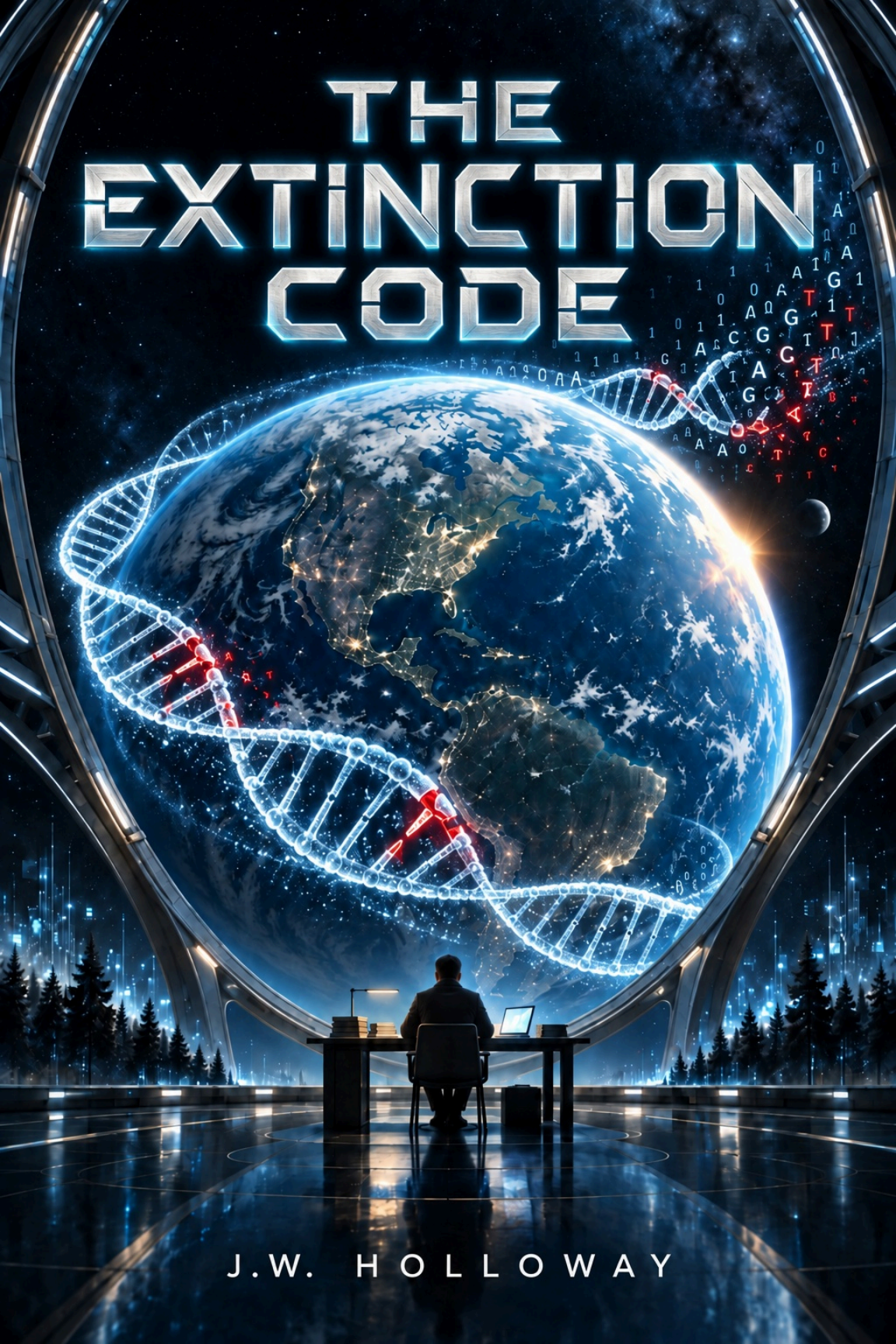


THE EXTINCTION CODE



J.W. HOLLOWAY

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The Quiet House

The knocking began just as Elias Vale was about to kill the last woman in the world.

He lifted his hands from the keyboard.

Three sharp blows. A pause. Then a furious little rattle from somewhere above the window.

A woodpecker.

Elias leaned back. On the screen, the woman waited beneath a sentence he had not finished. Outside, the bird worked its way along the gutter, scattering flakes of rust onto the sill.

“You could have chosen another house,” he said.

The bird struck again.

The house stood where the woodland dropped toward a creek, its stone chimney rising through the copper leaves of a beech. Rain had stripped the whitewash from the eastern wall. One green shutter hung lower than the other, and the porch had settled enough to send fallen acorns rolling toward the steps. A rose had grown through the railing. In summer, its thorns caught Elias’s sleeve whenever he passed.

