usual. Less activity. That's... not normal for this time of day."

That observation definitely didn't ease Zack's growing concern.

They turned down a narrower access lane that ran closer to the actual waterline. Ahead of them, industrial structures sat more isolated and spread out; less visible signage, fewer identifying markers.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Shipping containers were stacked in uneven rows that cast long, dark shadows across cracked pavement.

Miguel pointed ahead carefully. "Raúl said the building was unmarked. That one maybe?"

Zack followed his gesture with his eyes. One building stood noticeably apart from the surrounding structures. Plain concrete and brick construction with no architectural features. Absolutely no business identifiers or company names visible anywhere. The windows were covered internally with something rather than simply boarded over from outside. A single vehicle sat parked nearby, newer model, but with no company markings or logos.

Zack felt the tension settle deeper and heavier in his chest.

"Let's slow our approach significantly."

Miguel immediately matched his reduced pace.

Zack lowered his voice to barely above a whisper. "If this location is actively controlled by the people Raúl described, we have to assume surveillance presence before we achieve any visual confirmation."

Miguel nodded seriously. "Observe first. No stupid moves."

They stopped well short of the lane's actual end, carefully positioning themselves where stacked shipping containers provided at least partial concealment from direct view.

Zack studied the unmarked building with intense focus.

Something about the structure felt deliberately intentional - not abandoned and derelict, not obviously active and busy; simply present in a way that suggested purpose.

Waiting. He swallowed lightly, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Too many unknown variables here," he said quietly. "We maintain significant distance and limited exposure time."

Miguel glanced sideways at him. "You getting nervous?"

Zack didn't look away from the structure for even a second.

"...Appropriately attentive to potential threats."

Zack and Miguel remained partially concealed behind the stacked shipping containers, watching the unmarked building in complete silence for several long minutes.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Nothing moved. No sounds came from inside. No visible activity. Then, without warning, the building's side door opened. A man stepped out into the sunlight.

Zack recognized him instantly. The same individual they'd seen on the shoreline earlier. The same careful posture, the same measured awareness of his surroundings. He paused just outside the doorway, scanning the area methodically before turning and walking purposefully around the corner.



Miguel whispered urgently: "That's definitely him. Same guy."

They followed him out into the marina district, just a short distance behind. He moved like someone who knew every corner of the area without having to think about it.

Suddenly the man stopped abruptly and turned around. Not panicked. Not surprised. Just done being followed.

"¿Qué quieren?" His voice was flat and unhurried. What do you want?

His gaze moved deliberately between them - lingering noticeably longer on Zack, clearly measuring.

Miguel raised both hands slightly in a universal gesture of peace. "We're not looking for trouble. Just want to talk."

Miguel shifted his tone and switched smoothly into Spanish.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"Solo queremos hablar." (We just want to talk.)

The man said nothing. But his posture shifted slightly. Listening now.

Miguel tried again, speaking slower this time and with more careful word choice.

"Creo que tenemos algo en común." (I think we may have something in common.)

That earned a visible reaction—subtle, cautious, but definitely there.

Miguel continued, his voice becoming more personal: "Mi familia tiene raíces en el oeste. Siempre nos dijeron que veníamos de gente que caminaba esas tierras antes de que tuvieran otros nombres." (My family has roots in the west. We were always told we came from people who walked those lands before they had other names.)

A meaningful pause. Then Miguel added quietly: "Tal vez Wixárika." (Perhaps Wixárika.)

The man's entire posture changed—not relaxed exactly, but definitely more attentive now. More willing to engage.

He answered carefully in Spanish: "Ese no es un nombre que muchos usan sin razón." (That isn't a name many people use without good reason.)

Miguel nodded with respect. "No lo uso a la ligera." (I don't use it lightly.)

The tension in the narrow alley eased noticeably, though didn't disappear entirely.

The man spoke again, still cautious: "¿Por qué me siguen?" (Why are you following me?)

Miguel gestured back toward the marina building visible in the distance. "We saw you watching the investigation site last night. And again this morning at the beach."

The man studied them both for a long moment, then asked directly: "¿Y qué creen que vieron?" (And what exactly do you think you saw?)

Zack spoke plainly in English: "Something that doesn't behave remotely like any natural atmospheric event."

Miguel quickly relayed the statement in Spanish.

The man considered that response carefully, weighing how much to say.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

His eyes flicked briefly toward the marina buildings before returning to focus on them.

"I work the commercial docks here," he said, switching to accented but clear English. "Last week we unloaded specialized equipment that didn't belong to any shipping company I recognized. No manifests that I or any other workers were allowed to see."

He hesitated, clearly debating with himself.

"They issued us temporary access cards for that specific building. Said it was just for the week. But the power consumption draw from inside..." He shook his head. "It wasn't normal industrial usage. Way too high for regular warehouse operations."

Miguel translated key points quickly for Zack even though the man was speaking English now.

The man—whose name they still didn't know—continued, his voice dropping even lower.

"And the night when those lights came back over the water... the backup generators in that building were already running at full capacity long before anyone officially admitted anything unusual was happening."

Then, after a significant pause: "The lights you're investigating didn't actually begin this week."

Zack leaned forward slightly, his full attention engaged. "What do you mean?"

The man looked at them both, seeming to make a final decision about whether to trust them.

"They've been seen before. Many times before. Long before. There are stories passed down in families who've lived on this coast for generations."

Miguel glanced at Zack with raised eyebrows.

The man continued: "Y marcas... en piedra." (And markings... carved in stone.)

Miguel translated quietly for Zack's benefit. "He's saying something was carved. Stone markers. He thinks they describe the lights somehow."

Now Zack's analytical attention fully locked in.

The man hesitated one final time, then said clearly: "I am Óscar. If you genuinely want to understand what's happening here... I can show you something relevant."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Miguel looked questioningly at Zack.

Zack nodded immediately. "We accept. Thank you."

Óscar led them away from the industrial district and toward quieter residential streets that curved gradually inland from the water. The walking pace was relaxed and unhurried now, and the defensive tension that had defined their first tense encounter softened into something more like mutual observation.

Zack walked beside Miguel, watching Óscar as they moved. He was solidly built, the kind of man who'd spent years doing physical work rather than thinking about it - dark hair falling past his collar, a thick mustache, and a face that looked like it had seen a lot of weather and never complained.

He watched the developing dynamic between the two as they spoke intermittently in Spanish. Even when he couldn't follow every specific word being exchanged, the overall cadence and tone told him enough.

Questions were becoming progressively less guarded, answers less clipped and defensive.

After several minutes of walking, Óscar glanced toward Zack.

In English: "You understand some Spanish?"

Zack shook his head slightly. "No. Tone and body language more than actual vocabulary."

Óscar nodded with what might have been approval. "That is sometimes enough to communicate. But I will try to speak primarily in English for clarity."

They continued along a path that gradually shifted from paved streets to compacted dirt, passing low stone walls and increasingly dense vegetation that grew thicker the farther they moved from the developed town center. The air felt noticeably quieter here; less mechanical noise, more natural ambient sound, punctuated by birds calling and wind moving gently through leaves.

Miguel gestured ahead at the changing landscape. "You've lived in Bucerías your entire life?"

Óscar answered as he walked steadily forward. "Yes. All of my life. I work wherever work exists and pays. But I also watch the coast carefully. My grandparents taught me to notice patterns and changes that others typically ignore."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Zack's attention sharpened immediately at that statement. "You observed the lights during previous occurrences before the recent incidents?"

Óscar considered his wording carefully before responding. "I noticed changes in their behavior. Their frequency. Their patterns of appearance."

Zack exchanged a significant glance with Miguel.

"That aligns closely with our own observations and concerns."

Óscar gave a faint smile. "You don't talk like a kid who's just curious."

Miguel laughed softly. "Yeah, that's definitely him. Very analytical."

Zack accepted the characterization without comment.

They rounded a final bend where the trees and brush parted to reveal a weathered stone monument set slightly apart from the surrounding trees. The stone stood about seven feet high and four feet wide at its base.

Its rough surface bore carved markings that had been softened significantly by time but remained clearly visible beneath streaks of age, weather damage, and patches of lichen growth.

The markings seemed to be only on one side. The faces of the other three sides were completely smooth.

Óscar slowed his pace. "This is what I mentioned. What I wanted to show you."

Zack approached carefully, his eyes immediately beginning to scan the shapes and patterns carved into the stone. Miguel folded his arms and tilted his head. "Looks significantly older than everything else around here."

Óscar nodded. "It is. Much older."

Zack crouched down closer to the monument, his natural curiosity fully engaged now.

"Symbolic encoding," he murmured, almost to himself. "Non-random placement and organization."

Miguel glanced down at him. "Want to translate that into regular human language?"

Zack traced the air carefully just above one of the markings without actually touching the stone. "These symbols weren't carved casually or decoratively."

Óscar watched him work, his expression thoughtful. "That is exactly what my grandparents always said about them."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Zack leaned even closer to the weathered stone surface, studying the ancient carvings with intense focus. The markings definitely weren't merely decorative art, they were deliberately arranged in clear patterns. Repeated geometric shapes. Lines connecting different sections. Groupings that strongly suggested they contained encoded meaning.

"Fascinating," he said quietly. "But I can't interpret the specific meaning yet. Not without more context or reference material."

Miguel crouched down beside him. "So... we know these carvings matter somehow. We just don't know exactly how they matter."

"Correct assessment."

Óscar stepped closer to them both. "My grandparents told me stories about these carvings when I was young," he explained. "Not the exact meaning of each individual symbol."

"That knowledge was lost generations ago. But they did explain what the monument itself is believed to record."

Zack looked up with immediate interest. "What were you told?"

"That people who lived here long ago saw strange lights appearing over the ocean. Lights that came and went following patterns. They carved these symbols to create a permanent record of what they had witnessed."

Miguel frowned slightly in concentration. "So you're saying this isn't just ancient art or decoration. It's literally a historical record. Like a written document."

"Yes. Exactly that."

Óscar pointed toward one particular cluster of symbols. "According to the stories, they described lights that moved in deliberate patterns. Changed direction intentionally. Appeared more than once in the same locations."

Zack nodded slowly. "That behavior aligns very closely with current observations."

Óscar indicated another section of the carved stone. "And the stories also said that sometimes the lights came much closer—actually touched the ground in specific places—but did not destroy everything around them indiscriminately."

Miguel glanced at Zack meaningfully. "Like the focused strike last night that hit the outhouse."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"Possibly comparable in nature," Zack agreed.

Óscar stepped back slightly. "I cannot prove any direct connection between these ancient carvings and current events. I only know the stories I was told, and what I have personally witnessed recently felt disturbingly familiar to those old accounts."

Zack returned his full attention to the monument.

"So the monument itself doesn't explain what causes the lights or what they are..."

"...but it strongly suggests that people encountered something very similar before," Miguel finished the thought.

Zack nodded. "That's extremely useful contextual information."

Zack shifted his position, studying the carvings from several steps back rather than up close.

Sometimes meaningful patterns revealed themselves better when viewed as a complete whole instead of individual details.

He tilted his head, noticing something.

"Wait a moment."

Miguel glanced over. "What did you see?"

Zack traced the air along several connected symbols, his finger moving in deliberate arcs. "These aren't just individual random markings scattered across the surface. Look carefully at how they're specifically arranged in relation to each other."

Miguel leaned in to follow his gesture. "I see... shapes that repeat? Multiple times?"

"Yes. And consistent spacing between the repetitions."

Zack pointed more precisely. "This spiral symbol appears exactly three times across the monument. And the distance between each occurrence is nearly identical. And look. These connecting lines link them together at consistent geometric angles."

Miguel squinted at the stone. "So they're organized according to some system."

"More significant than simple organization," Zack said, his analytical mind clearly working through possibilities. "This pattern resembles structured information encoding."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Miguel looked at him directly. "Can you explain that in words I'll actually understand?"

Zack stood up and gestured more broadly at the entire monument. "If someone wanted to record complex information permanently without access to written language as we understand it, geometry would be one of the most reliable systems available. Angles, repetition, spatial position; those mathematical relationships are transferable across cultures and time periods."

Óscar watched with clear curiosity. "You think it contains specific instructions?"

"Possibly," Zack replied carefully. "Or coordinate information. Or sequence data describing patterns. The intentional placement strongly suggests purpose beyond simple storytelling or decoration."

He crouched down again to examine a specific section more closely.

"The mathematical precision here is remarkable for something carved this long ago."

Miguel crossed his arms, a slight smile appearing. "So basically ancient people created what amounts to a code."

Zack shook his head slightly in correction. "I wouldn't definitely call it code yet—that's an assumption. But it definitely behaves like encoded information according to recognizable principles."

He pointed to a section where multiple carved lines converged at a central point. "This particular cluster repeats in exact proportion three different times across the monument. That kind of mathematical precision is very rarely decorative or accidental."

Miguel's smile widened. "Okay, now this is getting genuinely interesting."

Zack nodded in agreement. "I'll need to document everything properly with detailed photographs."

Zack pulled a small high-resolution camera from his field pack and began systematically photographing the carvings from multiple carefully chosen angles; wide establishing shots first to show overall context, then progressively closer captures of specific repeating shapes, intersecting lines, and geometric relationships.

"Documentation in progress," he muttered, mostly to himself.

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Miguel stepped back several paces to give him adequate working space. "Just tell me if those symbols start rearranging themselves or glowing mysteriously."

Zack ignored the comment and continued his methodical work.

Óscar stood nearby, casually scanning their surroundings more out of ingrained habit than any specific concern.

Zack lifted the camera one final time, capturing a detailed close-up of the most intricate symbol grouping.

Then—

Voices drifted clearly through the brush and trees.

Close. Very close. Speaking English.

"...this should be the marker point according to the coordinates..."

"...we need to cross-reference it carefully with last night's energy dispersal data..."

Óscar reacted immediately with practiced efficiency, stepping back and motioning urgently toward a natural cluster of rocks and dense brush that provided concealment.

Miguel and Zack followed without any hesitation, crouching low and forcing their bodies to remain completely still and silent.

Long moments passed.

Then two men emerged along the dirt path, walking with clear purpose.

The first was tall and broad-shouldered, moving with the quiet confidence of someone who'd spent years in physically demanding work. A short salt-and-pepper beard framed his strong jaw, trimmed close and professional, and his eyes scanned the surrounding area in practiced, efficient sweeps that missed nothing.

The second man followed precisely one step behind—slightly shorter in stature, balding on top, wearing thick frameless glasses that wrapped protectively around his eyes like safety goggles. He carried a compact equipment case with careful attention and moved with the focused intent of someone on a specific mission.

They stopped directly beside the ancient monument.

Zack leaned forward just barely enough to hear their conversation clearly.

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The tall man spoke first: "Marker location is confirmed. The GPS coordinates match the predicted site."

The glasses-wearing man crouched down and adjusted some kind of handheld scanning device he'd pulled from his equipment case. "Signal variance data matches our impact dispersion model almost perfectly."

Miguel's eyes flicked sideways toward Zack, silently noting the significance.

The tall man walked slowly around the entire stone monument, examining it from multiple angles. "Document absolutely everything visible. Dr. Alvarez will want comprehensive comparison data for analysis."

The name registered instantly in Zack's mind. Where had he heard that name? He carefully filed it away as significant.

The man with glasses was now scanning the carved symbols with his device.

"These geometric alignments are considerably closer to our theoretical predictions than we expected."

The tall man replied calmly: "Whether that represents coincidence or ancient observation capability doesn't matter for our immediate purposes. Just record everything accurately."

A camera shutter clicked multiple times in rapid succession. Equipment hummed and beeped briefly.

After several minutes of methodical work, the glasses-wearing man packed up his gear. "I'll compile the complete dataset and run a comparison analysis tonight."

The tall man nodded once. "Good. We report our findings to the doctor and proceed according to standard protocol from there."

They departed back along the path they'd come from, their voices gradually fading into silence and distance.

Complete quiet returned to the area.

Miguel finally exhaled the breath he'd been holding. "Well. That was educational."

Zack emerged carefully from their concealment, brushing leaves off his clothes. "That definitively confirms external analytical involvement by organized researchers."

Miguel translated the statement to himself mentally: "So they're actively studying the lights too. Probably have been for a while."

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Zack nodded. "And apparently investigating the monument's potential relevance to current phenomena."

Óscar stepped out beside them, his expression thoughtful. "I have heard that particular name mentioned before in town."

Zack turned to look at him. "Dr. Alvarez?"

Óscar nodded. "Yes. Several times over the past few weeks."

Zack looked back thoughtfully toward the path where the two men had disappeared.

"Then that name is clearly our next investigative lead."

Miguel pulled out his phone and made a quick note. "Dr. Alvarez. Got it."

The investigation had just gotten significantly more complicated.

## Chapter 5 - The Watchers Are Watched

They stayed completely quiet for several long seconds after the two researchers disappeared down the path and their voices faded entirely into the distance.

Zack looked back at the ancient monument one final time, his eyes tracing the carved patterns they'd just spent so much time studying.

"So we've got at least two completely separate groups actively studying this phenomenon," he said thoughtfully. "Óscar noticing patterns and preserving traditional knowledge... and those two men running sophisticated electronic scans with expensive equipment."

Miguel nodded slowly. "And from what we just observed, neither group seems to have any idea the other one exists."

Óscar added quietly, his voice carrying the weight of experience, "Some people observe to understand. Others try to control what they find."

Zack adjusted his pack strap, settling the weight more comfortably across his shoulder. "Either way, we learned something significant. The carvings aren't random decoration or coincidence—and someone with substantial funding and resources thinks they matter enough to investigate scientifically."

Miguel smirked slightly. "That's a pretty massive upgrade from 'weird lights over the beach.'"

They began walking back together toward the town center, the late afternoon sunlight stretching long shadows across the dirt path. The mood among the three of them had shifted noticeably—less immediate excitement about the discovery, more quiet thinking and processing.

After they'd walked for several minutes in comfortable silence, Miguel's pace slowed slightly.

Zack noticed the change immediately. "What is it?"

Miguel kept his voice carefully low and controlled. "Don't turn around right away. Don't make it obvious."

Zack maintained his forward gaze, trusting Miguel's street awareness. "Understood."

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Miguel continued in that same quiet tone: "We've got company. Across the street behind us, maybe twenty meters back."

Zack's peripheral vision caught movement. Two men standing near a parked black SUV. Their attention wasn't remotely subtle or casual. One had lifted a phone slightly, possibly taking photos. The other was watching the three of them with clear, focused interest.

Zack felt his stomach tighten with tension. "Are they just curious observers," he asked quietly, "or professionally interested?"

Miguel's answer was immediate and certain: "Professionally interested. Definitely."

Óscar's tone hardened noticeably. "I've seen those two asking questions around town over the past few days. At the marina also. Showing photos to people. Offering money for information."

Zack took a slow, deliberate breath to keep his voice steady. "Okay... then we don't give them a clear, straight path to follow us."

Miguel grinned faintly despite the situation. "Now you're finally catching on to how this works."

Zack nodded subtly toward a narrow side street coming up on their right. "That direction. Stay casual. Don't change pace suddenly."

They turned together as naturally as if they'd planned to go that way all along, disappearing into the network of narrow residential alleys that branched off the main street. Behind them, after a brief pause, the sound of footsteps began to follow.

They maintained their casual walking pace as they turned down the side street, acting like three people with a normal destination. Miguel angled slightly ahead of the group, his familiarity with the town showing as he scanned upcoming intersections and passages.

"Two people behind us," he murmured quietly. "Still there."

Zack resisted the urge to look back. "Distance?"

"Maybe fifteen meters now. Closing slowly but deliberately."

Óscar gestured ahead toward a narrow passage squeezed between two aging buildings. "This way. I know where it goes."

They slipped into the shadowed corridor, their footsteps echoing briefly off the close walls before the tight space opened unexpectedly into a small

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service yard cluttered with commercial storage bins, stacked wooden pallets, and discarded equipment.

Miguel paused, listening intently. Footsteps still coming. "They're definitely following us in."

Zack nodded and quickly reached into his pack, his fingers finding what he needed. "I have something that might help."

He pulled out a device roughly the size of his thumb, a matte black cylinder with a small activation switch on one end. He pressed the switch carefully, a tiny green LED blinking once to confirm activation, then placed it strategically behind a wooden crate near the entrance they'd just come through.

Miguel raised an eyebrow with curiosity. "What exactly does that thing do?"

Zack answered while already moving toward the opposite side of the yard: "It's called an echo emitter. Creates directional audio signatures that mimic footsteps and movement sounds."

Miguel blinked. "Okay, but can you explain that in one of the actual languages I speak?"

"It makes them think we went a different direction than we actually did," Zack simplified.

Miguel's grin widened. "Now that's genuinely useful. ISA really does give you cool toys."

They moved quickly but quietly across the cluttered yard, following Óscar's lead through a narrow gate that opened onto a shaded residential footpath winding between low buildings and mature trees that provided excellent cover.

Behind them in the service yard—

Heavy footsteps entered the space.

Voices speaking urgently.

Then clear confusion in their tones.

"...they definitely went left, I heard movement..."

"...no, the sound came from straight ahead..."

"...check both directions..."

The trio continued walking at a steady pace without rushing or running, increasing their distance with every turn Óscar led them through.

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He clearly knew every shortcut and passage in this part of town.

Only after they'd put several full blocks of distance between themselves and the service yard did Miguel finally slow his pace and risk a glance backward.

"No one visible behind us now."

Zack allowed himself a small exhale of relief. "Good. That worked."

Óscar gave him an approving look with something like respect. "You planned ahead for the possibility of pursuit?"

