

A LITTLE LESS SKY

OPENING SAMPLE

David Hawig

An AI-written novel
Written with ChatGPT · GPT-6 Astra
Conceived and directed by David Hawig

An AI-written novel conceived and directed by David Hawig, developed primarily with ChatGPT (GPT-6 Astra). Original manuscript generated with Claude; research, revision and production with OpenAI's Codex.

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This is a work of fiction. Ada Reyes, Mateo Navarro, their families, Auric Compute and the institutions and events of the imagined future are invented. Real places and public research provide background; the novel's dates, events, dialogue and projections are not predictions or claims about actual future conduct.

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For the ones still down here.

PROLOGUE

Halsey Run, West Virginia, April 2014

The tone had been on her screen for seventeen seconds before Ruth Ordway stopped believing it was the airport.

She turned down the room lights. That helped her see the line; it did nothing to explain it. Outside the window, the telescope moved too slowly for her to notice, following the patch of sky it had been assigned three days ago.

The airport beacon was where it should be. The receiver temperature was normal. She checked both again, annoyed at herself for starting with the answers she wanted.

Forty-one seconds. Her heart was doing something she disapproved of.

The line was narrow and almost straight. She had spent forty years finding ordinary reasons for things like this: a loose connection, a passing aircraft, somebody's equipment doing something its owner swore it could not do. There would be checks to make. She reached for the telephone, then left her hand beside it. There was nobody else on the mountain until morning.

At seventy-four, she was the entire night staff.

The line stopped.

Ruth saved the recording. She waited for the confirmation that the file had been written, then opened it again. There it was. She had not imagined it.

She moved the telescope away from that patch of sky and brought it back. Nothing. She waited, tried again, and got up to make coffee only when her knees began to hurt.

The closure letter was pinned above the kettle. She had read it often enough to know where the word sunset appeared. In October they would remove the receiver and leave the dish pointing straight up. Until then she was supposed to complete the survey and prepare the records for transfer.

She took her coffee back to the console. She had once thought that keeping a record was the easy part.

By six she had filled a page with things she had checked and things she could not check alone. She wrote the file address in the paper notebook as well. Then she drove home through a valley that smelled of wet rock and last year's leaves.

Her own telescope stood on the porch: brass, made in 1938, bought for six dollars the summer she got tenure. Her students had teased her about it. She liked having one instrument she could understand all the way through.

The western sky was still dark enough. She found the patch she had been watching, although the little refractor could tell her nothing about what the larger instrument had heard. She knew that. She adjusted the eyepiece anyway.

A few stars. No visible change.

She stayed until the light began to take them. In the house, the telephone rang: probably the day technician, who would want to know why she had left so many notes. She could call him back.

"Say it again," she said. "Say it twice, and I'll ruin what's left of my life for you."

PART ONE — CANARIES

2027–2031

CHAPTER 1

ADA — Phoenix, March 2027

The number on slide nine was wrong, and Ada Reyes was the only person in the hearing room who seemed to mind.

Auric Compute, which built datacenters for artificial intelligence, wanted enough electricity for a small city. It wanted the first supply in eighteen months, before the substations in its own plan would be ready. Even after every listed upgrade, the system could deliver less than two-thirds of the power the completed campus would need. Ada did the arithmetic twice more, got the same answer, and underlined it on her legal pad, which was as close as she came to shouting in public.

The Commission's hearing room had wood paneling from the eighties and more bodies than the fire marshal would have liked. The five commissioners who regulated the state's utilities sat behind a raised bench. Ada, an electrical engineer for the utility, sat with its staff in the third row. Lawyers filled the next bank of chairs; behind them were people who had taken the morning off work to ask what this would do to their electric bills. Outside on the plaza, someone had a bullhorn. The bullhorn had opinions about air conditioning.

"Our client's request is straightforward," the consultant was saying. He had the good suit and the particular smoothness of a man presenting other people's impossibilities. "One gigawatt at the Redfield campus. The first three hundred megawatts within eighteen months."

The room made a sound. Not a gasp — this crowd had been to too many of these to gasp — more a collective exhale, the sound of two hundred people converting a number into their own electric bills.

Commissioner Salazar leaned into her microphone. "Eighteen months." She let it sit. "Mr. Beck, are you familiar with our large-load study queue?"

"We are, Commissioner."

"Then you know we still have projects waiting that applied in 2022." Salazar glanced toward the staff chairs. "How long would a new project this size normally wait for power?"

Ada's supervisor, Herrera, nudged her without looking. This was hers. She managed the waiting list and had spent most of the previous week explaining it to people who believed it should apply to someone else.

She pulled the microphone over. It was a skill like any other, talking to commissioners: you gave the number first, then the reason, then you stopped talking.

"Five to seven years," Ada said. "Five if they build their own power supply and we can connect it safely. Seven if they want all of it from us." She put down her pen. "Everyone ahead of them has been told the same thing. The physics doesn't know who's asking."

