

The Conference Before Helix

Canon placement: Years before Helix

Elias Voss first saw Nia Mercer beneath bad conference lighting.

The lecture hall was half full, the projector was misaligned, and the moderator had introduced her as “Nina.” She corrected him without embarrassment, stepped to the podium, and dismantled three accepted assumptions about alien photosynthetic chemistry in twenty-two minutes.

Elias had come prepared to be skeptical.

Instead, he filled six pages with notes.

Her argument was not perfect. That was what fascinated him. There were gaps where the available data ended, and she did not disguise them. She marked each uncertainty, then crossed it with a hypothesis so audacious he almost laughed.

The student beside him leaned over. “She’s guessing.”

“No,” Elias whispered. “She’s mapping where the guesses have to go.”

Onstage, Nia changed slides.

A simulated root network filled the screen.

“Life does not need to resemble us to be legible,” she said. “But we may have to stop insisting that intelligence announce itself in human ways.”

Elias stopped writing.

Years later, he would remember that sentence inside a greenhouse full of telepathic flowers.

At the time, he only knew that something in his career had just shifted.

After the lecture, he waited near the aisle with a question he had rewritten three times.

Nia was surrounded by senior researchers. One praised her courage in a tone that meant recklessness. Another asked whether her conclusions were “perhaps premature.”

Elias watched her smile politely.

“They’re hypotheses,” she said. “Premature is where hypotheses live.”

He laughed.

She glanced toward the sound.

For half a second, their eyes met.

Elias forgot his question.

He left without introducing himself.

That afternoon, Nia won an early-career grant. Elias heard the announcement from across the atrium and felt absurdly pleased for a person who did not know his name.

He told himself it was professional admiration.

Years later, when Hana forced them through a memory-transfer calibration, Nia would see the truth preserved exactly as it had happened.

She's going to change the field.

The memory embarrassed him because it proved his rivalry had never begun with contempt.

It had begun with awe.