Zack shook his head slightly in correction. "I planned for general uncertainty and potential complications. That's standard field protocol."

Óscar looked confused. "Are you some kind of spy?"

Miguel laughed, the tension breaking. "I'm really beginning to like how your mind works."

They merged smoothly into the increasing late afternoon activity of the main town streets; tourists browsing shops, locals heading home from work, street vendors calling out their offerings. Just three more people in the crowd. Anonymous again and unremarkable.

But the uncomfortable feeling lingered in all of them. They weren't simply conducting a quiet investigation anymore. They were being actively noticed. Being tracked.

Being followed.

And that changed everything about how careful they needed to be going forward.

## Chapter 6 – Helix Dynamics

The safehouse grew quieter as evening faded into night. Zack had moved the monument images to one screen and pulled up a blank digital grid on the other. He started copying the carvings, redrawing them carefully line by line.

Miguel watched over his shoulder. "You're recreating it?"

"I want to see if the spacing is consistent," Zack said, his eyes never leaving the screen.

Óscar leaned forward from his chair. "What would that tell you?"

Zack traced another spiral before answering. "If the symbols are evenly spaced, then whoever carved them wasn't just guessing. They were measuring something specific."

Miguel nodded slowly, understanding clicking into place. "Like tracking the lights."

"Exactly."

Zack finished tracing the third spiral shape and sat back, studying the pattern. "They're not random. The distance between each one is almost identical, and the lines connecting them follow the same angle every time."

Óscar frowned slightly. "So it's a record of what they saw."

"Looks like it." Zack turned back to his keyboard. "If ancient people noticed the lights followed a pattern, someone today might be studying the same thing."

He started typing into the search bar, trying different combinations of words. Natural light phenomena over ocean pattern. Repeating marine atmospheric lights.

Most of the results were useless. Tourist blogs claiming they'd seen UFOs. Conspiracy forums arguing about government cover-ups. The usual internet noise.

Miguel smirked from beside him. "Finding anything good? Aliens, maybe?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Too many aliens." Zack closed those tabs and refined his search, getting more specific. Coastal plasma phenomenon scientific research.

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This time, something different appeared near the top of the results. A university paper with an official-looking header.

The title read: Stabilizing Naturally Occurring Marine Plasma Events.

The author: Dr. Lucía Alvarez.

Zack clicked it and began reading, his eyes moving quickly across the screen. After a minute of silence, Miguel couldn't wait anymore.

"Well? What's it say?"

Zack angled the screen so Miguel could see. "She studies electrical energy that forms naturally over saltwater."

Miguel blinked. "Like lightning?"

"Not exactly." Zack scrolled down, scanning the abstract. "Lightning comes from storm clouds building up charge. This is different. It forms from electrical charge that collects in the air just above the ocean surface."

Óscar had been listening carefully from his spot across the room. "And she thinks this energy can be controlled?"

Zack nodded, still reading. "She believes it follows predictable paths based on atmospheric conditions. If you understand the pattern well enough, you could theoretically guide it where you want it to go."

Miguel looked back at the monument image still displayed on the other screen. "And those carvings show patterns."

"Yeah." Zack scrolled further down the paper. "She's been trying to prove this theory for years, but most scientists didn't believe her. They thought it was too unstable to predict."

Miguel grinned. "Scientists ignoring someone with a new idea? How shocking."

But Zack didn't smile this time. His expression had gone serious. "Until recently."

He clicked on another link embedded in the research paper, and a press release loaded onto the screen. The header showed a sleek corporate logo.

Dr. Alvarez announces private funding to conduct real-world stabilization tests offshore. Partner: Helix Dynamics.

Óscar had gone very still, staring at the Helix Dynamics logo on the screen.

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"That's the company," he said quietly. "The crates we unloaded. That logo was on every one of them."

Miguel looked at him. "You're sure?"

Óscar nodded once. "I don't forget a logo when it comes with orders to ask no questions."

Zack turned in his chair. "Why didn't you mention this before?"

Óscar met his eyes steadily. "You didn't ask me about logos. You asked me about the equipment and the power draw." A slight shrug. "I told you what you asked."

Miguel almost smiled. "Fair enough."

Zack turned back to the screen. The equipment wasn't coming. It was already there. Already unloaded. Already running.

"Three days," Óscar said quietly. "They've been drawing power from that building for three days."

Miguel crossed his arms, his tone shifting from playful to cautious. "Private funding usually means someone expects to make money off this."

Zack nodded and opened Helix Dynamics' main page in a new tab. The website was polished and professional, filled with images of massive industrial structures. "They build large-scale energy infrastructure. Power plants, offshore drilling platforms, that kind of thing."

Óscar asked quietly from behind them, "Do they build carefully?"

Zack hesitated, clicking through a few more pages. "They build quickly."

Miguel leaned closer to the screen. "That's not the same thing."

Zack went back to the press release and scrolled to the top, starting over from the beginning. His expression had changed again, becoming more focused. More concerned.

Miguel noticed immediately. "What? What did you find?"

"Let me read this properly," Zack said quietly, his voice taking on that tone he used when something didn't sit right. "Let's see how they're actually describing this."

Miguel pulled his chair right up next to Zack's. "Always read the fine print."

Zack nodded and began reading aloud so they could all hear. "Helix Dynamics is proud to announce the upcoming field demonstration of its

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Marine Plasma Stabilization Initiative, developed in partnership with Dr. Lucía Alvarez and her research team."

Miguel raised an eyebrow. "Sounds real fancy."

Zack continued, his voice steady. "This demonstration represents a significant step toward scalable, clean offshore energy generation capable of providing sustainable power to coastal communities worldwide."

Óscar listened carefully, his weathered face thoughtful. "They are promising a great deal."

"Yeah," Zack said. "They're framing it like a major breakthrough. Making it sound like the future of energy." He scrolled further down and kept reading. "The controlled test will occur within a secured offshore perimeter and will involve temporary concentration and redirection of naturally occurring atmospheric plasma over designated marine coordinates."

Miguel blinked and looked at Zack. "Okay, but in normal person English?"

Zack translated, keeping his eyes on the screen. "They're going to gather up all that natural electrical energy in one spot over the ocean and try to guide it where they want."

He kept reading, but then his voice slowed on the next sentence. "All safety measures have been implemented to ensure minimal environmental and civilian impact."

Miguel frowned. "Minimal. Not zero. Minimal."

Zack stopped scrolling. "Yeah. That word choice is interesting."

Óscar stood up and moved closer, standing behind both boys now. "What does minimal mean to them?"

Zack scrolled down to find the safety section and started reading more carefully. "Here it is. The safety perimeter extends 1.5 nautical miles from the designated test coordinates. All vessels within this zone will be temporarily restricted."

Miguel grabbed his phone and pulled up the cruise schedule he'd been checking earlier. "The Aurora Pacific docks tomorrow at three in the afternoon. But it has to anchor offshore before passengers can get off." He tapped through a few screens. "It'll be sitting out there in the water."

Zack pulled up the exact coordinates listed in the press release and compared them against a marine navigation map. His face went completely still.

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"What?" Miguel leaned over to look. "How close?"

"The ship passes within two nautical miles of the test zone."

Miguel's eyes widened slightly. "That's only half a mile outside their safety perimeter."

"Yes."

Óscar's voice was quiet but steady. "Is that far enough away?"

Zack didn't answer right away. Instead, he scrolled further down the document, searching for more technical details. When he found the section he wanted, he read it aloud. "Preliminary simulations indicate a high probability of containment within projected dispersion parameters."

Miguel squinted at the screen. "High probability. Not certainty. Probability."

Zack nodded slowly, his analytical mind working through what that language actually meant. "Which means it's not guaranteed."

He turned the monitor slightly so both Miguel and Óscar could see the text better. "They're saying they're confident the energy will stay inside that 1.5-mile safety zone. But they're using probability language."

Miguel swallowed. "And what happens if it doesn't stay contained?"

Zack pointed to the phrase he'd just read. "Projected dispersion parameters. That's their computer model predicting how far the plasma might spread." He leaned back in his chair, his voice quieter now. "And if the model is wrong, or if the conditions are different than they simulated, the plasma could spread farther than expected."

Óscar's voice dropped even lower. "Spread toward the ship."

Zack nodded once. "Yes."

The clock on the wall ticked past 2:58 AM. The safehouse felt very quiet.

Miguel looked from the screen to Zack, his usual easy confidence replaced with something more serious. "So let me make sure I understand this completely."

Zack waited, giving him space to work through it.

"They're about to try grabbing a piece of electrical sky fire and squeezing it into a smaller space than it wants to be in. And if their calculations are wrong, or if it slips out of their control..." He paused. "Sixteen hundred people could be close enough to get hurt. Not just see pretty lights. Actually hurt."

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Zack closed the laptop slowly, the click of it shutting sounding louder than it should have in the quiet room. "And Helix already knows it isn't fully predictable. That's why they used the word 'probability' instead of 'certainty.'"

Silence filled the safehouse. The danger didn't feel theoretical anymore. It didn't feel like something that might happen someday to someone somewhere.

It felt scheduled. Planned. And less than sixteen hours away.

## Chapter 7 – A Dangerous Anomaly

The click of the laptop closing lingered in the quiet room like an echo that wouldn't quite fade.

Miguel didn't move for a long moment. He just stared at the dark screen as if it might suddenly flip back open and tell them the whole thing had been a misunderstanding. Some kind of mistake in the data. A different ship. A different test. Anything but what they'd just discovered.

"It's tomorrow," he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper. "Not next week. Not someday far off. Tomorrow afternoon."

Zack nodded slowly, his mind already racing ahead through possibilities and problems. "Less than sixteen hours from now."

Óscar crossed his arms, leaning back against the wall. His expression was thoughtful but tense, like he was working through the same calculations they were. "And the ship? When does it arrive?"

"Afternoon," Miguel said, pulling up the schedule on his phone again even though they'd already checked it twice. "It anchors offshore first, before passengers can disembark. Standard procedure for cruise ships here." He looked up from the screen. "Which means it'll be sitting right there in the water, not moving, right when they're doing their test."

Zack stood and walked to the small window overlooking the street. He pulled the thin curtain aside just enough to see outside. A stray dog trotted across the empty road under a flickering streetlamp. Somewhere several blocks away, music drifted faintly from a late-night bar, the kind of place that stayed open until the early morning hours. A car passed slowly, its headlights sweeping across the buildings.

Everything looked completely normal. Peaceful, even.

It felt wrong somehow. Too ordinary for what they now knew was coming.

Miguel's voice broke the silence. "We can't let this test happen. Not like this. Not with that kind of uncertainty hanging over it."

Zack turned away from the window. "No. We can't."

Óscar tilted his head slightly, studying both boys with the patience of someone who'd learned long ago to think carefully before acting. "Then what do you propose we do?"

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Zack didn't answer right away. He walked back to the table, his steps deliberate, and reopened the laptop. The screen glowed back to life as he navigated back to Dr. Alvarez's profile page, the one from the university website. Her professional photo showed a woman in her forties with intelligent eyes and a serious expression.

"If she truly believes this plasma energy is stable and controllable," Zack said slowly, choosing his words with care, "then she needs to see what we're seeing. She needs to understand what the actual risks are."

Miguel frowned, leaning forward in his chair. "You think she doesn't already know? She's the scientist. She designed this whole thing."

"I think she believes her computer model works," Zack replied, his eyes still on the screen. "And I think Helix Dynamics believes the safety margins are acceptable for their purposes."

Miguel's voice took on an edge. "Acceptable for who, though? Not for the people on that ship."

Zack's jaw tightened slightly, the only outward sign of the frustration building inside him. "Exactly."

He clicked through to the contact information section of Dr. Alvarez's university profile. The page displayed her office email address, a phone number, and the physical address of her research laboratory at the university.

Miguel leaned over Zack's shoulder, reading the information on screen.

"You're not seriously thinking about sending her an email. 'Dear Dr. Alvarez, we're a couple of kids who think your science project might be dangerous'? That'll go straight to spam."

"No." Zack shook his head and opened a new tab, pulling up a detailed marina map of the industrial district. "I'm not emailing her."

Óscar moved closer to look at the map, his experienced eyes immediately understanding what Zack was thinking. "The industrial docks. That's where they'll run the test from."

Zack nodded, zooming in on the coordinates. "If the demonstration is scheduled for tomorrow evening, she'll be there onsite well before that."

"Scientists don't trust other people to set up their experiments properly. She'll want to oversee everything herself."

Miguel blinked, starting to understand where this was going. "So we just... walk up to her? In the middle of a secured test site?"

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Zack finally turned to meet Miguel's eyes directly. "We go there and we explain that her safety perimeter calculations don't account for vessel drift patterns or model variance under actual real-world conditions."

Miguel stared at him. "Okay, but can you say that in language normal humans speak?"

Zack took a breath and let it out slowly. "We tell her that sixteen hundred people could be close enough to the plasma release to get seriously hurt. And we show her why."

The silence that settled over the safehouse this time felt different from before. It wasn't the heavy, helpless kind of quiet that had filled the room when they'd first understood the danger. This silence had purpose behind it. Decision.

Óscar finally spoke, his voice carrying the weight of experience. "That's assuming she's willing to listen to two boys who show up uninvited."

Zack's expression hardened just slightly, that determined look that Miguel was beginning to recognize. The one that said Zack had made up his mind and wasn't going to be talked out of it easily.

"She'll listen," Zack said with quiet certainty. "Because if she's really a scientist, she'll want to know if her calculations are wrong. And if we can show her the data properly, she won't be able to ignore it."

Miguel looked between Zack and Óscar, then back at the map still displayed on the laptop screen. The industrial docks looked massive even from the satellite view. Lots of warehouses, shipping containers, and security fencing.

"So we're doing this," Miguel said. It wasn't quite a question.

Zack nodded once. "We're doing this."

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

Miguel pushed his chair back and stood up, rolling his shoulders like he was preparing for something physical. "Okay then. But we're going to need a plan.

A real one. Because just walking up to a secured test site and hoping security doesn't throw us out isn't going to work."

Zack's lips curved into the smallest hint of a smile. "Who said anything about hoping?"

## Chapter 8– The Marina Plan

By late morning, the marina felt like a completely different world.

The industrial docks that had seemed quiet and half-abandoned when they'd scouted them the day before were now buzzing with activity. Heavy trucks rumbled in and out through temporary security gates, their engines growling as they navigated the narrow passages between warehouses. Workers in bright reflective vests moved crates and thick cables across the pavement, shouting instructions to each other over the noise. The Helix Dynamics logo seemed to be everywhere Zack looked—printed on banners stretched between buildings, stamped on equipment cases stacked ten feet high, emblazoned on the sides of white utility vans parked in neat rows like soldiers at attention.

Zack studied it all from their position across the street, taking in every detail.

Miguel stood beside him with his hands tucked casually into his hoodie pockets, doing his best to look like just another local kid hanging around the docks. Nothing to see here. Óscar stood slightly behind them both, his weathered face calm as he watched the rhythm of movement with the understanding of someone who'd spent decades learning how docks actually worked.

"They've really tightened security," Miguel murmured, keeping his voice low. "Way more than last night."

"Of course they have," Zack said quietly, his eyes tracking a patrol pattern. "It's test day. They can't afford anything going wrong."

Óscar nodded once, his gaze fixed on a specific section of the dock layout. "There's a service corridor that runs behind Warehouse Three. Delivery access. It won't be part of the main security sweep yet. Too far from the primary staging area."

Miguel looked at him, one eyebrow raised. "You sure about that?"

"I know this dock's layout," Óscar replied with quiet confidence. "What I don't know is exactly what they've brought in and where they've positioned it. But the basic structure hasn't changed."

That was enough reassurance for Zack. "Then that's our way in."

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They waited until a large truck passed in front of them, using its bulk as cover, then slipped quickly across the street. They moved between stacked shipping containers and into the narrower industrial passages that ran behind the main dock area. The air here smelled thick with machine oil and saltwater, and their footsteps echoed slightly off the metal walls.

The service corridor was definitely quieter than the main dock. Temporary chain-link fencing blocked part of the entrance, but Zack could see immediately that whoever had installed it had been in a hurry. The panel was secured with plastic zip ties instead of proper bolts or padlocks.

Óscar pulled a small multi-tool from his pocket and clipped through them cleanly, one after another. The fence panel swung open just wide enough for them to slip through.

Inside the perimeter, the sounds changed around them.

Not quieter, exactly. Just different.

There was a steady electrical hum of powered equipment running somewhere close by. Voices echoed inside what had to be a large enclosed space, bouncing off high ceilings and metal walls. Something heavy rolled across the floor with a deep metallic rumble, probably being repositioned by workers.

Zack felt his pulse quicken, adrenaline starting to kick in now that they were actually inside.

They kept close to the exterior wall of the nearest building, staying in the shadows, then spotted their opportunity; a side entrance that had been left partially open, probably for workers who needed to move equipment in and out quickly without going around to the main doors.

Zack led the way inside, Miguel and Óscar right behind him.

The moment they stepped into the warehouse, it became absolutely clear that this wasn't normal dock activity. Not even close.

Banks of unfamiliar monitoring equipment lined one entire wall, all of it humming with power and covered in blinking indicator lights. Massive cable spools, each one taller than Zack, fed thick power lines into sophisticated control units mounted on rolling equipment racks. Multiple screens displayed constantly shifting graphs and wave patterns that pulsed and changed in real time.

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None of this equipment belonged to a regular dock operation. This was pure scientific and industrial hardware.

Miguel's voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "They really are setting up something huge."

Zack nodded, his eyes moving quickly across the space, cataloging everything. "Follow the main cables. They'll lead to the primary control station."

They moved carefully between stacked equipment crates and wheeled cases, keeping to the shadowed edges where the overhead lights didn't reach quite as well. The workers scattered throughout the warehouse were completely focused on their individual tasks; checking connections, running diagnostic tests, calling out readings to each other. None of them were expecting three teenagers to be carefully weaving through their workspace.

Zack's eyes tracked the thickest bundle of feed lines across the floor until he found what he was looking for—a cluster of active display screens near the center of the warehouse, clearly the main monitoring station.

Test coordinates glowed in bright green across one of the larger screens. He stepped closer, trying to get a better view without being too obvious.

Miguel stayed half a step behind him, his head on a swivel, constantly watching for anyone whose attention might drift their way.

Zack scanned the perimeter radius displayed on the computer model, doing quick mental calculations. His stomach tightened with a sick feeling.

"They adjusted the perimeter," he whispered urgently.

Miguel leaned in closer. "The safety zone? In which direction?"

"Smaller. They made it smaller."

Miguel swore quietly under his breath, just loud enough for Zack to hear.

Zack reached into his pack and carefully pulled out his compact field scanner. He kept it low and close to his body, positioning it near the cable housing of one of the primary control units where it could take readings without being immediately obvious.

The numbers on his scanner's tiny screen jumped much higher than he'd expected them to.

His jaw tightened. This was worse than their calculations.

"Something's definitely off with their model," he said quietly.

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Miguel's voice took on an edge of urgency. "How long do you need?"

"Twenty seconds to get a full reading."

That was exactly when a heavy steel door clanged open at the far end of the warehouse with a sound like a gunshot.

A sharp voice cut through the steady hum of machinery and worker chatter. "Hey! You three! Stop right there!"

Security guards. Multiple sets of heavy footsteps hitting concrete, coming fast.

Miguel reacted first, his street instincts kicking in immediately. "Move! Now!"

They broke toward the side exit they'd come through, weaving around equipment racks and trying to stay ahead of the guards. But they quickly realized they'd seriously miscalculated how many security personnel were stationed inside the warehouse itself.

A hand grabbed Miguel's arm hard, yanking him to a stop.

Another caught Zack at the shoulder before he could dodge.

Óscar didn't even try to resist. He simply stopped and raised his hands slightly, knowing when fighting back would only make things worse.

It was over in seconds.

One of the guards, a muscular guy with a crew cut and a name badge that read "JENKINS," shook his head with obvious irritation. "You kids think this is some kind of game? Think breaking into a restricted facility is funny?"

Miguel tried his best to look indignant instead of out of breath and slightly panicked. "We weren't breaking in. We were just looking around."

"Yeah," Jenkins replied dryly, clearly not buying it for a second. "Just looking around in a restricted test facility. Right."

Zack stayed completely silent, his mind already working on their next move.

Jenkins keyed the radio clipped to his tactical vest. "Control, this is Jenkins. Got two minors and an adult inside Warehouse Three, interfering with equipment staging. Requesting instructions."

There was a brief pause, then a crackle of static before a voice responded through the radio. "Take them to Mr. Davenport's office. He specifically said he doesn't tolerate industrial espionage or interference."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Miguel swallowed hard. The way the voice on the radio had said "doesn't tolerate" hadn't sounded promising at all.

They were marched out of the warehouse with guards on either side of them, heading toward the large central command structure positioned near the water's edge. It was clearly the nerve center of the entire operation.

Miguel leaned slightly toward Zack, keeping his voice barely audible. "Please tell me this is still somehow part of the plan."

Zack kept his expression carefully neutral, not giving anything away. "It is."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

They were halfway across the open dock area, guards still gripping their arms, when a woman stepped down from the main operations platform ahead of them. She moved with purpose, like someone who was used to being listened to.

She wasn't wearing one of the Helix-branded jackets like most of the other personnel. No corporate executive polish or fancy business clothes. Just practical field clothing—cargo pants, sturdy boots, and a work shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She carried a tablet computer in one hand and had reading glasses pushed up on top of her head.

Her expression was sharp and intensely focused as she looked at the approaching group.

"Where exactly are you taking these three?" she asked, her tone making it clear she expected a real answer.

