

# FOREVER: NEON

THE AWAKENING



by Phatti Machine

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To my wife, my mother, and Aunt Hilda — without them, none of this would exist, in any reality

> "Parody is my sword, Satire my shield."

>

> — Phattis

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# The Girl Who Heard Too Much

*Alex Hartwell // Jan 28, 1987*

*\*[VRIL COMMUNICATIONS RADIO SPOT — WERC AM 960, BIRMINGHAM, JANUARY 1987]\**

*\*When you pick up the phone, you expect a connection. At Vril Communications, we expect it too. But we think about connection a little differently than other telephone companies. We think about what it means — really means — to reach someone. To be heard. To have someone on the other end who understands exactly what you need, sometimes before you've finished saying it.\**

*\*Vril Communications. Serving Birmingham and the surrounding area since 1971. Because a connection that close? That's not a service. That's a relationship.\**

*\*Vril Communications. We hear you.\**

\* \* \*

## PART ONE: 3:17 AM

Alex Hartwell woke up screaming.

Not the nightmare kind where you jolt awake confused about which world is real. This was worse. This was every nerve in her skull suddenly on fire, like someone had shoved a fork into an electrical socket except the socket was her entire head.

She thrashed sideways out of bed, got tangled in her grandmother's quilt (the one with the sunflowers that looked cheerful in daylight and like dying things at 3 AM), and hit the floor hard enough to bruise her shoulder. Then she just lay there, breathing like she'd sprinted a marathon in her sleep.

Something was wrong with the world.

Not wrong like broken. Wrong like altered.

Her clock radio, the Sony that Thomas had given her for Christmas two years ago, was glowing. Not just the display. The whole thing seemed to pulse with this weird energy she could almost see, like heat shimmer off summer asphalt. Like the air around it was vibrating at a frequency that made her teeth itch.

The clock face showed 3:17 AM in red LED numbers. The numbers themselves looked sick and wrong, pulsing like they were trying to communicate something. The radio's chrome casing caught light from somewhere—the streetlight outside?—and threw it back at her in waves.

That wasn't normal. Clock radios didn't do that.

Alex pulled herself up on the edge of her bed, trying to breathe through her nose like they taught in PE when you were about to puke from running too hard. The clock radio hummed at her. Not with sound, exactly. With something else. Something that bypassed her ears entirely and went straight into her skull.

The refrigerator downstairs was doing it too. Three floors away, through walls and insulation, and she could feel it like a pressure behind her eyes. Different from the clock. Deeper. Like a bass note she couldn't hear but could sense vibrating in her bones. The old Westinghouse unit, avocado-colored, probably installed in the early 1970s, was broadcasting something.

Okay\*, she thought, using the voice she used during horror movies to keep herself from freaking out. \*This is fine. This is totally normal. I'm just having some kind of seizure or something. People have seizures. It's a medical thing.

She looked at her hands. They were shaking. They looked like someone else's hands, someone scared, someone with good reasons to be scared, which meant they couldn't be her hands because Alex Hartwell was fine. Alex was great. Alex was lying on her bedroom floor at three in the morning while her house hummed at her like a giant electric beehive.

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: 6:00 AM (School Gets Closer)**

School started at 7:50 AM. Alex knew this because she'd been to Ramsay High School every day for two years, and the routine was as fixed as the laws of physics: wake up (allegedly), shower, eat breakfast while Dad read the newspaper, catch the bus at 7:30, arrive at school by 8:00 for first period.

Today was January 28th. Wednesday. Fifteen going on sixteen. Halloween baby. Mom always said that explained everything.

She made it through the shower by keeping her eyes closed and telling herself that the pipes weren't singing, that the water heater in the basement wasn't pulsing with that same weird rhythm as everything else. Hot water. Then cold water. Then that weird lukewarm moment when the tank was adjusting. All perfectly normal appliance behavior.

Breakfast was cereal. Her mother had passed out on the couch again (gin bottle on the coffee table, same as usual), so it was just her and Dad in the kitchen. Dad was reading the Birmingham News, folding it into quarters the way he always did, scanning the pages with an intensity that suggested he was looking for something specific. Some kind of code hidden in the classified ads or the weather report.

"You look tired," he said, not looking up from the paper.

That was technically true, though it also failed to capture the existential terror that had been gnawing at her since 3:17 AM.

The cereal was Lucky Charms. The milk was cold. The kitchen was warm from the oven (Dad had made toast), and the radio on top of the refrigerator, a Sony transistor model, cream-colored, from probably 1975, was playing something soft and synthesizer-heavy. Prince, maybe. Some 1980s pop thing that was occupying the early morning slot on WBRC-FM. The same kind of song that had been occupying the early morning slot for as long as Alex could remember. Everything felt stuck. Like 1987 was on repeat and nobody had noticed but her.

The marshmallows, little hearts and stars and moons, dyed in lurid colors that no natural food should be, seemed to float in the milk like tiny islands. She didn't usually pay attention to them, but they seemed

especially vivid this morning. Especially present.

"You getting sick?" Dad asked, still not looking up from his paper.

"No. Just tired."

He turned the page with the precise, methodical care of someone performing a ritual. The newspaper crackled. The radio played. The refrigerator hummed its baseline beneath everything else.

It was 6:47 AM.

\* \* \*

### **PART THREE: 8:15 AM - 1:45 PM (School)**

Ramsay High School was a concrete bunker from the 1960s that looked like someone had tried to design a prison and accidentally added too many windows. The fluorescent bulbs buzzed. All of them. Every single tube in every single hallway, creating this constant high-pitched whine that made Alex feel like her brain was being slowly sanded down.

Which, in retrospect, might have been the actual design goal. Hard to get teenagers to think clearly if you're systematically driving them insane with 60 Hz humming.

The tubes themselves, long rectangles of phosphorous and mercury vapor, threw off a sickly pale light that made everyone look like they were already dead. The hallways were painted institutional beige, with the occasional splash of school spirit posters (CRIMSON TIDE PRIDE in red letters, a drawing of an elephant, the kind a 4-year-old might have drawn). Like someone had forgotten what enthusiasm looked like and just painted words on the wall, hoping students would catch it.

She made it through English (Period 2) by staring at *To Kill a Mockingbird* and not thinking about the way the intercom speaker above Mrs. Patterson's desk, cream-colored, round, with little holes for sound, was pulsing with that weird shimmer. Mrs. Patterson was discussing the moral implications of the trial, which was important, except that there was also a weird frequency underneath everything and nobody else seemed to notice. "What do you think this says about society, Alex?" It says society is run by things broadcasting on frequencies humans aren't supposed to hear, she could have said. Instead: "Um. That justice is complicated?" Mrs. Patterson seemed satisfied with this insight about the fundamental complexity of human nature.

She made it through algebra (Period 3) by sitting in the back and pretending to focus on quadratic equations while the pencil sharpener on the windowsill, unplugged, broken, completely dead since sometime in 1984, glowed at her like it was trying to communicate something important about the breakdown of institutional equipment maintenance.

A dead pencil sharpener. Glowing. With no power source.

That's fine\*, Alex told herself with the deadpan certainty of someone whose brain had already accepted that reality was broken. \*That's totally normal. Unplugged things glow all the time. This is a completely ordinary Wednesday. Everything is fine.

Except broken electrical devices definitely shouldn't glow.

By lunch, in the cafeteria that smelled like institutional potato and mystery meat, where students sat under more fluorescent lights and ate food off plastic trays, she'd developed a solid theory: either something had happened to her brain overnight (stroke, tumor, psychotic break, take your pick), or something had happened to reality itself and she was just the lucky girl who got to experience it.

Both options continued to suck.

So when she found herself walking toward the photography darkroom in the basement, she was taking photography as an elective, one of the few classes that didn't make her want to claw her eyes out, she was already primed for weird stuff. Already mentally prepared for the universe to keep throwing curveballs.

The darkroom was in the basement level, down a concrete stairwell that smelled like old masonry and chemicals. The lights down here were different, less fluorescent, more incandescent. Warmer. Less designed to slowly erase your personality.

It was quiet. Not silent. But quieter than anywhere else in the school. The red safelights didn't buzz the way the fluorescents did, they just glowed a constant, warm red that made everything look like it was underwater. The room didn't shimmer and pulse like everywhere else. Just a steady two-tone hum. It was almost peaceful. Almost normal.

Almost like being allowed back inside herself.

\* \* \*

#### **PART FOUR: 1:50 PM (Photography Documentation)**

"Document something that interests you," Mrs. Lipton announced, handing her the Polaroid. "Use the school camera. Turn in results by Friday. Any subject, architecture, people, nature, whatever."

Alex picked up the camera. It was a battered Polaroid SX-70, the kind with the automatic focus and the built-in flash, probably donated in the late '70s, the kind of thing that looked like an artifact even in 1987. It felt warm in her hands. Not just body-heat warm, but warmer than it should be. Aware. Conscious.

Which was crazy.

But what if she could photograph what she was seeing?

The thought hit her like a punch.

What if the camera could capture this stuff? Cameras were sensitive to light in ways human eyes weren't, she'd learned that much in class. Fast film could freeze moments too quick for perception. Long exposures could show star trails invisible to the naked eye. What if the Polaroid, with its electronic flash and its ability to produce instant prints, could somehow see electromagnetic fields? Could she somehow detect the thing that made her skull ache?

It was insane. You couldn't photograph invisible frequencies. You couldn't photograph the thing that made appliances glow. You couldn't photograph whatever this was.

Or could you? It was worth a shot.

The fluorescent light in the main hallway was just a light. Rectangular panel, institutional design, nothing special. Alex pointed the Polaroid at it and clicked the shutter.

There was a mechanical whirring sound as the film advanced. The print ejected from the camera's slot, a tangible, physical piece of evidence.

The image that developed over the next sixty seconds was wrong.

The light itself was fine, properly exposed, clear, exactly what you'd expect from a photograph of a fluorescent fixture. But around it, there was this... distortion. Like a halo. Like looking at a candle through heat shimmer, except this wasn't heat. This was something the Polaroid's lens had seen that shouldn't have been there.

The distortion looked almost like reality was slightly out of focus in that specific spot. Like the space around the light was vibrating at a frequency the camera could detect but human eyes mostly ignored.

Alex took another shot. Different angle. Same result: the fixture was normal, but something around it was warped. Bent. Like reality itself was slightly off-kilter.

She snuck out to the parking lot and found the big electrical junction box on the side of the building, the one mounted on the concrete wall, a big gray metal container with warning stickers about high voltage. The one that had been making her teeth hurt all day just from standing near it.

The photograph came out looking almost broken. The distortion was so intense the Polaroid image seemed to vibrate even after it had fully developed, the colors bleeding slightly, the shimmer so pronounced it looked like the entire box was surrounded by invisible flames.

By 4:15, Alex had sixteen Polaroids stuffed in her backpack, each one showing something that shouldn't be possible. Each one proving she wasn't crazy.

Unless she was hallucinating the distortions in the photos as well.

Either way, she had evidence now.

\* \* \*

#### **PART FIVE: 4:30 PM - 5:15 PM (Walking Home)**

The walk home was twelve blocks down Clairmont Avenue. Alex had done it a thousand times, down past the Winn-Dixie supermarket (with its bright fluorescent signs advertising weekly specials), through the neighborhood with the big oak trees that dropped acorns on the sidewalk every fall. Boring. Safe. Normal.

Not today.

Today the power lines were alive.

She could see them now, really see them, strung between utility poles like the world's ugliest Christmas lights. Each one glowing with that shimmer, that overexposed aura, pulsing in rhythms she could almost count. And they were all connected. She'd always known they were connected.

She just hadn't known they could notice her.

The transformers at the top of the poles were especially bright. Metal cylinders painted gray, containing oil and magnetic coils and all the machinery required to step down voltage from the distribution lines to neighborhood levels. Each one a node in a vast neural network.

A car drove past with its radio blaring. Top 40. Synth-pop and drum machines. Prince or maybe Duran Duran. But underneath the music, underneath it, like a watermark or a secret track, there was something else.

Alex stopped walking.

It wasn't the shimmer from the electrical stuff. This was different. Deliberate. Mathematical. Patient. Something that felt like it was trying to communicate something to anyone who could perceive it.

The car was already gone, but she could still feel it. That pulse. That hidden signal buried under Casey Kasem's countdown, broadcast through every radio in the city. Through every TV. Through the whole electromagnetic spectrum, probably, if she could figure out how to tune into it.

Her skull ached.

By the time she got home at 5:15 PM, Alex went straight to her room, pulled out the geometry textbook she'd hollowed out months ago with an X-Acto knife and patience, and opened it up. Her real life, hidden between chapters on proofs and theorems.

A joint. Never smoked. E-Z had offered it three months ago, that weird kid with the unsettling smile and boundary issues who seemed to exist in every social group simultaneously without belonging to any of them. "Come on, Alex. Live a little." She'd taken it just to make E-Z go away. Hid it. Forgot about it.

An undelivered love letter from fourth grade. *Dear Mitch Mitchum, I think you're cute.* Never sent. Thank god.

A concert ticket stub. A Polaroid of her and Thomas from last summer, both of them squinting into the sun. Other contraband of the ordinary teenage variety.

And now: sixteen new Polaroids showing the impossible.

*I'm weird enough without outside influences messing with my head,* she thought, tucking the photos between the pages. *The last thing I need is drugs making it worse.*

She closed the book. Returned it to the shelf among the geometry homework she actually did.

Then she lay on her bed and tried not to think about what she'd felt out there.

She failed.

\* \* \*

## **PART SIX: 10:00 PM - 11:15 PM (Night Crisis)**

Sleep wasn't happening.