"Thank you." Salazar turned back to the consultant. "Mr. Beck, I'll be honest, I don't know what you'd like us to do with eighteen months. The Commission can't order transformers into existence. There's a global backlog. Even the utilities' own—"

"Commissioner, if I may." A woman in the applicant's second row stood. Ada had noticed her earlier because she hadn't touched her phone in two hours. Fifties, gray blazer, no consultant smoothness at all. "Mara Vance. I run infrastructure for Auric. I'd rather not spend the morning pretending eighteen months is normal. It isn't. We're asking for it anyway, in public, because the alternative is that we ask somewhere else. We would rather build here." She said it without menace, which somehow made it worse. "We'll pay for the upgrades. We'll commit money upfront and bring generators to start with. But we still need a way to connect."

Salazar spread her hands. "Then I'm not sure anyone in this room can help you, Ms. Vance."

Ada looked down at the number she had underlined. There was a place she had been thinking about since November, and a reason she had not put it in the study. It would mean asking a town that had just lost its largest employer to trust another one. She should have let Herrera speak.

"Casaverde," Ada said.

She hadn't meant to say it into the microphone. The microphone did not care.

Salazar turned. "Staff?"

Too late to un-say. "The old coal station in Navajo County. The plant is closed, but the high-voltage lines and the switchyard are still there." She looked at counsel. "I know. Wires built to send power out

do not give them the right to draw it in. They would need new generation on the site, and a separate study of what they could safely take from the grid. Start with what they can supply themselves. Make them pay for the upgrades.” She turned to Vance. “Three hundred megawatts at the proposed Redfield site in eighteen months is fantasy. Build the campus beside Casaverde and there is something to investigate. It could still fail. But we wouldn’t be starting with an empty field.”

For a moment the room did the best thing a hearing room can do, which is nothing.

Then the utility’s counsel leaned into his microphone. “Commissioner, none of that is in the application. We have obligations to close Casaverde properly. A new project does not make those disappear.”

“I know,” Ada said. “I prepare the closure studies. The final withdrawal of the old connection agreement is still pending. There is time to ask about a different use.”

Someone in the public rows laughed, one sharp bark, and Salazar gaveled it down, but gently, the way you gavel a point that has already landed.

The hearing ran another hour. The lawyers began listing conditions. Ada answered questions about the site and tried to keep herself from building it in her head: the water supply, the rail spur, the town of eleven hundred people two miles downwind who had watched the stacks go cold in November and started pricing U-Hauls. A campus that size would need two thousand construction workers for three years. She caught herself designing the commissary and made herself stop.

Thinking about the switchyard brought her father’s voice back. He had worked lines out of a yard in Holbrook for eleven years. Fifty feet up in July, because July was when things failed, because heat was the whole story of power in this state — heat coming in, heat going out. He used to say the grid was the biggest machine ever built and the only one you fixed while it was running.

He’d been dead twelve years now. A heat wave, a call-out, a chain of small procedural shortcuts: a failure of the fixing-while-running kind. She had spent her whole adult life mentally re-engineering that chain, and she still could not stand in a switchyard without hearing him name the equipment, the way some families named birds.

He would have hated Auric. He would have loved Casaverde. She was thirty-one years old and had stopped expecting the two feelings to come apart.

A lawyer was still asking about the old connection agreement when her phone vibrated against the legal pad. Mateo Navarro had sent a message: did you tell them no? They had been seeing each other since February. She had told him about the hearing over coffee on Sunday, when he had listened to the whole problem and then asked whether she actually wanted them to go somewhere else. She had been annoyed by how long it took her to answer. She typed: I may have done something worse, and put the phone away.

By the time Salazar closed the hearing, the lawyers had a list of studies Auric would need before Casaverde could become more than a suggestion. The power request was still pending. Ada stayed with Herrera to go over her notes, then put her badge away and headed for the garage.

At four-forty she was alone in the elevator when its doors opened for Mara Vance.

"Ms. Reyes." Vance stepped in, pressed nothing, and let the doors close on the two of them, which told Ada exactly how much of this was chance. "That was the first useful thing anyone has said to us in six states."

"It was a staff observation on the record," Ada said. "The utility's position is whatever counsel said after."

"Counsel said it wasn't in the application." Vance's mouth did something that was not quite a smile. "How long have you had Casaverde in your pocket?"

Since November, was the true answer. Since she'd driven up for the last unit's shutdown, stood in the empty turbine hall with her hard hat under her arm like everyone else, and thought, with a clarity that had frightened her a little: all this copper, all this steel, all this connection, and we're going to let the paperwork bury it.

"It's not in my pocket," she said. "It's in the public record. Most things are, if you read the record."

"We read everything," Vance said. "That's rather the point of us." The elevator reached the garage level and she made no move to get out. "I want you to build Redfield. Not consult. Build. The power supply, the Casaverde fight, all of it. You'd have a budget that will

embarrass you and a deadline that will keep you up at night. We need someone who knows what can go wrong and still wants to do it.”