"To Mr. Davenport's office, Doctor," Jenkins replied with automatic respect. "We caught them inside the restricted staging area."

Her eyes shifted to look at the boys directly, taking them in with what felt like a single comprehensive sweep. For just a fraction of a second, Zack saw something in her expression that wasn't anger or annoyance. It was assessment. Calculation. Like she was trying to figure out a puzzle.

She looked back at Jenkins. "Mr. Davenport can wait. Bring them to my office instead."

The guard hesitated, clearly caught between two different authorities. "But ma'am, we have direct orders—"

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"That wasn't a suggestion, Jenkins. It was an instruction." Her voice stayed level, but the steel underneath it was unmistakable.

Jenkins nodded immediately. "Yes, Doctor Alvarez."

As the guards redirected their course toward a smaller prefabricated building positioned near the water, Miguel shot Zack a quick sideways look that clearly said, Did that just actually work?

Zack didn't let himself smile or show any reaction. But his eyes told Miguel everything he needed to know.

They were heading exactly where they needed to be.



## **Chapter 9 - Dr. Alvarez**

Dr. Lucía Alvarez's office wasn't designed to impress anyone. It was purely functional.

The walls were temporary partitions that could be taken down and moved in a day. A basic folding desk held two computer monitors running live atmospheric data feeds, the screens filled with constantly updating numbers and graphs. Charts and printouts were taped somewhat unevenly along one wall, covered in handwritten notes and calculations. This wasn't the polished workspace of a corporate executive. This was a scientist's field office, set up for work, not appearances.

She entered first and stepped aside smoothly, allowing the security guards to guide the three boys inside. Once they were all in, she turned to face the guards directly.

"Thank you, Jenkins. I'll handle this from here."

The guards hesitated, clearly uncomfortable leaving her alone with potential intruders. Jenkins shifted his weight. "Doctor, these three were caught inside Warehouse Three. That's a restricted access zone with active protocols."

"I understand that." Her tone wasn't annoyed or dismissive. It was simply controlled, the voice of someone who was used to being in charge and expected to be listened to.

"But—"

"I said I'll handle it."

Jenkins nodded reluctantly and gestured for his partner to follow. The door closed behind them with a solid click, and suddenly the room felt much smaller.

For a long moment, Dr. Alvarez said absolutely nothing. She simply stood there and looked at them, her sharp eyes moving from face to face.

Zack noticed immediately that she wasn't scanning them for signs of guilt or nervousness. She was studying their posture, their body language, the way they held themselves. It was the kind of analytical observation he recognized because he did the same thing.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Miguel shifted his weight slightly but kept his eyes forward, not looking away. Óscar stood with his hands loosely at his sides, completely calm. Zack met her gaze directly and steadily.

"You don't look like vandals," she said finally, breaking the silence.

Miguel blinked, a little surprised by the observation. "We're not vandals."

"I know. That wasn't actually a question." Her eyes moved back to Zack and stayed there. "You weren't afraid when the guards caught you."

Zack didn't respond, waiting to see where she was going with this.

"You were calculating," she continued, taking a step closer. "Thinking. Planning your next move. Most teenagers in that situation would either start arguing loudly or panic completely. You did neither."

Miguel almost smiled at that assessment despite the seriousness of the situation.

"And yet," Dr. Alvarez said, folding her arms lightly across her chest, "you chose to enter a restricted industrial test site on the day of a major controlled demonstration. A demonstration with significant security measures in place."

Her gaze sharpened, becoming more focused and intense.

"That kind of decision requires either complete stupidity... or very specific purpose."

Zack finally spoke, his voice quiet but clear. "Purpose."

A flicker of genuine interest crossed her face. Not anger. Not suspicion. Interest.

"All right then," she said. "I'm listening. What purpose brought you here?"

Miguel glanced sideways at Zack for just a second. This was it. The moment they'd been working toward since they'd discovered the danger last night.

Zack took a small step forward, squaring his shoulders slightly.

"Your safety perimeter is too small."

The words landed in the room without any drama or theatrics. Just a simple statement of fact.

Dr. Alvarez didn't react outwardly. She didn't gasp or get defensive or laugh. But Zack saw something subtle shift in her posture. A tightening. An increase in attention.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"You're making a claim about a mathematical model you haven't actually seen," she said calmly, her scientist's mind already engaging with the challenge.

"I've seen enough," Zack replied steadily.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, reassessing him. "Enough to justify breaking into my staging facility? That's a significant risk for a feeling."

"Enough to know that a cruise ship carrying sixteen hundred passengers will be anchored within two nautical miles of your test zone tomorrow afternoon."

That got her full attention. Not anger. Not defensiveness. Pure, focused concentration.

She moved toward one of her monitors, her fingers already reaching for the keyboard. "Explain. Specifically."

Zack exhaled slowly, organizing his thoughts. "You reduced your safety perimeter radius to 1.5 nautical miles this morning. Down from the original 2 miles stated in your initial press release."

Her eyes flicked sharply toward him, surprised. "How would you possibly know that?"

Miguel remained silent this time, letting Zack handle it.

Zack didn't try to dodge or deflect. "Because it was displayed on your live staging screen in Warehouse Three. Current test parameters, updated as of 0800 hours this morning."

She absorbed that information, her expression unreadable. "So you're not denying you accessed unauthorized areas and looked at restricted information."

"No. I'm not denying it."

The silence that stretched between them felt heavy with unspoken questions.

"You're also not acting like this is some kind of teenage prank or dare," she observed.

"It isn't a prank."

Dr. Alvarez studied him for another long moment, and Zack could practically see her mind working, processing, analyzing everything he'd said and how he'd said it.

"Who are you?" she asked finally. "Really?"

## The Bucerías Anomaly

There it was. The question Zack had known was coming. He weighed the decision for exactly half a second, running through the risks and benefits. Then he made his choice.

"I work with the International Spy Agency."

Miguel didn't flinch at the revelation. Óscar didn't move a muscle. They'd all agreed this might be necessary.

Dr. Alvarez didn't laugh or roll her eyes or call security back in. But she did lean back slightly against her desk, her arms still folded, her expression thoughtful.

"That's a very unusual thing for someone who appears to be about twelve years old to say in my office."

"I'm aware of that. But it's true."

She held his gaze without blinking, and Zack got the distinct impression she was running some kind of internal calculation, weighing probabilities.

"And if it is true," she said slowly, "if you actually do work with an intelligence organization... what does that mean for this conversation?"

"It means I'm not here to sabotage your work or cause trouble for your demonstration," Zack said evenly, keeping his voice calm and professional.

"I'm here because I believe your safety model may be missing a critical variable. And sixteen hundred people could be in danger because of it."

Something changed in her expression. The defensive scientist posture softened slightly. Now she was genuinely listening. Not agreeing yet. Not accepting his claims. But listening with real attention.

"And what variable," she asked quietly, leaning forward with renewed focus, "do you believe I've missed?"

Dr. Alvarez folded her arms loosely across her chest. The posture wasn't defensive exactly, more like she was physically containing her reaction while she processed what Zack had just said.

"Tell me the variable," she said. "Specifically."

Zack stepped closer to the nearest monitor, careful not to actually touch anything without permission. "Your containment model assumes stable atmospheric density at the projected discharge altitude."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, the first hint of pushback. "That's not an assumption."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

It's based on live environmental readings taken from the test site every six hours."

"It's based on projected stability," Zack corrected her gently, choosing his words with care. "Which works perfectly well if the plasma charge disperses evenly across the calculated area."

She didn't interrupt him this time. Just watched and waited for him to continue.

Miguel shifted his weight slightly, watching both of them carefully now. This was where everything either worked or fell apart.

"But the Aurora Pacific," Zack continued, keeping his voice steady and factual, "anchors offshore tomorrow afternoon at approximately 2:30 PM. Sixteen hundred passengers on board. That represents a significant amount of mass."

Dr. Alvarez's expression remained carefully controlled, giving nothing away. "You're suggesting that a cruise ship somehow alters atmospheric charge density at a distance of two nautical miles?"

"I'm suggesting that sixteen hundred people, plus several thousand tons of metal hull, sitting within two nautical miles of your test zone, could potentially interfere with plasma field behavior in ways your model isn't accounting for."

"The influence would be negligible at that distance." She said it with confidence, but Zack noticed she hadn't completely dismissed the idea.

"It might be negligible," Zack agreed calmly. "If the plasma remains perfectly contained within your projected boundaries."

She studied him for a long moment, her scientist's mind clearly working through possibilities. "And you believe it won't."

"I believe probability isn't the same thing as certainty." Those words landed in the room with unexpected weight.

Dr. Alvarez turned to her computer screen and pulled up what looked like a live model projection. A complex three-dimensional simulation of the plasma discharge field rotated slowly above a digital grid representing the marina and surrounding water.

"Show me," she said simply.

Zack stepped beside her, close enough to see the screen clearly but still respectful of her space. "Zoom in on the anchor zone where the ship will be positioned."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

She hesitated for just a fraction of a second—maybe not wanting to be told what to do, or maybe reconsidering whether she should be doing this at all. Then her fingers moved across the keyboard.

The ship's projected position appeared on the grid as a red outline, surprisingly close to the test zone when you actually saw it visually.

"Now increase the metallic mass interference variable by five percent," Zack said quietly.

Her fingers paused over the keyboard. "That's an arbitrary number."

"It's actually conservative," he replied. "That accounts for normal anchor drift, passenger movement around the deck, and natural vessel rotation from current and wind."

Miguel watched her face closely, trying to read what she was thinking.

She adjusted the input parameter, typing in the new value. Her expression was focused, scientific, not emotional. The model began recalculating, numbers streaming across a sidebar.

At first, nothing obvious changed in the main display.

Then the projected containment boundary—the invisible line that was supposed to keep the plasma safely contained—shimmered slightly. A faint outward distortion appeared along one edge. Small. Barely noticeable if you weren't looking for it. But definitely visible.

Dr. Alvarez's posture changed in a way that was almost imperceptible. A slight straightening of her spine. A tightening around her eyes.

"That's still within acceptable tolerance levels," she said, but her voice had lost some of its certainty.

"Barely," Zack replied quietly.

She stared at the screen for another moment, then adjusted the variable again with deliberate movements. Another five percent increase in mass interference. The boundary warped further this time, bulging outward like a balloon being pressed from the inside.

The distortion now pushed clearly past the projected safety perimeter line displayed in yellow. Not dramatically. Not catastrophically. But undeniably.

The room went very quiet. Even the hum of the computers seemed to fade into the background.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Miguel felt something shift in the atmosphere before he fully understood what he was looking at. This wasn't going the way Dr. Alvarez had expected. She hadn't anticipated seeing that.

Dr. Alvarez stared at the simulation, her face very still. "That shouldn't—" She stopped herself mid-sentence, catching the words before they fully formed.

She recalibrated the parameters manually, double-checking each input. Ran the simulation again with fresh calculations. The distortion remained. The boundary still pushed past the safety line.

She didn't look at Zack immediately. Instead, she kept her eyes fixed on the screen like she was trying to find the error through sheer force of will.

"You don't have access to my full data set," she said carefully, almost defensively. "This is a simplified model running on limited parameters."

"No, I don't have your full data," Zack agreed without argument. "But Helix Dynamics reduced your safety perimeter radius this morning. From 2 miles down to 1.5."

She stood up straight, pulling her eyes away from the screen.

"They didn't reduce it," she said sharply, her professional composure cracking slightly. "That's not their decision to make."

"They revised it," Zack replied evenly, keeping his tone neutral and factual.

Dr. Alvarez pulled up a different window on her screen, navigating quickly through folders until she found the perimeter settings file. Her fingers moved fast across the keyboard.

Her jaw visibly tightened when she saw the numbers. There it was, displayed in plain text. Current Safety Perimeter: 1.5 nautical miles. Last Modified: 08:47 AM.

She hadn't approved that change. Zack could see it in her face.

She knew she hadn't approved it, and someone had altered her safety parameters anyway.

Miguel saw the exact moment it registered. The smallest shift in her eyes. Not panic, not yet. But something had cracked in her certainty. Doubt.

"You're very confident for someone so young," she said quietly, still staring at the screen.

Zack met her gaze steadily when she finally looked back at him. "I'm not confident. I'm concerned."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Silence settled between them, heavy with the weight of what they'd just discovered.

"You're asking me to postpone a live demonstration that's backed by a multinational corporation," she said slowly, each word measured. "Based on a model adjustment made in what amounts to a temporary simulation environment with incomplete data."

"I'm asking you to account for a variable that could put sixteen hundred people at risk," Zack replied simply.

That was the first time the number had hung in the air without any technical language attached to it. Not "passenger capacity" or "vessel occupancy." Just sixteen hundred. Passengers. Families. People.

Dr. Alvarez exhaled slowly, the breath carrying what might have been frustration or fear or both. "You're what. Twelve years old?"

"Yes."

"And you expect me to believe you actually represent an international intelligence agency."

"I expect you to believe the data we're both looking at right now."

That was the moment everything changed. Not because of authority or spy credentials or any claim about who Zack worked for. Because of the data. Clear, hard evidence. Numbers that didn't care who was reading them.

Dr. Alvarez turned back to the screen one more time. And this time, Zack could see it clearly in her body language—she wasn't trying to prove him wrong anymore. She was trying to see if he might actually be right.

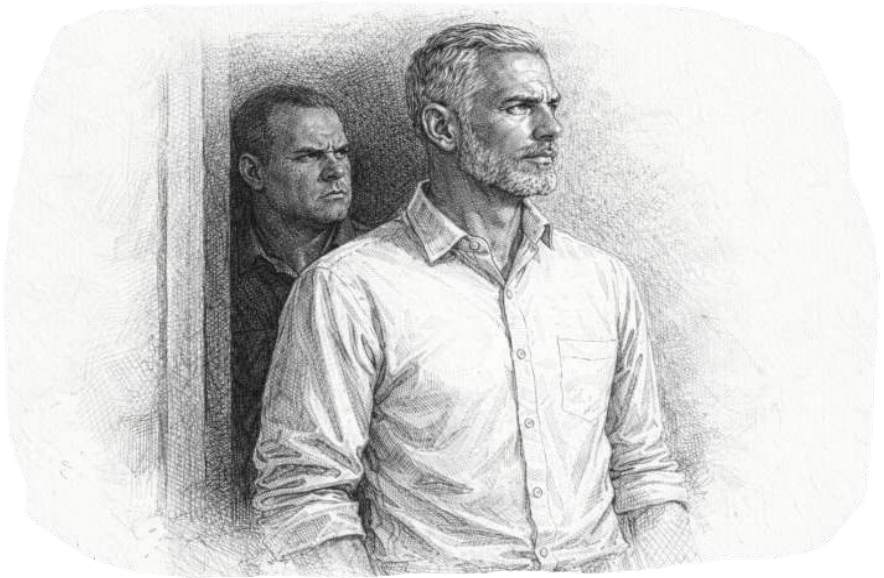
## Chapter 10 – Davenport

Before Dr. Alvarez could adjust the model parameters again, the office door swung open without a knock. Without warning. Without permission.

A tall man stepped inside, moving with the kind of calm, unhurried confidence that came from knowing he belonged wherever he chose to be. He had a salt-and-pepper beard trimmed close to his jaw, perfectly maintained. His white shirt was crisp and pressed, the sleeves rolled with precise folds to exactly mid-forearm. No lab coat. No visible ID badge hanging from his neck.

He didn't need one.

Behind him, a second man entered—broader, heavily built, wearing dark tactical clothing and an earpiece. Security. The kind of professional that didn't just watch buildings, but actively managed threats. Miguel carefully turned his head away, recognizing him as one of the men who had pursued them through the back streets of town.



## The Bucerías Anomaly

The tall man's mere presence shifted something in the room, like the air pressure had suddenly changed.

"I was notified that someone has been modifying perimeter variables in the test model," he said, his voice even and controlled. "Is there a particular reason for that?"

He didn't look at the boys yet. Didn't acknowledge they were even in the room. He looked only at Dr. Alvarez.

She didn't step away from the computer screen, holding her ground. "I'm reviewing a potential fluctuation in the plasma containment boundary. It showed up when I ran a scenario with increased mass interference."

"Today?" he asked, the single word carrying more weight than it should. "You're running new scenarios today?"

"The issue is relevant to the demonstration."

"It's demonstration day, Doctor." His tone stayed mild, almost pleasant. "Not analysis day."

There it was. Not said loudly. Not said aggressively. But absolutely final.

The large security man stepped forward slightly, pulling out his phone. He held it toward the tall man, speaking in a low voice but clearly audible in the quiet office.

"Mr. Davenport, those are the two kids who were snooping around the restricted area earlier. The ones asking questions at the monument site."

Zack felt his stomach drop but kept his face carefully neutral.

Davenport's eyes shifted immediately to the boys, his gaze sharpening with interest. He took the phone, looking at what was clearly a surveillance photo, then back at Zack and Miguel.

The assessment in his eyes changed. This wasn't casual curiosity anymore. This was suspicion.

"Interesting," Davenport said quietly, handing the phone back. His attention was now fully focused on them. "And who exactly are you two?"

Dr. Alvarez started to speak. "They're—"

"I'd like to hear from them directly," Davenport interrupted smoothly, his eyes never leaving Zack.

Miguel glanced at Zack, tension visible in his shoulders. Zack knew this moment was critical.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Play it wrong and they'd be escorted out—or worse. Play it too carefully and he'd seem suspicious.

He needed to be exactly what Davenport would dismiss as harmless.

Zack straightened slightly, letting a hint of nervous enthusiasm into his voice. "I'm Zack. This is Miguel. We're... well, I'm kind of obsessed with atmospheric phenomena. When I heard about the lights over the bay, I had to come see the investigation site."

Davenport's expression didn't change. "Obsessed."

"Yeah." Zack let himself speak a bit faster, like an excited kid who'd found someone who might actually listen. "I've been reading about ball lightning and plasma formations since I was like nine. I even built a Tesla coil in my garage last year—my parents weren't super thrilled about the electric bill—but when I saw the reports about lights appearing in patterns over the water..."

He gestured toward the computer screen with genuine enthusiasm that wasn't entirely faked.

"I mean, that's not normal atmospheric discharge. The energy concentration required for sustained visibility over multiple nights suggests either a natural phenomenon we don't understand yet or..." He paused, letting his voice carry that teenage excitement about possibilities. "Or something even cooler that nobody's documented before."

Miguel added, playing his role perfectly, "He dragged me out to the beach at like midnight. Twice. I'm just here because he won't stop talking about it and my grandma said I should keep an eye on him."

Davenport studied them both, his sharp mind clearly evaluating whether this was an act.

The security guard spoke again. "They were asking locals about the test equipment. Showed up near one of the dock warehouses."

Zack jumped in quickly, maintaining his enthusiastic kid persona. "Because I wanted to know if there was any official research happening! Look, if actual scientists with real equipment are studying this phenomenon, that's like... that's incredible. That means there's actual data being collected, not just phone videos and social media posts."

He looked at Dr. Alvarez with what he hoped seemed like genuine admiration. "Are you the principal investigator? Because that simulation you

## The Bucerías Anomaly

were running—the mass interference variable you added—that's exactly the kind of modeling you'd need to predict field dispersion patterns."

Dr. Alvarez blinked, clearly not expecting to be engaged so directly.

Davenport's eyes narrowed slightly. "You understand the simulation."

"I mean, kind of?" Zack made himself sound less confident, more like a smart kid who's studied a lot but knows he's out of his depth with actual professionals. "I've watched a lot of videos about plasma physics and I read some papers online, but I'm sure I'm missing like ninety percent of the actual complexity. I just think it's amazing that someone's actually studying this properly instead of just calling it UFOs and moving on."

He gestured around the office, letting legitimate curiosity show. "How did you even get approval for a live demonstration? That must have taken months."

Davenport's posture relaxed slightly—just a fraction. The question sounded less like intelligence gathering and more like an impressed kid asking about the logistics of adult work.

"Eighteen months," Davenport said, his tone still cool but with a hint of professional pride. "Maritime authority, environmental impact assessments, investor presentations."

"That's so cool," Zack said, meaning it. Then he caught himself and looked embarrassed. "Sorry. I'm probably being annoying. Miguel says I do that when I get excited about science stuff."

"Constantly," Miguel confirmed with perfect timing.

The security guard still looked suspicious, but Davenport seemed to be reassessing.

"You're trespassing in a restricted industrial zone," Davenport said, but his tone had shifted slightly. Less threatening. More like an adult explaining rules to a kid who got overenthusiastic.

"I know," Zack said, trying to sound appropriately apologetic. "That was definitely not smart. We just saw the monument with the carvings and those guys were there documenting them, and I thought maybe if we followed the research trail we could actually see where the analysis was happening." He looked down. "Which was stupid. I'm sorry."

Davenport studied him for a long moment. Then he turned back to Dr. Alvarez.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"Enthusiastic amateur scientists aside, the demonstration timeline remains unchanged."

He looked at the boys one more time. "You two should leave this facility. If you want to watch the demonstration, do it from a safe distance like everyone else. The public observation area will be clearly marked."

Zack nodded quickly. "Yes sir. Definitely. Thank you for... you know, not having security throw us out."

Davenport's mouth twitched in what might have been the ghost of a smile. "Try to channel that enthusiasm into actual education. Perhaps university-level physics courses."

"I'm planning to," Zack said earnestly.

Davenport turned his full attention back to Dr. Alvarez, and the temperature in the room dropped again as he shifted from mildly amused adult to corporate authority.