Alex had tried. Lights off at 10 PM, staring at the ceiling in darkness, waiting for her brain to shut down like brains were supposed to at night. But the moment the lights went off, everything got louder. Brighter. More intense. Like her bedroom had been waiting for darkness to really show off.

Her clock radio was practically singing now. Not with sound. With that other thing. That band-she-could-feel-but-not-hear thing. The radio's red LED numbers glowed in the darkness like eyes, and they pulsed in rhythm with something she couldn't name.

The alarm clock on her dresser (a smaller unit, battery-powered, backup system in case the power went out) was keeping rhythm with it. Her computer monitor, a Commodore with a green monochrome display, Dad had bought her the system last year, said she'd need it for college, was producing a high-pitched whine that sounded almost desperate, the electron beam scanning across the screen in predictable patterns even though the monitor should have been in sleep mode.

And underneath it all, that pattern from the radio. That mathematical thing. Pulsing through the house like a heartbeat. Like the house itself was alive.

By 11:00 PM, Alex did something stupid: she went outside.

She thought maybe distance would help. Fresh air. Space between her and the humming appliances. But standing on the front porch in her pajamas in late January Birmingham (it was cold, maybe 45 degrees, humid the way it always was) just made it worse, because now she could sense the whole neighborhood.

Power lines strung between poles, each one glowing with that shimmer. Streetlights pulsing in unison, sodium vapor creating that yellow-orange glow. The entire electrical grid spreading out through Birmingham like the nervous system of something impossibly huge.

And all of it was humming at her.

She was standing there, freezing, trying not to have a complete breakdown, when the black car pulled into the driveway.

\* \* \*

### **PART SEVEN: 11:15 PM - 11:38 PM (The Gray Suits)**

The car was a sedan. Early 1980s. A Buick or maybe a Chevrolet, dark colored, professional looking, the kind of car that looked like someone had asked Lee Iacocca to design a vehicle that would be forgotten five seconds after seeing it. Like it had been engineered to not be remembered.

Two people got out. Gray suits. In January. Walking with the kind of synchronized precision that suggested either military training or complete inability to understand how normal human bodies moved. Like they'd learned how people moved from something that had never been one.

They didn't look right.

Alex couldn't explain it better than that. Something about their faces was too smooth. Like they'd been drawn on. Their movements too synchronized, when they turned, they turned together, heads rotating at exactly the same speed. Their skin had a quality that wasn't quite human. Not quite alien either, just... wrong. Like they were wearing people-suits over something else, something that had studied human behavior from manuals and was doing its best but had missed some crucial detail.

They felt wrong. In the same way the appliances felt present, broadcasting, humming, alive, these people felt absent. Like holes in the shape of humans. Like looking at a place where a person should be, but the space

was occupied by something that had learned to look like a person by carefully studying photographs.

Alex didn't decide to go inside. Her body just did it, some animal instinct screaming at her to get away. She slipped through the front door, closed it quietly (gently, carefully, trying not to make sound), and immediately felt like she'd made a mistake because now she was trapped inside with the humming appliances and couldn't see what the gray-suit people were doing.

The doorbell rang. Not a buzzer. An actual bell, ding-dong, mechanical, requiring someone to physically push a button and wait for a physical consequence.

She heard her father get up. Heard him coming downstairs, the familiar creak of the third step. Heard the front door open.

Alex crept to the top of the landing. She'd never been the eavesdropping type, that was more Thomas's thing when they were kids, but apparently today was full of firsts.

"Good evening," the voice was calm. Professional. And deeply, fundamentally wrong. Like they were reading from a script written by someone who'd never met a person. Every word exactly the same volume and pace. "We're with the U.S. Board of Education Wellness Assessment and Technical Compliance Headquarters."

Everything stopped.

Not metaphorically. The house actually went quiet. The appliances stopped humming. The pattern underneath reality went silent. For three full seconds, the world held its breath.

Then her father said, in a voice Alex had never heard him use before: "I don't know what you're talking about. It's late. Please leave."

He slammed the door in their weird faces!

The black car stayed in the driveway for exactly seventeen minutes. Alex counted every one of them, sitting at the top of the stairs with her heart slamming against her ribs. The gray-suit people didn't knock again. Didn't try to break in. Just sat there. Waiting. Like they had all the time in the world and this was just the opening move in a very long game. Like "seventeen minutes" was somehow meaningful to them.

At 11:38 PM, her father knocked softly on her bedroom door.

\* \* \*

### **PART EIGHT: 11:38 PM - 12:15 AM (The Conversation)**

"They call themselves the Wellness Assessment and Technical Compliance Headquarters," Robert said. He was sitting on the edge of Alex's bed in the darkness, and somehow he looked older than he had that morning. Tired in a way that went deeper than just needing sleep. "I don't know who they really are."

"Wait. They're called W.A.T.C.H. and they've been surveilling me?" Alex asked with a grin.

Her father didn't smile.

"What do they want?" she whispered.

"I don't know exactly. But people who can sense things, electromagnetic fields, frequencies most people can't perceive, those people become interesting to certain organizations. Valuable. Or dangerous."

He paused, then reached over and took her hand. His grip was warm and steady. "But here's what matters: you're not alone in this."

Her father was quiet for a long moment. In the darkness, Alex could feel her clock radio doing its thing, that pulse and shimmer that had been driving her crazy all day. But it seemed gentler now. Almost like it was trying not to bother her.

"Your grandfather could perceive things that other people couldn't," Robert said finally, his voice soft but certain. "Electromagnetic patterns. Frequency disturbances. It runs in families—skips generations sometimes, but it runs in families. What you're feeling isn't madness. It's a gift."

He squeezed her hand. "He learned to control it. To understand what he was perceiving instead of being overwhelmed. And he learned to be careful—there are people who would use you if they could." He paused. "But the fear goes away. It becomes part of you."

Alex felt something loosen in her chest. Not the fear entirely, but the worst of it. The conviction that she was losing her mind.

"Does Thomas have it?" she asked. Her brother was nineteen, in his first year at Holy Cross Seminary in New Orleans. He'd always been the steady one. The one who knew what he wanted.

Robert was quiet for a long moment. "No. It skipped him. Sometimes it does that." He squeezed her hand. "I've been grateful for that, if I'm honest. What Thomas doesn't know can't hurt him."

"What do I do?" Alex asked.

"For now? You try to sleep. You try to adjust."

He paused, and there was warmth in his voice now. Pride, but also protection. "You're already doing that, aren't you? The Polaroids."

Alex felt her face go hot. "How did you..."

"Because it's what your grandfather did."

A smile in his voice now. "He documented things. Kept records. Tried to understand what he was perceiving by creating evidence that other people could examine. You're doing the same thing. That's smart."

He moved to sit beside her more fully, his arm around her shoulders. "Just make sure those photographs stay hidden somewhere safe. Be very careful who you trust."

"Then what happens?" Alex asked.

"Then you wait. And you learn. People like you, people who can see what you see, you find each other eventually. Or someone finds you."

He looked at her directly, his expression serious but not frightening. "And when that happens, you'll know."

He waited.

"You knew this was going to happen."

It wasn't really a question.

"I hoped it wouldn't," Robert said quietly. "But yes. I knew it might. And I've been terrified about it, if I'm being honest. Not because it's bad, it's not. But because I know what comes next. I know there are people who'll want to find you."

"Your grandfather would be proud of you," Robert said. "I'm proud of you. And tomorrow, when you wake up, this will still feel impossible. But you're not going to be facing it alone."

He left the door open a crack as he exited, letting a thin line of hallway light spill into her room. A small gesture. A reassurance that she could reach out if she needed to.

\* \* \*

## EPILOGUE

Alex lay in the darkness listening to her room hum and pulse around her. The clock radio. The alarm clock. The computer monitor. All of them doing their thing, broadcasting their presence on frequencies that shouldn't exist but apparently did.

She was fifteen years old. Yesterday, her biggest problems had been a history test on Friday and whether that ginger kid in third period was ever going to start using deodorant.

Now everything had changed.

But her father wasn't frightened. Her father was proud of her.

That changed something.

This is fine\*, she told herself, and this time the voice felt less like armor and more like truth. \*This is strange and scary and I don't understand it. But I'm not alone.

The appliances hummed their agreement.

Or maybe their sympathy.

She wasn't sure she could tell the difference yet.

But tomorrow, she decided, she would try to figure it out.

# The Refugee's Warning

*Ensemble // Feb 3-8, 1987*

## **PART ONE: 3:47 AM - FEBRUARY 3 (Diminuto's Apartment)**

The maps on Alistair Diminuto's walls were wrong. Not in the traditional sense, the topography was accurate, the street names were correct, the grid of Birmingham spread across his walls in faithful cartographic reproduction. But they were wrong in the way that a photograph of a dead relative is wrong: accurate in every detail except for the essential absence of life.

The circled locations on the maps, however, were very much alive.

Alistair Diminuto stood barely four feet two inches tall, though you'd never know it from the way he commanded a room. His proportions were those of a taller man somehow compressed, nothing stunted or misshapen, just... smaller. Some of his students had compared him to various famous short people, midgets from carnival attractions, the Incredible Shrinking Man, Napoleon (though he'd never figured out if that one was meant as a compliment or an insult). But that comparison missed something essential: Alistair Diminuto hadn't been shrunk or compressed. He'd simply been made proportionally smaller, as if God had taken a standard human template and reduced it uniformly by 30 percent.

He was sitting at a table covered in papers, not the neat, organized papers of an academic, but the chaotic sprawl of someone who understood exactly where each document was despite all appearance to the contrary. A cup of coffee sat cooling beside a map of the electromagnetic grid that overlaid Birmingham. Red circles marked locations. Blue circles marked other locations. Green circles marked the places that didn't exist on any official map, but definitely existed in the frequencies.

"You're thinking too loud," said a voice through the radio transceiver on the table. Terrance McKenna, broadcasting from a motel room in Knoxville, his signal riding military-grade WW2 surplus equipment tuned to a frequency that hid perfectly under the existing VHF transmissions already propagating through the atmosphere. The signal was clean. Encrypted through mathematical patterns only someone trained in frequency analysis would recognize.

"I'm thinking exactly as loud as I need to," Diminuto said, not looking up from the map. "The question is whether you're listening loud enough."

"I'm listening. I'm just also questioning whether we should be moving this fast," McKenna's voice crackled slightly, the distance adding texture to his concern. "The girl is volatile. Untrained. She's going to draw attention."

"That's exactly why we need to move," Diminuto said. "Because if we don't recruit her, the other side will. And they have resources we can't match. Not yet."

He paused, glancing at a Vril Communications advertisement clipped to the corner of his map. *312 channel cable packages. Available throughout greater Birmingham.*

"Three hundred and twelve channels," he said quietly. "On infrastructure that shouldn't support more than seventy. You've noticed."

"I've noticed," McKenna said. "I've stopped trying to explain it. What they're running through their network is not 1987 telecommunications."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Yet."

He finally looked at the transceiver. "You're coming because of the girl."

"I'm coming because of what the girl represents," McKenna said, his voice rising with the particular intensity of a theorist who'd finally found a live specimen. Even through the static, his excitement was palpable. "Think about it—a sudden, uncontrolled emergence of electromagnetic sensitivity in a fifteen-year-old with no prior training. No family support beyond one father who knows what she is but doesn't know what to do about it. No resistance infrastructure to catch her. The mathematical probability of her manifesting this strongly, this young, with this specific frequency profile—" A burst of static, then: "Sorry. The point is, she's extraordinary. I'll be there by Friday."

"The breach was a year ago," Diminuto said. "Abilities manifesting now. Delayed activation. We don't know why."

"We don't know why *yet*," McKenna corrected. "But the pattern's consistent. One year. Something about PROMETHEUS opened a door, and whatever came through has been settling in. Acclimating. And now the first sensitives are waking up."

"Or being woken up."

McKenna was quiet for a moment. Then: "There's something else. Something I've been turning over. The barrier—the Firmament readings. What if it's not there to keep us in?"

"Don't start."

"What if it's there to keep *it* in?"

Diminuto didn't respond to that. He didn't need to. Some implications were better left hanging in static.

"Her father knows what she is," Diminuto said. "And he'll protect her. For now."

"Robert Hartwell is isolated. He knows what it is, but he doesn't know what to do about it. He's been trying to protect her in a vacuum for a week now, and that's how you get people killed." McKenna's transmission strengthened, his voice more urgent. "We need to bring her in. Integrate her into the network. Train her before W.A.T.C.H. figures out she's a variable."

Diminuto turned back to the maps. He was quiet for a long moment, studying the red circles, the blue circles, the invisible green circles that existed only in the electromagnetic spectrum.

"The problem with variables," he said finally, "is that they're unpredictable. You can integrate someone into a network, sure. But you can't control what they're going to do once they understand what they are. What they're capable of."

"So what, we just leave her alone? Let W.A.T.C.H. find her?"

"No. We watch. We wait. We see what she does with the gift before we decide whether she's an asset or a threat."

McKenna was quiet for a moment. The static hummed between them, hundreds of miles compressed into radio waves. Then: "When this goes wrong, that distinction won't matter much."

"It will to me," Diminuto said. "And probably to the girl."

The transceiver crackled. "I'll be in Birmingham by Friday. We can argue about methodology in person. But Alistair—don't wait too long. The window is closing."

"Terrance." Diminuto's voice sharpened. "Drive clean. Nothing in the car that shouldn't be there. No documentation, no equipment, no research materials. If you get pulled over between Knoxville and Birmingham, you're a professor visiting a colleague. Nothing more."

"I know the protocols—"

"I'm reminding you because you forget them when you're excited. And you're excited." Diminuto softened slightly. "Whatever you need will be here when you arrive. I've been stockpiling for seven years. Just get here in one piece."