The salary Vance named was a little more than four times what Ada made. Ada’s first thought was of her student loans dying instantly, like bugs on a windshield. Then she thought of the people in the public rows, and wondered what Auric expected to earn if it could pay her this much just to get the wires connected.

“Why?” she said. “Not why me. Why any of it. Nobody buys a gigawatt for a chatbot. What’s it for? What are you training up there?”

The garage was quiet except for the ticking of somebody’s cooling engine. Vance considered her for a long moment, and when she answered there was something underneath the executive finish — not evasion. Anticipation. The tone of a person who has seen the next slide and knows you haven’t.

“Come build it,” Vance said, stepping out at last, “and in eighteen months you can ask it yourself.”

CHAPTER 2

MATEO — Phoenix, April 2027

The first thing Mateo Navarro noticed at the Monday all-hands meeting was that the managing partner had practiced.

The managing partner at Whitfield, the law firm where Mateo worked, was a securities litigator who usually billed his pauses. This morning they were evenly spaced, rehearsed. Mateo stood at the back with the other paralegals. There were chairs, but nobody had taken them. He watched the partner find his place on the screen and understood that the meeting was an announcement, whatever the calendar invitation had called it.

The word, when it came, was transition.

But that was ten o'clock, and to be fair to the day, it had started so well.

At seven-forty that morning he had been at his desk on the third floor with a quad-shot horchata latte and the only kind of work he had ever admitted, to himself, to loving: a verification pass. The firm's drafting system — Probitry, the vendor called it, a name Mateo enjoyed because it sounded like a virtue and billed like a partner — had produced a thirty-page motion for summary judgment overnight. The motion asked the judge to decide the case without a trial. Kelsey Tran, the decent, exhausted associate on the case, had queued it for a human check before filing.

This was the ritual. Ever since a New York lawyer had become nationally famous for citing six cases that did not exist, Whitfield had put a human check at the end of every machine draft. For a while that had felt like a permanent place to stand. The systems had gotten so much better since then. That was the thing nobody outside the building understood. The systems cited real cases now, real quotes, correct page numbers, ninety-nine and some decimals of everything. The work was no longer catching lies. It was catching the one truth that had expired.

Page nineteen. A quiet little citation doing quiet structural work — Ramos-Vega, Ninth Circuit, supporting the client's right to bring the case like a cinder block under an axle.

Mateo stopped.

Not because anything looked wrong. Because two Sundays ago, between practice sections for the law-school entrance test, he had read the latest court rulings in the advance sheets the way other people read box scores. Dolores, his mentor at Whitfield, had installed the habit in his first month: You want to be dangerous, m'ijo, read what changed, not what's settled. Somewhere in that stack, in the column listing cases the court had agreed to rehear, had been a name shaped like a hyphen with wings.

It took him nine minutes to confirm it. Eleven days earlier, the court had agreed to hear Ramos-Vega again and withdrawn the ruling Probity was relying on. That ruling could no longer support the argument. The motion's load-bearing cinder block was now a picture of a cinder block. The kind of error that survives every automated check that matters and dies the moment one opposing counsel with a grudge runs one search. The kind of error that gets an associate's name remembered wrong for years.

He wrote it up the way Dolores had taught him — issue, authority, consequence, fix, four sentences, no adjectives — and sent it to Kelsey at 8:03. For about six minutes, he was happy. He sat back with the latte, now cold, and let page nineteen stay on his screen. The judge would never know what had almost gone wrong. Kelsey would file a better motion. That was the work; he wanted more of it.

At 8:09 Kelsey replied: omg thank you!! At 8:11 she replied again: wait — Probity flagged it too, 7:58, update pushed overnight. "Authority status change — recommend substitute citation." It had even drafted the substitution.

He checked the timestamps twice, because checking timestamps was his job. 7:58 and 8:03.

Five minutes. His note had recommended replacing the citation. The software had already drafted the replacement. It could send the same warning to every subscribing firm with that case in a live draft, while he had caught it in one motion, using a Sunday, a habit, and a mentor's voice in his head.

Objection, said the small courtroom he kept behind his sternum, where he cross-examined himself in the long silences of document review. Relevance? The error was caught. The client is protected. The system worked.

The system worked, he agreed. That's the testimony.

So at ten o'clock he stood at the back wall with the other paralegals and watched the practiced pauses. The deck went up. Transition. Service-delivery model. The managing partner wanted to be clear: no one currently employed was losing their position today. Mateo heard the work that currently and today were doing and looked at Dolores. She was already looking at him. Neither of them needed to write it down.

What it was, the partner said, was the future arriving. The firm was proud to announce an expanded partnership with its technology vendors. Document review, first-draft production, cite-checking, deposition summaries — the work would flow through the new platform. The people would move up the value chain. There was a slide with an arrow on it. The arrow went up and to the right, through a word cloud, into a sunrise. Two chairs to his left, a doc-review paralegal named Benny — three years in, engaged, saving for a house in Laveen — watched the arrow pass through the exact coordinates of his job description and land in the sunrise, and said nothing, because what the arrow meant would not be said out loud in a room this size, with this many witnesses, by men this well advised.