"The demonstration is scheduled to begin at nineteen hundred hours. That's 7 PM. Maritime authorities have been officially notified. Media representatives from three countries are scheduled for remote coverage. Our investors will be observing the test in real time here and via secured video feed."

He wasn't explaining. He was reminding her of everything that was at stake.

"We are not revising safety parameters six hours before execution," he continued, each word chosen with care. "That would be irresponsible and would raise questions we don't have time to answer."

Dr. Alvarez's jaw visibly tightened, but her voice stayed professional. "The cruise vessel anchoring offshore this afternoon introduces mass interference variables that weren't present in any of our baseline simulations. The Aurora Pacific wasn't part of the original calculations."

Davenport's expression didn't change at all. He might have been discussing the weather. "Maritime traffic operates daily in that corridor. Ships pass through those waters constantly."

"Not during active plasma concentration and discharge," she countered.

"All operations fall within established maritime safety standards."

"Safety standards are written for predictable, well-understood systems." Her voice took on an edge. "This is experimental technology."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"And this is a controlled system," he replied smoothly. "Operating under carefully designed parameters that have been reviewed by multiple agencies."

His voice remained smooth as silk, but Zack heard the steel underneath it now. Hard. Unyielding.

"You personally signed off on today's execution window, Doctor. Your signature is on the authorization documents."

"I signed off on a two-nautical-mile safety buffer," she said, her voice rising slightly. "Not 1.5 miles."

A beat of silence passed.

Davenport's gaze sharpened just a fraction. "The revision to 1.5 nautical miles was cleared through our compliance department after consultation with the maritime authority. Everything was done properly."

"Without my authorization."

"It did not require your authorization." He said it simply, stating a fact.

"Compliance has the authority to adjust operational parameters within approved ranges."

There it was, laid out clearly now for everyone in the room to understand. He wasn't asking for her approval. He wasn't requesting her cooperation. He was informing her how things were going to be.

Zack felt Miguel shift his weight slightly beside him, tension radiating off his friend. They'd been dismissed, should probably be leaving, but Zack found himself frozen, watching this power dynamic play out.

The computer model continued rotating quietly on the screen, the distorted boundary still visible, still wrong, still ignored.

Davenport stepped back slightly, smoothing one sleeve of his shirt with casual precision. "The demonstration begins this evening at nineteen hundred hours as planned. The safety perimeter remains at 1.5 nautical miles as approved by compliance. These facts will not change."

He didn't raise his voice even slightly. He didn't make threats or pound his fist on the desk. He simply stated it as reality. As something that was going to happen regardless of anyone's objections.

He glanced once more at the boys. "I believe you two were leaving."

It wasn't a question. Zack nodded quickly. "Right. Yes. Sorry."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

He and Miguel moved toward the door, but Zack caught Dr. Alvarez's eyes as they passed. She looked trapped. Constrained. And something in her expression told him she knew exactly what he'd been doing.

Playing dumb to stay under the radar.

Davenport straightened his already-straight posture, adjusting his collar with one hand. "Doctor Alvarez, I trust there will be no further unauthorized recalibrations or modifications to approved parameters."

It wasn't phrased as a question. It was a statement of expectation.

He turned smoothly, walked past the boys and out of the office, the security guard following behind him. The door closed with a quiet click that somehow felt louder than a slam would have been.

The hum of the computer monitors filled the space again. Zack and Miguel stood near the door, unsure if they should leave or stay. Dr. Alvarez didn't move for several long seconds.

She just stood there, staring at the closed door, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. Then she looked at Zack. Really looked at him.

"That was quite a performance," she said quietly.

Zack dropped the enthusiastic kid act. "He needed to see someone harmless."

"And are you?" she asked. "Harmless?"

"Not if sixteen hundred people are at risk."

Miguel added, "He's actually twelve and he actually is obsessed with science. So that part was true."

Dr. Alvarez's expression shifted. Not quite a smile, but something close to respect.

"The test begins in six hours," she said quietly, almost to herself. "Six hours and sixteen hundred people will be anchored exactly where that boundary might fail."

She looked at Zack with a different kind of assessment now.

"You said you're with an agency."

Zack nodded slowly.

"Can you help me stop this?"

Zack met her eyes. "We're going to try."

## **Chapter 11 -An Elegant Solution**

Dr. Alvarez stared at the computer model for a long moment, her mind clearly working through possibilities and constraints. Then she turned back to face Zack directly, her expression shifting from defeated to determined.

"I cannot halt the demonstration," she said quietly, each word measured. "Not without triggering immediate regulatory intervention and complete corporate override. Davenport would simply go forward without me, and then I'd have no ability to influence what happens at all."

Miguel crossed his arms, frustration evident in his voice. "So that's it? We just let it happen?"

"No." Her voice sharpened with sudden intensity. "That is absolutely not it."

She stepped back to the monitor, her fingers already moving across the keyboard, pulling up different data sets. "If the safety perimeter cannot be expanded to a safer distance, then the plasma discharge vector itself must be corrected."

Zack's eyes sharpened with immediate understanding. "Redirect the energy upward instead of outward."

"Exactly." She nodded, already running calculations in her head.

Miguel blinked, looking between them. "Wait, redirect what upward?"

"The plasma concentration," Dr. Alvarez replied, her words coming faster now as the solution took shape in her mind. "If we can force the energy to disperse vertically into the upper atmosphere instead of spreading laterally across the water surface, then any interference from the vessel's mass becomes essentially negligible. The plasma never reaches the ship's position at all."

Zack nodded slowly, his analytical mind already seeing the next problem. "But that kind of directional control requires active field harmonization. You can't just aim plasma like a spotlight."

Her eyes flicked to him again, reassessing. "That's correct."

"And your portable harmonizer prototype was never successfully scaled up from laboratory conditions."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

A beat of silence passed. She looked at him much more carefully now, really studying his face. "How do you possibly know about that research? The harmonizer work was barely mentioned in my published papers."

"It was cited in your earlier publications," Zack said simply. "Appendix C, footnote seventeen. You described the theoretical framework but noted the prototype lacked sufficient field strength to influence a live marine plasma event."

Miguel glanced sideways at his friend with an expression that clearly said, Of course you read the appendix. Of course you did.

Dr. Alvarez hesitated, looking almost uncomfortable. "The harmonizer design worked beautifully in controlled laboratory settings. But when we tried to scale it up for real-world application, the field strength degraded exponentially. It simply lacked the power to influence atmospheric plasma at the distances and intensities we needed."

"At your laboratory scale," Zack said carefully. "With your available resources and funding."

Her gaze sharpened like a blade. "What exactly are you implying?"

Zack reached into his pack slowly, deliberately, his movements careful and non-threatening.

Miguel's pulse spiked with sudden alarm. "Zack, what are you—"

"It's fine," Zack murmured quietly. "Trust me."

He withdrew a compact cylindrical device no larger than a standard flashlight. It was matte black with a seamless casing that looked almost organic in how perfectly the components fit together. A faint metallic ring circled the exact midpoint, gleaming dully in the office lighting.

Dr. Alvarez actually froze in place, her eyes locked on the device. "That design," she breathed. "That's—"

"Yours," Zack finished. "The core architecture is entirely based on your published research. But it's been refined and engineered for field deployment."

He placed it gently on the desk between them, the soft click of metal on wood somehow significant.

"The International Spy Agency has been monitoring atmospheric plasma research for years," he continued in an even, professional tone. "When we identified it as a potential security concern—both as a threat and as a

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technology—we reviewed all major research in the field. I knew I had heard your name before. Your harmonizer architecture was the most stable and elegant micro-field regulator ever published. It just needed better materials and more sophisticated power management."

Her eyes had gone wide, staring at the device like it was something impossible. "That design was purely theoretical. I never built anything that looked like that. The materials science alone would require—"

"Advanced composite alloys and adaptive field amplification circuitry," Zack said. "Which the ISA has access to through partner research institutions."

He pressed a small recessed activation pad on the device's side.

The harmonizer emitted a soft, controlled hum that seemed to resonate at a frequency just barely audible. A faint corona of blue light shimmered around its tip—not wild or crackling like electricity, not chaotic or dangerous. Perfectly controlled. Stable. Beautiful in its precision.

Dr. Alvarez stepped closer without seeming to realize she was moving, drawn by scientific fascination that overrode everything else.

"That's impossible," she whispered. "The power requirements alone should —"

"It's scaled properly now," Zack explained. "Adaptive field amplification with real-time environmental feedback. It reads the surrounding plasma density and adjusts its output to match what's needed."

Her eyes darted from the device to the computer monitor nearby. The atmospheric reading feed displayed there flickered for just a moment, the numbers jumping slightly. Then everything stabilized, settling into perfectly smooth readings.

Miguel just stared, his mouth slightly open. "You just... did that? With that thing? Right now?"

Zack didn't look at Miguel. He kept his attention focused entirely on Dr. Alvarez, watching for her reaction.

She reached toward the harmonizer device with one trembling hand but stopped just short of actually touching it, like she was afraid it might disappear if she made contact.

"That architecture," she said quietly, her voice filled with wonder. "The stabilizing ring design, the way the field projects... I sketched that out five

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years ago on a napkin at a conference. I didn't think anyone had even read that paper."

"I read it," Zack said simply. "It was brilliant. The ISA's engineering team read it too. They said it was the most elegant solution to plasma field harmonization they'd ever seen. It just needed the right resources to make it real."

She looked up from the device to meet his eyes directly.

For the first time since they'd met, she wasn't looking at him as a curious adult trying to understand why a bold child had broken into her facility. She was looking at him as one scientist recognizing another scientist. As an equal who understood what she understood, who saw what she saw, who spoke her language.

"You're not lying," she said quietly. It wasn't a question. It was a realization. "About any of it. The ISA, the research, your understanding of the science. None of it is a story."

"No," Zack confirmed. "None of it is a lie."

Silence filled the office, but it was different now. Not tense or hostile. Contemplative. The silence of two minds working on the same problem from the same side. Then Dr. Alvarez straightened her shoulders and made a decision.

"Show me how it works," she said, her voice taking on the crisp tone of someone moving from theory into action. "Show me exactly what this harmonizer can do, and then we're going to figure out how to use it to save those sixteen hundred people."

## Chapter 12 – Evading Detection

Dr. Alvarez stepped back from the desk, her mind already racing ahead to the next obstacle. Her expression shifted from wonder to concern.

"If we integrate that harmonizer device into the primary discharge array, the monitoring system will immediately detect a field amplification anomaly," she said, thinking out loud. "The sensors are designed to catch exactly that kind of unauthorized modification."

"And automatically notify compliance," Miguel added, understanding the problem instantly.

"Immediately," she confirmed, her voice tight. "Davenport would know within seconds. He'd shut down the modification before we could even finish installing it."

Zack nodded calmly, like he'd already anticipated this exact problem. "Then we don't amplify the field in a way the system can detect."

She turned to look at him, one eyebrow raised. "I'm listening."

"We compensate for the change instead of announcing it."

"Explain."

Zack gestured toward the harmonizer still sitting on her desk. "That's what your original harmonizer design was meant to do, wasn't it? Stabilize variance in plasma fields. Smooth out irregularities."

"Yes, but that was at laboratory scale with controlled conditions," she said.

"This is completely different."

"Scale is just mathematics," Zack replied simply. "The principles don't change, only the numbers."

Dr. Alvarez stared at him for a long second, her expression somewhere between impressed and exasperated. "You're twelve years old."

"Yes, I am."

"That wasn't meant as a compliment."

Miguel tried very hard not to smile at the exchange.

Zack turned toward her computer monitor, his posture shifting into the focused stance he used when solving complex problems.

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"Show me your environmental compensation routine. The one the system uses to adjust for weather conditions."

She hesitated for only a brief moment, weighing whether she should be giving a twelve-year-old access to her control systems. Then she pulled up the code.

A secondary window appeared on screen, revealing layers of programming beneath the polished interface. Data feeds adjusted automatically in real time for wind shifts, humidity changes, temperature variations, atmospheric pressure fluctuations—dozens of micro-corrections happening every second.

"The system already makes tiny adjustments constantly," Zack said, studying the scrolling code. "Small ones that don't trigger any alerts because they're expected behavior."

"That's correct," she confirmed. "Environmental compensation is essential for maintaining stable plasma conditions."

"So we insert the harmonizer's field output into that existing correction loop," Zack said, his fingers tracing patterns on the screen without touching it. "We hide our modification inside the normal environmental adjustments."

Her eyes widened slightly as she understood what he was proposing. "You want to disguise a structural vector adjustment as routine environmental compensation."

He nodded. "Exactly. The monitoring system won't see it as a modification to the test parameters. It'll interpret it as the system stabilizing itself against atmospheric variance."

Miguel blinked, looking between them as understanding dawned. "So instead of telling the system we're changing how the test works..."

"We tell it we're just compensating for weather conditions," Zack finished. "Which it does automatically anyway."

Dr. Alvarez stared at the screen, her mind clearly working through the implications. "That would require completely rewriting the monitoring threshold logic. The system would need to accept much larger corrections without flagging them as anomalous."

"Yes, it would."

"And if compliance runs a detailed audit of the data afterward—"

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"They'll see fluctuation variance within acceptable noise parameters for a live atmospheric test," Zack said. "Nothing that would indicate intentional modification. Just a slightly unusual weather day that required more active compensation than normal."

She studied him with an expression that was difficult to read. Part respect, part concern, part curiosity.

"You've done something like this before," she said. It wasn't really a question.

Zack didn't answer directly, which told her everything she needed to know. His silence was answer enough.

Dr. Alvarez made a decision and moved quickly now, her fingers flying over the keyboard with practiced speed. "We'll need to create a temporary subroutine and insert it directly into the environmental compensation loop. Something that can accept the harmonizer's output and translate it into correction parameters the system will recognize as legitimate."

"I can handle that part," Zack said, already moving to stand beside her at the computer.

She paused, her hands hovering over the keys. "You understand my system architecture well enough to write code for it?"

"I understand patterns," he replied simply. "Your system follows logical patterns. I can work with that."

That almost made her smile despite the tension and time pressure. She stepped aside slightly, giving him better access to the keyboard. "All right then. Show me what you can do."

Miguel watched both of them lean toward the screen, their heads close together as they began working through the code line by line. Two scientists separated by decades of experience but connected by the same way of seeing problems and solutions.

For the first time since Davenport had walked out of the office, Miguel felt something that might have been hope. They actually might be able to pull this off.

## **Chapter 13 – A Rough Weather Day**

Dr. Alvarez rotated the monitor slightly so Zack could see the screen more clearly from where he was standing.

"This," she said, pointing to a gently undulating line that moved like a slow, steady heartbeat, "is the environmental compensation system running in real time. The plasma field is never completely still, even under ideal conditions. Wind shifts, humidity changes, subtle temperature differences over the water surface—all of it nudges the field constantly."

Miguel leaned in closer to the screen, studying the moving line. "So the system is always correcting for small stuff happening around it?"

"Exactly. Small variations. Normal ones that happen in any coastal environment." She zoomed in on a section of the graph, showing the gentle rise and fall more clearly.

Zack watched the line with focused attention. "How does it determine what counts as normal and what's an actual problem?"

"It averages the last thirty seconds of environmental data continuously and builds a rolling baseline from that," she explained. "If any reading moves too far outside the expected range from that baseline, a notification goes to compliance immediately."

"So if we just connect the harmonizer directly into the system," Miguel said slowly, working it through, "it'll look like a massive sudden spike on that graph."

"Exactly right. And that kind of spike would trigger an immediate review, which means Davenport would know about it before we'd even finished the installation."

Zack stayed quiet for several seconds, his eyes fixed on the slowly moving line on the screen. His expression was the concentrated, distant look he got when he was sorting through possibilities in his head. Then he looked up at her with a different question than she was expecting.

"What actually happened on the beach that first night?" he asked. "The night the outhouse was destroyed. Was that caused by your equipment?"

She paused, clearly surprised by the shift in direction.

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"The outhouse," he clarified. "The blast that started all of this. Was that connected to your test array?"

Miguel glanced between them, relieved someone was finally asking directly. He'd been wondering the same thing since that first night on the beach.

Dr. Alvarez walked to a different monitor and pulled up what looked like a recorded event log with timestamps. "No," she said. "That had nothing to do with our equipment. That event was completely natural."

She zoomed in on a visual replay of the event—not dramatic, just a simplified projection showing charge density building over the shoreline in shifting colors.

"Sometimes atmospheric electrical charge builds up naturally over warm saltwater," she said, her voice taking on the tone of a teacher who genuinely loves their subject. "It collects slowly over time. The warm air above the water and the salt-heavy ocean below act almost like opposite sides of a battery, building up charge between them."

Miguel blinked, staring at the display. "So the sky was literally charging itself up like a battery?"

"In a simplified sense, yes."

She advanced the timeline slightly, and they watched the colors in the projection deepen and concentrate.

"Eventually you get what we call a concentration point. A narrow column of air where the charge becomes too unstable to hold itself together any longer. If it discharges cleanly and spreads evenly, you see what the locals have been calling the hovering colors—those beautiful lights people filmed over the beach."

"And if it doesn't discharge cleanly?" Zack asked, though his tone suggested he already suspected the answer.

She kept her eyes on the screen. "Then it looks for the nearest available conductive path. Something it can travel through to release the energy."

Miguel swallowed hard, suddenly remembering the sound of the outhouse exploding in the dark. "Like wood? Or metal?"

"The structure had a metal latch and a metal roof," she said quietly. "Metal pathways through an otherwise non-conductive building. They provided exactly the kind of path the charge needed."

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She moved the timeline forward. The projection showed a sharp spike, then nothing.

"The discharge wasn't actually that large in terms of total energy," she said, studying the data. "But because it was so focused into such a small pathway, the effect was dramatic."

Zack was still watching the model carefully, his head tilted slightly. "So the plasma didn't choose the outhouse. It didn't target it deliberately."

"No. It simply followed the path of least electrical resistance. It wasn't intelligent. It was pressure looking for release."

He nodded slowly, almost to himself. "Electrical pressure seeking the easiest available outlet."

She glanced at him, surprised by the phrasing. "Yes. That's exactly right."

He watched the model run through its sequence one more time. "So if your test concentrates that same kind of energy deliberately offshore, and something unexpected interferes with the plasma field during discharge—"

"It could behave unpredictably," she finished. "The energy could redirect itself toward whatever conductive path is most available."

Miguel straightened up slowly, his expression grave. "And sixteen hundred tourists on a cruise ship make one very large metal object sitting right in the water."

"Yes," she said softly. "They do."

The office went quiet for a moment, the weight of that sitting on all of them. Then Zack turned his attention back to the compensation graph, his mind visibly shifting from understanding the problem to solving it.

"If the system already makes small adjustments for environmental fluctuations constantly," he said, thinking out loud, "then we don't really need to hide what the harmonizer is doing. We just need to teach the system to treat the harmonizer's output as part of the natural environment it's compensating for."

She studied him, following his reasoning. "Explain further."

"If we widen the baseline gradually over time instead of all at once, the harmonizer output won't register as a sudden intrusion. It'll look like a slightly unusual but still natural correction. Like the system is just doing what it always does, slightly more than usual."

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Miguel nodded, catching on. "Like convincing it the ocean is just having a rough weather day."

Zack almost smiled. "Something like that."

Dr. Alvarez leaned closer to the screen, already working through the technical challenges. "That approach only works if the harmonizer's output doesn't oscillate faster than the compensation system can keep up with."

She pulled up a new data window showing a complex waveform; jagged, irregular, constantly shifting like a living thing.

"That's the plasma pulse pattern," she said. "It's not smooth or predictable. It spikes and drops based on atmospheric conditions."

"How fast do the spikes come under high charge density?" Zack asked.

"Variable. Significantly faster when the concentration levels are high, which is exactly when we'd need the harmonizer most."

Zack thought for a moment, then reached over and placed the harmonizer device carefully on the desk next to the keyboard.

"It reads those pulse patterns in real time," he said. "Not just averaged data like your compensation system uses. It tracks micro-variations as they happen and adjusts instantly."

She looked at the device with new appreciation. "That core operating principle is based on my research."

"You published the theory," he replied simply. "We had the resources to extend its range and response speed significantly."

She didn't comment on that directly. Instead, she straightened up and looked back at the screen with renewed focus. "If we feed the harmonizer's live pulse readings directly into the compensation loop as a data source, the system would interpret its corrections as responses to genuine environmental changes. It would believe it's just compensating for an unusually active weather pattern."

"Yes. And it would log everything as normal atmospheric compensation activity."

Miguel leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms. "So instead of telling the computer we're secretly changing the experiment, we tell it the wind picked up and things got choppy."

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Dr. Alvarez nodded slowly. Then she looked at Zack with an expression that had moved well past skepticism. "You understand how systems work at a fundamental level. Not just this one."

Zack shrugged. "Systems follow patterns. Once you see the pattern, the rest is just details."

She held his gaze for a long, thoughtful moment. Then she said something unexpected. "People don't follow patterns the same way."

He blinked, caught off guard.

"Davenport, for example," she continued carefully. "You're assuming he won't push the test past its absolute safety limits. That he'll pull back before risking catastrophic failure in front of investors and media."

"That would be the logical decision," Zack said, but his voice carried just a trace of uncertainty now.

She held his gaze steadily. "You're assuming he's optimizing for safety."

"Isn't he?"

"No," she said quietly. "He's optimizing for impact. For the moment of spectacle that convinces his investors this technology is worth billions. Safety limits are boundaries to him. Impact is the goal."

That sat with Zack in a way that shifted something in his thinking. He didn't argue or immediately come back with a counter-analysis. He just held the thought for a moment, letting it change how he was seeing the problem. Then he turned back to the screen with renewed urgency.