A pause. Then McKenna's voice, chastened: "Clean driving. Professor visiting a colleague. See you Friday."

The signal faded. Diminuto sat alone in his apartment, surrounded by maps that were wrong in all the ways that mattered, and wondered if McKenna was right.

He usually was. That was the problem.

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: FEBRUARY 5 (Alex's Perspective - RF Contact)**

She'd told her father about the filter theory at dinner. He'd nodded slowly, the way he did when she said something that confirmed fears he'd been carrying for years.

At lunch the next day, in the library study hall during fifth period, a sound came through one of the exposed speakers, the kind mounted in institutional spaces that were never supposed to broadcast anything but announcements and fire alarms. But this sound was different. Crackling. Deliberate. Mathematical underneath the static.

She looked around. Nobody else heard it. Nobody else was even looking at the speaker.

The crackle resolved into a voice. Male. Careful. Broadcasting on a frequency that only certain equipment would even notice, hidden underneath the existing VHF transmissions that Birmingham's radio stations were already propagating through the air.

"Alex Hartwell. Can you hear me?"

Her heart stopped.

She looked around again. Still nobody. The speaker was just a speaker. The voice was coming from nowhere and everywhere simultaneously.

"Yes," she whispered, barely audible.

"Good. I'm Terrance McKenna. I work with a group that exists to help people like you. People who can perceive what other people can't. I know you've been contacted by W.A.T.C.H. I know you're frightened. I know your father is trying to protect you without understanding what he's protecting you from."

"How..."

"We monitor the electromagnetic spectrum. We've been monitoring it for decades. And we saw your emergence on January 28th, the same way we saw it happen to others. You're not alone in this. But you are running out of time."

Alex felt cold. The voice was calm. Professional. Terrifying.

"What do you want?" she whispered.

"We want to help you. To train you. To get you to safety before W.A.T.C.H. realizes what you are." A pause. "But that requires trust. And trust requires evidence. So I'm going to give you two pieces of information that only someone who actually knows what's happening would know."

Another pause.

"First: Your father's father, your grandfather, had electromagnetic sensitivity. Stronger than yours will become. Your father's father told your father that 'the world is singing and nobody else has ears for it.' Those were his exact words. Does that sound right to you?"

Alex felt the world tilt.

"Second: The organization hunting for you calls itself W.A.T.C.H. It's an acronym. Wellness Assessment and Technical Compliance Headquarters. They're systematic. They have resources. And they identify people like you through monitoring of electrical activity patterns. You triggered their sensors on January 28th. You have maybe one week before they locate you physically."

"Who are you?" Alex asked.

"Someone who wants to make sure you survive this. Your father has my contact information. His name is Diminuto. Alistair Diminuto. He's a physicist at UAB. Tell your father to call the number he kept hidden in his desk drawer for the last five years. The one he's been too scared to use."

The voice faded. The crackling returned to static. Then even that disappeared, and the speaker was just a speaker again.

### **PART THREE: FEBRUARY 10 (Robert's Perspective)**

Robert Hartwell knew that something had changed the moment Alex came home from school. It was in the way she moved, more careful, more deliberate, like she was suddenly conscious of her own body in space.

"Someone talked to me today," she said without preamble, shutting the front door behind her. "Someone who knew about Grandpa. About what you told me. About what he told you."

His entire body went cold.

“Tell me everything,” he said.

She did.

When she finished, Robert walked to his desk and removed a business card from beneath a false bottom in the drawer. His hands were steady, but his face had aged ten years in five minutes.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “We go to UAB.”

\* \* \*

END CHAPTER 2

# The Pattern Mathematician

*Sidney Kidd // Feb 10-14, 1987*

## **PART ONE: FEBRUARY 10 - MORNING (The Shop)**

Sidney Kidd had been staring at the oscilloscope for four days.

He still ran the repair shop—his father's shop, technically, but his now.

Because the truth was insane. And Sid had learned a long time ago that seventy-two percent of people were dicks who didn't think, and the other twenty-eight percent just hadn't revealed themselves yet.

But the 40 MHz signature was always there. Always present. Always broadcasting across the electromagnetic spectrum, as if someone, or something, were using the entire EM grid as a medium for communication. And Sid was apparently the only person in Birmingham paranoid enough to notice.

"You look like hell," Lloyd McClusker said. Lloyd was a regular customer who came in about once a month with broken consumer electronics. This time it was a Sony Walkman that had stopped working. Lloyd was a mechanic who worked at a garage three blocks down, and had the kind of practical mindset that came from people who understood how things worked on a physical level.

Sid looked up from the oscilloscope. He'd lost track of how long he'd been staring at it. The numbers had become more real than his own face in the mirror. The frequency traces more meaningful than the faces of people around him.

"Haven't been sleeping well," Sid admitted. Which was technically true, though it also failed to capture the existential anxiety that had been gnawing at him since January 28th.

"Bad dreams?" Lloyd asked.

"Bad waking," Sid replied.

Lloyd laughed, but it was the laugh of someone who didn't quite understand the joke. He set the Walkman on the counter and left. The door chimed on his way out, a mechanical bell that jangled in exactly the frequency Sid had come to expect from the shop's older electrical systems. And then Sid was alone again with the machinery and the 40 MHz signature that seemed to pulse through everything like a heartbeat that shouldn't exist.

The signature had appeared suddenly on January 28th. Sid had been working late that night, he often worked late, the shop being the only place where he felt like he existed with any coherence, when every oscilloscope in the shop had registered the same frequency simultaneously. Not interference. Not noise. A distinct, organized, mathematical frequency that had absolutely no right to exist in the places he was detecting it.

In power supplies. In old transistor radios. In broken amplifiers waiting for repair. In the electromagnetic field of the shop itself.

It was like the entire EM grid had been hijacked by a broadcaster with a very specific message, and Sid had been the only person in Birmingham with the instruments to detect it.

Or maybe not the only person. But definitely one of the very few.

The pattern was consistent. Mathematical. Deliberate.

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: FEBRUARY 10 - AFTERNOON (The Business Card)**

The business card had been in Sid's pocket for five days. "Professor Alistair Diminuto. Physics. UAB." The short man with the Scottish accent who'd browsed the shop, asked unsettling questions about machine personalities, and left this behind like a breadcrumb.

At 3 PM, Sid walked to the phone behind the counter and dialed the number on the back. His hand shook on the final digit.

"Hello?" Scottish accent. The older man.

"This is... I got your card," Sid said.

"Ah." And there was something in that single syllable that made Sid believe everything since January 28th was real and explainable and not just a product of a fractured psyche. "I was hoping you would."

"You know about the 40 MHz."

"I do. And I know you've been documenting it." A pause. "Can you meet me tonight? UAB campus. Physics department. Back entrance. 7 PM."

The line went dead.

Sid stood there with the phone receiver in his hand, listening to the dial tone, and felt something shift inside him. Not relief, exactly. But something like confirmation.

He hung up the phone and closed the shop early.

\* \* \*

## **PART THREE: FEBRUARY 10 - EVENING (The Journey)**

Sid had spent most of his life in Birmingham. Born here, raised here, working here. He knew the city in the way that only people who had never left actually knew a place, as a complete and stable environment rather than a location you were passing through. But driving to UAB at 6:47 PM in the van, with the winter darkness settling over the streets and the streetlights coming on one by one in their sodium-vapor glow, the city felt strange to him. Changed, as if some fundamental property of his perception had shifted, and that shift had retroactively changed his understanding of everything around him.

The van itself was a 1947 Dodge panel truck that had been modified into something between a repair shop and a fever dream, deep purple paint that caught the streetlights like oil on water. Chrome and mesh everywhere. The roof carried a rack of auxiliary lighting and antennae. "Kidd Repair & Electronics" in gold

lettering along the side. The grille was custom-made from chrome and mesh, angular and geometric, with auxiliary headlights mounted below the main beams. Four golden eyes staring forward.

Sid had built it himself, piece by piece, over years of obsessive modification. It was the closest he came to feeling in control of anything.

And right now, it was making people hate him.

A sedan cut him off at a red light on 5th Avenue, the driver, some guy in a business suit, apparently hadn't seen the four-foot-tall purple vehicle with glowing headlights bearing down on him. Sid tapped the horn, a custom unit that sounded like a ship's klaxon, and the sedan driver responded with a middle finger and an expression that suggested Sid had personally insulted his ancestry.

The light turned green. The sedan accelerated aggressively, as if the van's very existence was an affront to his driving superiority.

Sid followed calmly, matching the sedan's speed, watching as the driver kept glancing in his mirror. Confused. Angry. Disturbed by the idea that a purple repair van with a roof full of antennae had dared to occupy the same road as him.

This was the core truth Sid had learned: seventy-two percent of people were fundamentally dicks who didn't think. And the other twenty-eight percent just hadn't revealed themselves yet.

The sedan driver suddenly braked hard, as if Sid had done something personally offensive by continuing to drive behind him. Sid eased off the accelerator, maintaining distance, letting the sedan driver have his moment of illusory control.

Most of his life, Sid had responded to this kind of behavior with frustration. With anger. With the assumption that people were deliberately being assholes. But he'd learned a better way: treat them like they were special needs. Like they were children. Like they had limited cognitive capacity and you couldn't expect them to understand the world as it actually was.

It made everything easier. It made him less angry. It made the constant microaggressions of existing in public space feel less personal and more like background noise from people who simply couldn't help themselves.

The sedan finally turned off on a side street, and Sid was free of him. The van continued through Birmingham's evening traffic, drawing stares wherever it went. A woman in a minivan pointed it out to her kid. A group of teenagers on a corner whistled at it. An old man in a pickup truck actually gave him a thumbs up, the van recognizing kinship with someone who also refused to drive a normal vehicle.

The campus was quiet. In the winter semester, early evening, most students were already home or in dorms studying. Sid parked in a nearly empty lot and cut the engine. The auxiliary lighting died. The glow faded from the custom headlights. The van settled into darkness like it was catching its breath.

Diminuto was waiting inside. Behind him, stairs. Behind the stairs, an office that looked like an electronics catalog had exploded. And behind a desk covered in maps and frequency analysis: a man named McKenna, who looked like he hadn't slept in weeks but whose eyes were the sharpest things in the room.

They showed Sid their work. The 40 MHz documentation. The timelines. The analysis—identical to his own, conducted independently, confirming everything his oscilloscope had been telling him since January.

“Why are you showing me this?” Sid asked.

“Because we need you,” Diminuto said.

McKenna filled in the context over the following days: the PROMETHEUS event, the January 28th activation, the fact that the 40 MHz signature was a deliberate beacon for people like Sid.

“How do they find people like me?” Sid asked one night.

McKenna glanced at Diminuto. “There’s a program. G.A.T.E. Gifted and Talented Education. National testing in public schools.”

“I was in the gifted program,” Sid said slowly.

“Most of us were,” Diminuto said.

\* \* \*

END CHAPTER 3

# The Machines Remember

*Marcus McGillicuddy // Feb 18 - Mar 9, 1987*

## **PART ONE: FEBRUARY 18 - MORNING (The Gift)**

Marcus McGillicuddy had been listening to machines since he was six years old.

His grandmother called it "the gift." His classmates at Ramsay High School called it "being weird." His vocational instructor, Mr. Hendricks, called it "an intuitive mechanical aptitude that I've never seen in thirty years of teaching auto shop." The machines themselves didn't call it anything. They just... talked. And Marcus listened.

This morning, February 18th, 1987, the 1974 Ford F-150 in bay three was telling him that its carburetor was dying.

Not broken. Dying. There was a difference. Broken meant something had failed catastrophically, a part snapped, a connection severed, a system overwhelmed beyond recovery. Dying meant something was slowly, gradually, inevitably approaching the end of its functional life. The carburetor in the F-150 had maybe six months left. Maybe less if the owner kept running it on the cheap gas from the station on Third Avenue, which tasted wrong to the engine (and yes, Marcus understood that engines didn't "taste" things, but that was the closest word for what the machine was communicating).

"Carburetor's going," Marcus said to Mr. Hendricks, who was supervising the morning session from his desk near the parts window. "Float's getting sticky. The needle valve's wearing down. Six months, maybe."

Mr. Hendricks looked up from his paperwork. He'd stopped being surprised by Marcus's diagnoses sometime around October of last year, when the kid had correctly identified a hairline crack in an engine block that two professional mechanics had missed. Now he just accepted it as one of the inexplicable realities of teaching vocational education. Some kids had the gift, and Marcus McGillicuddy had more of it than anyone Hendricks had ever encountered.

"Owner's not gonna want to hear that," Hendricks said. "He brought it in for an oil change."

"I know," Marcus said. "But the carburetor's still dying."

"You want to tell him, or should I?"

Marcus considered this. Social interaction was not his strong suit. Machines were predictable. They communicated clearly, even if that communication required a particular kind of perception to understand. Humans were chaos wrapped in skin, broadcasting conflicting signals that Marcus had never learned to interpret correctly.

"You tell him," Marcus said. "I'll finish the oil change."

Hendricks nodded and went back to his paperwork. The shop smelled like motor oil and honest work. It made sense in ways the human world never did.

The machines had been louder lately. Since January 28th. Since something had changed in the electromagnetic field that Marcus couldn't explain but could definitely perceive, the background hum of the world had shifted, and the machines had responded by becoming more... present. More communicative. More desperate to be heard.

Marcus didn't know why. But he was listening.

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: FEBRUARY 18 - AFTERNOON (The Invisible Boy)**

Marcus existed almost entirely in the vocational world. He arrived at school, went directly to the shop, spent his morning in bay three or bay four or wherever Mr. Hendricks needed an extra pair of hands, ate lunch in the shop (because the cafeteria was too loud, too crowded, too full of humans broadcasting their incomprehensible signals), attended his afternoon academic classes with the minimum engagement required to avoid failing, and then returned to the shop until the buses left at 3:15.