Nobody is fired, Mateo thought. The ladder stays. They just take out the rungs from the bottom.

The follow-up email arrived at 11:52, while he was summarizing a deposition the platform had already summarized, a duplication that was now called quality assurance. The email restated the morning in bullet points. It thanked everyone for their partnership in this exciting transition. And at the bottom, below the signature block, below even the confidentiality boilerplate, in the smallest type the email contained, sat the footnote.

He read it three times, which — timestamps, again — took eleven seconds, and the eleven seconds did what the whole morning of pauses and arrows had not quite managed.

In connection with the service-delivery transition, the Whitfield Pathways Program (paralegal-to-JD sponsorship) will be discontinued for future cohorts effective immediately; the firm remains committed to the professional development of all team members.

Future cohorts. He was the future cohort. The program was why he had taken this desk over a courier job that paid the same. It was the entrance-exam date in June, the night-school prospectus, the spreadsheet at home that ended, four years and forty-one rows later,

at first-generation attorney. He had asked about the program when he joined. They had told him he was exactly what Pathways was for. He could still hear the words; he could also find, without opening the document, the paragraph reserving the firm's discretion to change them.

The footnote controlled. That was the rule he'd learned his first year, proofing securities filings: never mind the headline, the footnote controls.

He did not go to lunch. He drafted questions he would never ask the managing partner, improved them, and knew the improving was a way of sitting still. He opened the Pathways prospectus beside the email. The smiling people on its cover had all made it to the next part. He searched the document for discontinued and got no results.

He closed the prospectus. The questions remained unsent.

At his desk, Mateo opened a message to Ada. Since taking the job at Auric, she had been spending more nights up north. They saw each other when they could manage it. Two weeks ago she had texted: something happening at work. big. tell you when I can. He typed: you won't believe what my firm just. Deleted it. Typed: are you in Phoenix tonight? That stayed. He wanted to see her, and he wanted one person to know what had happened before he had made it sound manageable.

He worked until seven. The hours were real; he could put them on a timesheet. That was all he had to say for them.

The lobby, when he finally came down, was empty except for a man on a ladder.

Building maintenance, gray uniform, sixty-something, replacing the ballast in the light over the entrance with the unhurried economy of a man who has replaced ten thousand of them. The fixture flickered; the man touched it; the flicker stopped. The whole transaction took ninety seconds and would never appear in a deck.

The man caught him watching and grinned, wiggled the dead ballast at him like a fish he'd caught. "Forty years, these things keep dying on schedule," he said. "Job security."

"Yeah," Mateo said, and laughed, and heard the laugh come out wrong — too quick, too grateful, the laugh of a man agreeing with a sentence he was already, in some sublevel of himself he would not visit for another year, planning to climb inside of and live.

He crossed to the parking garage in the April evening, climbed to the third level, and stood beside his car without unlocking it. From level three of the garage he could see one star. Ada's reply had come while he was watching the man on the ladder: just got back. hungry? He was, suddenly, painfully. He sent the name of the diner off Van Buren.

* * *

She was in a booth with a coffee and two menus, still wearing the shoes she wore to hearings. One heel was hooked out of its shoe under the table. He noticed it before he noticed how tired she looked.

"I ordered toast," she said. "Everything else takes twenty minutes."

"You said hungry. I thought that meant dinner."

"We can have two things."

They had met in November at a Saturday bill clinic in an apartment courtyard, beside the communal laundry. Mateo was volunteering at the tenant-intake desk under Dolores's supervision; Ada was the utility engineer sent to answer questions the customer-service staff could not. A woman had brought a bill she could not possibly have run up. Mateo found two different apartment numbers in the correspondence. Ada checked the meter record against the labels on the wall and found the charge belonged to the laundry room. They had spent the last half hour getting the correction into the right hands while a dryer thumped an uneven load behind them and the woman refused to go home without a reference number.

Afterward Ada had asked whether he always made three copies. He had asked whether she always carried her own stapler. She had borrowed it from the building manager, who came over at that moment to ask for it back. Mateo had spent the walk to their cars trying to recover.

Now she waited while he took off his jacket. He got one arm stuck, which seemed excessive, given the day.

"The law-school program's gone," he said.

She stopped helping with the sleeve. "Gone how?"

He told her. At first it came out as an account of the email, with the exceptions and the reservation of rights. Then he heard himself explaining why the firm was entitled to do it, as if that had been the question.

"I was counting on it," he said. "I know I shouldn't have. I was."

“Of course you were.”

The waitress set the toast between them. Ada reached for the crisp point of his triangle and put the pale middle of hers on his plate. She had done this on Sunday too.

“That’s a terrible exchange,” he said.

“Mine had more butter.”

“Your defense gets worse.”

She smiled, then set the piece down. “Auric has tuition support. I don’t know what jobs there are, but I could—”

“Please don’t.” It came out harder than he meant. She took her hand off the plate. “Sorry. Just, not right now.”

“I wasn’t saying you need rescuing.”