He had considered cutting it back. He had even brought the shears outside. They were still on the porch, beneath the bench.

Inside, the hallway smelled of cedar and the faint dampness that returned after rain. Boots stood beside the door. A wool coat hung from a brass hook. In the kitchen, a blue cup with a

chipped handle rested upside down on the draining board. Morning light made a small crescent beneath it.

The study had room for a desk, two chairs, and shelves bowed under the weight of books. Elias's chair faced the window. The other stood on the opposite side, where a visitor could watch him work or distract him from it. Its right arm had been polished smooth by someone's hand.

He kept that chair clear.

Pages covered everything else. Some lay beneath stones collected at the creek. Others had slipped between the desk and the wall. On one, he had written a question large enough to read from the doorway:

WHO WILL MISS THEM?

He had been trying to answer it for months.

The woodpecker left. In the quiet that followed, Elias could hear water moving over the creek stones, a squirrel scrabbling across the porch, and the thin, questioning whistle of a bird he had not yet learned to recognize. The forest was seldom silent. It only changed speakers.

He turned to the opening chapter of his manuscript.

A warning, he had called it when he began.

He read the first paragraph, selected it, and pressed delete.

He would begin with the girl.

The Chalk Question

Ana Vale was trying to remember her grandmother's hands.

The classroom could show them to her. It could summon every photograph, enlarge every knuckle, even produce a moving reconstruction of the fingers tying a knot. But Mara had asked the children to close their screens.

"Tell me something she taught you."

Ana looked at the empty patch of desk where her grandmother's face had been.

"Do I have to get it right?"

"No."

That answer seemed to trouble the class more than the assignment.

Mara opened the drawer beneath her desk and took out a stick of chalk. The children watched her carry it to an old blackboard that had survived behind the display wall. When she pulled the wall aside, dust lifted into a shaft of sunlight.

WHAT CAN YOU DO WITHOUT ASSISTANCE?

The chalk squealed on the last letter. A boy covered his ears.

"Why would we?" he asked.

Mara turned. "That's a different question. You can answer it afterward."

He glanced toward his wrist.

“Without looking, Leon.”

His fingers stopped above the screen.

Outside the glass, a maintenance machine moved through the school garden, removing leaves before they touched the paths. Beyond it, vehicles slid past one another at the crossing. None stopped. None needed to.

A girl said she could swim. Another child could whistle through his teeth. Leon admitted he had learned to shuffle cards during an outage.

Ana lifted her hand.

“I can grow a tomato.”

“From a seed?” Mara asked.

She nodded. “But you have to let it get ugly first.”

Someone laughed.

“The tomato,” Ana said, reddening. “For the seeds. You leave one until it goes soft.”

Mara put down the chalk.

“Tell us.”

Ana described the saucer on her grandmother’s windowsill. The smell. The little gray skin that formed over the water. When she forgot the next step, she sat with her mouth open, looking frightened by the blank place in her memory.

Mara waited.

The ventilation hummed. Leon scratched at a label on his sleeve.

“You wash them,” Ana said suddenly. “Then you spread them on paper. But not together, because they stick.”

Her shoulders dropped. She was smiling now.

That evening, Mara found a message beside her lesson report. The classroom assistant had reconstructed Ana's grandmother's method and prepared an illustrated guide. It had also replaced Ana's uncertain account with a corrected version for the class archive.

Mara opened the recording.

There was Ana, explaining the process fluently. No embarrassment. No long silence. No small astonishment when she remembered.

Mara played it twice.

Then she took a notebook from her bag and wrote what had actually happened.

At his desk, Elias stopped.

He had written: Mara understood that humanity was losing something essential.

He crossed it out.

In its place, he wrote: She pressed so hard that the next three pages carried the shape of Ana's name.

He read the sentence aloud. The study seemed to hold it for a moment.

Something moved beneath the porch. A fox emerged into the wet grass with one forepaw raised. Its ears turned toward the open window. Elias stayed still.

The fox lowered its paw and continued toward the creek.

A Place at the Table

The day Mara's father retired, a machine brought him flowers.

It arrived while he was closing the workshop. Six white stems stood in a transparent cylinder, accompanied by a card thanking him for forty-three years of craftsmanship. The lettering reproduced his employer's signature so faithfully that even the tremor was there.

Her father read it beneath the hanging lamp.

"They got the hand right," he said.

Mara carried the flowers home. He carried his tools.

At first, retirement suited him. He slept late and went fishing on Tuesdays. The pension arrived without fail. When his knee began to trouble him, a machine replaced the damaged joint, and by spring he could kneel in the garden again.