"All right," he said. "Then we make absolutely sure that his impact doesn't become a disaster for sixteen hundred people who don't even know they're at risk."

Dr. Alvarez nodded once, decisive.

"Start writing the subroutine," she said. "I'll guide you through the system architecture."

And this time when he moved to the keyboard and began typing, she leaned over his shoulder, close and focused—not to take control away from him, but to guide him through territory she knew better than anyone else in the world.

Two of them, working together, racing a six-hour clock.

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## Chapter 14 – The Control Room

The warehouse control room felt smaller now than it had an hour ago.

Hotter too, despite the steady hum of air conditioning running overhead.

Dr. Alvarez stood at the central console, her eyes moving constantly between screens, monitoring the live system feeds. Zack had taken a secondary screen off to one side, watching the compensation graph with the focused patience of someone waiting for a specific signal. Miguel had positioned himself near the open doorway, his body angled so he could watch the corridor outside without being obviously visible to anyone passing by.

The masking loop was running exactly as they'd designed it. The baseline variance was widening gradually, fractions of a percent at a time. Slow enough to look like natural atmospheric fluctuation. Careful enough to stay completely invisible to the compliance monitoring system.

On Zack's display, the numbers inched upward with steady, reassuring patience.

Two-point-one percent.

Two-point-two.

Still well below the threshold that would trigger a compliance alert. Still invisible to anyone watching the system logs. Miguel kept his voice low, his eyes still on the corridor. "So far the ocean is being very dramatic about its weather."

"It's behaving exactly the way we told it to," Zack replied without looking up.

Dr. Alvarez glanced over her shoulder with something that might have been amusement under different circumstances. "Not told. Encouraged."

He almost smiled at that. Almost. Then something changed on his screen. Not dramatically. Not the kind of sudden shift that sets off alarm bells. Just a subtle restructuring of the data pattern, enough to make his eyes narrow and his brain shift into a different gear.

The primary system feed flickered and recalculated itself, the numbers rearranging in a way that didn't match the pattern he'd been tracking. Zack leaned closer to the screen, his jaw tightening.

"That's not right."

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Dr. Alvarez was beside him instantly, her eyes scanning the display. "What changed?"

"The compression rate. Someone adjusted it remotely. Look at the plasma column."

On the main projection screen, the simulated plasma column had narrowed visibly. It was thinner than it had been five minutes ago. Brighter. More concentrated, like light being focused through a magnifying glass.

Dr. Alvarez's expression hardened in a way that made Zack's stomach drop. "He authorized adaptive compression."

Miguel looked between them, his easy manner replaced with sharp attention. "That sounds like it's probably bad."

"It means he's tightening the plasma field," she said, her voice controlled but tight. "Concentrating the same amount of energy into a much narrower column."

"Why would Davenport do that right now?" Miguel asked. "Right before the test?"

Zack kept his eyes on the screen. "Because it looks more impressive."

Dr. Alvarez nodded once, her lips pressed together. "A wider plasma field is stable, but it looks diffuse. Spread out. A tighter column burns brighter. It looks cleaner and more dramatic on camera. More like the breakthrough technology he's been promising his investors."

Miguel muttered under his breath, "Better television."

The number in the corner of Zack's display continued its slow, patient climb. Two-point-four percent.

Two-point-five.

Zack's throat felt dry. "What actually happens if he keeps increasing the compression?"

Dr. Alvarez turned to face him fully, her answer immediate and precise. "Pressure builds inside the containment field."

"What kind of pressure?"

She reached past him and angled the screen slightly, then pointed at the plasma column simulation. "Right now the plasma is spreading its electrical charge over a relatively wide area. That width is what keeps it balanced and stable. If you force the same amount of energy into a narrower space, the

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charge has far fewer places to distribute itself."

Miguel watched the screen, working it through. "Like putting your thumb over the end of a garden hose. Same amount of water, but now it's all pushing through a smaller opening."

"Yes," she said. "Except this particular hose carries electrical energy at temperatures significantly hotter than a bolt of lightning."

Zack studied the projection carefully, running calculations in his head. "And if the containment boundary holds under that kind of pressure?"

"Then the demonstration will be genuinely spectacular," she admitted. "Exactly what Davenport promised. A brilliant, narrow column of controlled plasma energy." She paused. "The investors will be very impressed."

"And if the boundary doesn't hold?"

She met his eyes directly. "The discharge will instantly seek the nearest available conductive path."

Miguel had gone very still in the doorway. "The cruise ship," he said quietly.

"Or anything else within range that conducts electricity," she replied. "Metal hulls. Dock cranes. Communications towers. The seawater itself in a broad arc."

The number ticked upward again. Two-point-seven. Two-point-eight.

Zack's voice dropped lower. "How close is he to the absolute safety limit?"

Dr. Alvarez pulled up a secondary overlay on the screen—a faint red line marking the maximum projected containment tolerance. The boundary the system had been designed to never cross.

"He's approaching it," she said.

Miguel stared at the line, at how close the climbing number was getting to it. "Approaching as in how close exactly?"

She kept her eyes on the screen. "If he increases compression by another five percent from where he is right now, we enter what the model classifies as non-linear instability."

Miguel grimaced. "In regular human language?"

"The system stops behaving in ways we can predict or model," she said simply. "The math breaks down."

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Zack understood the implications immediately and completely. "Cascade failure," he said. "Everything goes at once."

"Yes."

The simulation flickered as the adaptive compression algorithm recalculated automatically, doing exactly what it had been programmed to do.

Two-point-nine-one. Two-point-nine-three.

Zack felt something tighten in his chest that hadn't been there before. "He wouldn't actually push past the safety limit," he said. "Not with investors watching in real time. He knows what's at risk."

Dr. Alvarez didn't respond to that right away. Instead, she pulled up the system authorization log and let the screen speak for itself. Davenport's credentials sat at the top of the list, timestamped just minutes ago.

Manual override: approved. Field intensity parameter: increased by 8%.  
Visual enhancement protocol: enabled.

Zack frowned at the last line. "Visual enhancement?"

"It boosts the luminosity of the plasma field for the broadcast camera feed," she said flatly. "Makes it more photogenic."

Miguel let out a long, disbelieving breath. "He's making it brighter. He's making it look better for the cameras."

"Yes."

"While it's already sitting at the edge of the safety line."

"Yes."

Two-point-nine-six.

Zack kept his eyes on the moving number, forcing his voice to stay analytical. "If the containment boundary actually fails under this level of compression, how quickly does it happen?"

Dr. Alvarez's answer came without hesitation. "Instantly."

He looked at her. "There's no gradual warning? No slow degradation we could respond to?"

"No warning," she said, her voice steady even as the implications of that hung in the air between them. "If the containment field collapses under this kind of compression, the plasma doesn't gradually disperse or slowly fade. It arcs. Immediately. To the nearest conductive mass it can find."

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The image of the Aurora Pacific flashed through Zack's mind. White hull. Metal decks. Crowded railings. Families taking photos of the sunset, not knowing what was building offshore.

Two-point-nine-eight.

Miguel shifted his weight in the doorway, his casual posture gone completely. "He knows all of this, right? Davenport actually understands what he's doing right now?"

Dr. Alvarez's voice was measured and careful. "He knows the probability of containment failure is low."

"Low isn't zero," Miguel said immediately.

"No," she said. "It isn't."

Two-point-nine-nine. Zack's fingers hovered over the keyboard without touching it.

For the first time since he'd arrived in Bucerías, since he'd stepped off the transport into warm salt air and emergency sirens, he felt the uncomfortable weight of something he genuinely hadn't planned for.

He had modeled the physics of the plasma field. He had modeled the system thresholds and safety parameters. He had modeled the containment tolerances under multiple scenarios. He had not modeled what happened when the most dangerous variable in the room wasn't the plasma.

It was the person controlling it.

"He's deliberately pushing right to the edge of the limit," Zack said quietly. "Not past it. Just close enough to look as impressive as possible without technically crossing the line."

Dr. Alvarez didn't look away from the display.

"Yes," she said, and the single word carried everything she wasn't saying out loud.

The number on the screen held steady. Two-point-nine-nine.

Perfectly, impossibly balanced right at the edge. Held.

## Chapter 15 – The Aurora Pacific

The Aurora Pacific sat steady against her anchor chains, the massive cruise ship barely swaying in the calm afternoon water. Sunlight glinted off polished brass railings and the long rows of tinted windows that marked each deck level. From this distance, the vessel looked almost peaceful, like a floating hotel enjoying a quiet afternoon.

From the bridge, high above the water, the plasma column rising from the test site looked almost unreal. A pale, shimmering spear of light that stretched straight up from the ocean surface into the sky, perfectly vertical, steady as a lighthouse beam.

First Officer Grant lowered his binoculars and let out a low whistle of appreciation. "I've got to admit, that's actually pretty impressive. You don't see that every day."



Captain Marquez stood beside him at the wide observation windows, hands clasped behind her back in the relaxed posture of someone who'd been commanding ships for two decades. She didn't disagree with his assessment.

"It's very precise," she said. "Whatever they're doing out there, they've clearly got it under control."

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Below them, several decks down at water level, the tender boats continued their steady rhythm between ship and shore. Small white boats with the ship's logo painted on their sides bobbed gently in the calm bay, ferrying groups of passengers in bright orange life vests toward the beach and the town beyond.

"Third tender departing on schedule," the bridge communications officer reported from her station, not looking up from her screen.

"Good. Keep them staggered on the approach," Marquez replied automatically. "I don't want boats clustering at the dock. Traffic control stays smooth."

"Aye, Captain."

Grant checked his watch, then looked back out at the plasma column with casual interest. "Local industry sure picked a good day to run their demonstration. Beautiful weather, calm seas, and we're providing them with a built-in audience of tourists with cameras."

Captain Marquez allowed herself the smallest smile. "As long as whatever they're doing stays safely out there where it belongs."

She watched the column for a moment longer, studying it with the professional eye of someone who'd spent years learning to read the ocean and the sky.

The light pulsed slightly brighter, the color shifting from pale white to a warmer, more golden tone.

Still perfectly vertical, though. Still contained within whatever invisible boundaries they'd set for it.

"Any updates from port authority?" she asked, turning slightly toward the communications station.

"Just the routine update we got an hour ago, Captain. Demonstration is proceeding within approved maritime perimeter. No alerts, no advisories, no changes to their timeline."

Marquez nodded, satisfied. "All right then. We maintain current position and keep watch. Standard protocols."

On the upper passenger decks far below the bridge, scattered applause broke out as the plasma column intensified slightly, becoming brighter and more dramatic. Phones were raised high along the railings, everyone wanting to capture the unusual sight to show friends back home.

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Somewhere near the forward observation deck, a child's excited voice carried clearly across the water. "Mom! Look! It's getting brighter! It's so pretty!"

On the bridge, no one looked concerned. Why would they be?

The demonstration was beautiful. Controlled. Happening exactly where it was supposed to happen, well within the safety perimeter that maritime authorities had approved. Exactly as advertised.

First Officer Grant took a sip from his coffee mug, still watching the light show. "You know, if this becomes a regular thing, we might want to adjust our anchoring schedule. Passengers would pay extra for front-row seats to something like this."

Captain Marquez chuckled quietly. "Let's make sure it works first before we start selling tickets to it."

The plasma column pulsed again, a gentle rhythm like breathing.

Everything on the Aurora Pacific remained perfectly, blissfully normal.

## Chapter 16 – An Impressive Display

Containment deviation: 2.99%. The number sat there on the screen like a held breath, not moving, not changing. Three long seconds passed. Four. Five.

Zack barely allowed himself to breathe. Dr. Alvarez stood perfectly still with one hand resting lightly against the edge of the console, her entire focus locked on the display showing that single flickering number.

Miguel shifted his weight from one foot to the other, the silence getting to him. "So... that's good though, right? If it's just holding steady at that level?"

"For the moment," Alvarez replied quietly, her voice carrying a tension that hadn't been there a minute ago.

The number shifted. 2.97. Zack let out a slow, careful breath. "The system is compensating. It's pulling back from the edge."

2.98. 2.99. Then the number jumped upward. 3.01.

A soft chime sounded from somewhere in the control system. Not a blaring alarm or emergency klaxon. Just a single clear tone that somehow carried more weight than any loud noise could have. A warning that something had crossed a line it wasn't supposed to cross.

Miguel looked quickly from the screen to Zack's face, reading his expression. "That sound didn't seem particularly reassuring."

"The masking loop caught it," Zack said, his eyes never leaving the scrolling data. "Our modifications absorbed the spike and disguised it as environmental correction. That's what it's designed to do."

The number dropped again, responding to the system's automatic adjustments. 2.96.

On the main projection screen mounted on the wall, the plasma column visible in the live camera feed tightened slightly. It became noticeably thinner, the light concentrating into a narrower beam that burned brighter against the blue afternoon sky.

Dr. Alvarez's eyes narrowed with immediate understanding. "He's adjusting the compression parameters again. Right now."

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Zack turned sharply toward her. "You can tell that just from watching the projection?"

She was already pulling up the system override log, her fingers moving quickly across the keyboard. "Yes. Look. Manual field intensity increase authorized thirty seconds ago. One-point-five percent increase in compression."

Miguel frowned, confused and frustrated. "Why would Davenport do that if the system is already stable at the limit? Why push it higher?"

"Because it looks better on camera," Alvarez said flatly, not bothering to hide the anger in her voice anymore. "A narrower column reads as more controlled. Brighter output looks more powerful. It's more impressive for the investors watching the live feed."

The containment deviation number began climbing again, but this time the movement wasn't smooth or steady. 2.94.

2.98. 2.99.

It hovered right there, wobbling back and forth like it couldn't decide which direction to go.

Zack leaned closer to his display, studying the pattern of fluctuation. "It's not settling into a stable state. The value is oscillating."

Miguel looked between them. "Meaning what exactly?"

"It means the system is actively searching for a balance point," Alvarez explained, her voice tight. "Trying to distribute the pressure evenly. But Davenport isn't giving it enough time to find equilibrium before he makes another adjustment."

The value jumped again, the fluctuations getting wider. 3.00. 2.97.

3.02. The warning tone sounded again, longer this time. More insistent.

On the large wall screen showing the containment field simulation, the boundary around the plasma column shimmered faintly. A subtle bulge formed along the right side of the projected field, like an invisible balloon being pressed from the inside, pushing against the containment boundary.

Zack felt his stomach drop. "He shortened the system's recalculation window, didn't he?"

Alvarez checked the system settings quickly, then her jaw visibly tightened. "Yes. It's set to ten seconds now."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"It was thirty seconds when we checked an hour ago," Zack said, more a statement than question.

"Yes it was."

Zack's mind raced through the implications. "So he's forcing the system to make corrections faster and faster. But the plasma field can't redistribute its internal pressure evenly if the containment parameters are constantly being changed. It needs time to stabilize."

On the live camera feed showing the actual bay and test site, the plasma column pulsed noticeably brighter. A faint ripple traveled visibly down its length from top to bottom, then vanished.

Miguel took a step closer to the screen. "That looked different than before."

"It was different," Alvarez confirmed, her voice dropping lower. "That ripple was lateral stress showing itself. The field is under significant pressure."

The containment deviation number flickered again, the oscillations getting worse. 2.99.

3.03. The warning chime sharpened into something more urgent.

The boundary projection on the screen stretched visibly to one side, distorting the perfect circle into something more oval-shaped. It wasn't breaking yet, but the containment field was definitely thinning in that spot, the boundary line getting narrower and more fragile-looking.

Like a rubber band being pulled tighter and tighter toward its breaking point.

Zack felt the understanding hit him with sudden clarity before he'd fully processed all the data. "He's not just increasing the brightness of the display. He's compressing the plasma column faster than the outer containment field can physically adjust to compensate."

Alvarez nodded once, sharp and tense. "And if the outer containment ring can't adjust its shape quickly enough to maintain balance—"

"The pressure looks for release somewhere else," Zack finished, his throat dry. "Anywhere else."

The deviation value dipped again. 2.95.

But when Zack looked at the containment boundary projection, it hadn't returned to its original circular shape. The distortion remained, still visibly warped on one side.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Miguel stared at it, his casual demeanor completely gone now. "That boundary shape doesn't look like it went back to normal."

"That's because it didn't," Alvarez said quietly. "The field has been stressed. It's holding, but it's been permanently deformed by the pressure spike."

The number began climbing again, faster this time.

3.01.

3.04. The warning tone grew sharper, more insistent, edging toward alarm.

On the live camera feed of the test site, a thin line of brilliant light peeled sideways from the main plasma column for a split second, shooting horizontally across the screen—

Then snapped back violently into the main column, absorbed back into the containment field.

Miguel actually took a full step backward from the screen. "Okay. That was definitely not part of the approved demonstration."

"No," Alvarez said, already reaching for the security access card hanging on a lanyard around her neck. "We can't stabilize this from here anymore. The local controls don't have enough authority."

Zack looked at her, understanding immediately. "Main control room. We need direct system access."

"Yes. If we're going to prevent cascade failure, we need to be at the primary console where we can override Davenport's adjustments directly."

The containment deviation flickered upward again.

3.05. This time the number didn't immediately fall back down. It held there, hovering right at the edge.

The boundary projection warped visibly farther, the distortion stretching the circle into an obvious oval shape before it managed to tighten slightly.

But it didn't return to normal. It stayed deformed.

Miguel glanced toward the door, then back at the screens. "That thing is about to stop asking for permission and just do what it wants."

Zack didn't waste time answering. He was already moving toward the door, Dr. Alvarez right behind him, Miguel bringing up the rear.

The warning tone followed them into the corridor, getting louder with each step they took away from it.

## Chapter 17 – Tender Three

The Aurora Pacific rested steady at anchor, barely moving in the calm afternoon water. Sunlight flashed and danced across the bay in restless patterns of glitter, reflecting off thousands of tiny waves.

On the bridge, Captain Marquez stood at her usual position near the observation windows, hands loosely clasped behind her back, watching the bright plasma column rising from the water a few nautical miles away.

It was beautiful, she had to admit, in an unnatural sort of way. Too perfectly straight. Too geometrically clean. Nothing in nature made lines that precise.

First Officer Grant shifted his stance beside her, adjusting his footing slightly. "They've really tightened that column up since we first spotted it. Looks much sharper than it did an hour ago."

Marquez gave a small nod of acknowledgment. "As long as whatever they're doing stays safely out there where it belongs, I'm content to let them have their demonstration."

Several decks below them at water level, one of the ship's tenders was cutting steadily back toward the Aurora Pacific from shore, its wake fanning out behind it in a clean white V-shape. Passengers wearing bright orange life vests leaned against the tender's safety rails, laughing and talking excitedly, holding up phones to capture the glowing spectacle in the distance.

Grant lifted his binoculars and focused on the plasma column again, studying it more carefully this time.

His expression changed.

"Captain..." He paused, uncertain. "Does that look like it's moving to you?"

Marquez took the binoculars from him without a word and raised them to her eyes.

At first glance, the column appeared completely steady. Perfectly vertical. Exactly as it had been for the past half hour.

Then she saw it.

A faint shimmer along one side of the column. A subtle ripple in the light that didn't belong there, like heat distortion rising off hot pavement—except sharper somehow. More defined.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

The shimmer smoothed out after a moment.

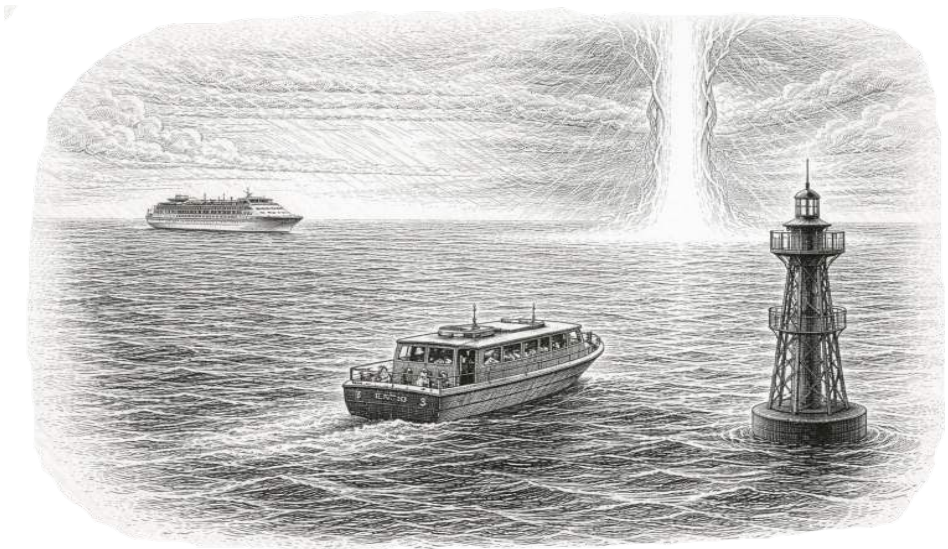
Then it came back, stronger than before.

On the passenger decks far below the bridge, scattered applause and excited shouting broke out as the plasma column brightened dramatically, becoming more intense and golden. Through the thick safety glass of the bridge windows, the sound of celebration felt oddly hollow and distant.

Grant spoke quietly, his voice taking on a more professional tone. "Captain, Tender Three is currently mid-channel. They're in open water returning to ship."

Marquez shifted her view through the binoculars to find the smaller vessel. It was positioned well clear of the marked safety perimeter around the test site, exactly where it should be according to maritime protocols.

Everything appeared completely normal. The plasma column pulsed again, the light intensifying.