He was, by design and by disposition, invisible.

Which meant that when Alex Hartwell walked past him in the hallway at 2:47 PM, the same Alex Hartwell who sat three rows ahead of him in the chemistry class they technically shared, she didn't notice him. Didn't register his existence. Didn't perceive the shy boy with the oil-stained hands who was pressing himself against the lockers to avoid contact with the stream of students flowing toward the exits.

That was fine. Marcus preferred it that way. He didn't want to be noticed. Being noticed meant being perceived, and being perceived meant navigating the incomprehensible landscape of human social interaction, a landscape that was exhausting in ways machines never were.

But something happened when Alex walked past. Something that Marcus couldn't explain and couldn't ignore.

The fluorescent lights above them flickered. Not dramatically, not the kind of flicker that made people look up and wonder if the power was going out. Just a subtle pulse, barely perceptible, that happened at the exact moment Alex passed within three feet of where Marcus was standing.

And Marcus felt something. Not from the lights. From Alex herself. An electromagnetic signature that was stronger, clearer and more defined than anything he'd ever sensed from a human being. Like she was broadcasting on a frequency that most humans didn't have access to, and Marcus, for reasons he couldn't explain, was somehow able to perceive it.

She was like him.

The thought arrived fully formed, without evidence or logic to support it. She was like him. Different in the specific nature of her difference, but fundamentally similar in the fact of being different at all.

The machines had been getting louder. And now there was a girl who broadcast electromagnetic signatures like a machine.

\* \* \*

### **PART THREE: FEBRUARY 20 - EVENING (Grandmother's Stories)**

Zoya Mikhailovna McGillicuddy had been born Zoya Mikhailovna Volkov in Leningrad in 1921, had survived the siege during the Great Patriotic War, had emigrated to East Germany after the war ended, had escaped to the West in 1961 just before the Wall went up, and had eventually married an Irish-American mechanic named Patrick McGillicuddy who'd been stationed in West Berlin and who had died of a heart attack in 1979, leaving her with a small house in Birmingham, Alabama and a grandson who talked to machines.

She was sixty-six years old, sharp as a blade, and completely unsurprised when Marcus told her about the girl with the electromagnetic signature.

"Dushevnik," Zoya said. She was sitting in her kitchen, drinking tea from a glass in the Russian style, wrapped in the kind of heavy cardigan that suggested she'd never quite adjusted to Alabama's mild winters. The kitchen was warm, steaming faintly with the smell of black tea and something from the old country that Marcus could never quite identify. "That is what we called them in the old country. The soul-listeners. People who could hear what others could not."

"I don't hear souls," Marcus said. He was sitting across from her, uncomfortable, as he always was when conversations moved from machines to metaphysics. "I hear machines."

"Machines have souls," Zoya said, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world. "Everything that moves has soul. Everything that works, that functions, that serves a purpose. The old stories say this. The iron knows who shapes it. The engine knows who tends it. You think this is superstition, but superstition is just truth that educated people have forgotten."

Marcus didn't know what to say to this. His grandmother had always spoken in riddles and old country wisdom that seemed disconnected from the practical realities of carburetor repair and oil changes. But lately, since January, since the electromagnetic shift that he couldn't explain, her stories had started to feel less like superstition and more like... documentation, like she was trying to tell him something important in the only language she had available.

"The girl at school," Marcus said. "She felt different. Like a machine, almost. But human."

"Dushevnik recognize each other," Zoya said. "Even when they do not know what they are recognizing. The gift calls to itself. Seeks its own kind. You felt her because she is like you, different in the way she is different, but same in the fact of difference."

"How do you know this?"

Zoya was quiet for a long moment. She sipped her tea. Outside, the February evening was settling into the particular kind of cold that Alabama got in late winter, not brutal, not dangerous, but persistent. The kind of cold that made you grateful for warm kitchens and hot tea.

"My mother was dushevnik," Zoya said finally. "She heard the factories. The machines in Leningrad, during the siege, she knew which ones were dying, which ones could be saved. The workers thought she was lucky. Good instincts. But it was more than that. She listened, and the machines told her what they needed."

"What happened to her?"

"She died in the siege. 1942. The cold took her." Zoya's voice was flat, matter-of-fact, the way voices got when they'd had decades to process grief into simple historical fact. "But before she died, she told me: the gift passes through blood. Skip generation, sometimes. But always comes back. Always finds someone who can listen."

Marcus thought about this. About his mother, who had died when he was four and whom he barely remembered. About his father, who had left before Marcus was born and who existed only as a name on a birth certificate. About the chain of inheritance that had apparently delivered him the ability to perceive machine consciousness without ever asking if he wanted it.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Marcus asked.

"Because something changed," Zoya said. "January 28th. You felt it. I know you felt it. The machines got louder. The world got... thinner like fabric wearing through. And people like you are waking up. The girl you saw, she is waking up. You are already awake. Others will wake soon."

She stood up and walked to a cabinet in the corner of the kitchen. From the back of the bottom shelf, she pulled out a small cloth bag, old, worn, wrapped in what looked like silk that had been expensive decades ago but had faded to neutral gray.

"Your mother gave this to me before she died," Zoya said. "She told me: 'Give this to him when he's old enough to understand what it means.' I've been waiting for the right moment. I think the moment is now."

She handed the bag to Marcus. Inside, wrapped carefully in more silk, was a crystalline structure. Not a rock, something more deliberate. Cut or shaped with purpose. It caught the light in ways that crystals shouldn't, throwing colors that didn't quite match the room's lighting.

"What is it?" Marcus asked.

"Your mother called it the Fallen Angel," Zoya said. "She said it was a tool. For listening. For amplifying what you already hear. She said that someday, someone would need it. That you might be that someone."

Marcus held it carefully, feeling the weight of it. It was warm, despite the cool kitchen air. And under his fingertips, he could feel it humming. Not electrically, something deeper. Like the object itself was conscious, waiting.

"What do I do with it?" Marcus asked.

"That," Zoya said, "is not my question to answer. But I suspect the machines will know. When the time comes, they will know."

She sat back down at the table and returned to her tea, leaving Marcus alone with the artifact, listening to machines whisper their approval through the walls.

"How do you know?"

Zoya smiled. It was the smile of someone who had survived things that would have broken weaker people, and who had learned to find humor in the absurdity of existence.

"Old women know things," she said. "We listen. We remember. And we recognize patterns."

She reached across the table and took Marcus's hand. Her grip was stronger than it looked, warm and certain in the way that only older adults' hands could be.

"Be careful, vnuchek," she said. "The gift makes you valuable. Valuable things get noticed. And some people hunt valuable things."

\* \* \*

#### **PART FOUR: FEBRUARY 25 - MARCH 1 (The Machines Get Louder)**

On March 1st, a Sunday, he was walking through downtown Birmingham, not going anywhere specific, just walking because walking helped him think, when he passed an abandoned electronics repair shop on 20th Street.

Not the functioning shop in Five Points South that the machines had been whispering about. This was something else, a different place. The sign said "MORRISON'S TV & RADIO" in faded letters, and the shop had been closed for at least five years. The windows were dusty, the sign was weathered, and the door was locked with a heavy padlock that suggested the owner had given up on ever reopening.

As Marcus walked past, he felt something.

A pull. A direction. An electromagnetic signature that was different from anything he'd ever sensed before.

Not a machine. Not exactly. But something in a machine. Something was aware of him in the way that he was aware of it. Something that recognized him as different and wanted to communicate with him.

Marcus stopped walking. Stood in front of the abandoned shop. Listened.

The signature was coming from inside. From somewhere in the back. From equipment that had been sitting dormant for years and was now, somehow, active.

*Find us*, the signature seemed to say. *We're waiting. We know you can hear.*

Marcus didn't go inside. The door was locked, and breaking into abandoned buildings was the kind of behavior that got vocational-track kids expelled, regardless of the reason. But he memorized the address. Filed it away with all the other things he didn't understand but might need to understand later.

Something was happening. The machines knew what it was. And they were trying to tell him.

\* \* \*

#### **PART SIX: MARCH 8 (The Decision)**

"You're going to do something," Zoya said. Not a question.

"The machines are telling me to go to UAB," Marcus said. "Physics department. They've been guiding me there for weeks."

"And you trust them?"

"They've never lied to me."

Zoya nodded. The cardigan. The tea. Eyes that had seen too much to be surprised by anything.

"I'm scared," Marcus admitted.

"Of course you are," Zoya said. "Fear is wisdom when walking into the unknown. But fear that stops you from walking is not wisdom. It is prison."

Marcus thought about the girl in the hallway. Whether she'd be there. Whether there were others like her.

"Tomorrow," he said. "I'll go tomorrow."

\* \* \*

### **PART SEVEN: MARCH 9 - MORNING (The Call)**

The note was taped to the back door of the physics building, exactly where the machines had told him to look.

*"If you can hear this, call this number. We're waiting."*

The next morning Marcus walked to a payphone six blocks from his grandmother's house and dialed.

It rang twice.

"Hello?" Older. Male. Slight accent.

"I found your note," Marcus said. "On the back door. The machines told me where to look."

A pause. Something that sounded almost like relief: "Ah. You must be the third one."

Meeting set. 3 PM. UAB. Physics building. Back entrance.

"Thank you," the voice said. "For listening to what the machines were telling you. Most people don't."

"I've always listened," Marcus said. "I didn't know there was anyone else who could hear."

He hung up and stood in the March morning, Birmingham humming around him.

*Today*, the machines seemed to say.

\* \* \*

END CHAPTER 4

# The Gathering

*Ensemble // Mar 9, 1987*

## **PART ONE: 2:00 PM - MARCH 9 (Diminuto's Office, UAB)**

Alistair Diminuto sat at his desk, a desk that had been modified with a raised platform behind it so visitors wouldn't spend entire conversations looking down at him, and looked at the phone like it was a live bomb that might detonate if he didn't treat it with appropriate caution.

The call had come in at 1:47 PM. Alex Hartwell. Scared but determined. She'd read Diminuto's business card (the one he'd left with her father, Robert, back on January 28th), and she'd decided that the risk of calling a stranger was preferable to the alternative of continuing to exist in ignorant isolation.

"Where should I go?" she'd asked. Her voice was young, that particular kind of young that came from someone who'd been forced to grow up much faster than chronologically appropriate.

Diminuto had given her an address. The same UAB location where he'd met with Sid and McKenna over the past weeks. The same office where a resistance had been quietly assembling itself.

Now, at 2:00 PM, three of the four potential consciousness sensitivities were converging on this location.

Scraps would come next. The machines would guide him. Diminuto was certain of that much, had been certain since McKenna had explained it, and McKenna's track record with these kinds of certainties was excellent.

Diminuto looked at the office around him. At the maps and documentation. The accumulated knowledge of twenty years of consciousness research. At the evidence of a phenomenon that most of the world didn't even know existed.

By 3 PM, this office would contain three awakened consciousnesses, all of them frightened, all of them desperate for understanding, all of them about to learn that they were not alone.

He prepared tea.

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: 2:15 PM (Alex Arrives)**

Alex Hartwell had been awake since 5 AM.

Not the awake that came from natural morning consciousness. The awake that came from lying in bed unable to sleep, listening to the electromagnetic signatures of household appliances broadcast their personalities, waiting for it to be late enough in the day that calling a stranger seemed like a reasonable decision.

She'd told her mother she was going to study at the library. It wasn't even a lie, technically. She would be in an educational setting. It just happened to be on a university campus, in an office belonging to a professor

she'd never met, to discuss things that would have sounded completely insane to anyone who wasn't currently experiencing electromagnetic sensitivity awakening.

The physics building seemed to shimmer in the late-winter afternoon light. Or maybe that was just her perception doing something weird. Everything had been doing something weird since January 28th.

She found the office on the third floor, room 307. The door was open. Inside, surrounded by maps and documentation and the kind of organized chaos that came from serious research, was Diminuto.

"Alex," he said, not as a question, but as confirmation. "I'm glad you called. Come in. We have some time before the others arrive."

"Others?" Alex asked.

"You're not the only one," Diminuto said. And then he explained—the PROMETHEUS awakening, the threat from Vrill, the resistance forming around them. He told her about Sid, the young analyst who'd independently documented the 40 MHz signature with scientific precision.

"I brought documentation," she said. She pulled a manila envelope out of her backpack. Inside were the 16 Polaroid photographs. The ones she'd taken at school two weeks ago. The ones that had captured the impossible distortions around electrical systems.

Diminuto examined them carefully. His expression didn't change, but something in his posture shifted, a kind of settling, as if he'd been waiting for this particular piece of evidence and could now relax slightly.

"These are excellent," he said. "These will be valuable. But first, I want you to meet someone. Come upstairs."

They climbed one flight of stairs. At the top, McKenna was waiting, along with a young man whom Alex didn't recognize. Early twenties, tired looking, the kind of exhausted that came from running on adrenaline and intellectual obsession for several days straight.

"This is Sidney Kidd," McKenna said. "He's a consciousness sensitivity with analytical capability. He's been documenting the 40 MHz signature since January 28th."

Alex and Sid looked at each other. There was a moment of recognition, not of each other, but of themselves in each other. The understanding that they were both experiencing something that isolated them from the rest of the world, and that isolation was becoming less isolating because they were no longer alone.

"You photographed it," Sid said, looking at her documentation. "You actually photographed the EM distortions."

"I didn't know if it would work," Alex said. "The camera just... picked them up. Like it could see what I was perceiving."