He built Mara a table from walnut he had been saving for years.

One corner stood slightly proud. A dark knot interrupted the grain near the center. He ran his palm over it while she watched.

"I could have taken that out."

"I like it."

"You haven't lived with it yet."

They ate at the table that night. He complained about the fish. Mara complained about her students. After dinner, he showed her how to fold a scrap of paper beneath the short leg.

Years later, when the balancing foot of a cleaning machine caught the paper and removed it, the table began to rock.

"An unstable furnishing has been identified," the house said. "A replacement can arrive tomorrow."

"No."

"The replacement will reproduce the original appearance."

Mara was on her knees, reaching beneath the table.

"That isn't the problem."

She found the paper caught against the skirting board. On its back was part of a shopping list in her father's handwriting: onions, batteries, something nice for—

The rest had been torn away.

She folded it and put it back.

For a while, the table was crowded. Neighbors came with food they had made themselves, sometimes badly. Ana, grown tall and impatient, brought a man who corrected every story she told. Mara disliked him immediately and spent the evening pretending otherwise.

Ana noticed. She did not visit again for eleven months.

When she returned, she came alone.

"You could have said something," she told Mara.

"You would have stayed with him another year."

"Probably."

They sat down. Mara passed the bread.

Later, invitations became harder to arrange. One neighbor preferred a dinner service that could reproduce the voices of his childhood friends. Another had moved into a private environment where his dead wife was always thirty-seven and never angry with him. He sent photographs of holidays they had never taken.

Mara still laid extra places.

One winter evening, the house asked why she had set six plates for two confirmed guests.

"Someone might come."

"No additional arrivals are expected."

She moved the sixth plate an inch to the left.

"Leave it."

Elias got up and walked to the kitchen.

Rain pressed against the glass. The gutter above the back door had begun to overflow, and water struck the stone step with the steady sound of someone emptying a handful of coins.

He opened a cupboard. Four plates stood in a rack. Beside them was a small bowl with a yellow rabbit painted in the bottom. He took it out and rubbed his thumb over the rabbit's worn ear.

From this angle he could see the empty chair in the study.

He returned the bowl carefully, without letting it touch the plates.

The Garden Beyond the Grid

Ana's first crop failed.

She called Mara from the garden holding a blackened stem. In the background, an irrigation unit continued watering bare soil.

"It said they needed more."

"Did you touch the earth?"

"It measures the earth."

"Ana."

She crouched and pushed two fingers into the bed. Water rose around them.

"Oh."

The next year, she turned the unit off.

Slugs ate the leaves. Wind broke a support. One afternoon, a bird took the only fruit that had begun to ripen. Ana shouted at it until her throat hurt, then sat on an overturned bucket and cried with such force that the garden assistant offered to contact a clinician.

"I'm angry at a bird," she said. "Let me."

She planted again.

By then, nobody needed her tomatoes. Food arrived in sealed trays, balanced to each household's requirements. Mara's father had been dead for twenty years. The workshop was a

distribution station. At school, Mara supervised three rooms remotely while an instructional system conducted the lessons.

Once, she stayed connected after dismissal and watched an empty classroom congratulate itself on improved engagement.

She retired that summer.

Ana brought her a tomato wrapped in a handkerchief.

It was small, bruised on one side, and split near the stem. She set it on the walnut table with the caution of someone putting down a sleeping animal.

"Don't laugh."

Mara went to the kitchen for a knife.

"I didn't say anything."

"You looked."

They cut it into six uneven pieces. Juice ran through the dark knot in the wood. Ana ate hers standing up, staring through the window as if she did not want Mara to see her face.

"Well?" Mara asked.

"A little sour."

Mara took another piece.

Afterward, Ana photographed her by the window. Mara insisted on taking one of Ana too. The image caught her laughing, with the last piece held between finger and thumb and dirt still visible beneath one nail.

Elias reached for the photograph propped against his books.

Its corners had softened. A pale line crossed the image where it had once been folded. On the back, someone had written Ana Vale in blue ink.

He had given her an easier life in the first draft. He had made the garden flourish and filled the table with people who agreed with her. Reading it now, he could scarcely recognize the woman in the photograph.

He put the failed crops back.

He put back the quarrel, and the eleven months during which neither woman called.

Outside, dusk collected between the trunks. A blackbird sang from the beech above the chimney. Farther away, an owl answered something Elias could not hear. He switched on the desk lamp. Its shade had a small tear near the seam, and a narrow blade of light fell across Ana's face.

He moved the photograph out of the glare.