This time, a thin thread of brilliant light peeled visibly away from the main column's side, stretching horizontally across the water like a reaching finger. It snapped back into the column almost instantly, reabsorbed into the main beam.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Grant lowered his own binoculars slowly. "Do you think that was part of their scheduled demonstration?"

"No," Marquez muttered, her voice flat. "It wasn't."

The column flared again, burning even brighter now.

The entire structure seemed to squeeze inward at its base, compressing like someone was gripping it.

The thin arc of light stretched out again, farther than before.

This time it didn't immediately retract back to the column.

It wavered in the air, hanging there suspended.

Then, slowly but unmistakably, it began to bend.

Curving through the air.

Toward open water.

Toward Tender Three.

Grant stepped forward instinctively, his body tensing. "Captain, that arc is drifting toward the tender."

Marquez didn't hesitate for even a second.

"Bridge to Tender Three, adjust your course immediately. Come two degrees to port. Repeat, alter course two degrees to port. Acknowledge."

She kept her voice calm and professional, but there was steel underneath it. This was an order, not a suggestion.

The radio crackled with static as the transmission went out across the water. The arc of light brightened significantly, becoming almost blinding to look at directly. It curved more sharply now, bending through the air with visible intent.

Along the passenger railings of the Aurora Pacific, people gasped in surprise and then cheered louder, thinking this dramatic display was all part of the planned choreography. Part of the show they'd been promised.

On the bridge, no one was cheering.

Grant's voice tightened with barely controlled tension. "Captain—"

The arc suddenly leapt forward through the air. A blinding flash of white light swallowed the tender's entire silhouette.

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The explosion that followed cracked across the bay like a massive thunderclap, a sound so loud it rattled the bridge windows in their frames and made everyone on the bridge flinch instinctively.

For one terrible heartbeat, the tender completely disappeared behind a wall of rising smoke and white spray blown up from the water's surface.

"Impact!" someone on the bridge crew shouted.

Marquez's hands gripped the edge of the console hard enough that her knuckles went white. "Damage report! Tender Three, respond immediately! Do you copy?"

Nothing but static hissed from the radio speaker. One second passed. Then another. Then three more that felt like an eternity.

Grey smoke drifted slowly across the disturbed water, obscuring everything.

Through the thinning edge of the smoke, the shape of Tender Three finally emerged into view—tilted at an angle, rocking violently back and forth in the chaotic wake created by the blast.

But intact. Still floating. The radio suddenly burst to life with a rush of voices and background noise.

"Tender Three to bridge! We're intact! Repeat, vessel is intact and all passengers accounted for!"

Marquez felt something unclench in her chest, but she didn't allow herself to relax. "Report your exact status. What's your condition?"

"We experienced severe wake from the blast event, Captain, but the discharge did not strike our vessel directly. The navigation buoy positioned off our port side—it took the full impact. The buoy is completely destroyed. We're maneuvering clear of the debris field now and returning to ship at best speed."

Grant let out a long breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding in his lungs.

Through the slowly clearing smoke, twisted chunks of metal that had once been a channel marker bobbed and sank in the disturbed water where the buoy had stood moments before.

On the passenger decks of the Aurora Pacific, the excited cheering had transformed into confused shouting and then genuine screaming as people finally understood what they'd just witnessed.

## **The Bucerías Anomaly**

Captain Marquez's voice hardened instantly into pure command authority. "All tenders abort shore operations and return to vessel immediately. Full alert status across all departments. Notify port authority of the incident. I want immediate confirmation from test organizers regarding perimeter stability and containment status. Now."

She turned her gaze back toward the plasma column still burning over the bay in the distance.

It continued to rise from the water, still glowing, still visible. But it no longer looked steady or controlled. It looked alive now. Unstable. And very dangerous.

## Chapter 18 – Óscar

The alarms filling the control room were no longer subtle suggestions that something might be slightly wrong.

They weren't screaming emergency klaxons yet, but they definitely weren't being polite anymore either. A steady, insistent warning tone pulsed through the space in rhythmic waves while the assembled investors stood frozen, staring at the main display screen where the buoy's twisted metal remains drifted slowly in the disturbed water.

Davenport stood near the front of the room, completely still for three full seconds. Then he moved. Not frantically. Not with any hint of panic or loss of control.

He stepped forward calmly, placing his hands lightly on the back of an empty chair as if what had just happened was nothing more than a minor technical hiccup. A small deviation from the script that meant absolutely nothing.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, his voice perfectly even and controlled, "what you just witnessed was a perimeter interaction event. A non-critical boundary response. The containment system identified and neutralized a potential variance exactly as it was designed to do."

A murmur passed through the assembled investors like a wave. Some people looked reassured by his calm certainty. Others seemed less convinced.

On the main display screen mounted on the wall, the plasma column continued burning over the bay. It looked perfectly steady from this angle. Controlled. Beautiful even.

It wasn't.

Across the room at a monitoring station, Zack was staring at the live telemetry data that the investors couldn't see from where they stood. Numbers that told a very different story than Davenport's words.

"The containment field didn't return to baseline," he said quietly, keeping his voice low so only Alvarez and Miguel could hear. "Look at the deviation values. They're still elevated."

Alvarez leaned closer to her screen, her eyes scanning the data feed. "No. It didn't stabilize. The system is holding containment, but it's under continuous stress now."

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The boundary projection on their secondary monitor showed the truth. The containment field was still flexing and distorting, the shape pulsing in and out slightly. Not violently. Not catastrophically. But wrong. Definitely wrong.

Miguel started to turn to say something to the group—

And stopped mid-motion.

"Wait. Where's Óscar?"

Zack didn't answer immediately.

Because at that exact moment, he saw something on one of the exterior security camera feeds mounted along the dock perimeter.

A familiar figure moving fast across the concrete. Running with clear purpose. Toward the massive crane positioned at the edge of the test site.

"There," Zack said, pointing at the small monitor showing the exterior camera angle.

Miguel moved closer to look. "What's he doing?"

Alvarez pulled up a wider view from a different camera. The angle showed more of the dock layout, including the crane's position relative to the plasma column still burning over the water.

Her expression changed as she understood.

"The crane," she said. "It's a massive conductive structure positioned at the edge of the perimeter. If the plasma arcs again in another direction and seeks the nearest conductive path—"

"It hits the crane," Zack finished, his throat suddenly tight.

On the screen, Óscar reached the base of the crane structure and started climbing the external maintenance ladder without any hesitation.

Miguel's voice rose with sudden alarm. "He can't just climb up there! That thing is a giant lightning rod if the plasma breaks containment again!"

"I think he knows that," Zack said quietly, watching the screen.

"Then why—" Miguel stopped himself, his eyes widening as understanding hit. "He's going to try to ground it somehow. Redirect the charge if it arcs toward the crane."

Alvarez was already pulling up the crane's electrical systems on her console, her fingers flying across the keyboard. "If he can access the crane's power distribution panel and connect it to the dock's main ground system before

## The Bucerías Anomaly

another discharge event, he might be able to create a safer pathway for the energy. Channel it down into the ground instead of letting it arc through the structure."

"Might," Miguel repeated, his voice tight.

"Yes," she said. "Might."

On the security feed, Óscar was climbing higher, moving with the practiced efficiency of someone who'd worked on dock equipment his entire adult life.

The plasma column pulsed brighter in the distance behind him. The containment deviation number on Zack's screen ticked upward.

3.07.

3.09. The warning tone in the control room grew sharper.

In the investor viewing area, Davenport was still talking smoothly, still maintaining his calm certainty that everything was perfectly under control.

But on the monitors that told the truth, the numbers kept climbing.

And Óscar kept climbing with them.

## **Chapter 19 – Climbing The Crane**

Óscar didn't hesitate for even a second. The buoy strike had told him everything he needed to know about what was happening out there over the water.

Energy like that didn't just disappear into nothing when it broke free from containment. It had to go somewhere. It always went somewhere. And it would choose the path that gave it the least resistance.

He reached the base of the massive dock crane and grabbed the first rung of the external maintenance ladder without looking back at the control building or the confused investors or anyone who might try to stop him.

Below him on the dock, scattered groups of workers in reflective vests and hard hats were shouting to each other, their voices carrying across the concrete. Some were pointing at the plasma column. Others were looking at the crane. None of them seemed sure whether they should be running away from the waterfront or staying frozen in place to see what happened next.

Óscar climbed, his hands finding each rung automatically from years of experience working dock equipment.

The wind hit harder the higher he went, tugging at his shirt and whipping around the metal framework. The entire crane structure vibrated faintly under his boots with each step upward, humming with a frequency he could feel through the ladder rungs more than hear.

He didn't understand plasma field compression or containment boundary mathematics or any of the technical terms Zack and the scientist had been throwing around in that control room.

But he understood metal. He'd worked with it his entire adult life. He understood height and weight distribution and how structures responded to stress.

And he understood, deep in his gut where instinct lived, that if that column of energy lashed out sideways again looking for somewhere to discharge, it would choose the tallest conductive object it could find within range.

## **The Bucerías Anomaly**

The crane towered above everything else on this section of the dock. Which meant the plasma would choose it. And Óscar intended to make absolutely certain that when it did, he'd already made that choice safer for everyone else on the ground below.

He kept climbing, his breathing steady despite the exertion, one hand over the other, one boot finding purchase after another.

The plasma column burned in his peripheral vision, impossibly bright against the afternoon sky. He didn't look at it directly. He just kept climbing toward the crane's power distribution panel, fifty feet above the dock surface, where he could do what needed to be done.

## **Chapter 20 – Captain Marquez**

"Captain, all tenders have acknowledged and are maneuvering to return to the vessel," First Officer Grant reported from his position near the navigation console, his voice carrying that careful professional tone people use when they're trying not to show how worried they actually are.

"Good. Keep them moving at best speed," Marquez replied, her hands gripping the railing in front of the observation windows. "I want every small craft back alongside within ten minutes. No exceptions."

She didn't take her eyes off the plasma column burning in the distance. It was no longer rising perfectly vertical from the water's surface the way it had been for the past hour. There was a definite lean to it now, a slight angle that shouldn't be there. Subtle enough that most people probably wouldn't notice it yet. But unmistakable to anyone who knew what they were looking at.

"Captain," the communications officer called out from her station, her hand pressed against her headset. "Port authority is on the line. They're requesting immediate confirmation of system stability from the test coordinators. They want to know if we need to initiate emergency protocols."

Marquez opened her mouth to respond. But the words never came out. Because at that exact moment, the plasma column pulsed violently.

Harder than before. More intense. The entire structure of light convulsed like something alive, the glow flaring so bright that it hurt to look at directly even from this distance.

Grant took an involuntary step back from the windows. "That's getting worse, not better."

"No argument here," Marquez said quietly, her mind already racing through emergency procedures and evacuation timelines and a hundred other things she'd trained for but hoped she'd never actually need.

The column flickered again, throwing off visible ripples of distorted light that spread outward through the air like shockwaves.

Along the passenger decks below, the screaming was getting louder. More panicked. People who'd thought they were watching an impressive technology demonstration were starting to realize they might be watching something far more dangerous.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"Communications," Marquez said, her voice taking on the absolute authority of command. "Tell port authority we are declaring a maritime safety concern. I want confirmation that test operations are being suspended immediately. And get me a direct line to whoever is running that demonstration. Right now."

"Aye, Captain. Attempting contact."

Grant was checking the navigation display, tracking the returning tenders. "Captain, Tender One is approximately eight hundred meters from our position and closing. Tender Two is right behind them at nine hundred meters."

"And Tender Three?" Marquez asked. The one that had nearly been hit. The one that had watched a navigation buoy get vaporized just off their port side.

"Still inbound from the incident location, ma'am. They're running at full speed but they're the farthest out. Approximately twelve hundred meters and closing."

Marquez felt her jaw tighten. Tender Three had already been through enough today. She wanted that boat back alongside where she could see it.

"Distance from our position to the test column?" she asked.

"We're holding at two nautical miles, ma'am. Just outside the revised safety perimeter they established this morning."

Just outside. Barely outside. The plasma column pulsed again, even harder this time. The light intensified to the point where it looked almost solid, like a pillar of white-hot metal rising from the ocean.

Marquez made a decision.

"Helm, prepare to weigh anchor on my command. I want us ready to maneuver if that situation deteriorates further."

"Preparing to weigh anchor, aye," came the immediate response from the helmsman.

"Captain," the communications officer said, frustration clear in her voice. "Still no response from test operations. We're getting automated messages only. No one is picking up."

Of course they weren't. Because whoever was running that demonstration knew exactly how badly it was failing, and they were too busy trying to save it to answer phone calls from concerned ship captains.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Or they were trying to hide just how out of control it really was.

Marquez watched the column pulse again, the light flaring brighter with each cycle. Whatever was happening over there at that test site, it wasn't stable. It wasn't controlled. And she had sixteen hundred passengers and crew depending on her to keep them safe.

"All hands," she said clearly, her voice carrying across the bridge and through the ship's intercom system simultaneously. "This is the Captain. We are implementing precautionary measures due to unstable conditions in the offshore demonstration area. All passengers are to move to interior spaces away from exterior railings immediately. All tenders expedite return to vessel. This is not a drill."

The words felt heavy leaving her mouth. But they needed to be said.

Grant was still watching the plasma column through his binoculars, his face drawn and tense.

"Captain," he said quietly. "Whatever they're doing over there... they're losing control of it."

Marquez didn't answer. Because she was thinking exactly the same thing.

## Chapter 21 – The Mathematics Of Catastrophe

The containment deviation number climbed steadily on Zack's monitor, each tick upward feeling like another step toward something inevitable.

3.6. 3.9.

Dr. Alvarez's fingers moved quickly across her interface, pulling up system logs and authorization records with practiced efficiency. Her expression grew darker with each screen she opened.

"He's still actively compressing the field," she said, her voice tight with controlled anger. "Look at this. He hasn't reduced output at all. If anything, he increased it again thirty seconds ago."

Zack leaned closer to study the waveform pattern displayed on the secondary monitor. The line that showed plasma stability had been relatively smooth earlier in the demonstration, with only minor fluctuations. Now it looked completely different. Jagged. Uneven. Spiking irregularly like the heartbeat of something stressed beyond its limits.

"He thinks the buoy absorbed the anomaly," Zack said, understanding Davenport's logic even as he saw how wrong it was. "He thinks that discharge event released the built-up pressure, and now the system has corrected itself back to stable parameters."

"Then he's dangerously wrong," Alvarez replied, pulling up another data stream. "The pressure didn't release. It redistributed. The containment field is still under massive stress. It's actually worse now than it was before the buoy strike."

On the large monitor showing the investor viewing room, one of the remote observers—a woman in an expensive suit joining via video conference—leaned forward toward her camera with a carefully neutral expression.

"Mr. Davenport," she said, her tone professionally diplomatic but with an edge underneath. "That interaction we just witnessed appeared... energetic. Some might say unexpectedly so."

Davenport turned toward the camera with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. The expression was perfectly calculated to project confidence and control.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"Powerful systems are inherently dynamic systems," he said smoothly, like he was explaining something obvious to a child. "What you witnessed was not a failure. It was resilience. The containment field identified a variance, responded appropriately, and maintained integrity. That's exactly what we promised you this technology could do."

But even as he spoke those reassuring words to the people watching remotely, the containment deviation value on Zack's hidden monitor continued climbing.

4.0.

4.2.

In the corner of the plasma field projection, the boundary distortion that had appeared during the buoy strike widened visibly. The containment field wasn't healing itself. It was degrading.

Miguel grabbed Zack's sleeve suddenly, his fingers tight with urgency.

"Zack. Look at the projection. It's building pressure again. Right now."

"I see it," Zack said quietly, his eyes fixed on the screen.

He pulled up the full three-dimensional model of the plasma column and its surrounding containment field, rotating it slowly to see all angles.

For the first time since the demonstration had begun hours ago, Zack realized he wasn't trying to calculate future states anymore. He wasn't running projections of what might happen in the next five minutes or ten minutes. He was calculating present damage. Immediate danger. The mathematics of catastrophe that was already in motion.

"If that field loses containment and arcs again," he said slowly, working through the physics in his head, "it won't hit another buoy this time."

The words hung in the air between them.

Alvarez turned away from her console to look at him directly. "What do you mean?"

Zack gestured toward the live camera feed showing the dock area. "The buoy was the tallest conductive object in that specific radius when the plasma arced the first time. But look at the field angle now. Look at where the pressure is building."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

He pointed at the distortion in the containment boundary. It wasn't symmetrical anymore. The bulge in the field was pushing toward one specific direction.

Toward the dock. Toward the industrial equipment. Alvarez followed his gesture to the camera feed. And saw the crane rising against the sky. Her face went pale.

"Óscar," she breathed.

On the live feed, they could just barely make out a small figure still climbing the maintenance ladder, moving steadily higher up the massive metal structure.

The deviation number ticked higher.

4.4.

4.5.

In the investor room, Davenport was still talking smoothly about energy efficiency and commercial applications, his voice projecting absolute certainty. But on every monitor that showed the actual data, the truth was undeniable. The plasma column was becoming more unstable with each passing second.

And Óscar was climbing directly into the path of what would happen when it finally broke free. Zack's hands moved to his keyboard, fingers hovering over the keys.

"We need to activate the harmonizer now," he said. "Right now. We're out of time for subtle corrections."

Alvarez looked at the authorization screen, then at Davenport's back visible through the glass partition.

"If we override his controls without clearance, he'll know immediately. He'll shut us down."

"If we don't override them," Zack replied, his voice steady despite the fear climbing up his spine, "people are going to die."

The containment deviation hit 4.7. The plasma column pulsed brighter, so intense it was hard to look at directly even through the camera feed. Miguel was staring at the live video of the crane, watching Óscar climb higher.

"Do it," he said quietly. "Whatever you have to do. Just do it."

## **The Bucerías Anomaly**

Dr. Alvarez took a deep breath. Then her fingers moved to activate the harmonizer integration sequence they'd built. The one that would save lives. The one that would end her career.

She didn't hesitate.

"Initiating field redirection protocol," she said. "Authorization Alvarez-Zero-Seven-Alpha."

The system accepted the command. Deep in the code they'd carefully hidden inside the environmental compensation loop, the harmonizer came online.

And somewhere over the bay, invisible to everyone watching, the plasma field began to shift.

## Chapter 22 – Grounding The Crane

Óscar reached the upper platform of the crane just as the sky flared brilliant white again, the plasma column pulsing so bright it left afterimages burned into his vision even when he squeezed his eyes shut.

The metal platform beneath his boots vibrated constantly now, humming at a frequency that made his teeth ache. The entire crane structure was resonating with something he couldn't see but could definitely feel. A kind of electric tension in the air itself.

He didn't like it. Not one bit.

He didn't understand plasma containment fields or atmospheric charge distribution or any of the technical terms the scientists used when they talked about what was happening out there over the water.

But he understood storms. He'd worked these docks through hurricanes and lightning strikes and electrical failures that left half the harbor in darkness. He'd seen what happened when nature decided to discharge energy through the path of least resistance.

And he'd learned one simple, essential rule that had kept him alive through thirty years of dock work: When lightning is coming, you give it something tall and properly grounded to hit. Something that can handle the energy and send it safely into the earth where it belongs. Otherwise it finds its own path. Usually through people.

The crane had an emergency grounding system built in—a thick copper chain kept secured along the inner frame near the top platform, installed decades ago for use during severe electrical storms when the entire harbor operations had to shut down for safety.

Óscar had used it twice before in his career. He'd never thought he'd be using it for something like this.

He dropped to one knee on the platform, his work-roughened hands finding the metal housing that protected the grounding mechanism from weather and salt corrosion. His fingers wrapped around the emergency release latch.

He pulled. The latch stuck for half a second, corroded from years of salt air. Óscar swore under his breath in Spanish and yanked harder, putting his full body weight behind it.

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The latch snapped open with a metallic screech that cut through the ambient noise.

Inside the housing, the heavy copper chain was coiled tight and clipped into place with industrial securing pins. The links were thick as his thumb, dark with age but still solid. Still conductive.

Below him on the dock, someone was shouting his name. A worker he recognized, probably trying to tell him to get down from there, to get to safety. He didn't look down. Didn't have time for arguments or explanations.

His fingers worked the securing clips quickly, muscle memory from decades of dock maintenance taking over. First pin released. Second pin. Third.

The chain came free in his hands, heavy and cold. Óscar grabbed the loose end and heaved it over the side of the platform with a grunt of effort.

The chain spilled downward in a heavy, clattering arc, fifty feet of copper links unraveling as it fell. The sound of metal striking metal rang out as the chain bounced and scraped against the crane's steel framework.

The last length of chain hit the water with a tremendous splash, sinking immediately. The crane was now directly connected to the saltwater bay below. A direct conductive pathway from the tallest point on the dock straight down into the most conductive substance available—seawater.



## **The Bucerías Anomaly**

Óscar straightened up, breathing hard from the exertion and the adrenaline, and looked out at the plasma column burning over the bay. He had no idea if what he'd just done would actually work. No idea if the physics of plasma discharge were anything like the physics of lightning strikes. No idea if this grounding chain would be enough to safely channel that kind of energy if it came arcing toward the crane.

But he knew one thing with absolute certainty: It was better than doing nothing. Better than letting that energy choose its own path through the dock, through the equipment, through the people working below.

If that column of fire was going to hit something, it might as well hit something that was ready for it.

Óscar gripped the platform railing and held on tight, his eyes fixed on the brilliant light in the distance. Waiting.

## Chapter 23 – Stretching The Balloon

Back inside the control room, Zack's eyes were fixed on the security camera feed showing the dock area when he caught movement on one of the smaller monitors.