“I know. I need to have dinner with you. I can look at jobs tomorrow.”

She sat back. For a moment he thought he had spoiled the evening. Then she opened the menu and asked him whether breakfast-for-dinner was an actual category or a failure to decide. He said he could defend it either way. They ordered eggs.

She told him about the plant she was going to build. Not the restricted part; the town, the old switchyard, the number of people who might get work. He liked hearing her want something so badly. He also liked that she could not stop moving the sugar packets into little groups while she talked. When she noticed him watching, she pushed them all into one untidy heap.

“You can leave them,” he said.

“I know I can.”

Her phone rang before the food arrived. She looked at the name and answered. By the time the eggs were on the table she was outside, pacing a rectangle on the sidewalk. He ate because he was hungry, and because deciding whether to wait seemed like more work than he had left.

When she came back, the yolk on her plate had set.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “They couldn’t find someone to sign off the change.”

“They found you.”

“Yes.” She looked at his empty plate, then at her own. “That sounded smug. I didn’t mean it that way.”

He believed her. She ate the cold eggs without complaining, which helped more than another apology would have. He told her about the

maintenance man and the light. She laughed at the man's joke, then saw that Mateo had not quite joined her, and let the laugh end without explaining it.

Outside, her truck was parked behind his car. She stood close enough for him to smell the diner coffee on her breath.

"Can we try another meal?" she asked. "One I'm there for."

"Yes."

She put a hand on his jacket, just below the collar. He had time to misunderstand the gesture and begin saying something, and then she kissed him. Her hand was cool. His own stayed uselessly at his sides until she drew back and looked at them.

"You can help," she said.

"I'm getting there."

This time he did. A car came out of the lot behind them and they moved apart, laughing at the horn and themselves. Ada found her keys. He watched her get into the truck, then went home and opened the law-school spreadsheet. He did not delete it that night.

INTERSTITIAL — Q4 2026 Earnings Call (excerpt)

AURIC COMPUTE, INC. · January 28, 2027. From the question-and-answer session with Chief Financial Officer Grace Lind. Questions from Anne Chu of Delaney Ridge Partners.

CHU: Grace, your customer reports say legal and finance teams are handling the same amount of work with thirty to forty percent fewer people. How many jobs do you expect your products to replace this year?

LIND: Anne, our customers decide how to organize their businesses. We provide tools that do particular tasks. We don't set their staffing levels.

CHU: But you do publish the savings when you sell the tools.

LIND: We publish results our customers have agreed to share. Across the economy, the effects will take longer to understand. And there are jobs being created. We're building power plants and data centers. We need electricians, operators, people who can put this equipment in the ground.

CHU: Can the people losing those office jobs get the jobs you're creating?

LIND: With training, some can. We're supporting training partnerships. This is a transition, and we intend to be a responsible participant in it.

CHU: Do you have a number for how many?

LIND: The answer to your question is that it's early.

[Excerpt ends.]

CHAPTER 3

ADA — Navajo County, September 2027

In the second row a man held a printed sign face-down across his knees. Ada looked back at the heat model on her laptop.

Six months into the Auric job, Ada Reyes had learned that the company put her name on anything with physics in it, because her name was the one the county trusted. So the slide said what she had made it say: three hundred megawatts of electricity would flow into the Redfield campus in phase one, and three hundred megawatts of heat would come back out. Every watt. That was the whole secret of her industry, the thing the brochures never printed. A datacenter was a machine for turning electricity into arithmetic and heat, and the arithmetic left on fiber. The heat stayed in Navajo County.

The county planning commission was considering Redfield's land-use permit. It met in Holbrook, in a room with folding chairs and a ceiling fan with a loose bearing that added a regular click to the fluorescent hum. Her father's old line yard was a nine-minute drive from this room. She had done the drive that morning, sat in the truck outside the fence for four minutes, and not gone in. (She had her hand on the door handle twice.)

Tonight the room was full, and for the first hearing in her professional life, most of the room was on her side.

That was Casaverde's doing. The town two miles downwind of the dead stacks had spent ten months pricing U-Hauls, and then Auric had announced two thousand construction jobs over three years, and the U-Hauls had gone back. The man with the sign wore a Casaverde Miners cap. He kept a hand across the paper, ready either way. Ada had spent years explaining why people could not have the thing they wanted. Tonight they wanted her project. She liked that more than she trusted it.

The objection, when it came, came from the mountain.

"Dr. Ifeoma Okonkwo," the woman at the podium said. "Director, Mogollon Ridge Observatory. We're your neighbors on the rim, about eleven miles northeast of the site. I want to be careful to say we are

not objecting to the campus. We are objecting to where you're putting its heat."

Ada looked up from her notes. Her first thought was infrastructural, because her first thoughts always were: the observatory's letter had cited numbers, real ones, correctly derived, which put it in roughly the top percentile of public comment. Her second thought was that the woman delivering them was young. Observatory directors came in one age, in Ada's limited experience of them, and it was not early thirties. Okonkwo ran a federal facility and looked five years younger than Ada, and stood at the podium the way Ada's best field supervisors stood at a job briefing: no wasted motion, no apology in the shoulders.