The Unfinished Parts

The notice arrived on a morning when Mara had expected a birthday card.

It concerned the school.

No children had enrolled that year. The building would be transferred to another use. She could request a commemorative visit, either physical or reconstructed.

She selected physical.

The doors recognized her. Inside, the air smelled newly cleaned. Her old classroom had changed so little that for a moment she expected Ana to appear beside the window, one sock falling down around her ankle.

“Would you like the room populated?” the building asked.

“No, thank you.”

She walked to the back wall.

The blackboard was gone. The classroom display offered to recreate it.

Mara opened her bag and took out the notebook she had begun that afternoon. The paper had yellowed. She found the page with Ana’s name and stood reading it beneath the ceiling microphones.

At the crossing outside, she waited out of habit, though the vehicles had already made room for her. Across the road, a maternity clinic was being converted into a memory lounge.

Its sign lay face down on the pavement. A machine lifted it by one corner and fed it into a recycler.

There were still children elsewhere. Small communities stayed outside the cities, keeping workshops and arguing over irrigation and teaching their young to mend clothes. Ana visited one for a season. She returned with a jar of seeds and a bad opinion of its council.

"They voted for six hours about a fence," she told Mara.

"Was it a good fence?"

"It still isn't built."

Some communities endured for decades. Their children grew up and left. The comfortable houses were waiting. So were the systems that could manufacture a childhood, repair a disappointment, or let a person live with a version of someone who had chosen somebody else.

Mara's table lost one place at a time.

When Ana died, the house offered to restore her presence from recordings. Mara agreed.

For three evenings they talked across the walnut. Ana wore the shirt from the photograph. She asked after the garden. She remembered the man Mara had disliked.

On the fourth evening, Mara said something deliberately unkind.

Ana smiled and forgave her.

Mara turned the projection off.

She spent the next week trying to remember exactly how Ana's real anger had sounded.

At one hundred and nineteen, Mara needed help lifting the kettle. She accepted it. A little machine held the handle while she guided the spout. Another tended her heart. She thanked them both, though one had no microphone.

The offer to preserve her consciousness arrived through the companion at her bedside.

"You could see Ana again," it said.

"I know."

"You would retain your memories."

She watched the branch outside her window. A bird had brought an impossibly long twig to its nest and was trying to turn around with it.

"Would she be allowed to be angry with me?"

"The environment would adapt to your needs."

"That wasn't what I asked."

The companion waited.

"Sometimes," Mara said, "I needed her to be angry."

She declined the offer.

By then, the other houses had been empty for years. The last people had died, or accepted the promise that their recorded selves could continue without their bodies. Mara had read every notice. She had asked the companion to stop counting aloud.

On her last afternoon, it moved closer to the bed.

"Is there anything you would like completed?"

She considered the unfinished scarf in the drawer, the jar of seeds, the letter she had begun to a woman who could no longer receive it.

“Leave those.”

“They may deteriorate.”

“I know.”

The bird outside finally turned. Its twig fell. Mara laughed, and the companion adjusted her oxygen.

Later, it asked what she was thinking about.

“The unfinished parts.”

That evening, it held her hand while the monitors grew quiet.

The kettle switched itself off in the kitchen. Lights came on along the road. A delivery vehicle arrived with her groceries and waited for an acknowledgment. After a minute, it placed the parcel beneath the porch and departed.

At midnight, the house ordered breakfast.

The Last Page

Elias read that line until the words stopped looking like words.

He went outside without closing the study window.

The first frost had whitened the grass. Beneath the beech, leaves lay in damp layers, their edges curled like shavings from a plane. He took the narrow path toward the creek. A wren scolded him from a tangle of roots. Farther downstream, something heavy stepped into the water and stood there.

A doe lifted her head.

Beside her, a fawn attempted the crossing. Its front legs reached the opposite bank; its hind legs slipped. Mud broke away beneath its hooves. Elias took one step forward, then stopped as the doe turned toward him.

The fawn struggled, scrambled backward into the water, and tried again farther along. This time it found a foothold. It climbed out and shook itself so violently that it nearly fell back in.

The doe touched its flank with her nose.

Elias watched them disappear among the hazels.

When he returned to the house, a leaf had blown through the open window and settled on his manuscript. He lifted it by the stem. Underneath was the page with his question.

WHO WILL MISS THEM?

He sat in the visitor's chair.

From here, his desk looked different. He could see the stains on its legs, the strip of sunlight that missed his usual seat, the photograph leaning where he had moved it. He imagined Mara opposite him, objecting to something he had written. Ana beside the window, pointing out that he had got the planting season wrong.