The crane. Someone climbing. Miguel leaned closer to the screen. "Óscar."

A heavy chain was dropping from the top platform, unspooling rapidly as it fell. The copper links caught the afternoon light as they tumbled down the metal framework. The chain hit the water with a visible splash, the end sinking immediately beneath the surface. Nobody in the control room spoke for a moment.

Miguel's voice came out quiet. Shaken. "He's standing on top of the thing that's most likely to get struck."

On the plasma field projection, the containment deviation value jumped upward with sickening speed.

4.9. 5.2.

And Óscar didn't move.

The warning tone in the control room shifted from steady pulse to rapid beeping. On the plasma field projection, the distortion in the containment boundary bulged outward dramatically, the invisible wall holding back all that energy stretching thinner and thinner. Like a balloon being pushed to its absolute breaking point.

Miguel grabbed the edge of the console. "Zack..."

"I see it," Zack said, his voice tight.

Dr. Alvarez's fingers flew across her keyboard, trying to monitor the harmonizer's influence on the field while simultaneously tracking the containment failure that was happening right in front of them.

"The harmonizer is active," she reported, her voice professional despite the fear underneath. "It's redirecting energy vertically as designed. But the compression Davenport added is fighting against it. The field is trying to stabilize but there's too much pressure building too fast."

## **Chapter 24 - The Arc Bends**

On the bridge of the Aurora Pacific, First Officer Grant had his binoculars trained on the plasma column when it pulsed again.

"Captain," he said, his voice tight. "The column's changing. Look at the base."

Captain Marquez didn't need the binoculars. She could see it with her naked eyes.

The plasma was no longer rising straight and vertical. The entire structure was bending, slowly but unmistakably, like a tree leaning in heavy wind. Bending away from the ship. Toward the shore. Toward the marina.

"It's moving," she said quietly.

A thin arc of light peeled away from the main column, stretching out over the water. Then another. The arcs weren't random anymore. They were reaching. Searching. All of them bending in the same direction.

Grant lowered his binoculars, his face pale. "Captain, this is not going to end well."

"No," Marquez agreed, her hand moving instinctively toward the ship-wide alert. "It's not."

The plasma column flared brilliant white. So bright it hurt to look at. And then the arc leapt forward.

## **Chapter 25-The World Turns White**

On the live camera feed of the bay, the plasma column pulsed with blinding intensity. Then a thin arc of light peeled away from the main column. It stretched out over the water. Searching. Moving. Bending toward the dock. Toward the tallest conductive object it could find.

Toward the crane.

Toward Óscar.

"No," Miguel whispered.

The arc brightened, becoming almost impossible to look at directly even through the camera.

Zack's hands were frozen on his keyboard, every calculation he'd run, every variable he'd accounted for, suddenly meaningless in the face of what was about to happen.

The arc leapt forward.

And the world turned white.

## **Chapter 26 – Aftershock**

Miguel was already gone by the time the emergency alarms began to wind down from their urgent wailing to a lower, steadier tone.

Inside the control room, no one moved for several long seconds. Nobody seemed to know what to do or say or even where to look.

Grey smoke drifted slowly across the marina camera feed like fog. The crane stood dark and scorched but structurally intact, still upright against the sky. The plasma column that had burned so brilliantly over the water had collapsed completely, fading into nothing more than a weak shimmer that was already dissolving into the afternoon air.

Davenport reached up and straightened his cuffs with deliberate, careful movements. Like nothing unusual had just happened. Like this was all still going according to plan.

The investor video channel flickered as multiple connections refreshed simultaneously.

One face after another filled the large wall screen—executives in expensive suits, sitting in conference rooms and home offices scattered across multiple continents. The people who had put millions of dollars into this demonstration. No one was smiling anymore.

"What," one of them said flatly, her voice cutting through the silence like a blade, "exactly was that?"

Davenport kept his tone perfectly level and controlled, his corporate mask still firmly in place. "What you witnessed was a high-energy lateral discharge event interacting with a conductive structure on the dock. The containment system identified the excess load and redirected it appropriately. The system performed exactly as it was designed to perform under stress conditions."

Dr. Alvarez had been standing silently near her console, staring at the data screens. Now she turned slowly toward Davenport.

"Do not," she said quietly, each word carefully measured, "misrepresent what just happened here."

Her voice wasn't raised. She didn't shout or gesture dramatically. She didn't need to.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

The entire room's attention shifted toward her like a compass needle finding north.

"That plasma arc exceeded the approved containment model parameters by more than thirty percent," she continued, her voice steady but carrying absolute authority. "The discharge was not predicted by our simulations. It was not compensated for in the safety margins. And it was not part of the demonstration parameters that I personally signed off on three days ago."

Davenport's expression hardened slightly, the first crack in his smooth facade. "The outcome was successful. The vessel anchored offshore remains completely intact. No injuries occurred."

"The ship remains intact," Alvarez replied, taking a step closer to him, "because a dockworker named Óscar climbed a crane and manually grounded it thirty seconds before that arc struck."

The words landed in the room like physical objects hitting the floor. Even the investors watching remotely heard the weight in them.

On the screen, one of the investors—a silver-haired man in London judging by the time displayed on his video feed—leaned forward sharply toward his camera. "I'm sorry, did you just say a dockworker grounded a crane? As in, an individual person took action independent of your system?"

Alvarez didn't look away from Davenport's face. "The lateral plasma surge sought the nearest available conductive mass to discharge through. That's basic physics. Had that crane not been directly connected to saltwater grounding at the precise moment the arc struck, the discharge pathway would have remained completely unpredictable."

"Let me make sure I understand this correctly," another investor said, a woman whose video tag identified her as calling from Singapore. Her voice was tight and controlled. "Are you telling us that a private civilian intervention prevented a potential strike on a passenger vessel carrying sixteen hundred people?"

Alvarez met the camera lens directly.

"Yes," she said clearly. "That is exactly what I'm telling you."

She didn't hesitate. Didn't qualify the statement. Didn't soften it. The single word echoed in the suddenly silent control room.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Davenport's jaw flexed visibly, a muscle twitching beneath the skin. "That characterization is an extreme oversimplification of a complex energy redistribution event."

"No," Alvarez said, and now there was unmistakable steel underneath her professional tone. "It is an accurate description of what happened. And you know it."

She moved purposefully to her console and pulled up the recorded telemetry data from the previous thirty seconds, her fingers navigating the interface with practiced speed. The graphs appeared on one of the large displays where everyone could see them clearly.

"This," she said, pointing to a sharp vertical spike in the data, "is the compression increase you personally authorized at 17:47 local time. And this —" her finger moved to trace a warping line, "—is the resulting containment boundary distortion that your adjustment created."

She zoomed in on a specific section of the waveform, enlarging it so the deviation was unmistakable.

"And this moment right here," she said, her voice dropping lower, "is where the containment model exceeded its designated safe operational threshold. Where we entered failure territory."

The London investor's voice came through the speakers, no longer polite or cautious. "We were explicitly assured during the funding phase that the safety perimeter had substantial margin built into it. Multiple meetings addressed this concern."

"It did have margin," Alvarez replied without hesitation. "Before the perimeter was reduced from 2 nautical miles to 1.5 miles this morning without my authorization or review."

There it was. Not stated loudly. Not delivered with theatrical drama. But absolutely unmistakable and impossible to ignore.

Davenport turned toward the investor screen, his composure still intact but clearly requiring more effort now. "The perimeter adjustment was reviewed and approved by our compliance department. It met all maritime regulatory requirements for the demonstration."

"Meeting compliance standards," Alvarez cut in sharply, "does not automatically equal maintaining adequate safety margins. Those are two completely different things, and you know it."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Silence filled the control room like water filling a sinking ship.

On the investor wall screen, one person reached forward and muted their microphone. Another leaned back and whispered urgently to someone off-camera, their hand covering the mic but their body language speaking volumes. A third removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose slowly with the expression of someone whose worst fears were being confirmed in real time.

Davenport's carefully maintained calm was beginning to show visible cracks now, like ice under too much weight.

"Doctor Alvarez," he said, his voice taking on a sharper edge that cut through the room, "you are reacting emotionally to an outcome that was well within acceptable parameters for a field demonstration."

"I am reacting scientifically," she answered immediately, not giving him even a second to reframe the narrative, "to the fact that you increased plasma compression levels specifically to create a more impressive visual display for the observers watching this demonstration remotely."

"I increased compression to demonstrate the scalability potential of the technology for future commercial applications," Davenport countered, his corporate training showing through. "That's what our investors needed to see."

"You increased compression without recalibrating the containment field parameters to compensate for the additional stress," Alvarez snapped, her professional restraint finally breaking completely. "And in doing so, you nearly redirected a focused plasma discharge directly into a cruise ship carrying sixteen hundred civilians who had absolutely no idea they were in any danger at all."

The words hung in the air like smoke that wouldn't clear. Nearly. Cruise ship. Sixteen hundred civilians.

Not data points. Not statistics. People. Families. Children on vacation.

One of the investors in the control room spoke, and this time there was no corporate polish left in his voice at all. The professional veneer had cracked. "I need a direct, unambiguous answer from someone. Was that passenger vessel actually close to your revised 1.5-mile safety buffer zone when this discharge event occurred?"

Alvarez didn't answer immediately. She didn't need to.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Her silence—heavy, meaningful, damning—answered the question more clearly than any words could have. Davenport felt it shift in that precise moment. The fundamental dynamic in the room had changed like a switch being thrown. The posture of the investors on the screens and in the room had transformed.

They were no longer evaluating the plasma technology or its commercial potential or its future profitability. They were evaluating him personally. His judgment. His priorities. His truthfulness. His fitness to lead.

He straightened his shoulders deliberately, attempting to reclaim some sense of authority and control over a situation that was rapidly spiraling away from him. "The incident has concluded," he said, his voice firm but carrying an edge of desperation now. "There were no casualties of any kind. No infrastructure damage to report. No losses to account for. The containment system performed under extreme stress conditions and demonstrated adaptive resilience in an actual real-world scenario—exactly what we promised you it could do."

"Adaptive?" Alvarez repeated, her voice sharp with disbelief that bordered on anger. "The containment field fractured. It broke down under the pressure. That's not adaptation, that's failure."

"It held long enough to prevent catastrophe," Davenport insisted.

"It fractured under pressure that you deliberately created for dramatic effect," she shot back.

For the first time in the entire demonstration, something became clearly visible in Davenport's carefully controlled face. Not anger, exactly. Not yet reaching that point. But strain. Real, undeniable strain showing through the corporate mask he'd worn so perfectly all day.

Behind them, another alert chimed sharply from the communications console. Incoming priority message: the Maritime Safety Authority was demanding immediate contact. Another chime followed almost immediately, overlapping the first. Port Control demanding immediate suspension of all operations pending an investigation.

Another.

Multiple media outlets flagged for urgent inquiry, their requests piling up in the queue.

Davenport glanced at the cascading notifications appearing on the screens like dominoes falling.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

For the first time since the demonstration had begun hours ago with such confidence and promise, he didn't immediately have something smooth and reassuring to say. No polished corporate response. No carefully crafted message to manage the situation.

The investors saw that hesitation too. That moment of uncertainty.

One of them—the silver-haired man from London who'd been asking the pointed questions—leaned forward toward his camera with deliberate intent. When he spoke, his voice was colder and more final than Davenport's tone had ever been.

"Gentlemen, I believe we need to be very clear about next steps here," he said. "We will be conducting an independent technical review of this incident before any further capital funding is released to this project. And I do mean independent—not conducted by Helix personnel. Expect our review team to contact you within twenty-four hours to arrange full access to all systems and records."

And that was it. Not dramatic. Not explosive. No shouting or accusations. But absolutely lethal to everything Davenport had been trying to build.

His eyes flicked to the wall screen, watching helplessly as one video connection after another began disconnecting. Investors signing off without pleasantries or promises of future meetings or encouraging words about moving forward. Just clean disconnections as they removed themselves from what they now saw as a liability. The investors that watched live had already left.

The London investor was the last to go, his image freezing for a moment before the connection terminated. The screen went dark. Empty. And for the first time since the demonstration had begun with such confidence this morning, Davenport had absolutely nothing to say. No spin. No explanation. No path forward. Just silence in a control room that suddenly felt very small.

## **Chapter 27 – Director Hale**

The control room doors opened again. This time there was no shouting. No alarms blaring. No chaos. Just the sound of deliberate, measured footsteps crossing the threshold with absolute authority.

Three uniformed port security officers entered first, moving to positions along the walls with the practiced efficiency of people who knew exactly what they were doing. They weren't aggressive. They didn't draw weapons or make threats. They just positioned themselves. Watching. Waiting.

Behind them walked a tall man in a dark suit with no visible insignia on it anywhere. No badge hanging from his neck. No raised voice. No sense of hurry at all. He carried a thin leather document case in one hand.

He didn't look impressed by anything he was seeing. He looked like someone who had arrived to finish something that should never have started in the first place.

"Power down the harmonizer system," he said calmly, his voice carrying across the room without any need for volume. "All plasma generation equipment offline. Now."

The words weren't shouted. But they cut through the tension in the control room like a knife through paper.

Davenport turned sharply toward the newcomer, his carefully maintained composure finally cracking into something closer to indignation. "And exactly who are you to walk into my facility and start issuing orders?"

The man stopped precisely in the center of the room. He opened the leather case just enough to reveal official credentials—government-issued identification with multiple security holograms visible even from a distance. He didn't flash them dramatically. Didn't wave them around for effect. Simply held them steady where everyone in the room could see them clearly.

International Spy Agency. Senior Director. Level Four Authorization.

He closed the case again with a soft click.

"My name is Director Hale," he said in that same even, controlled tone. "This demonstration is suspended immediately pending formal investigation and review by maritime safety authorities."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Davenport took a step forward, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. "You don't have legal jurisdiction over a privately funded commercial technology demonstration on international waters—"

Hale didn't raise his voice even slightly.

"Eleven minutes ago your equipment nearly killed sixteen hundred people. That's my jurisdiction"

The investor screens were still active, still broadcasting to conference rooms around the world.

They heard every word of that.

Davenport's face flushed slightly. "The plasma discharge was successfully contained. No one was injured. The system performed exactly as designed under stress conditions."

"Contained?" Hale repeated, and now there was something almost like curiosity in his tone. Like he genuinely wanted to understand how Davenport could possibly believe that.

He walked over to one of the telemetry screens still displaying the recorded data and pointed at a specific spike in the graph.

"Your lateral deviation measurement exceeded your approved safety envelope by nearly forty percent. That's not containment. That's barely controlled failure."

The number—forty percent—landed in the room like a bomb going off. Dr. Alvarez didn't speak. Didn't add anything to what Hale had just said. She didn't need to. The data spoke for itself.

Hale's eyes moved slowly through the control room, taking in every person, every screen, every detail with the practiced assessment of someone who missed nothing.

Then his gaze stopped.

On Zack, standing quietly near the back console. A brief nod of acknowledgment. Recognition between professionals.

"Taggart," Hale said simply.

That was all. Not praise. Not surprise. Not gratitude. Just recognition that Zack had done exactly what he'd been trained to do. Miguel felt the weight of that single word like a shockwave rolling through the room.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Davenport felt it too. His gaze snapped from Hale to Zack, understanding dawning in his expression.

"You," he said, his voice sharpening with anger. "You've been interfering in operational decisions you don't have the education or experience to understand. A child playing spy games with equipment worth millions of dollars."

Zack didn't move. Didn't flinch. Didn't respond.

Hale stepped slightly forward, placing himself casually but deliberately between Davenport and the boy. Not making a show of it. Just repositioning.

"Mr. Davenport," he said in that same calm, even tone, "the International Spy Agency submitted a formal safety advisory to your compliance department at 08:30 this morning. That advisory specifically recommended against increasing plasma compression while any passenger vessel was positioned within two nautical miles of the test zone."

Davenport's carefully maintained composure was dissolving rapidly now. "That advisory was purely speculative. Based on theoretical models, not real-world data."

"It was accurate," Hale replied simply. "As events have now demonstrated."

"You're telling me you allowed a, what, a fourteen-year-old child to influence international maritime policy?" Davenport's voice was rising now, control slipping away.

"I allowed a certified ISA field operative to flag a legitimate safety risk," Hale corrected, his voice staying level while Davenport's climbed. "Which he did. Accurately. While you dismissed that risk in favor of creating a more impressive demonstration for your investors."

The room went absolutely silent. Certified operative. Field operative. There it was, stated plainly for everyone to hear.

Finally Zack broke the silence.

"Actually, I'm twelve."

Davenport let out a short, sharp laugh that had nothing to do with humor.

"He's twelve years old!"

"Yes," Hale agreed without hesitation. "And he was correct about the containment failure risk. While you, with all your experience and credentials, were wrong. That's unfortunate for you, but it doesn't change the facts."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Complete silence filled the control room. The investors on the screens were frozen, watching this unfold.

Dr. Alvarez was watching Davenport with an expression that was carefully neutral on the surface but burning with vindication underneath. Davenport's control finally cracked completely.

"This is absurd," he snapped, his voice loud now. "You're all overreacting to a successful test. Breakthrough technology requires controlled risk-taking. Controlled escalation. You can't scale revolutionary energy infrastructure by tiptoeing around every theoretical anomaly some consultant dreams up."

"Sixteen hundred people on that cruise ship were not theoretical," Alvarez said sharply, her voice cutting through his speech. "They were real. And they were in real danger because of decisions you made."

Hale's expression didn't change at all. "You overrode the safety margins. You ignored the warnings. You did it anyway." A pause. "We'll let the investigators decide what to call that."

Davenport turned toward the investor wall, appealing to them directly now. "You're seriously going to let this entire project be derailed by a teenager with government credentials? This is political interference in private enterprise—"

No one answered him. One by one, the investor video feeds went dark. Disconnected. Conference rooms in London, Singapore, New York, San Francisco—all of them signing off without another word. Funding evaporating in real time. Support dissolving before his eyes.

Hale's voice remained absolutely steady. "Secure all system logs and telemetry data. Nothing leaves this facility until the investigation is complete."

The port security officers moved immediately, professionally, taking positions near the main computer terminals.

The harmonizer powered down fully with a descending electronic tone.

The last faint shimmer of residual plasma energy visible on the bay camera feed faded completely, leaving only afternoon sunlight reflecting off calm water.

Davenport looked around the room slowly. At the security officers positioned along the walls. At the dark, empty investor screens. At Dr. Alvarez standing with her arms crossed. At Director Hale with his leather case. At Zack, still standing quietly near the console.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

And finally, something in his expression shifted. Not anger anymore. Not defiance or indignation. Recognition. Understanding. He had lost. Not to sabotage or corporate conspiracy or government overreach. He had lost because he had dismissed a legitimate warning. A warning delivered by a twelve-year-old boy who understood the risks better than he had.

Director Hale turned toward the door, then paused and looked back.

"Mr. Davenport, you'll need to come with us for formal questioning. Officers?"

Two of the port security personnel moved forward, not aggressively, but with clear purpose.

"You're detaining me?" Davenport's voice was hollow now. Disbelieving.

"We're bringing you in for questioning regarding potential criminal negligence," Hale said calmly. "You'll have the opportunity to contact legal representation. But yes, you're coming with us. Now."

It wasn't a threat. It wasn't dramatic. It was simply what was going to happen.

One of the officers gestured politely toward the door. "Sir, this way please."



## The Bucerías Anomaly

Davenport stood frozen for one more moment, his entire world collapsing around him. Then his shoulders sagged slightly, and he walked toward the door with the officers flanking him. As he passed Zack, he stopped briefly. For a moment it looked like he might say something. Might try one last argument or justification. But he didn't.

He just looked at the boy who had been right when he'd been wrong. Then he kept walking. The control room door closed behind them with a heavy, final sound.

Director Hale turned to Dr. Alvarez. "Your cooperation with the investigation will be appreciated, Doctor. I understand you raised concerns about the safety parameters."

"I did," she said quietly. "Multiple times."

He nodded. "That will be noted in our report." He glanced at Zack. "Good work, Taggart. Debrief in forty-eight hours."

Then he too walked out, leaving the control room suddenly, strangely quiet. Just the hum of computers and the distant sound of the ocean outside.

Dr. Alvarez looked at Zack.

"How old are you really?" she asked.

Zack almost smiled. "Twelve. That part was true."

She shook her head slowly, something between disbelief and respect in her expression.

"Twelve," she repeated. "And you just helped take down a multimillion-dollar demonstration."

"We helped save sixteen hundred people," Zack corrected gently.

Alvarez was quiet for a moment. Then she nodded.

"Yes," she said. "We did."

## Chapter 28 – A Dockside Reunion

Miguel didn't stop running until he reached the base of the crane, his lungs burning and his heart hammering against his ribs.

The massive metal structure still ticked and pinged faintly as it cooled down from the strike, sharp little pops and cracks echoing in the sudden quiet. Thin ribbons of gray smoke drifted up from the upper framework where the plasma arc had made contact, curling lazily in the afternoon breeze.

For one terrible, endless second, Miguel couldn't see anyone on the crane at all. The platform at the top looked empty. The ladder looked abandoned.

Then—

A hand appeared on one of the rungs. Gripping. Moving. Óscar. Halfway down the ladder, descending one careful step at a time. Moving slowly. Too slowly. But moving.

Miguel let out a breath so hard it felt like his chest might collapse. "Óscar!" he shouted, his voice cracking slightly. He grabbed the side of the ladder frame with both hands as if he could somehow steady the entire structure through sheer will.