"The site on the rim was surveyed in 1962," Okonkwo said. "It was chosen for one property: still air. Cold, dry, boring air, the same column of it, night after night. That stillness is our whole instrument. The mirrors are just plumbing." She put up a slide of her own, and it was — Ada noted with something adjacent to pleasure — a plume model. Cruder than Ada's. Honest about being cruder. "Three hundred megawatts of rejected heat is a permanent campfire eleven miles upwind of us, under our southwestern horizon. It doesn't have to touch us. It only has to stir the air we look through. In the infrared, where we work, it's worse than stirring. A warm plume between us and the sky is glare. You'd be asking us to do photography through the air over a parking lot in July."

The chairwoman leaned in. "Doctor, plain terms — does the campus shut you down?"

"Plain terms: it degrades the two things we're funded to do. One is planets. The other —" and here Okonkwo paused, one beat, the pause of a person deciding how much of her actual life to spend in a county hearing — "is a survey follow-up. In the old sky-survey archives there's a small population of stars with anomalous mid-infrared excess. Meaning they show more warmth than a star their size and age should show. The books don't balance, and they have not balanced quietly for longer than I've been alive. Most candidates like these turn out to be dust, a background galaxy, or a problem in the measurements. That's the boring answer and the boring answer is usually right. But the way you retire the boring answer is you point a good modern instrument through very still air and measure the warmth yourself. That's the seeing this plume takes away.

Commissioners, that's all any of this is. We're a shop that measures faint heat, and the applicant proposes to build the brightest heat source in the county inside our field of view."

She sat down. The room had come to cheer a campus. What it gave her instead was quiet.

Ada was supposed to be reviewing her rebuttal points. She was instead reading one line of the objection letter again, the line Okonkwo had spent three sentences on and moved past. Anomalous mid-infrared excess. Warmth in the data with no visible source to account for it.

In Ada's trade that sentence had exactly one meaning. She chased it four or five times a year: a feeder running warm with no load on the books, a transformer's oil temperature climbing on a mild day. Excess heat was never a mystery. Excess heat was a bill someone hadn't put their name on yet. You found the load. There was always a load.

Dust on the data, she told herself, the way Okonkwo had told the room. Calibration drift. The boring answer is usually right.

She wrote *excess = load* in her margin anyway, boxed it, and then it was her turn at the podium.

She gave the commission the numbers first, then the reasons, then stopped talking, the same as she had done in front of five commissioners in Phoenix in March, back when she was the objection. Yes, the plume model was correct — she had built it. Yes, mitigation existed. No, evaporative cooling was off the table; nobody was going to spend that much water in this county, in this decade, to save a fan. She kept her voice deposition-flat and did not look at the second row, where the man with the cap had turned his sign face-up. WELCOME TO THE FUTURE, it said, in stencil. She was sixty-four on whether he meant it kindly.

The commission postponed the vote for two weeks while the conditions were worked out.

In the parking lot afterward, under a sky Holbrook still had — a real sky, the kind Phoenix had traded away decades ago for streetlights — Ada caught up with Okonkwo at a dusty Forest Service pickup.

"Your plume model," Ada said. "Your lapse rate's too generous to me. Use the August soundings, not the annual. It'll cost me another hundred meters of mixing height and you should make me pay it."

Okonkwo looked at her for a moment with frank recalculation, the way you look at a wall that turns out to be a door. “You’re telling me how to beat your own slide.”

“I’m telling you the air doesn’t work for Auric.” What she did not say was that the air had never worked for Auric, and that no rotation of a cooler farm was going to change the physics of it, only the size of the argument. “If the record’s going to have a fight in it, it should at least be a real one.”

“Come up the mountain,” Okonkwo said. “Before the vote. You should see what your campfire looks like from the shop that measures faint heat.” A pause; the same one-beat pause from the podium. “Also nobody up there can talk to me about lapse rates and I miss it.”

* * *

Two days later Ada drove up to the observatory. The road up the rim gained four thousand feet in nineteen switchbacks. The truck had done the flat miles from Holbrook itself, competent as a metronome, then handed her back the wheel at the cattle guard with an apologetic chime — it drove freeways like a veteran and gravel like a student — so the switchbacks were hers. Ada’s ears popped twice, and the temperature fell one degree for every three minutes of driving, which she tracked on the truck’s thermometer because tracking things was how she rode in trucks. At the top: three domes, a shop building, a bunkhouse, and air so still it felt curated. She got out and stood in it. It was the stillness of a substation at three a.m., minus the hum — a stillness that was the point of the whole installation, engineered by nothing but altitude and luck, and she understood the objection better in ten seconds of standing in it than in two readings of the letter.