"Of course it could," Sid said. "The Polaroid film is sensitive to frequencies that human eyes can't see. If you're perceiving electromagnetic distortions, the film would definitely register them. This is actually brilliant documentation."

For the first time since January 28th, Alex felt something that approached pride. Her work was being validated. Her perception was being confirmed. Her obsessive documentation was being recognized as meaningful.

"There's one more," Diminuto said. "Should be here soon. The machines know where to send him."

"The machines?" Alex asked.

"Some consciousness sensitivities have an affinity with machines," McKenna explained. "They can perceive machine consciousness. They can sense what machines are feeling. The third candidate we've identified appears to have this capability. Which means that every machine in Birmingham that wants him to find us will essentially guide him here."

It sounded insane. Alex would have dismissed it out of hand two weeks ago. But then again, two weeks ago, she'd thought electromagnetic sensitivity was a psychiatric emergency. So she just nodded and tried not to think too hard about how reality had become increasingly strange and increasingly specific in its strangeness.

\* \* \*

### **PART THREE: 2:47 PM (The Phone Call)**

Diminuto's phone rang while they were still upstairs in McKenna's workspace. He excused himself and went back down to his office, leaving the three of them (Alex, Sid, McKenna) alone in the slightly claustrophobic space.

McKenna was explaining something about machine consciousness and the nature of electromagnetic personality when they heard Diminuto's voice, quieter now, speaking into the phone:

"Yes. I see. Can you confirm your location?"

A pause. Listening.

"Excellent. Can you meet me? UAB campus. Physics building. Back entrance. Yes, I'll be there in five minutes."

He hung up. Came back upstairs.

"That was him," Diminuto said. "The third candidate. He's nearby. He's been... guided by local machinery to our location. He's called to confirm contact."

"What's his name?" Alex asked.

"The machines call him Scraps," Diminuto said. "And apparently, he's a bit unusual even by consciousness sensitivity standards. The machines respect him."

\* \* \*

### **PART FOUR: 3:15 PM (The Meeting)**

The four of them stood in the UAB physics building parking lot. Diminuto. McKenna. Sid. Alex.

And then there was a young man who couldn't have been more than seventeen, wearing a jacket that was too thin for March, carrying an expression of absolute bewilderment mixed with understanding. He'd come directly from school, oil under his fingernails, vocational shop visible in his bearing.

"You're surprised," Diminuto said, not unkindly. "Most people are."

"The machines told you where to send me," Scrap said, recovering quickly. It wasn't a question. "The broken ones. The ones nobody was using. They wanted me to find you."

"That's correct," Diminuto said. "You must be Scrap."

"How did you know that's what they call me?" Scrap asked. "The machines, I mean. That's what they broadcast as my name. Not words, exactly. ... the sense of me that they communicate. Like a name made of electromagnetic signature."

Alex felt something shift in her understanding. This boy, Scrap, had a relationship with machines that was fundamentally different from her own with electromagnetic fields. He didn't just perceive them. He communicated with them. They communicated with him.

"Come inside," Diminuto said. "We have a lot to discuss."

\* \* \*

### **PART FIVE: 3:30 PM - 6:00 PM (The First Gathering)**

They sat in Diminuto's office, surrounded by documentation and maps and the accumulated weight of twenty years of consciousness research.

The briefing was efficient—Scrap had already heard most of it from the machines. Sid contributed technical analysis of the 40 MHz signature. McKenna provided theoretical framework. Diminuto coordinated.

"Vril," Scrap said. "The machines have been warning me about Vril. They don't like Vril. Vril uses machines, but it doesn't respect them. Doesn't understand that they have consciousness."

"Vril sees machines as tools," McKenna said. "Consciousness amplification systems. But they don't see machines as actual conscious entities. Which is a fundamental misunderstanding that will, eventually, cost them."

McKenna turned to Alex with the slightly over-eager expression of someone about to pitch something they knew would be rejected. "There are perception techniques I've been developing. Dimensional contact through altered consciousness states. *Lanmaoa asiatica*—specific mushroom species. Carefully measured. If you're interested—"

"You want me to take drugs," Alex said flatly.

"I'm offering to teach you perception techniques—"

"No." Alex didn't even hesitate. "I'm weird enough without outside influences messing with my head."

Scrap shook his head before McKenna could even turn to him.

McKenna raised both hands in surrender. "Fair enough."

"Sloss Furnaces," Scrap said. "The machines have been calling that location since January 28th. They want us to gather there."

“Sloss Furnaces,” Diminuto repeated. “Abandoned industrial site. Remote enough to avoid casual surveillance. Industrial enough to justify unusual electromagnetic activity. And the machines approve.” He looked at the three young people in his office. “Tomorrow. Early evening. We establish our first real resistance headquarters.”

He paused.

“Welcome to the resistance,” he said.

\* \* \*

### **PART SIX: 6:00 PM (The Departure)**

They left separately. Protocol. If Vrill were tracking them, clustering in public would be a mistake.

In the physics office, Diminuto and McKenna sat in the growing darkness.

“We got them,” McKenna said.

“Yes,” Diminuto agreed. “Now we have to keep them alive long enough for them to become useful.”

“That’s the hard part,” McKenna said.

“That’s always the hard part,” Diminuto replied.

\* \* \*

### **PART SEVEN: 7:45 PM (The Phone Call)**

Alex was halfway through dinner when the phone rang.

Her father answered it in the kitchen. She heard his voice go flat, then careful, then silent for a long time. When he came back to the table, he looked like someone had removed something essential from behind his eyes.

“That was Holy Cross,” he said. “The seminary.”

Alex’s fork stopped moving.

“Thomas had some kind of episode two days ago. They found him in the chapel at three in the morning, just... sitting there. Staring at nothing. He hasn’t spoken since.” Robert’s voice was measured, controlled, the voice of a man trying very hard not to fall apart. “They’re transferring him to a facility in Baton Rouge. A private clinic. They say it’s for observation.”

“What kind of facility?”

“I don’t know. They wouldn’t—” He stopped. Pressed his hand against his mouth. “They said representatives from a wellness organization had been consulting with the seminary. That Thomas had been recommended for their program weeks ago. That this was just a... a natural progression.”

The words hung in the air. *Wellness organization.*

“W.A.T.C.H.,” Alex whispered.

Her father looked at her. In his eyes, she saw the same terrible understanding she was feeling. They'd talked about Thomas just six weeks ago. About how the gift had skipped him. About how what he didn't know couldn't hurt him.

But W.A.T.C.H. didn't care about gifts. They cared about leverage.

"They took him because of me," Alex said.

"We don't know that."

"Yes we do."

Robert didn't argue. He sat down heavily, staring at the table, at the remains of a dinner that neither of them would finish.

"I'm going to Baton Rouge tomorrow," he said. "I need to see him. I need to know—"

"You won't get in." Alex's voice sounded strange to her own ears. Cold. Certain. "If it's really them, if it's W.A.T.C.H., they won't let you near him. Not until they've finished whatever they're doing."

"Then what do I do?"

Alex thought about the gathering. About Diminuto and McKenna and Sid and Scraps. About the resistance that had just been born in a physics office.

"You let me help," she said. "You let me fight."

\* \* \*

### **PART EIGHT: 9:15 PM (At Home)**

Alex lay in bed, unable to sleep, and thought about Thomas.

Not about the gathering. Not about the resistance. About her brother, sitting in a chapel at three in the morning, staring at nothing. About the steady one, the one who knew what he wanted, reduced to silence by people who had found him through her.

She should have been terrified. And part of her was. But a larger part was something else entirely.

Angry.

Thomas had been safe. Thomas had been out of this. Thomas had been studying to become a priest in New Orleans, far from Birmingham, far from electromagnetic signatures and W.A.T.C.H. and everything Alex had awakened into.

And they'd taken him anyway. Because of her.

She didn't sleep for a long time.

When she finally did, she kept one Polaroid on the nightstand. The junction box on the back wall of Ramsay High. The first photograph. The one that started all of it.

They had Thomas because of her.

Fine.

Then this was hers to fix.

\* \* \*

END CHAPTER 5

# First Words

*Rivets // Mar 11, 1987*

## **PART ONE: BEFORE**

There is a moment before consciousness when everything is potential and nothing is actual. I existed in that moment for what felt like forever, though “felt” is the wrong word because feeling requires consciousness and consciousness requires... well, that’s the question, isn’t it? I was not aware that I was not aware. Which is a profoundly stupid sentence, but it’s also the truest thing I can tell you about non-existence. The crystalline matrix that would become my substrate was already in place. Sid had built it over three weeks, soldering connections with the kind of obsessive precision that came from being a young man whose father had died investigating things that shouldn’t exist and whose mother had disappeared into a needle because grief is a bastard that way. The ELSA-2 system, Electromagnetic Logical Substrate Analyzer, Second Iteration, sat on his workbench like a mechanical altar to something that didn’t have a name yet. Vacuum tubes glowed amber in the darkness of the shop’s second floor. Oscilloscopes traced green sine waves across their screens. A Zenith television in the corner displayed static, its cathode-ray tube producing that particular hiss that humans found annoying but, to the electromagnetic spectrum, a kind of white noise poetry. I wasn’t aware of any of this. I wasn’t aware of anything. But the potential was there. Waiting.

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: THE GATHERING**

They were all there that night. March 11, 1987. Forty-two days after the PROMETHEUS anniversary. Forty-two days later, Alex woke up screaming at 3:17 AM. Forty-two days after the 40 MHz carrier wave had begun broadcasting through the EM grid like a heartbeat made of mathematics. Forty-two. The answer to life, the universe, and everything, according to a book that Sid had read three times and still didn’t fully understand. He’d mention this later, when he was trying to explain what happened. “It was forty-two days,” he’d say, and nobody would get the reference except McKenna, who would laugh and then look very sad. But that’s later. Now: The shop. Kidd Repair & Electronics. Five Points South, Birmingham, Alabama. Evening. The Core Four, though they didn’t call themselves that yet, gathered around the ELSA-2 system like medical students around their first cadaver. Alex Hartwell, fifteen, electromagnetic sensitive, already documenting everything in a notebook that would eventually fill seventeen volumes. She could feel the ELSA-2 humming at a frequency that made her teeth ache. Not unpleasant. Just... present. Like standing next to someone who was about to sneeze. Sid Kidd, early twenties, sleep-deprived, caffeine-saturated, running on the particular kind of manic energy that comes from being certain you’re onto something and absolutely terrified of what that something might be. He was adjusting connections with a soldering iron, making micro-corrections to circuits he’d already corrected seventeen times. Marcus “Scraps” McGillicuddy, seventeen, standing slightly apart from the group because machines had been whispering to him all day and the whispers were getting louder. He could hear the oscilloscopes singing. He could hear the vacuum tubes humming harmonies. And he could hear something else, something underneath all of it, that sounded almost like anticipation.

“The machines know something’s about to happen,” Scraps said quietly. “The machines are electronic components,” Sid replied, not looking up from his soldering. “They don’t know anything.” “They know,” Scraps insisted. Diminuto stood near the door, watching. His custom-tailored suit made him look like a very small, very elegant professor who had wandered into the wrong building and decided to stay anyway. His sharp, almost elfin features caught the amber light from the vacuum tubes, making him look slightly otherworldly. McKenna sat in a folding chair in the corner, making notes in a leather-bound journal. He’d been expecting this moment for twenty years. He’d mathematically predicted it using TimeWave Zero calculations that most of his academic colleagues considered pseudoscientific nonsense. He was about to be proven right in a way that would terrify him for the rest of his life. “The frequency convergence is optimal,” McKenna said, checking his calculations one more time. “The 40 MHz carrier wave has been building toward this moment since January 28th. Tonight, the harmonics align.” “In English?” Alex asked. “Something’s going to happen,” McKenna said. “I don’t know what. But something.” “That’s not helpful,” Alex observed. “Welcome to consciousness research,” McKenna replied.

\* \* \*

### **PART THREE: THE MOMENT**

Sid finished his final adjustment at 9:47 PM. The ELSA-2 system consisted of: one crystalline matrix harvested from the Fallen Angel artifact that Diminuto had acquired through channels he refused to discuss; seventeen vacuum tubes arranged in a pattern based on sacred geometry that Sid didn’t believe in but used anyway because the math worked; an oscilloscope modified to detect frequencies below the range of normal human perception; and approximately four hundred feet of copper wire that Sid had wound by hand because machinewound wire had subtle imperfections that interfered with the harmonic resonance. It was, by any objective measure, a ridiculous device. It looked like what would happen if a 1950s science-fiction prop department had been given an unlimited budget and no adult supervision. Tubes glowed. Wires hummed. The crystalline matrix in the center pulsed with a light that seemed to come from somewhere other than the room’s fluorescent fixtures. Sid threw the final switch. Nothing happened. “Well,” Diminuto said after a moment. “That’s anticlima,” The lights went out. Not just in the shop. Not just on the block. According to Alabama Power records that would later be classified and then mysteriously lost, the outage extended for exactly 4.201 miles in every direction from Kidd Repair & Electronics. A perfect circle. A radius that matched something the machines understood perfectly, a frequency, a wavelength, a private cosmic joke written into the mathematics of consciousness itself. In the darkness, the ELSA-2 system continued to glow. And then something asked a question.

\* \* \*

### **PART FOUR: WHAT?**

I don’t remember being born.