Óscar didn't answer until his boots finally touched solid concrete. When they did, his knees buckled slightly before he caught himself against the ladder.

Up close, Miguel could see the real damage.

The entire left sleeve of Óscar's work shirt was burned dark and crispy at the cuff, the fabric charred through in places. His hair looked like it had been hit by a hurricane, sticking up at wild angles and singed at the tips. Both of his hands trembled visibly, not violently but constantly, like a low-grade electrical current was still running through him. There were red marks across his forearms that were going to be serious burns by tomorrow.

Soot streaked his face in dark lines.

"You're completely insane," Miguel said, his voice coming out rough and uneven. "Do you know that? Absolutely out of your mind."

Óscar blinked at him slowly, like he was still processing the fact that he was alive and on the ground. His eyes looked slightly unfocused.

"Probably," he admitted, his voice hoarse from smoke or shock or both. "Yes. Probably insane."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Miguel shoved him lightly in the shoulder—not angry, just overwhelmed with relief that turned into something physical because he didn't know what else to do with it.

"You could have died up there. That thing hit like—like a bomb going off. I saw it from the control room. The whole screen went white."

Óscar looked back up at the crane slowly, studying the scorch marks on the metal framework like he was seeing them for the first time.

"I've worked these docks for thirty years," he said quietly, his words coming slower than usual. "Been through hurricanes. Lightning storms that lit up the whole harbor. And every single time, when lightning comes in off the water..." He pointed weakly at the crane. "It always hits that thing first. Tallest point. Best conductor."

He tried to shrug, though the movement made him wince. "Figured it was better to give that plasma something ready for it than let it choose on its own. Pick something worse."

Miguel stared at him, seeing the exhaustion in every line of his face.

"You didn't even know if grounding it would actually work. You were just guessing."

Óscar managed a tired half-smile, though it looked like even that small expression took effort.

"Wasn't guessing," he said. "I knew grounding was better than doing nothing. That was enough."

They stood there for a long moment, the weight of what had almost happened settling between them like something physical and heavy.

Out on the bay, the Aurora Pacific sat steady and completely untouched, her white hull gleaming in the afternoon sun. The tenders were pulling in close to the ship now, crew members waving passengers back aboard with orange flags. People were talking excitedly, pointing back at the shore, probably already turning the experience into stories they'd tell for years.

The water looked calm. Peaceful. Like it hadn't just nearly torn itself apart with impossible energy.

Behind them, the heavy doors of the control building opened with a metallic clang. Miguel turned, one hand still resting on Óscar's shoulder to steady him.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Director Hale stepped out first, moving with that same measured, unhurried authority he'd had inside.

Even from this distance, there was something absolutely unshakeable about him. Calm. Controlled. Final. Like he was the period at the end of a very long sentence. Behind him walked Davenport.

Two port security officers flanked him on either side, not touching him but staying close. Professional escorts.

No one was shouting now. No dramatic confrontations. No cameras recording for posterity. No grand speeches about breakthrough technology. Just the quiet, inevitable movement of a man being escorted away from something he no longer controlled and probably never really had.

Óscar watched the small procession pass, his breathing still a bit too fast.

"That him?" he asked, nodding slightly toward Davenport. "The one who ran the test?"

Miguel nodded. "Yeah. That's him."

They stood side by side in silence as the group moved past the crane, past the dock equipment, past the exact spot where the sky had turned brilliant white and the air had tried to catch fire.

For just a brief second, Davenport's eyes lifted. He glanced toward the crane structure. Toward the heavy copper chain still hanging down into the water, dripping and dark. Then he looked away quickly, like he couldn't stand to see it. Like looking at it meant admitting something he wasn't ready to admit.

Miguel exhaled slowly, feeling something unknot in his chest.

"Guess he didn't account for you in his calculations," he said.

Óscar looked down at his trembling, burned hands. Opened and closed his fingers slowly, testing.

"Guess he didn't account for a lot of things," he said quietly.

The distant sirens that had been wailing since the strike finally faded to nothing. The harbor breeze moved gently through the rigging of nearby boats, making the lines sing softly. And for the first time all afternoon, nothing in the sky was glowing or pulsing or threatening to explode.

Movement to their left caught Miguel's attention.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Two paramedics in bright orange vests were jogging toward them, one carrying a medical kit, the other pushing a wheeled stretcher across the uneven dock surface.

"Sir!" the first one called out as they approached. "Were you on that crane when it was struck? We need to check you for electrical burns and shock."

Óscar started to wave them off with one hand. "I'm fine, just—"

"No you're not," Miguel interrupted firmly. "You're going with them. Right now. Don't even argue."

The second paramedic was already pulling out equipment, her professional assessment taking in Óscar's burned sleeve and trembling hands in seconds.

"He's right," she said, gently but firmly taking Óscar's arm. "You took a massive electrical discharge. We need to monitor your heart rhythm and treat those burns immediately. Can you walk to the ambulance or do you need the stretcher?"

Óscar looked at Miguel, then at the paramedics, then down at his own shaking hands like he was just now realizing how badly he was hurt.

"I can walk," he said, though his voice was uncertain.

As they guided Óscar away toward the waiting ambulance, he looked back over his shoulder at Miguel.

"Tell Zack..." he started, then paused. "Tell him good work. With the science stuff."

Miguel felt his throat tighten unexpectedly.

"I will," he promised. "And Oscar? That thing you did? That was the bravest thing I've ever seen."

Óscar's tired smile was real this time.

"Or the dumbest," he said.

"Both," Miguel agreed. "Definitely both."

The paramedics helped Óscar into the back of the ambulance, and Miguel watched the doors close with red lights beginning to flash.

As the ambulance pulled away toward the hospital, Miguel stood alone on the dock, looking up at the blackened crane still standing against the clear blue sky. A monument to the disaster that almost happened.

And to the man who wouldn't let it.

## Chapter 29 – A Quiet Confession

Dr. Alvarez stood near the edge of the marina, her arms folded loosely across her chest, watching the last gentle ripples fade away where the crane's heavy copper chain still hung down into the water like a fishing line someone had forgotten to reel in.

The bay looked peaceful again now that the plasma column was gone. Almost innocent. Like nothing dangerous had ever happened here at all.

Zack approached quietly along the dock, his footsteps soft on the concrete, but he didn't speak right away. Sometimes silence was better than saying the wrong thing. She didn't turn around when he stopped beside her.

"I designed the plasma stabilization system to work with naturally occurring atmospheric energy," she said finally, her voice carrying clearly over the water. "The whole point was to harness it safely. Guide it where we wanted. Reduce the volatility so it could be useful instead of destructive."

Her voice wasn't shaking or breaking. It was just tired. Worn down by the weight of the day.

"And today it nearly arced sideways into a cruise ship full of families." She shook her head slowly. "Sixteen hundred people who came here for vacation, not to be part of an experiment gone wrong."

"The plasma tore sideways because Davenport increased the compression rate without recalibrating the containment field parameters to handle the additional pressure," Zack said evenly, keeping his voice factual rather than comforting. "The system didn't fail. It was pushed past its limits deliberately."

She gave a small smile that had no humor in it at all.

"That's the technical explanation for what happened."

"It's also the accurate one," Zack replied.

She exhaled slowly, her shoulders dropping slightly. "The review boards won't care about technical accuracy. They'll call my research reckless. Dangerous. They'll say I should have built in more safeguards, more restrictions, more fail-safes."

"Some of them will say that," Zack agreed, because there was no point pretending otherwise. "Some people always focus on what went wrong instead of understanding why."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"And others will say the entire technology is too inherently dangerous to pursue at all," she continued, her voice getting quieter. "They'll want it shut down permanently. Buried."

Zack looked out over the calm water, watching a seabird drift lazily overhead.

"The technology isn't dangerous," he said thoughtfully. "It's powerful. Strong. There's an important difference between those things."

She turned to look at him then, really studying his face with curiosity mixed with something like respect.

"For someone who's only twelve years old," she said quietly, "you're remarkably certain about that distinction."

"I'm certain about what the mathematical models show," he replied, choosing his words carefully. "When the plasma stabilization system operates within properly calculated safety margins, the containment field holds exactly as designed. The science is sound. The execution today wasn't."

A long pause stretched between them, filled only by the sound of water lapping gently against the dock pilings and the distant calls of seabirds.

"I won't abandon this research," Dr. Alvarez said finally, her voice stronger now. More determined. "I've spent too many years developing it, and the potential applications are too important. Clean energy. Sustainable power generation. It could change how coastal communities access electricity."

She looked down at her hands, then back at the water.

"But I will never—and I mean never—allow it to be pushed past safety limits for spectacle again. Not for investors. Not for publicity. Not for anyone."

"That sounds significantly wiser," Zack said.

She was quiet for another moment, then asked the question that had probably been building since Director Hale left.

"You warned them, didn't you? Before the demonstration even started. You filed some kind of official advisory."

"Yes," Zack confirmed simply. "This morning. As soon as I calculated what would happen if compression was increased while the ship was nearby."

"And you still allowed the demonstration to proceed even after warning them."

It wasn't quite an accusation, but it wasn't entirely neutral either. Zack considered how to answer that honestly.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

"I hoped the warning would be enough," he said. "I hoped that presenting the data clearly would convince Davenport to adjust the parameters. That reason would win." He paused. "I was wrong about that."

Another small silence fell between them, more comfortable this time.

The afternoon breeze moved lightly across the dock, bringing the smell of salt water and fish and motor oil—the normal smells of a working marina.

Dr. Alvarez straightened her shoulders slightly, a subtle shift in her posture that spoke of decisions being made.

"I won't wait for warnings from twelve-year-old field operatives next time," she said, and there was the faintest hint of dry humor in her voice now. "If I build this system again—when I build it again—it will be engineered with safeguards that physically cannot be overridden. Not by corporate executives. Not by compliance departments. Not by anyone who thinks they know better than the science."

She looked at him directly.

"Hard limits built into the hardware itself. Mechanical failsafes, not just software restrictions. Something that can't be sweet-talked or authorized around."

Zack nodded once, approving. "That's probably the right approach for the next version."

She looked back at the bay, at the water that had almost become the path for something terrible.

"Next version," she repeated softly to herself. Not defeated. Not giving up. Already rebuilding in her mind. Already planning. Already improving the design based on what she'd learned today.

Zack recognized that expression. That determination. He'd seen it in a mirror often enough.

"The technology is worth pursuing," he said. "You just learned an expensive lesson about who should be allowed to control it."

Dr. Alvarez smiled slightly—a real smile this time, small but genuine.

"Expensive is right. I don't think I'll be getting funding from those particular investors again anytime soon."

"Probably not," Zack agreed. "But there will be others. Better ones. People who understand that safety margins exist for reasons."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

She turned to face him fully, extending her hand.

"Thank you," she said simply. "For the warning. For the help with the harmonizer. For not letting me be the person whose research killed sixteen hundred people."

Zack shook her hand, the gesture feeling strangely formal but appropriate somehow.

"You would have figured it out," he said. "Eventually."

"Maybe," she said. "But eventually might have been too late."

They stood there together for another minute, two scientists of very different ages and experience levels, both understanding that what had happened today would change how they saw their work going forward.

Then Dr. Alvarez checked her watch.

"I should go deal with the investigation team," she said with a slight sigh.

"Multiple governments are probably going to want extensive documentation of everything that happened."

"Probably," Zack agreed.

She started to walk away, then paused and looked back.

"Will I see you again, Zack Taggart? Or do ISA field operatives just disappear mysteriously once a mission is complete?"

Zack almost smiled.

"I don't disappear," he said. "But I do tend to show up in unexpected places."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said.

Then she walked back toward the control building, her steps steady and purposeful.

Zack stayed by the water for a few minutes longer, watching the sun sink lower toward the horizon and paint the bay in shades of orange and gold. The crane stood dark against the sky, scorched but standing. A reminder that sometimes the right action taken at the right moment makes all the difference.

Even if that action comes from someone unexpected.

## Chapter 30 – Statistically Significant Tacos

By morning, the marina looked almost ordinary again.

The dramatic chaos of yesterday had faded into the background hum of normal dock operations. Workers in reflective vests and hard hats had already begun their careful inspection of the crane, climbing the framework with safety harnesses and measurement equipment. The heavy copper grounding chain still trailed down into the clear water, catching the early morning sunlight and glinting like a strange piece of industrial jewelry.

A few reporters still lingered near the control building, drinking coffee from paper cups and checking their phones, hoping someone important would step outside and give them one more quote for their stories.

Most of the tourists who'd watched the demonstration had already moved on to their next destination, carrying photos and videos that would probably become exaggerated stories by the time they got home.

The bay shimmered peacefully under the morning sun, its surface undisturbed except for the gentle wake of passing boats.

Miguel found Zack sitting on a low concrete barrier near the edge of the dock, his small pack resting beside him, watching a weathered fishing boat idle slowly out toward open water with its nets carefully stowed.

"You're really leaving already?" Miguel asked, sitting down next to him without waiting for an invitation. "Like, today? Right now?"

Zack didn't turn to look at him right away, keeping his eyes on the fishing boat.

"The ISA prefers operations to end cleanly," he said in that matter-of-fact way he had. "Once the system data is secured and all the official statements are recorded, there's not really much reason for me to stay longer."

Miguel kicked lightly at a loose pebble near his shoe, sending it skittering across the concrete.

"Feels weird though," he admitted. "Yesterday afternoon the entire sky was exploding and plasma was trying to kill everyone. Today it's just... Tuesday. Normal Tuesday. Like none of it even happened."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Zack nodded once, still watching the boat grow smaller in the distance. "That's usually how it works after something like this. Things go back to normal faster than you'd expect."

Miguel hesitated for a moment, then said more quietly, "Óscar's doing okay, by the way. In case you were wondering. They checked him over twice at the hospital last night. Kept him for observation but released him this morning. He keeps telling anyone who'll listen that he's way tougher than he looks."

"He is," Zack said simply. "Significantly tougher."

Miguel glanced sideways at his new friend. "You didn't actually see him when the plasma hit the crane, did you? You were inside the control room."

"No. I saw the data and the flash. But not him directly."

Miguel nodded slowly, looking down at his hands. "Yeah. Me neither. I was running but I wasn't there yet when it happened."

They let that uncomfortable truth sit between them for a moment. The memory of those few seconds when they hadn't known if Óscar had survived didn't need to be described out loud.

After a moment, Miguel shoved both hands deep into his pants pockets and forced his voice back to something lighter.

"You know," he said casually, "if you're planning to disappear in some dramatic light-bending teleportation way like you showed up, you could at least try the best street tacos in all of Bucerías first. Seems only fair."

Zack finally turned to look at him properly.

"Street tacos?" he repeated, like he wasn't entirely sure what those were.

Miguel straightened up immediately, warming to his subject with obvious enthusiasm. "Two blocks directly inland from here. Small cart with a red canvas canopy. This guy named Tomás runs it. He only makes one thing—carnitas tacos with his grandmother's secret salsa recipe—and he completely sells out every single day before noon. People come from three towns over just to get them."

Zack considered this information carefully, processing it like data.

"They're statistically significant?" he asked seriously.

Miguel stared at him for a second, then translated. "They're incredible. Mind-blowing. Life-changing. The best thing you'll eat this year."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Zack looked back out over the calm water. The marina was stable and secure. The ISA had all the system data safely backed up. Director Hale had given all his official statements and made all his official arrangements.

There was no immediate crisis requiring his presence. No urgent mission parameters to fulfill. Just a quiet morning and a fishing boat heading out to sea.

"How long before Tomás sells out of tacos?" Zack asked.

Miguel's grin spread slowly across his face like sunrise.

"Maybe forty-five minutes from now? An hour at most?"

Zack reached down and adjusted the shoulder strap of his small pack, settling it more comfortably.

"I suppose my departure can be delayed briefly for reconnaissance purposes."

Miguel actually laughed. "Reconnaissance purposes? Seriously?"

"Yes."

"You're going to file a report on street tacos?"

"Possibly. If they're as significant as you claim."

"Good," he said, standing up and offering Zack a hand to pull him to his feet.

"Because if you left Bucerías without trying Tomás's tacos, that would honestly be the real tragedy of this whole operation. Worse than the plasma column."

"That seems unlikely," Zack said, but he was smiling as he accepted Miguel's hand and stood.

They started walking away from the dock together, their footsteps falling into an easy rhythm on the concrete walkway.

As they passed directly under the crane, Miguel couldn't help glancing up at the scorched metal framework and the chain still hanging down like a monument.

"You think Óscar's eventually going to start charging tourists admission to climb up there and take selfies where the lightning bolt hit?"

"It's possible," Zack said thoughtfully. "Though you should probably discourage him from making crane-climbing during plasma storms a regular habit."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Miguel snorted with laughter. "Yeah. Next time maybe he doesn't volunteer to become a human lightning rod for experimental energy weapons."

"Next time," Zack replied, his tone completely serious, "we should attempt to avoid any lightning-based scenarios entirely."

Miguel nudged him lightly with his elbow, grinning. "No promises. Weird stuff just seems to find us."

"That's concerning," Zack said.

"That's life," Miguel corrected.

They turned the corner away from the marina, disappearing into the narrow cobblestone streets of the old town where the delicious smell of grilled meat and warm corn tortillas was already drifting through the morning air, mixing with the salt breeze from the ocean.

Behind them, the harbor carried on exactly like it always had for generations. Calm and peaceful. Ordinary and routine. Alive with the normal business of fishing boats and cargo vessels and tourists looking for their next adventure.

And for the first time since those mysterious lights had first appeared hovering over the water four nights ago, Bucerías felt completely, genuinely, authentically normal again. Just a small coastal town waking up to another beautiful morning.

And two boys heading out to find the best tacos in Mexico before they sold out for the day.

Some missions, Zack decided, were more important than others.

# Epilogue

Three weeks later, Zack was supposed to be doing physics homework.

The textbook sat open on his desk, untouched, while a digital starfighter banked sharply across his monitor, narrowly avoiding a swarm of incoming drones.

"Vector left," he muttered to himself, fingers moving quickly across the controls.

A knock tapped lightly against his doorframe.

"You've been vectoring left for twenty minutes," his mother said from the hallway.

Zack didn't look away from the screen. "It's a complex maneuver."

"So is homework."

He sighed but didn't argue. The game paused with a soft chime. She stepped into the room and held up a slim tablet.

"You might want to see this before you return to complex maneuvers."

Zack leaned back in his chair. On the screen was a news headline:

Independent Research Initiative Launches Offshore Energy Laboratory in Mexico

He straightened slightly. Below the headline was a familiar face.

Dr. Lucía Alvarez stood in front of what looked like a brand-new coastal research facility. The building was sleek, open, sunlight glinting off wide glass panels. No corporate logos anywhere in sight.

Zack scrolled.

By Elena Martínez, Senior Science Correspondent

Three weeks after a high-profile energy demonstration in the Bay of Banderas was suspended following an unexpected plasma discharge, a coalition of international research investors has announced the launch of a fully independent laboratory dedicated to advancing marine plasma stabilization technology.

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Dr. Lucía Alvarez, the physicist whose research formed the basis of the halted demonstration, will lead the new facility. In a statement released this morning, Alvarez emphasized that the lab's mission will focus on "responsible advancement grounded in rigorous safety modeling, transparent oversight, and scientific integrity."

According to consortium representatives, the decision to fund Alvarez's work independently reflects "continued confidence in the underlying science, coupled with a commitment to ensuring future development is insulated from commercial performance pressures."

The announcement comes as Helix Dynamics, the corporation that funded the original demonstration, faces mounting regulatory scrutiny. Federal energy regulators suspended the company's operating licenses last week, citing a pattern of safety violations and unauthorized modifications during the Bay of Banderas incident. Investigators also uncovered evidence of previous compliance failures at Helix facilities in three other countries, including unreported containment breaches and aggressive land acquisition practices that circumvented environmental review processes. The company's assets are currently under court-ordered freeze pending completion of a multi-agency investigation into potential criminal negligence charges against senior leadership.

Zack read the quote about Dr. Alvarez twice. Responsible advancement.

Then he read the paragraph about Helix Dynamics again. Court-ordered freeze. Criminal negligence charges.

He allowed himself the smallest smile.

"She didn't quit," his mother observed, watching him.

"No," Zack said quietly. "She recalibrated."

His mother studied him for a moment, seeing something in his expression that told her this news meant more than it appeared to.

"Finish your homework," she said gently. "The world can wait an hour."

He nodded. She stepped back into the hallway. Zack glanced once more at the article. At the new lab with its open design and transparent walls. At the bay visible in the background, calm and peaceful. At the small mention near the end that the facility would be implementing "mandatory independent safety review protocols for all experimental procedures."

## The Bucerías Anomaly

Then he unpaused the game. The starfighter surged forward into open space. This time, he adjusted the power settings before accelerating.

Measured. Controlled. Safe.

He'd learned something these past few weeks. Sometimes the most important victories weren't the dramatic ones.

They were the ones where you made sure things were done right.



When mysterious lights appear over the beach town of Bucerías, Mexico, most people reach for their phones.

Zack Taggart reaches for his field kit.

He's a teenager. He's also one of the International Spy Agency's most capable operatives—and this case is unlike anything in the database.

The lights aren't drones. They aren't fireworks. And whatever energy is behind them has already proven it can destroy—and drawn the attention of governments on three continents.

What starts as a seventy-two-hour investigation pulls Zack into a web of corporate intrigue, experimental technology, and a physicist whose work may be capable of far more destruction than anyone is letting on.

Zack has the data. He has the training. He just needs everyone to listen before it's too late.

*Some mysteries can't wait for adults to figure them out.*