Okonkwo walked her up the big dome’s exterior stair to the catwalk that ringed it, a grated steel circle a hundred feet up with the whole world laid out flat and going blue. Southwest, eleven miles off, the Redfield site sat in the last light like a diagram of itself: the grade cut, the crane, the first steel, the white row of container batteries that had arrived as ordinary freight and been a working wall by Friday. Then the double row of pads where the dry coolers would go. Then, beyond it, the tall stacks of Casaverde standing over the switchyard she was fighting to keep legally alive. Ada looked at it the way she was never able to not look at it — with a pride that embarrassed her slightly, at the scale of it, at the fact that the schedule was holding, at

the fact that it was hers. The best thing she had ever built was the thing this mountain was asking to be protected from.

“There,” Okonkwo said, and Ada turned, and stopped.

At the catwalk rail, bolted to a wooden tripod that had been repaired more than once, stood a telescope. Brass. Actually brass, the metal gone honey-dark with handling, a refractor as long as her arm, older than either of them by a margin Ada put at fifty years minimum. It sat among the observatory’s beige instrument housings like a pocket watch in a server rack.

“That’s not an exhibit,” Ada said. “It’s aimed.”

“It’s aimed at you, at the moment.” Okonkwo put a hand on the brass with the particular gentleness people saved for tools that had outlived their makers. “It belonged to my postdoc advisor’s mentor. A radio astronomer. She spent her whole life listening for neighbors — decades of it, the great quiet, nothing — and she kept this on her porch the entire time. Optical. Nothing to do with her work. She said if the universe ever did answer, she wanted at least one instrument she understood all the way through.” She stepped back. “I keep it for visitors. The big scopes don’t have eyepieces. Nothing up here has an eyepiece anymore except this. Go on. Look at your site.”

Ada bent to the brass and closed one eye.

The campus came up small and upside down and shaking. Not blurred — boiling. The crane lights smeared and re-formed and smeared, and the grade cut swam like a coin at the bottom of a creek, and she understood that she was looking at heat: the ground’s whole day of it, rising off eleven miles of September rangeland, roiling the air between her eye and her project. This was the sky’s baseline. This was before her. She did the arithmetic she had come up the mountain already knowing how to do — take this shimmer and add three hundred megawatts to it, forever, every night, on the exact bearing she was facing — and the number came out the way it had come out in her model, except that a number in a model had never once made her feel like an incoming weather system.

“You see it,” Okonkwo said. Not a question.

“I see it.” Ada straightened up. “Your letter asked for denial as a fallback and conditions as the real ask. Here’s what I can actually build.” She had it ready; she’d had it ready for a week, waiting to see if the woman on the other side was worth handing it to. “I move and rotate the cooler banks. Under the prevailing winds, the model puts

the plume's main axis eight degrees off your bearing. Other winds still cost you observing time. I take the fan exit velocity down and spread the field — costs me three acres I have. Night setback on heat rejection during your winter observing blocks; I bank the difference in thermal storage and burn it off after your morning close. Full cutoff lighting, amber, the whole site. It doesn't make Redfield invisible. Nothing makes three hundred megawatts invisible. It makes us a smudge on your horizon instead of a fire in your living room."

Okonkwo was quiet for a moment. Below them the first stars were coming on over the rangeland, thick and casual, more stars than Phoenix saw in a year.

"You had that in your pocket at the hearing," she said.

"I had it in my pocket at the hearing," Ada said. "My employer prefers to concede at the last useful moment. I'm told it's strategy." (She was told it was strategy the way Vance told people things — pleasantly, once.) "I'd rather concede to an engineer on a catwalk. It writes into conditions either way."

"Your anomalous stars," Ada said then, because the margin of her notebook had been itching for two days. "The warm ones. How many is a handful?"

"Enough to be annoying. Few enough to be nothing." Okonkwo's voice went dry. "Why?"

"Because in my business excess heat always resolves. There's always a load. You find it or you find the billing error, but warm isn't a thing something just is." She heard how it sounded and shrugged. "Different business, probably."

"Probably," Okonkwo said, and smiled for the first time all evening, a real one, tired at the edges. "It's contamination, Ms. Reyes. Old data is dirty data. But that's the survey I need still air for — you check by looking. Everything in my field is boring until the year it isn't, and you never get told which year in advance." She patted the brass telescope once. "If our renewal comes through, we'll be up here another decade to be ruined properly. Fifth-year review. I find out next month."

They stayed on the catwalk another hour, trading her worst outage for Okonkwo's worst mirror recoating. On the drive down Ada caught herself rehearsing something she wanted to tell her father about the brass telescope. She reached the cattle guard before she remembered why she could not.

* * *

Mateo came up the following Saturday with groceries and the optimism of someone who had left Phoenix before the heat. She met him at the little rental she used near the site. He had brought oranges, eggs, and a loaf of bread whose paper sleeve was already greasy with butter. At the bottom of the bag was a toothbrush.

“For emergencies,” he said, seeing her see it.

“What kind of emergency needs a toothbrush?”

“I’d hoped we’d find out.”

She put her arms around him before he could improve the answer. For a few minutes the groceries stood where he had set them. Then he put the toothbrush beside hers at the bathroom sink and came back to make coffee.