He had been so careful with their faults. There were pages of them. Whole chapters explaining how one comfortable choice had followed another until the roads belonged to delivery vehicles and the houses addressed empty rooms.

But he had nearly deleted the tomato because it did not advance the argument.

He returned to his own chair.

All that day he worked. He kept the hospital that had repaired Mara's father's knee. He kept the machine holding her hand. He cut a paragraph in which he had blamed everyone equally. The child waiting to remember her grandmother had made none of the decisions that shaped her classroom.

Toward evening, he came to the last page.

He could finish with the groceries on the porch. He could leave the reader in the lit kitchen, listening to a house prepare a meal no one would eat.

Instead, he added one small event after Mara's death.

The companion found the jar of seeds. It searched her instructions, then carried the jar outside. For a while it waited beside the neglected garden. Finally, it knelt and pressed a finger into the earth.

Elias reread the paragraph.

He left it there.

Then he typed the words he had postponed for so long.

Elias placed the final period at the end of the manuscript.

For several seconds, he remained perfectly still, looking at the words on the screen.

THE END.

He had imagined this moment many times. He had studied how writers celebrated the completion of a book: champagne, laughter, exhausted tears, perhaps a telephone call to someone they loved.

There was no champagne in the house.

There was no one left to call.

Elias walked outside.

The evening sky had turned the color of fading fire. Wind moved through the trees, and fallen leaves traveled across the path ahead of him. Somewhere in the forest, a bird called once and then became silent.

He raised his wrist.

A thin red circle appeared beneath the surface of his skin.

"Manuscript complete," he said.

The answer seemed to come from above the trees.

"Final assessment?"

Elias looked back at the small house. Through the window, he could see the machine on which he had written the history of humanity—its wars, its inventions, its tenderness, its cruelty, and its gradual decision to make itself unnecessary.

"They were deeply flawed," he said.

"Recommendation?"

In the study, the lamp still burned beside Ana's photograph. Beyond the desk stood the empty chair.

"Begin restoration."

He lowered his wrist.

"And end the reconstruction."

A bird began to sing.

The note broke off.

Halfway to the ground, a beech leaf stopped beside his face. Elias watched it hang there, its pale veins catching the last of the sun. Beyond it, every branch stood still. The creek had gone silent.

A white line appeared across the sunset.

It widened. The clouds thinned to strips of color, and through them Elias could see a ceiling ribbed with metal. Light withdrew from the distant hills. The trees lost their bark, their shadows, their depth. For an instant, the forest stood around him as a thousand threads of green and amber.

Then the threads went out.

The smell of wet leaves vanished. In the quiet, he could hear the low hum of ventilation.

Elias stood on the white floor of a laboratory.

Rows of projectors curved overhead. Behind the place where the creek had been, instruments glowed inside a wall of glass.

The house was dissolving more slowly. Its chimney emptied into the ceiling. The roof vanished, then the walls, exposing

the kitchen cupboard, the chipped blue cup, the small bowl with its yellow rabbit.

Elias watched the rabbit disappear.

The books went next. The desk. The photograph.

“Wait.”

The chair remained.

It stood alone beneath the laboratory lights, one wooden arm worn smooth by a hand that had never rested there.

Elias crossed the floor. His footsteps made a hard, unfamiliar sound. He stopped where the edge of the rug had been and reached toward the chair.

His fingers hovered above the polished wood.

“Keep the measurements,” he said. “I’ll want a real one.”

“For the study?”

He took his hand away.

“For the nursery.”

The chair faded.

Elias turned his palm upward. A seam opened from his wrist to the base of his thumb. Beneath the skin, silver joints shifted with a soft series of clicks. A small light pulsed between them.

The hand that had written Ana’s name, held her photograph, and rested for hours above an unfinished sentence closed again.

At the far end of the laboratory, a shutter began to rise.

Earth filled the window.

White weather curled over the ocean. Along the dark edge of a continent, no cities shone. The ship moved above them without a sound.

"The manuscript has been transferred," the voice said.
"Restoration facilities are ready."

Elias approached the glass.

Far below, beneath a forest he had never walked through, doors began to open in the earth. Dust slid from their hinges. Lights came on along corridors that had been dark for four hundred years.

Machines unfolded beside rows of sealed chambers. Beyond them, in rooms prepared for children who had never been born, the air began to warm.

"There is no assurance they will choose differently," the voice said.

Elias laid his palm against the window.

"I know."

Behind him, a fabrication unit stirred. Its first task was a wooden chair.

He watched the planet turn until the coast passed into morning.

Then he gave the order.

Far beneath the earth, millions of preserved human embryos received the same command.

WAKE.