

Prologue

Cameras flashed all across the auditorium, capturing shots of the three of them as they stood behind the raised podium. Professor Grant Hill stood center, leaning gently on the cane in his hand. Both Gerald and Lyra, his research assistants, flanked either side. The crowd roared excitedly, cheering their successful efforts to bring a clean energy source to mankind. A mockup of the Professor's generator, specifically the containment field matrix, rose from a platform in the floor before the podium. For years, the three of them had been testing and modifying the Professor's original concept and now, finally, they were able to present it to the world.

Lyra beamed at the gathered masses, overwhelmed by a mix of excitement, terror, and pride. She glanced at the Professor and Gerald to her right. The Professor, always a man of stature and composure, smiled and nodded politely. Gerald, even in this austere setting, surrounded by hundreds, maybe thousands of his peers in the Scientific Academy, managed to look disgruntled. She shook her head at him and turned her attention back to the cheering crowd. The thunderous applause died away.

The Professor cleared his throat. "Thank you. Madam Chairperson, distinguished members of the Academy, honored guests. Thank you all. We find ourselves in a world on the brink of collapse; runaway energy needs, climate change, cataclysmic pollution, dwindling resources, and an unsustainable population. In the face of these monumental challenges, the promise of a clean, sustainable energy source has never been more crucial. Today, we have found that source."

A resurgent round of applause erupted from the assembly and the Professor waited patiently for it to abate before continuing. "What began as the mad chalkboard scribbles of an idealistic old man, is now, through years of perseverance, a reality. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Academy, my team and I present to you...Exotic Particle Energy. No fossil fuels, no nuclear waste, nor coal pollution. A means of generating clean energy without a foreseeable end, to propel mankind into a brighter, sustainable future."

On cue, the reactor whirred to life. At the heart of the containment unit, a glow began to emanate. It grew brighter as fluoresced particles streamed through the generated field, creating a shimmering curtain of incandescent hues. Cool blues and greens quickly heated to brilliant reds and golds. The awestruck assembly broke into excited cheers and applause at the spectacle.

Lyra was blinded by the shimmering sea of flashing cameras, overcome by the thunderous praise. She closed her eyes, feeling then as if she were flying, soaring high above the city lights. Lights powered by the Professor's generator. She opened her eyes again and found herself there, actually flying high in the night's sky. Shock at the sudden shift from the auditorium to her present position passed like a fleeting thought.

She stretched out her arms and flew forward, darting playfully between a bank of low hanging clouds. Their puffy tufts silvered by the full moon above and basked in a golden hue from the city below. A city that seemed to stretch forever toward the horizon, gleaming brightly. She drank in the sight, laughing excitedly at the elation of it all. They had done it; they had secured a clean future through the Professor's Exotic Particle Reactor.

Lyra swooped low, returning to the glittering hall of the Academy of Sciences where she had been presenting the reactor with both the Professor and Gerald moments before. The brilliance of the pulsating light emanating from the reactor seemed to envelop the entire structure. The containment chamber thrummed within, a droning hum that intensified as the hall faded entirely from sight. Lyra,

hovering high above, raised a hand against the glare. Suddenly, a blinding flash like the corona of the sun burst from the hall, engulfing the surrounding city in an instant. She managed an abrupt shriek before the golden blaze consumed her as well.

Lyra jerked upright with a jolt, gasping in sudden panic. She cast her bleary eyes about, finding herself in her room sitting on her bed. *Just a dream, it was just a dream*, she reassured herself with a sigh. Though, the droning hum continued. Not the same thrumming of the reactor in her dream, but something softer.... Lyra twisted, tossing her pillow to the side. Beneath lay her cell phone, buzzing intently.

She picked it up, a fresh wave of panic seizing her as she looked at the time. “Oh god! I'm going to be late again!” She scrambled from the bed and frantically began throwing her clothes on. “The Professor is going to kill me.”