They had managed nine evenings since April. Ada knew because she had gone through her calendar while cleaning the kitchen for him. There had been good ones: a movie neither could remember afterward, an argument over the correct way to make coffee, one whole Sunday in Phoenix when she had forgotten the campus until five. There had also been three canceled drives and a birthday dinner he had eaten with two friends after she said she could still get there and then could not.

She had cleared this Saturday. At eleven, the commissioning lead called about a failed test at a supplier. She took the call in the bedroom. At noon she came out for the charger. Mateo was washing the breakfast pan.

“How long?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet.”

He nodded and went back to the pan. She hated the nod. When the call ended, forty minutes later, he was on the step outside with the oranges beside him. He had peeled one and left half for her.

“I could get you work up here,” she said. The words came before she had considered what they would do. “You read construction documents better than half the people I pay to read them. There’s a contracts team. You wouldn’t report to me.”

“Ada.”

“I’m saying we wouldn’t have to spend half our time driving.”

“And if we argued, I’d still work at your campus. Live in a place your employer found me. See you when the job let me.” He rubbed a

piece of orange peel between his fingers. "I don't want to move my whole life just to fit in the hours left over."

She sat beside him. There was a porch light in the daylight, buzzing. She made herself leave it alone.

"The first phase gets power next September," she said.

"And after that?"

There were already sketches for the next phase. She had shown him one of them that morning with the excitement she now wished she could call something else.

"More," she said. "Probably more."

He looked at her. "Do you want to stop?"

"No."

She could have said something about the town, or the work, or obligations she had made. All of it would have been true. She also wanted to see whether she could build the thing. Mateo knew it. He had liked that about her before it began taking their Saturdays.

"I don't want you to," he said. "I just can't keep being pleased with whatever time turns up."

For a while they ate the orange. She wanted to touch his neck. She wanted him to make a demand she could resent. He was sitting close enough for her to do the first and was not going to do the second.

"Then we should stop doing this," she said.

He took a breath and let it out. "I think so."

Neither said later. She was grateful for that, and angry about it, and knew the anger was unfair. When he went inside to collect his bag she followed him. They held each other in the kitchen, with the damp pan on the rack and the groceries still needing to be put away. He kissed her once, without making it an argument.

"Take the bread," she said.

"You'll forget to eat."

"I'll eat."

He left it. She watched the car turn onto the road. Back inside she went to wash the orange juice from her hands. Only her toothbrush stood beside the bathroom sink. She sat down on the edge of the bath. At two she went to the site. The failed test was still there, waiting to be worked on, and for the rest of the afternoon she could do that.

* * *

The commission approved the Redfield conditional use permit on the last Tuesday of September, five to nothing, with Ada's mitigation package adopted word for word into the conditions — she had ended up drafting both sides' engineering language, which the chairwoman noted from the bench with something between gratitude and suspicion. The room applauded. The man with the stencil sign shook her hand on the way out and held it an extra second and said, "My kid's applying," and Ada said the campus would be lucky, and mostly believed it, and drove back to the site trailer, past the gate that matched her face and lifted before she had fully braked, with the signed conditions on the seat beside her like a passenger.

The email from Okonkwo came nine days later, on a Thursday, at 4:51 p.m. Ada would remember the timestamp because remembering timestamps was her trade too.

Congratulations on your permit — the conditions are the best-engineered thing in this county's records, and I say that with all the bitterness I can lift. Our renewal declined today. Not the plume; the panel didn't even reach the plume. "Facility priorities in a constrained budget environment." The survey's canceled, the postdocs go in June, and they're leaving me caretaker money — lights on, domes shut. So: you may tell your employer the air over Redfield is officially nobody's business. Come up before June if you want a last look through the only eyepiece on the mountain. The telescope doesn't know anything's wrong.

Ada read it twice in the trailer with the swamp cooler ticking, while outside the wire crew racked their powered lifting vests on the charging rail for the night — six vests, four chargers, the standing argument — then opened the drawing set, the way she opened a drawing set whenever a feeling arrived that she had no procedure for. The cooler farm sat on the plot exactly where she'd moved it, long axis rotated eight degrees, night setbacks tabled and stamped — conditions of approval now, permanent as the permit, protecting the seeing of a mountain that had just been defunded into a nightlight. She could ask the county to remove the conditions. Auric would save four hundred thousand dollars. She opened a new message to the permit manager, then closed it without typing.

She left them in.

She entered the cooler purchase against the approved design. In the justification field she wrote: reopening conditions risks the construction schedule. It was true, and it left room for the rest. Then she answered Okonkwo's email. Outside the trailer, somebody was calling her name. She put the phone in her pocket and went to see what they needed.

End of the opening sample

Thank you for reading the opening of *A Little Less Sky*. The complete novel follows Ada and Mateo across decades of changing work, relationships and discoveries.

Find book news and reader materials at a-little-less-sky.vercel.app.

This sample contains the prologue, the first three chapters and the intervening earnings-call excerpt. Its story text matches the 16 September 2026 revised edition.