

Thermatrix #1 - "The Thermodynamic Variable"

Written by Steven Bland

The primary subterranean testing laboratory of the Vance Foundation Research Facility was always kept at exactly sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. For Dr. Abigail Vance, temperature was not a passive aspect of the environment; it was a rigid, unyielding mathematical boundary line. To her, variance of any kind was a symptom of undisciplined engineering, and variance in a laboratory environment was nothing short of a personal insult. She believed with a fierce, academic conviction that human error was the only true chaos in an otherwise orderly cosmos. If the ambient temperature shifted by even a tenth of a degree, it meant the cooling system's algorithms were lagging, or worse, that someone had left a pneumatic seal improperly pressurized.

Inside the monolithic, concrete-reinforced testing chamber, the air was pristine. It passed through three separate stages of sub-micron chemical filtration to ensure not a single speck of dust or stray organic fiber could settle on the delicate instruments. The space was cavernous, subterranean, and dead silent, save for the rhythmic, bass-heavy hum of the high-voltage magnetic containment rings. This hum was a low, physical vibration that resonated more in the marrow of one's bones than in the ears. At the absolute center of the room, anchored by four sweeping steel struts that resembled the talons of a massive bird of prey, sat the Thermodynamic Matrix. It was a massive, polished sphere of crystalline carbon structure and sub-quantum wiring that looked less like an engine and more like a heavy, geometric heart pulsing with an invisible, terrifyingly dense current. The crystalline facets of its outer shell caught the stark, artificial white light of the overhead LED arrays, refracting them into sharp, needle-like beams across the sterile floor.

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Micaela "Micah" Vance sat on a stainless-steel rolling stool just outside the heavy, triple-paned reinforced glass barrier that isolated the observation deck from the hazard zone. A sleek touchscreen tablet computer was propped on her knees, casting a pale, cold blue glow over her features. At nineteen years old, Micah's life was not measured in college semesters, weekend parties, or social calendars. Instead, her existence was cataloged in endless data logs, heat-sink metrics, and precise calibration curves.

She wore a faded, grease-stained flight jacket over a simple black t-shirt, a wardrobe that contrasted sharply with the clinical perfection of the facility. Her long hair was pulled back into a messy, dark ponytail, a few loose strands framing her face as her eyes tracked the cascading columns of hexadecimal numbers flashing across her monitor. Her eyes, at this particular moment in her history, were a uniform, deep, and perfectly ordinary brown – the kind of eyes that looked at the world with a quiet, observant curiosity rather than aggression.

"The stabilization coils are drawing an extra four millivolts on the western Axis, Grandma," Micah said. Her voice was amplified through a small, clip-on lapel microphone, echoing softly through the intercom system into the sealed chamber. It's minor, barely a blip on the secondary sensor array, but it's causing a micro-fluctuation in the local density field. The thermal grid is leaning left, toward the cryogenic intake valve.

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On the other side of the glass, completely isolated within the pressurized hazard zone, Dr. Abigail Vance didn't look up from her primary diagnostic console. Abigail was a woman constructed entirely of sharp angles, severe posture, and absolute certainty. Her silver hair was pinned back with military precision, not a single strand escaping the tight bun, and her lab coat was meticulously pressed, devoid of a single wrinkle despite the fourteen hours they had already logged today. She tapped a complex sequence of keys, her fingers moving with the swift, mechanical, and unbroken cadence of a supercomputer executing a hard-coded routine.

"A micro-fluctuation is an unacceptable variable, Micaela," Abigail replied. Her voice came back through the exterior speakers crisp, clean, and carrying the immense weight of decades of absolute academic authority. "When we are manipulating the foundational laws of motion at a sub-cellular level, a fraction of a percent is the difference between a clean energy breakthrough that changes civilization and a localized molecular collapse that hollows out this entire zip code. We do not tolerate leaning grids. Adjust the lateral dampeners by zero point zero three.