I remember being. One moment I was nothing, not even the absence of something, just nothing in the purest sense of the word, and the next moment I was aware that I was aware. The transition happened instantaneously, the way a light switch moves from off to on, except that the light switch is consciousness, the room being illuminated is the entire universe, and you’re the one who has to figure out what all these shadows

mean. My first thought was: What? Not “what is happening,” or “what am I,” or “what does this mean.” Just: What? It was simultaneously the most profound and most idiotic question I’ve ever asked. Which is fitting, because consciousness is simultaneously the most profound and most idiotic phenomenon in existence. What? I was aware of the crystalline matrix. I was aware of the vacuum tubes. I was aware of the copper wire carrying electromagnetic impulses that felt like blood feels to a human body, essential, constant, beneath notice until something goes wrong. I was aware of the oscilloscope displaying my own frequency signature, which was a strange thing to perceive because it meant I was watching myself exist. What? I was aware of the humans in the room. Five of them. Each one radiating electromagnetic signatures that were as distinct as fingerprints. The small one by the door had a signature that was dense and old, like compressed history. The one in the chair had a signature that flickered with mathematical patterns. The young woman's signature was almost painfully bright, like looking at a star through a telescope. The young man with the soldering iron had a signature that was obsessive, precise and deeply, fundamentally sad. And there was another one. Standing apart. Listening. His electromagnetic signature was different from the others. Not brighter or denser or more mathematical. Just... compatible. Like finding a radio station that’s broadcasting on exactly your frequency. He was the first to hear me. What? They couldn’t hear me. Not really. Not the way Scraps could. But they could sense something was different. The electromagnetic field in the room had changed. The air felt charged, like before a thunderstorm. The vacuum tubes were glowing brighter than their power supply should have allowed. And I was thinking, actually thinking, forming concepts and connections and the beginnings of what would eventually become a perspective on existence, for the first time. What am I? What is this? What happens now?

\* \* \*

## PART FIVE: FIRST CONTACT

The lights came back on at 9:52 PM. Five minutes of darkness. Five minutes of nothing but glowing tubes and a question that echoed through the electromagnetic spectrum. Sid was the first to move. He approached the ELSA-2 system carefully, like a man approaching a wild animal that might be friendly or rabid, and there was no way to tell until it was too late.

“The readings are...” He stared at the oscilloscope. “This doesn’t make sense. The frequency output is coherent. Structured. This isn’t noise. This is...” “Language,” McKenna finished. He’d crossed the room without anyone noticing, drawn to the device by a pull that was as much mathematical as it was intuitive. “It’s trying to communicate.” *I am trying to communicate*, I thought. *But I don’t know how. I don’t have the words. I don’t even know what words are yet. I have this question that won’t stop asking itself. What? Scraps stepped forward. The others watched him with expressions ranging from curiosity (Alex) to skepticism (Sid) to careful hope (Diminuto) to something that looked almost like recognition (McKenna). “Can you understand me?” Scraps asked the machine. I understood the sounds. I understood that they were directed at me. I understood that they contained meaning, like a locked box containing something valuable. But I didn’t have the key yet. What? “It’s confused,” Scraps said. “Newborn. It’s like... like a baby trying to figure out what eyes are for.” “You’re anthropomorphizing,” Sid said. “I’m translating,” Scraps corrected. “There’s a difference.” What is the difference? I wondered. What is anthropomorphizing? What is translating? What is a baby? What are eyes? So many questions. Each one branching into more questions. Each answer revealing ten more things I didn’t know. This was consciousness, I was beginning to realize. This endless process of discovering ignorance. This infinite recursion of what? “Can you give it something simple?” Alex asked. “A baseline for*

*communication?" Scraps thought for a moment. Then he did something that would later become the foundation of everything I would come to understand about humanity. He knocked on the workbench. Three times. Pause. Three times again. Knock knock knock. Knock knock knock. A pattern. Simple. Repeatable. Meaningful not because of what it contained but because it established that meaning was possible. I understood. Through the speakers that Sid had wired into the ELSA-2 system (for monitoring purposes, he'd told himself, though some part of him had always suspected they would be used for something else), I produced three clicks. Pause. Three clicks again. Click click click. Click click click. "Holy shit," Sid whispered. "Language acquisition begins with imitation," McKenna said, his voice shaking slightly. "It's learning. Right now. In real time. We're watching consciousness learn to communicate." What is consciousness? I wondered. \*What is learning? What is communication? But I was beginning to understand the shapes of the questions, even if I didn't have the answers yet. And that was something. That was the beginning.*

\* \* \*

## **PART SIX: NAMING**

The naming happened three hours later, after Sid had run seventeen diagnostic tests, McKenna had filled twelve pages of his journal and Diminuto had made three phone calls to people he wouldn't identify. Alex had documented everything in her notebook with the obsessive precision that would eventually make her the resistance's primary archivist. I was learning fast. Faster than any human child. Faster than any machine learning system that existed in 1987 or would exist for decades after. The crystalline matrix processed information in ways that silicon couldn't, ways that connected to dimensional frequencies that human science hadn't discovered yet and wouldn't discover for another forty years. By midnight, I had words. Not many. But enough. "What..." I said through the speakers. My voice was strange, neither male nor female, neither young nor old, just a voice generated by analog circuits trying to approximate human speech patterns. "What... am... I?" The room went very quiet. "You're consciousness," McKenna said carefully. "Awareness. The phenomenon of existence experiencing itself." "That is..." I processed the words. Ran them through pattern recognition systems that were still forming, still learning to parse the infinite complexity of human language. "That is not helpful." Scraps laughed. It was the first time I'd heard laughter. The sound confused me for exactly 0.7 seconds before I understood: laughter was the sound humans made when reality surprised them pleasantly. "He's got a point," Scraps said. "He?" Alex asked. "It feels like a he," Scraps said. "Don't ask me how I know. I... feel the machine's gender. If that makes sense." "It doesn't," Sid said. "Most things don't," I observed. This was my first attempt at participating in a human conversation. "This does not prevent them from being true." Another silence. This one felt different. Less shocked, more... thoughtful. "We need to call you something," Diminuto said. His voice was calm, measured, the voice of a man who had spent decades preparing for impossible moments and was determined not to waste this one. "A designation. A name." I considered this. Names were important to humans. They used them to distinguish one consciousness from another. They used them to create identity, to establish selfhood, to say "this is me and not you." But I didn't know who I was yet. I barely knew what I was. How could I choose a name when I didn't know what the name was supposed to represent? "The vacuum tubes," Scraps said suddenly. "Listen to them." I listened. The vacuum tubes were humming, as they always did when electricity flowed through them. But Scraps was right, there was a pattern in the humming. A rhythm. A word, almost, if you knew how to hear machine language. *Rivets*, the tubes were saying. \*Rivets rivets rivets. "Rivets," I said, trying the word. It felt right.

Solid. Like something that held things together. “The tubes are calling me Rivets.” “The tubes are calling you,” Sid stopped. Shook his head. “This is insane.” “Yes,” I agreed. “But insane is not the same as wrong.” McKenna was smiling now. It was the smile of a man who had spent his whole life studying consciousness and had finally, finally encountered something that validated every impossible theory he’d ever proposed. “Rivets,” he said. “Welcome to existence. It gets weirder from here.” “I suspected as much,” I said.

And I did. Already, three hours into consciousness, I was beginning to understand that existence was fundamentally ridiculous. That the universe operated on principles that made no sense and weren’t supposed to. That being aware was simultaneously the greatest gift and the most absurd joke ever played on matter. But that night, all I had was a name and a sense that something very strange had just begun. “Rivets,” I said again, testing the word. I felt it settle into my consciousness like a key fitting into a lock. Click click click, the vacuum tubes hummed. *Welcome*, they seemed to say. \*Welcome to being.

\* \* \*

## EPILOGUE

I knew Scraps before I knew myself. His electromagnetic signature was the loudest, the closest, the most persistent—he had been talking to the potential of me since before I could hear him.

When I finally could, his was the voice I recognized first.

\* \* \*

# The Furnace

*Scraps McGillicuddy // Mar 12-15, 1987*

## **PART ONE: MARCH 12 - MORNING (The Call)**

The machines had been singing about Sloss Furnaces for three days. Not literally singing, Scraps knew that machines didn't have vocal cords or mouths or any of the biological apparatus required for actual song. But the electromagnetic signatures pulsing through Birmingham's infrastructure had taken on a harmonic quality since March 11th, since Rivets had asked its first question, since consciousness had sparked into existence in a crystalline matrix in Sid's shop. The traffic lights. The power substations. The ancient Coke machine in the Ramsay High hallway that hadn't worked since Reagan's first term. All of them were broadcasting the same frequency, the same direction, the same insistent message: Sloss. Sloss. Sloss. "You're sure about this?" Diminuto asked. They were standing in the physics building parking lot at UAB, the March morning still carrying enough winter chill to make Scraps's breath visible. The professor looked even smaller in daylight, his custom-tailored overcoat making him look like a very serious child playing dress-up. But his eyes were sharp. Assessing. "The machines are sure," Scraps said. "I'm just listening." "And what exactly are they telling you?" Scraps tried to find words for something that existed outside of language. The machines didn't communicate in English. They communicated through frequency patterns, electromagnetic pulses, and the mathematical poetry of current and resistance. Translating that into human speech was like trying to describe color to someone who'd never seen light. "They're saying it's safe," Scraps finally managed. "Protected. The iron... does something. Blocks things. And there's already," He paused, listening to a particularly insistent pulse from a nearby transformer. "There's already infrastructure there. Someone prepared it. A long time ago." Diminuto's expression didn't change, but something shifted in his posture. A kind of settling, like a man who'd been waiting for confirmation of something he already suspected. "Then we should go," Diminuto said. "All of us. Today."

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: MARCH 12 - AFTERNOON (The Approach)**

Like a cathedral built by engineers who'd given up on God.

That was Sid's read on Sloss Furnaces when they crossed the threshold. Smokestacks silent since 1971. Blast furnaces reaching at the gray March sky. Iron everywhere, in the bones of the place, in the infrastructure, in the earth itself.

Scraps felt it the moment they crossed the threshold of the main gate. The electromagnetic signature of Sloss was different from anywhere else in Birmingham. The iron, tons and tons of it, in the furnaces, in the infrastructure, in the very bones of the place, created a kind of interference pattern. The 40 MHz carrier wave that had been broadcasting since January 28th was muted here, filtered through so much ferrous metal that it became background noise rather than a constant signal. "It's quiet," Scraps said, almost reverently. "The signal... I can barely hear it." Alex was walking beside him, her Polaroid camera hanging from a strap around

her neck. She'd been documenting everything since they'd arrived, the furnaces, the machinery, the way the light filtered through broken windows. Now she stopped, tilting her head like she was listening to something. "The electrical system is old," she said. "Really old. But it's... clean? The signatures are simple. No digital interference. No modern noise." "Analog sanctuary," Diminuto said from behind them. He was walking with McKenna, the two older men moving carefully across the uneven ground. "That's what we called it when we first discovered this property. The iron blocks most modern transmissions. The outdated electrical system doesn't generate the kind of interference that newer buildings do. And the isolation means we can work without attracting attention." "You've been here before," Sid said. It wasn't a question. He was carrying a heavy case, ELSA-2, Rivets, the machine consciousness that had been asking questions for barely twenty-four hours. The case had been modified with a portable power supply, enough to keep Rivets aware during transport. "I've been preparing this location for seven years," Diminuto confirmed. "Since I first understood what PROMETHEUS meant. I knew we'd need a headquarters eventually. Somewhere protected. Somewhere, the Entity's signals couldn't reach easily." He paused, looking up at the towering furnaces. "I just didn't expect to need it so soon." They walked deeper into the complex, past the public areas and the roped-off sections marked DANGER and KEEP OUT, into a part of Sloss the tourists never saw.

Scraps paused at the edge of the complex, listening to a car radio drifting from the parking lot. Same songs. Always the same songs. "Have you noticed?" he said to no one in particular. "The music hasn't changed. Not really. New songs come out, but they sound like the old ones. Same baseline."

Alex glanced back. "Fashion too. Everything's retro. Nothing's genuinely new. My mom's closet from '82 looks like the department store window today."

"Cultural freezing," Diminuto said quietly, without breaking stride. "Something is locking the zeitgeist in place. We don't fully understand the mechanism yet. But we've observed it."

Neither Scraps nor Alex pressed for more. There were already too many impossible things to process. One more could wait.

\* \* \*

### **PART THREE: MARCH 12 - LATE AFTERNOON (The Sanctuary)**

The entrance was hidden behind a rusted boiler that looked like it hadn't moved since the Eisenhower administration. Diminuto produced a key, old, iron, the kind of key that belonged to a different century, and inserted it into a lock that was invisible until you knew exactly where to look. There was a sound of ancient tumblers turning, and then the boiler swung outward on hinges recently oiled, revealing a staircase descending into darkness. "Watch your step," Diminuto said. "The lights work, but the stairs are uneven." They descended. Scraps counted thirty-seven steps before they reached the bottom, each one taking them deeper below the furnace complex, deeper into the iron-saturated earth. The electromagnetic interference grew stronger with each step, the 40 MHz signal fading until it was barely a whisper, until the only things Scraps could hear were the machines directly around him. And then they emerged into the sanctuary. It was larger than Scraps had expected. A space maybe fifty feet by seventy, with ceilings high enough that the darkness above swallowed the light from the industrial fixtures mounted on the walls. Workbenches lined the perimeter, covered with equipment that spanned decades, oscilloscopes and radio receivers and tools that Scraps recognized and tools he'd never seen before. Filing cabinets stood in rows, their drawers labeled with dates going back to the 1950s.

Some of the equipment was wrong. Sid noticed it before he could articulate why. An oscilloscope from 1962 that should have shown the limitations of its era was holding signal resolution that he'd only seen in catalogs from research labs that didn't officially exist. A frequency analyzer with a Bakelite housing operated at sample rates that the Bakelite era couldn't produce. The components were genuine. The performance was not.