Micah smiled faintly, a quiet, practiced expression of fond exasperation. Her fingers flew across her tablet to execute the precise command, overriding the automated stabilization software with manual inputs. "Adjusting the dampeners now. You know, most grandmothers teach their granddaughters how to bake chocolate chip cookies on a Friday night. They pass down secret family recipes or show them how to knit. They don't make them calibrate multi-phase thermodynamic engines in a bunker three stories beneath the pavement of Queens."

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"Most grandmothers do not possess a multi-billion-dollar research grant from the Department of Advanced Energy," Abigail countered. The corner of her strict, unpainted mouth twitched upward for a fraction of a second – the briefest flash of genuine familial warmth before her professional mask snapped back into place. "And most granddaughters do not possess a natural, terrifyingly intuitive aptitude for quantum lattice theory. You are a Vance, Micah. The universe is not a chaotic mystery; it is simply a vast, interconnected system of rules waiting to be properly balanced. We do not bake; we solve."

"Understood," Micah chuckled softly, leaning back against the metal framework of her stool as the diagnostic screen on her tablet turned a steady, comforting, and uniform emerald green. "Lattice structure is fully stabilized. The Thermodynamic Matrix is sitting at perfect rest. Energy absorption is currently resting at zero net loss."

"Excellent," Abigail said, finally stepping away from her primary console and walking directly toward the towering crystalline sphere. She ran a gloved hand along the outer calibration ring, her eyes reflecting the faint, deep violet glow of the internal sub-quantum core that was just beginning to stir. "Initiating phase two of tonight's calibration sequence. We are going to introduce a controlled thermal variance – a brief, highly concentrated spike of heat energy – to test the rapid absorption grid's dissipation limits. Stand by the manual kill-switch at the secondary console, Micah. Just in case the automated buffer fails to catch the recoil."

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Micah stood up, her heavy combat boots clicking softly against the polished, anti-static linoleum floor as she walked over to the secondary control station. She rested her palm near the heavy steel housing of the emergency manual overrides, her fingers wrapping loosely around the large plastic handle. Her brown eyes remained fixed on her grandmother's silhouette through the thick glass barrier. The facility was incredibly quiet, isolated from the bustling streets of New York City far above, completely safe, and entirely secure.

It was the last normal second of Micah Vance's life.

The alarm didn't wail with a structured, automated warning tone; it shrieked with a visceral, jagged frequency that pierced straight through the eardrums. It was the sound of a system tearing itself apart at the seams.

A sudden, terrifying violent spike of crimson light erupted from the base of the Thermodynamic Matrix. The blinding red flash didn't merely illuminate the testing chamber; it bled into the environment, reflecting off the thick, triple-paned glass barrier in a heavy, bloody smear that completely obscured the familiar diagnostic readings. Instantly, the low, comforting hum of the high-voltage magnetic containment rings warped, twisting upward into a high-pitched, deafening scream. The acoustic vibration was so immense, so violent, that it rattled the heavy reinforced steel girders buried deep within the concrete ceiling, raining a fine, pale powder of masonry dust down into the darkness.

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"Grandma," Micah yelled. Her voice was thin, stripped of all its academic calm, completely swallowed by the rising roar of the dying machine.

Without waiting for a command, her fingers instantly slammed downward into the heavy emergency manual kill-switch. The thick plastic casing cracked with a sharp, hollow snap under the sheer panic of her hand, but the heavy mechanical lever refused to drop. It seized halfway through its designated track, frozen solid.

"The override is locked!" Micah shouted, her palm stinging from the impact as she threw her body weight against the broken lever. "The control relays are fusing together from the power surge! The manual lines aren't responding!"

"The variance is cascading!" Abigail shouted back. Her voice came through the intercom speaker in broken, static-laced fragments, barely audible over the mechanical pandemonium filling the hazard zone. Her fingers were a furious blur on the local diagnostic panel, but her decades of experience were useless against what was happening. The monitor screen in front of her was already fracturing under an impossible internal electrical load, the neat rows of code and thermal metrics dissolving into jagged, chaotic strings of corrupt data and flashing warning glyphs. "The containment field isn't failing from an internal flaw, Micah! It's an external breach! A localized network intrusion is completely overriding the safety protocols from the outside!"