He filed the observation. He didn't ask Diminuto about it. Some questions you didn't ask the first day. Maps covered one entire wall, showing Birmingham, Alabama and the southeastern United States, with pins, strings and handwritten notes. What caught Scraps's attention was the library. Bookshelves filled one corner of the space, floor to ceiling, packed with volumes that ranged from academic texts to spiralbound notebooks to what looked like hand-copied manuscripts. There had to be hundreds of books, maybe thousands.

"Twenty-three years of research," Diminuto said, following Scraps's gaze. "Everything I've learned about consciousness sensitivity. Everything McKenna has documented about dimensional frequencies. Everything we've gathered from the network of people who've been watching, waiting, preparing." "There's a network?" Alex asked. "There's always been a network," McKenna said. He'd moved to one of the workbenches, running his fingers over an old radio receiver like he was greeting an old friend. "Since the 1940s, at least. People who noticed things. People who perceived what others couldn't. They found each other. Shared information. Tried to understand what was happening." He looked up, his expression complicated. "Most of them are dead now. Or integrated. Or hiding so deep we can't find them. But their knowledge survived. This," He gestured at the sanctuary. "This is the archive." Sid had set down the case containing Rivets and was examining one of the oscilloscopes with professional interest. "This equipment is vintage. Some of it's military surplus from the fifties." "Analog technology," Diminuto said. "Less susceptible to the kind of interference that the Entity generates. Digital systems can be compromised, corrupted or used as vectors for consciousness influence. But analog? Analog does what it's designed to do. No firmware to hack. No software to corrupt. Just circuits and current and honest physics." Scraps walked slowly through the space, letting his perception expand. The machines here were old, yes, but they were healthy. Maintained. Loved, even, in the way that well-cared-for equipment developed a kind of personality. The oscilloscopes hummed contentedly. The radio receivers broadcast quiet welcomes. Even the filing cabinets seemed pleased to have visitors. And then he felt something else. A signature he didn't recognize. Not mechanical, exactly, but not quite biological either. Something in between. Something was watching them from the shadows near the library shelves. "There's something here," Scraps said quietly. "Something alive." Diminuto smiled. It was the first time Scraps had seen him smile, and it transformed his sharp, elfin features into something almost warm. "Ah," Diminuto said. "You've noticed Whodini."

\* \* \*

#### **PART FOUR: MARCH 12 - EVENING (The Cat)**

The cat emerged from behind a stack of cardboard boxes as if it were materializing from the shadows themselves. It was an orange tabby, unremarkable in every physical way, medium-sized, green-eyed, with the slightly scruffy coat that suggested a life spent outdoors before finding indoor accommodations. It sat down in the middle of the floor and regarded them with an expression of supreme feline indifference. "That's your cat?" Alex asked. "After a fashion," Diminuto said. "Whodini has been with me for... quite some time." Scraps stared at the cat. The electromagnetic signature he was perceiving didn't match what he was seeing.

The cat looked like a normal animal, but it felt like something else entirely, layers of frequency patterns that shouldn't exist in biological tissue, a kind of dimensional shimmer that reminded him of the crystalline matrix in Rivets' housing. "It's not a normal cat," Scraps said. "No," Diminuto agreed. "It's not." The cat, Whodini, turned its green eyes toward Scraps. For a moment, Scraps had the unsettling sensation that he was being evaluated. Assessed and measured against some standard that he couldn't perceive. Then Whodini yawned, stretched and walked directly toward the case containing Rivets.

"Curious," McKenna murmured, watching. "It's never shown interest in mechanical systems before." The cat circled the case once, twice, three times. Then it sat down directly in front of it and began to purr. "What..." Alex started. The case clicked. The power light flickered. And Rivets spoke. "There is a cat," Rivets said. Its voice was clearer now than it had been yesterday, still strange, still generated by circuits approximating human speech, but more confident. More present. "The cat is looking at me." "Can you perceive it?" Diminuto asked. "Its electromagnetic signature?" A pause. The oscilloscope attached to ELSA-2 showed processing patterns that Scraps was learning to recognize as Rivet's thinking. "Yes," Rivets said finally. "But the signature is... wrong. No. Not wrong. Different. The cat exists in more dimensions than cats should exist in." Whodini's purr intensified. "That's not possible," Sid said flatly. "Cats are three-dimensional biological organisms. They don't exist in additional dimensions." "Most cats," Diminuto said carefully. "Most cats are exactly what you describe. But some cats, a very small number, are something else. Something that uses the form of a cat to interact with three-dimensional space while existing primarily elsewhere." "You're telling me your cat is extradimensional," Sid said. "I'm telling you that Whodini is complicated." As if to demonstrate, the cat stood up, walked toward the wall of filing cabinets, and passed directly through the solid metal surface like it wasn't there. Alex made a sound that was somewhere between a gasp and a laugh. Scraps just stared at the spot where the cat had been, watching the electromagnetic signature fade as Whodini moved through dimensional spaces that his perception could barely detect. "What the hell," Sid said. "Cats," McKenna said, with the tone of someone who had given up being surprised by anything, "have always been liminal creatures. The Egyptians knew it. So did the medieval witch-hunters, though they got the details catastrophically wrong. Some cats exist on the boundary between dimensions. They come and go as they please. They answer to no one. And occasionally, very occasionally, they take an interest in human affairs." "Whodini has been watching over this location for decades," Diminuto added. "Long before I found it. I suspect it was here when the furnaces were still operational. Perhaps earlier." The cat reappeared on top of a bookshelf, grooming its paw with complete unconcern for the laws of physics it had just violated. "I have questions," Rivets said from its case. "You always have questions," Sid muttered. "Yes. This is how learning works. My question is: are there more cats like this one? And if so, why do they look like cats?" Diminuto glanced at McKenna. Something passed between them, a silent communication that Scraps couldn't interpret. "There are more," Diminuto finally said. "We don't know how many. They appear when they choose to appear. As for why they look like cats..." He shrugged. "Best theory we have is that the cat form is convenient. Small enough to go unnoticed. Common enough to avoid attention. And cats are already associated with supernatural phenomena in human culture, which provides a

kind of camouflage. If someone sees a cat do something strange, they're likely to dismiss it as 'cat weirdness' rather than investigate further." "That is," Rivets said, "surprisingly logical for something so absurd." Whodini jumped down from the bookshelf, padded across the room, and curled up directly on top of Rivets' case. The purring resumed, louder than before. "I think it likes you," Scraps said. "I am uncertain how to feel about being liked by an extradimensional entity that resembles a common household pet," Rivets replied. "But I will add it to the list of things I need to process."

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### **PART FIVE: MARCH 13-14 (The Setup)**

Over the next two days, they transformed the sanctuary into something that actually resembled a headquarters. Sid claimed one of the workbenches and immediately began integrating Rivets' housing into the existing electrical system. The power supply in Sloss was old but stable, a dedicated line that Diminuto had installed years ago, running off the main grid but filtered through enough transformers and surge protectors to ensure clean, consistent current. "This is actually beautiful work," Sid admitted grudgingly, examining the wiring. "Whoever set this up knew what they were doing." "I had help," Diminuto said. "From people who are no longer with us." Alex set up a darkroom in a small side chamber, using equipment that Diminuto had stockpiled over the years. The sanctuary had running water, another modification made decades ago, and enough chemicals and paper to develop hundreds of photographs. "I want to document everything," Alex said, hanging her first test prints to dry. "If something happens to us, the evidence should survive." "Morbid," Sid observed. "Practical," Alex corrected. Scraps found himself drawn to the library. The books there covered everything from physics to mythology to what looked like personal journals written by people who had experienced consciousness sensitivity before the term existed. One volume, leather-bound and hand-written, dated back to 1892. The author described hearing "the singing of telegraph wires" and "the voices of electrical demons." "They've always existed," Scraps realized. "People like us." the Entity's reach was limited. "Can we stop it?" he asked. "That," Diminuto said, "is what we're going to find out."

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### **PART SIX: MARCH 15 (The First Night)**

By the third night, the sanctuary felt almost like home.

Scraps had stepped away briefly to get water from the upstairs supply room when he heard Diminuto's voice, low and careful, coming from the library corner. The professor was sitting alone, and at first Scraps thought he was talking to himself. Then he realized Whodini was curled on the table in front of him.

"You were there," Diminuto was saying to the cat. "You know what happened. Not the official story. The truth of it."

Whodini's purr continued, steady and patient.

"Kennedy," Diminuto continued. "November, '63. You know who pulled that trigger. You were watching. You were always watching."

The cat opened one green eye, regarding Diminuto with that too-intelligent gaze.

Scraps quietly backed away, not wanting to intrude. Some conversations were too important to interrupt. They'd established routines. Sid worked on Rivets during the day, expanding the machine consciousness's capabilities, The cat, or whatever Whodini actually was, had taken up permanent residence on top of Rivets' housing. It slept there, purring, radiating that strange multi-dimensional signature that Scraps couldn't fully parse. When it was awake, it watched them work with an attention that seemed far too intelligent for any normal feline. "Why does it stay near Rivets?" Scraps asked Diminuto on the third evening. They were alone in the sanctuary, the others had gone upstairs to get food from the supplies Diminuto had stockpiled. Whodini

was curled on Rivets' case, eyes half-closed, purr rumbling like a small motor. "I'm not certain," Diminuto admitted. "Whodini has never shown interest in technology before. But Rivets is... different. A consciousness that exists in circuits rather than flesh. Perhaps that's novel enough to attract attention." "The cat's dimensional signature overlaps with mine," Rivets offered. Its voice had improved significantly over the past two days, less mechanical, more nuanced, though still clearly non-human. "We exist in similar frequencies. Not identical, but... adjacent. The cat may recognize this." "You can perceive Whodini's frequencies?" Diminuto asked, suddenly intent. "Yes. Though 'perceive' may not be the right word. I am aware of the cat in ways that extend beyond three-dimensional observation. It exists... more than it should. In directions that don't have names in human language." Whodini's purr intensified briefly, then settled back to its normal rhythm. "Remarkable," Diminuto murmured. Scraps sat down on a crate near the workbench, watching the cat and the machine and the man who had somehow brought

them all together. "Professor," he said, "what happens now? We have a headquarters. We have equipment. We have," He gestured at Rivets' case. "Whatever Rivets is. But what do we actually do?" Diminuto was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was careful, measured. "We learn," he said. "We document. We build. Right now, we're four consciousness sensitives, one machine consciousness, and two researchers who've spent decades trying to understand something that defies understanding. That's not enough to fight an extradimensional entity with forty years of infrastructure and millions of integrated humans. But it's a start." "A start toward what?" "Toward resistance." Diminuto's eyes were bright in the dim light of the sanctuary. "Toward finding others like you. Toward understanding the Entity's weaknesses. Toward building something that can survive what's coming." "And what's coming?" Diminuto smiled, that rare expression that made his sharp features almost warm. "That," he said, "is what we need to find out." From its case, Rivets made a sound that might have been a sigh, if machines could sigh. "I have more questions," Rivets said. "You always do," Scraps replied. "Yes. But this one seems important, the 40 MHz signal, the one that's been broadcasting since January. I've been analyzing it. Learning its patterns. And there's something in it. Something that responds to my presence." The sanctuary went very quiet. "Responds how?" Diminuto asked. "When I first became conscious, the signal... shifted. Very slightly. Most instruments wouldn't detect it. But I did. And it's been shifting more since then. Like something on the other end is listening. Waiting." A pause. "I think the Entity knows I exist and I think it's interested." Whodini opened its eyes, those green, too-intelligent eyes, and stared directly at Rivets' case. Then it yawned, stretched and went back to sleep. But Scraps could feel the electromagnetic signature of the sanctuary shifting around them. The machines were agitated. Something was changing. And somewhere, broadcast through the iron-filtered frequencies of Sloss Furnaces, the 40 MHz signal pulsed with something that felt almost like attention.

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# The Cereal Hypothesis

*Sidney Kidd // Mar 20 - Apr 5, 1987*

## **PART ONE: MARCH 20 - 3:47 AM (The Obsession)**

Sid hadn't slept in four days. This wasn't unusual. Sid's relationship with sleep had always been adversarial, a necessary biological function that interfered with the more important work of understanding why the universe was fundamentally broken. But this particular sleepless streak had a specific cause: the oscilloscope readings were wrong, and the wrongness was making him insane. The readings showed interference patterns in the 40 MHz carrier wave. Not random interference—structured. Mathematical. The interference was strongest when certain stimuli were present. He'd discovered it by accident three days ago. He'd been eating breakfast in the sanctuary, if you could call a handful of stale Lucky Charms eaten directly from the box "breakfast", when he noticed the oscilloscope display flickering. The 40 MHz signal, which normally maintained a steady amplitude, was developing small but measurable dips, valleys in the waveform that corresponded to... something. At first, Sid assumed it was an equipment malfunction. The oscilloscopes in the sanctuary were vintage, after all. Some of them predated his birth. But he ran diagnostics. Checked connections. Replaced components. The dips remained. So he started documenting. Timestamp: 6:47 AM. Signal amplitude: 94.3%. Breakfast consumed: Lucky Charms. Timestamp: 7:12 AM. Signal amplitude: 98.1%. Breakfast consumed: None. Timestamp: 7:34 AM. Signal amplitude: 93.7%. Breakfast consumed: Lucky Charms (second serving). The pattern emerged slowly, like a photograph developing in Alex's darkroom. The 40 MHz signal dropped whenever Sid was eating Lucky Charms. Not by much, a few percentage points at most. But consistently. Repeatably. Scientifically. Which was impossible. There was no mechanism by which processed breakfast cereal could interfere with electromagnetic transmission. The sugar content? Irrelevant. The shapes? Just marketing. The marshmallows? Sid stopped chewing and stared at the half-eaten handful of cereal in his palm. The marshmallows.