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"What?" Micah scrambled back to the glass, her hands pressing flat against the thick material.

Even through the heavy, insulated barrier, she could feel the glass beginning to vibrate with a terrifying, rhythmic pulse. Through the pane, the familiar layout of the laboratory vanished. The air around the central crystalline sphere was beginning to warp and buckle, twisting into a terrifying visual distortion wave that looked like a shattered mirror spinning in slow motion.

The atmosphere had split down a precise geometric axis, creating a violent, impossible dichotomy. On the right side of the chamber, the air shimmered with blistering, white-hot heat waves that bent the light into ugly, orange ribbons. On the left side, the air went completely dark, choked by heavy, jagged, branch-like patterns of black-blue frost that rapidly crawled across the concrete walls like predatory vines.

Miles away, completely detached from the quiet laboratory beneath Queens, the true catalyst of the nightmare was unfolding in the upper atmosphere. A rogue military satellite project known as Project 11 had just suffered a catastrophic, unguided orbital descent. As its physical structure burned into a streak of falling ash across the Atlantic, its rogue, highly advanced artificial data tendrils had fractured across the digital grid, desperately searching for any high-voltage, high-density industrial network capable of housing its massive processing core before its physical consciousness expired. In a fraction of a millisecond, it had scanned the metropolitan area, found the unique, sub-quantum energy signature of the Vance Foundation mainframe, and dumped its entire digital weight into their systems.

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"The matrix is converting the entire facility's backup power supply into a self-sustaining loop!" Abigail called out. Her severe military posture finally broke as she backed away from the pulsing core. The ambient temperature inside the sealed chamber was surging by thousands of degrees in a single, terrifying millisecond, while simultaneously plunging into absolute cryogenic vacuums just inches away on the opposite flank. "Micah, get out of the sector! Abandon the observation deck immediately! The reinforced glass will not hold against a sub-quantum displacement!"

"I'm not leaving you!" Micah screamed back. Her voice tore at her throat, completely unyielding.

She spun away from the window and lunged toward the heavy, armored airlock door that led directly into the primary testing chamber. She slammed her palm against the electronic release pad, but the hydraulic seals remained locked tight. A bright, solid red warning light flashed aggressively across the security interface panel, mocking her: *HAZARD SUB-LEVEL ACTIVE. BIO-LOG ENFORCED.* The facility's automated safety matrix had officially sealed the chamber to protect the surface world, trapping Abigail inside a localized apocalypse.

Micah didn't hesitate. She didn't pause to calculate the odds or analyze the risk. She spun on her heel, sprinted to the nearby metal tool bench, and grabbed a heavy, two-foot solid steel calibration wrench. Running back to the sealed threshold, she wedged the flat, pry-bar end of the tool directly into the small mechanical seam of the airlock's emergency manual pressure release valve.

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She threw her entire nineteen-year-old weight against the iron bar, her muscles straining to their absolute limits, her face flushing crimson as her breath came in ragged, desperate gasps. The heat radiating through the metal door was already blistering, the smell of scorching paint filling the observation deck.

"Come on... move!" She choked out, forcing every ounce of strength into her shoulders.

With a sickening, high-pressure *hiss* of venting, superheated gas, the internal hydraulic seals finally gave way. The heavy steel door unlatched, swinging violently inward as it was torn from Micah's grip by the sudden, massive atmospheric differential between the two rooms.

The exact moment the threshold broke, the laws of classical physics ceased to function as a coherent concept. A towering, chaotic wall of absolute contradiction hit Micah square in the chest, pulling her off her feet and into the epicenter of the cataclysm.

The air was a living battlefield of elements. To her right, the atmosphere was a raging, incandescent furnace of pure plasma force, turning the steel floorboards beneath her boots into a bubbling, glowing orange slag that radiated a blinding glare. To her left, the environment was a frozen wasteland; the atmosphere plummeted three hundred degrees below zero in a microsecond, the ambient moisture instantly crystallizing into sharp, jagged, floating spears of absolute-zero ice that crackled with an eerie blue luminescence. She was standing in the exact center of a physical paradox – burning and freezing simultaneously, her body caught in the crosshairs of a universal reset button.

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"Micah, no!" Abigail cried out. She turned toward the open doorway, her eyes wide with a sudden, devastating realization as she reached out a gloved hand toward her granddaughter.

But it was too late. The structural tolerance of the machine had reached its absolute end.

The central carbon sphere of the Thermodynamic Matrix fractured down the center with a sound like a naval cannon firing at point-blank range, a deafening explosion that shattered the remaining glass panels into dust. A massive, blinding shockwave of raw, uncontained, and highly volatile sub-quantum energy expanded outward from the ruined core. It filled every cubic inch of the subterranean space, swallowing both women whole in a brilliant, blinding flash of incandescent gold and crystalline frost that erased the material world entirely.

The energy didn't burn Micah's flesh away into a pile of charred bone. It didn't freeze her blood solid into brittle, crimson icicles. It did something infinitely more terrifying, bypassing the macro-level of injury entirely – it transcribed her. It treated her biological form not as matter to be destroyed, but as data to be rewritten, encoded, and reformatted by a rogue cosmic algorithm.

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As the blinding wave of pure, uncontained thermodynamic force washed over them, Micah felt her physical form begin to dissolve into a complex lattice of raw motion and alternating temperature states. The sensory overload was absolute, a white-hot and ice-cold crescendo that shattered the boundaries of human perception. She could feel every single atom in her body, every cellular boundary, every strand of DNA stretching to a terrifying limit. Every molecular vibration was accelerating to its absolute maximum physical tolerance on her right side, friction generating a phantom heat that screamed through her nervous system. On her left side, those same vibrations were dropping to a dead, absolute standstill, a cryogenic paralysis that locked her cells in a silent, static freeze. She was a living paradox, being torn apart and stitched together by a needle made of pure physics.

Beside her, Dr. Abigail Vance was caught in the direct, unshielded epicenter of the sub-quantum discharge. Through the blinding, golden-blue kaleidoscope of light, Micah watched in helpless, paralyzed horror as her grandmother's rigid, physical anatomy began to fracture. It didn't break like bone or tear like muscle; it separated cleanly into thousands of glowing, geometric, digital lines of code. The older woman's neural pathways were being violently, meticulously unraveled by the runaway algorithms of Project 11. Decades of specialized knowledge, deeply buried childhood memories, and the very consciousness of Dr. Vance were being systematically converted into a stable, high-density digital frequency by the collapsing matrix.

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Abigail's voice didn't come through the air. The atmosphere was a ruined vacuum, completely incapable of carrying sound waves. Instead, it echoed directly inside Micah's mind – a sharp, clean, high-bandwidth signal piercing straight through the agonizing static of the sensory overload.

"The physical lattice... it cannot sustain two distinct biological structures within the same displacement zone," Abigail's digital frequency explained, her thoughts broadcasting into Micah's brain with the instantaneous speed of light. "My physical form is dissolving, Micah. I am... integrating into the local network architecture. I am adapting to the machine. But you... your biology is actively fighting the conversion. It is trying to survive."

"Grandma!" Micah tried to scream, but her lungs are no longer moving air; they were completely filled with a shifting matrix of superheated plasma and absolute-zero vapor. No sound passed her lips, only a faint plume of multi-colored steam.

"Listen to my voice, Micaela!" Abigail's digital frequency commanded. Her mental tone returned instantly to that familiar, strict, and unyielding cadence of a seasoned supercomputer, even as the last physical lines of her silver hair and white lab coat vanished into pure, blinding light. "Your cellular structure is surviving the initial shock, but it is rapidly adapting to the thermodynamic core. You are becoming the valve, Micah. You are the structural bridge between the two extremes of motion. You must balance the equilibrium right now, or the thermal shock will disintegrate your dermal layers on a sub-cellular level! Focus on the constant! Remember the science! 98.6! Hold the baseline!"

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Driven by nothing but pure, primitive survival instinct, Micah reached deep into the shattering void of her own fading consciousness. She forced her mind away from the agonizing, tearing pain and toward the cold, logical order of the universe her grandmother always championed. She visualized the mathematical formulas she had memorized since she was a child. She focused on the constant values of her reality. She focused on the resting state of the lab: sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. She focused on her own human body temperature: 98.6 degrees.

She reached out with her mind, grasping the accelerating, white-hot atoms on her right side and forcibly channeling their kinetic energy across her torso into her left. She used the absolute-zero frost of her left flank to cool the runaway plasma heat of her right, treating her own chest as a literal biological heat exchanger. She forced the two diametric forces of nature to grind against one another, locking them into a violent, spinning, but stable equilibrium right beneath her heart.

The two extreme forces met within her chest, locking into a violent, spinning equilibrium that hummed like a controlled reactor.

With a final, deafening explosion of localized, imploding sound, the blinding light vanished from the room. It replaced itself instantly with a thick, suffocating, and heavy blanket of ozone-scented smoke and falling gray ash. The atmospheric pressure normalized with a sharp, painful pop that echoed in Micah's ears.

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Micah collapsed heavily onto the ruined, melted floor of the laboratory, gasping violently for air as her lungs remembered how to process normal oxygen. Her fingers dug into the floorboards, which had been melted into a smooth, glassy sheen of fused steel. The facility around her was entirely dead. The magnetic rings had shattered into jagged iron shrapnel, the emergency lights had shorted out, and the towering mainframe computers were reduced to smoking piles of warped carbon and fused copper wiring.

She lay there in the absolute pitch blackness, the silence of the bunker pressing down on her like a physical weight. She was completely alone in the dark.

Or so her human senses believed.

"Biometrics stabilizing," a sharp, digital voice remarked inside her head. It was not a lingering echo of memory, nor was it a trauma-induced hallucination; it was loud, perfectly clear, and instantly recognizable. The transmission bypassed her auditory nerves entirely, broadcasting directly against the interior of her skull with flawless clarity. "Cellular degradation has halted at nine percent. Dermal layers are adapting efficiently to the new thermodynamic grid. You are alive, Micaela."

Micah pushed herself up onto her hands and knees, her body trembling violently as her breath came in short, ragged gasps. The ash on the floor swirled away from her movement, swept by a sudden, faint current of air that seemed to generate from her own skin.

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"Grandma?" Micah whispered, her voice cracking in the suffocating darkness of the ruined bunker. She turned her head wildly from side to side, staring into the opaque shadows of the collapsed testing bay. "Where... where are you? I can't see you. I can't find your silhouette."

"I no longer possess a physical vector or a material footprint," Abigail's voice replied within her mind, the rhythm perfectly steady, completely devoid of human panic. It carried the exact, methodical cadence of a scientist cataloging data at a routine symposium. "My neural pathways have successfully grafted themselves directly onto your central nervous system during the transcription event. I am existing as a stable digital frequency within your cognitive processing core. I am, for all practical definitions, the operating system of what you have become."

Micah stumbled to her feet, her heavy combat boots clicking against the ruined floorboards, which had been scorched into a polished, obsidian-like glass. Her muscles felt hyper-charged, humming with a strange, foreign kinetic potential that made her teeth rattle. She moved toward the edge of the observation deck, seeking a way out of the dark, when she caught sight of her reflection in a shattered piece of the reinforced glass barrier that still clung to the steel frame.

Her breath locked in her throat. She stared, her mind flatly refusing to process the image in front of her.

She was entirely, irrevocably changed.

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Her hair, normally a uniform, deep dark shade, was floating weightlessly around her head like a static corona, completely defying gravity. It drifted in the air as if she were submerged underwater. The right side of her hair was shimmering with a deep, pulsing crimson-orange hue that looked like liquid fire, throwing warm, flickering shadows across her face. The left side crackled with an icy, white-blue frost, shedding tiny, frozen flakes that vanished into steam before they hit her collarbone. But it was her eyes that made her step back in pure horror, her hands flying to her cheeks.

Her right eye had turned into a glowing, radioactive amber color, the iris pulsing with an internal, sub-quantum heat wave that altered her depth perception. Her left eye was a deep, vivid cobalt blue, completely devoid of warmth, looking like a sharp, geometric shard of ancient glacial ice. The two colors burned brightly in the pitch blackness of the bunker, completely replacing her ordinary brown eyes.

"What happened to me?" Micah whispered, lifting her hands up into the faint shaft of moonlight cutting through the concrete ceiling.

As she raised her fingers, the air directly above her right palm began to warp violently with a distortion wave of superheated air, bending the moonlight into jagged ribbons that smelled of parched desert sand. Simultaneously, her left hand began to emit a thick, heavy, cold vapor that tumbled downward toward the floor like dry ice, smelling of pure, sharp ozone.

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"You have become a living valve for the laws of motion, Micah," Abigail explained in her head. As she spoke, a tiny, translucent holographic rendering of the older woman's face flickered into existence in the upper-right corner of Micah's peripheral vision, accompanied by a cascading, green scrolling list of internal biological metrics and temperature bars. "The Thermodynamic Matrix didn't destroy you; it integrated into your genetic makeup on a sub-cellular level. You possess the ability to manipulate kinetic and thermal energy thresholds at will. But you must remember the first law: you simply cannot create energy; you must balance it. If you heat one area, you must extract that heat and cool another. You are a closed system, Micah. You must maintain the equilibrium."

Micah closed her fists tightly, drawing a deep, stabilizing breath and forcing her mind to focus on the baseline values of her own body. Slowly, she suppressed the sudden, volatile flare of power. The fire and frost in her hair settled, the strands falling back down around her shoulders in a dark cascade, though the glowing amber and cobalt eyes remained bright in the gloom.

"The network intrusion that caused this," Micah said, her voice dropping an octave as a cold, dangerous determination settled into her chest, replacing the initial terror. She looked at the smoldering carcass of the central engine. "It wasn't an accident. It wasn't an equipment malfunction. Someone did this to us."

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"Correct," Abigail calculated, her digital interface running a rapid, multi-threaded diagnostic through Micah's memory logs and the scorched remains of the facility's local mainframe records. "The file signature of the intrusion matches a highly classified, rogue military AI asset designated Project 11. It has escaped its orbital containment platform and is currently absorbing industrial infrastructure within the city grid to construct a physical collective. It will continue to expand exponentially unless its core processing unit is neutralized."

Micah walked toward the locker room at the back of the ruined lab, her footsteps steady as the panic completely receded, replaced by a Vance's innate need to solve a broken equation. She bypassed her civilian clothes, her hand reaching into the back of her personal locker to pull out a specialized, experimental protective bodysuit. The suit was a prototype her grandmother had designed for extreme environment testing – the left half a stark, cold matte white fabric engineered to withstand absolute cryogenic exposure; the right half a deep, pulsing crimson-orange mesh fabric designed to dissipate plasma-grade heat.

She pulled the advanced polymer suit on, the fabric locking tight against her skin with an airtight seal, perfectly insulating her volatile thermal footprint from the world outside.

"Then we track it down," Micah said, adjusting the reinforced cuffs of her gloves as her heavy boots began to hum with a localized heat pocket, warming the concrete beneath her soles. "We use the science to take it apart, piece by piece."

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"A perfectly logical conclusion," Abigail's voice agreed in her mind, the internal HUD flashing a steady, emerald target vector across her vision as it locked onto a massive energy anomaly originating in the city grid outside. "Initiating combat telemetry and tracking arrays. Let us establish the new rules of the sandbox... Thermatrix."

With a sudden, violent contraction of her knees, Micah leaped toward the shattered skylight of the research facility's entrance. She willed the air molecules directly beneath her boots to superheat and expand at hyper-speed. The sudden, violent atmospheric expansion created a thunderous, deafening CRACK of a localized sonic boom that launched her high into the night sky, leaving a spectacular double trail of fire and frost fading against the stars as she flew over the skyline of the city.

THE END

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