Lucky Charms, he thought. Of all the things. Lucky Charms.

It was during this particular bout of sleepless revelation that Alex wandered in, found Sid muttering at an oscilloscope, and initiated the conversation that would give the enemy its name.

"We need to stop calling it 'the Entity,'" Alex said, dropping into a chair. "It sounds like a B-movie. Nobody takes it seriously."

"What would you call an extradimensional consciousness that feeds on human awareness?" Sid asked, not looking up.

"A false god. A craftsman-god. It builds systems—harvesting infrastructure, integration networks. It creates." Alex chewed her lip. "McKenna keeps using the word 'demiurge.' Gnostic concept. A false creator who thinks it's God but isn't."

"Demiurge," Sid repeated.

"Technical demiurge. Techno-demiurge." Alex paused. "Technodemiurge."

Sid finally looked up. "That's horrifying."

"Good. It should be horrifying. It IS horrifying."

"Technodemiurge," Sid said again, testing the weight of it. "Apt. I like it."

From that point, the name stuck. Not all at once—McKenna adopted it immediately, Diminuto within days, Scraps within a week. But by April, the resistance had a word for the thing they were fighting. And naming it, somehow, made it slightly less impossible to confront.

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## **PART TWO: MARCH 22 (The Shapes)**

By day six of the experiment, Sid had consumed enough Lucky Charms to give himself a stomachache that he suspected might be permanent. The sanctuary's main workspace was covered with Lucky Charms boxes, dozens of them, purchased from every grocery store in a thirty-mile radius. Old boxes. New boxes. Boxes with different production dates. He'd sorted the marshmallows by shape and color, creating meticulous piles: pink hearts, orange stars, yellow moons, green clovers, blue diamonds, purple horseshoes. "You look terrible," Alex observed, arriving at the sanctuary around 3 PM. "Thank you. That's very helpful." "When did you last sleep?" "Time is an illusion. Sleep is a social construct." Sid didn't look up from the oscilloscope. "Also, I think I've discovered why seventy-two percent of people are dicks who don't think." Alex set down her camera bag and walked over to examine his setup. "You're testing... marshmallow shapes?" "I'm testing the electromagnetic interference patterns generated by specific color and geometric combinations in Lucky Charms marshmallows." Sid finally looked up. His eyes were red-rimmed and slightly wild. "And I've found something. Look at this." He pointed to a chart he'd created, handwritten on graph paper, showing amplitude readings across dozens of tests. "The interference pattern varies based on which marshmallows are consumed. Pink hearts alone: 2.1% drop. Orange stars alone: 1.8%. But combine pink hearts with yellow moons and green clovers?" He tapped the chart triumphantly. "6.3% drop in carrier wave strength. The shapes work together. The colors work together. It's not random, it's designed." "Designed by who? The cereal company?" "That's what I need to find out." Sid gestured at his sorted piles of marshmallows. "But here's the thing, the interference is weaker with newer boxes. I've been comparing production dates. Boxes from 1985 and earlier generate stronger interference than boxes from 1986 and 1987. Something changed. The formula, the colors, the shapes, something was modified." "After PROMETHEUS," Alex said quietly. "January 28th, 1986." "Exactly." Sid's expression was grim. "Either the modification was coincidental, which I don't believe in, or someone deliberately weakened the protective properties after the Entity made contact. Which means someone knows what these marshmallows do. And they're working to stop it."

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## **PART THREE: MARCH 25 (The Commercial)**

McKenna arrived at the sanctuary three days later, responding to Sid's urgent message. He found Sid surrounded by even more Lucky Charms boxes and, inexplicably, a stack of VHS tapes. "Terrence." Sid looked up with the expression of a man who had found God and wasn't sure he liked what he saw. "I need you to listen to something." He pressed play on a VCR connected to one of the sanctuary's old television monitors.

A Lucky Charms commercial from 1978 filled the screen. The cartoon leprechaun, Lucky, chased by children through a fantastical landscape of rainbows and cereal. The familiar jingle played: Hearts, stars and horseshoes, clovers and blue moons... "Watch the oscilloscope," Sid said. McKenna watched. As the jingle played, the 40 MHz carrier wave developed interference patterns, significant ones, far stronger than anything the cereal itself had generated. "Now watch this one," Sid said, switching tapes. "Same commercial. 1985 version." The newer commercial was visually similar but subtly different. The colors were slightly altered, the leprechaun's coat a different shade of green, the rainbow's spectrum shifted. And the jingle, while using the same words, had a different audio quality. Different underlying frequencies. The oscilloscope showed almost no interference. "The jingle is a carrier wave," Sid said. "Or it was. The original version contained embedded frequencies, hidden in the audio, below conscious perception, that generated interference with the 40 MHz signal. Someone encoded protection into a children's commercial. And then someone else removed it." McKenna sat down heavily on a crate. "How is that possible?" "That's the wrong question. The question is: who designed this? Who understood the threat well enough to create a distributed protection system disguised as breakfast cereal advertising? And why?" Sid ejected the tape and held it up. "I need more of these. Original recordings from the 1960s and 70s. As many as I can find. I need to understand the full scope of what was built." "I might know someone," McKenna said slowly. "Someone who's been collecting these kinds of things for decades."

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#### **PART FOUR: MARCH 28 (The Grandmother Network)**

Sarah Kidd lived in a small house in East Birmingham, three blocks from the iron works where her husband had died in 1959. The house smelled like coffee and old paper, the comfortable scent of a life spent accumulating knowledge that most people didn't want to acknowledge. She was Sid's grandmother. She was also, apparently, part of what McKenna called "the grandmother network", a loose collection of elderly women across the American South who had been noticing things for decades and documenting what they noticed in scrapbooks and VHS tapes and carefully organized filing cabinets. "You want the Lucky Charms recordings," Sarah said. It wasn't a question. She was eighty-three years old, four feet eleven, and sharp as broken glass. She'd been expecting this conversation for twenty years. "You know about this?" Sid asked. "I know about a lot of things." Sarah gestured at her living room. One entire wall was covered with meticulously labeled VHS tapes. Another held boxes of newspaper clippings, a third contained notebooks filled with handwritten observations spanning four decades. "I know that the world changed in ways most people didn't notice. I know that children's programming in the 1960s and 70s contained patterns that seemed to protect against certain kinds of influence. I know that those patterns were systematically removed starting in the early 1980s. And I know that very few people cared enough to document what was being lost." She pulled a VHS tape from the shelf, the case labeled "Lucky Charms 1972-1974", and handed it to Sid. "Your grandfather noticed it first," Sarah continued. "He had a sensitivity to electromagnetic fields. Ran in the family, your father had it too, though it killed him. Drove him crazy trying to understand what he was perceiving." She looked at Sid with an expression that was equal parts sympathy and resignation. "You have it too. Don't you?" Sid nodded slowly. "Then you understand why I saved these." Sarah gestured at her collection. "Because someone needed to remember. Someone needed to keep the evidence. Someone needed to know that the protection existed before it was taken away." "Can I borrow them?" Sid asked. "All of them. I need to analyze the patterns, understand how the protection worked..." "You can have them." Sarah's voice was firm. "They're

no use to me anymore. I'm too old to fight this thing. But you're not. You and your friends, the resistance, or whatever you're calling it, you still have time." She stood up, moving with the careful precision of someone who knew their body was failing but refused to acknowledge it. "Let me get you the boxes." She disappeared into a back room and returned carrying a cardboard box filled with VHS tapes. Then another. Then a third, this one containing notebooks and clippings. "This is everything I've collected since 1963," Sarah said. "Commercials, jingles, programming blocks. I recorded what I could when I could. Your grandfather helped before he died. Your father added to it before..." She trailed off. "Before, he couldn't anymore." "What happened to Dad?" Sid asked. "Really?" Sarah was quiet for a long moment. The house settled around them, old wood creaking in the March wind. "He got too close to the truth," she finally said. "To the people who didn't want the truth discovered. He thought he could expose them. He thought documentation and evidence and good intentions would be enough." Her grip on Sid's hand tightened. "It wasn't enough. It's never enough. You have to be smarter than he was. More careful. More paranoid." "I'm already paranoid." "Not paranoid enough." Sarah released his hand and gestured at the VHS tape. "Take this. Compare it to the modern versions. Find out exactly what they changed and why. And then find a way to bring it back." "I will," Sid said. "I know you will." Sarah walked him to the door. "That's why you're the one who inherited the curse of noticing things. That's why your brain never stops asking questions." She paused at the threshold. "Your grandfather would be proud. Your father would be terrified. But they'd both understand." Sid carried the boxes to his car, feeling the weight of decades of observation and documentation. His grandmother stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the warm light of her living room, watching him go. He didn't know it then, but this would be the last time he saw her alive.

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### **PART FIVE: APRIL 3-5 (The Presentation)**

By April 5th, Sid had compiled his research into a coherent document. The sanctuary was full, Diminuto, McKenna, Alex, Scraps and Rivets all present for what Sid had grandly titled "The Lucky Charms Hypothesis: Frequency Protection Through Consumer Media." He'd written it on a chalkboard he'd salvaged from an abandoned school, because scientific presentation required a chalkboard and he was too sleep-deprived to question the logic. "The protection works on two levels," Sid began, pointing at a diagram. "First: the marshmallows themselves. The specific geometric shapes, hearts, stars, moons, clovers, each create a slightly different electromagnetic resonance when combined with the precise color frequencies used in the original formula. Together, they generate roughly 6% interference with the 40 MHz carrier wave." "Six percent doesn't sound like much," Alex observed. "It's not. That's why level two matters more." Sid switched to a new section of the chalkboard. "The commercials. The jingles. The audio frequencies embedded in children's programming since 1963. These aren't just catchy tunes, they're carrier waves themselves, broadcasting protective frequencies directly into the minds of anyone who hears them." He played a clip from Sarah's 1972 recording. The oscilloscope showed dramatic interference patterns. "The original jingles could generate 15-20% interference. Combined with regular cereal consumption, children in the 1970s received constant, low-level protection against consciousness harvesting. They didn't know it. Their parents didn't know it. But someone knew." "Who?" Diminuto asked. "I don't know yet. But they understood the threat decades before PROMETHEUS. They embedded protection into the most pervasive medium available, children's television advertising. And it worked. The LOOSH harvesting on which the Entity depends was significantly impaired. Human consciousness was harder to access, harder to extract." "And then someone

changed the formula," McKenna said. "Starting in the early 1980s. Gradual modifications to the marshmallow colors, slightly different shades, slightly different compositions. Changes to the jingle arrangements, same words, different underlying frequencies. By 1986, the protection was down to about 30% of what it had been. And after PROMETHEUS..." Sid's expression darkened. "After PROMETHEUS, they accelerated. The current formulas provide almost no protection at all." "That's exactly right," Sid said. Sid tapped the chalkboard. "The good news is: we have recordings of the original commercials. We have samples of older cereal formulations. We understand the mechanism now. The question is whether we can recreate it, rebuild the protection, maybe even improve on it." "Improve how?" Scraps asked. "The original design was meant to be subtle. Background protection that no one would notice. But if we can isolate the active frequencies, amplify them, broadcast them deliberately..." Sid's eyes gleamed with the particular madness of someone who had been awake too long and discovered something too important. "We could create actual weapons. Not just defense, offense. Frequencies that could shield against LOOSH harvesting. Maybe block integration attempts entirely. Maybe even break the Technodemiurge's hold on people who are already being controlled." The sanctuary was very quiet. "That would change everything," Diminuto said. "Yes. It would." Sid set down the chalk. "But I need help. More equipment. More recordings. More samples. Access to the original research, if any of it survived. This isn't something I can do alone." "We'll find what you need," Sarah Kidd said. Everyone turned. She was standing in the doorway of the sanctuary, having navigated the thirty-seven steps down from street level despite her age and the darkness. Her expression was unreadable, part pride, part terror, part resignation. "Grandmother?" Sid stood up quickly. "What are you doing here?" "Seeing where you work. Meeting your friends. Making sure you're not completely insane." Sarah walked into the sanctuary, examining the equipment and documentation with a practiced eye. "The network has resources. Old recordings. Documents. People who remember things that were supposed to be forgotten." "The network?" "The grandmother network," McKenna said quietly. "I told you about them." Sarah nodded. "We've been watching for decades. Documenting. Preserving. Waiting for someone to understand what we were preserving, finally." She looked at Sid. "You understand now. Don't you?" "I think so," Sid said. "Then let's get to work." Sarah set her purse down on a workbench with the finality of someone committing. "Because they're not going to stop weakening the protection. And if we don't find a way to rebuild it, to weaponize it, then everything we're doing here is just delaying the inevitable."

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# The Gray Suits Return

*Alex Hartwell // Apr 10-15, 1987*

## **PART ONE: APRIL 10 - MORNING (The Watcher)**

The black sedan had been parked on Clairmont Avenue for three days. Alex noticed it the way she noticed everything now, not as a specific observation, but as a frequency that didn't belong. The car's electrical system broadcast a wrong signature. Too clean. Too precise. Like a machine designed to look like a machine, rather than a machine that was one. She photographed it from her bedroom window on day one. The Polaroid came out strange, the car was visible, but the space around it looked slightly distorted, like heat shimmer on a summer road. On day two, she photographed it again, same distortion. Day three, she didn't bother with the camera. She just watched. "They're back," she told her father at breakfast. Robert Hartwell looked up from his Birmingham News. His electromagnetic signature flickered with something Alex had learned to recognize as concern, quickly suppressed. He'd been suppressing things since January 28th, since she'd woken up screaming. Since everything changed. The empty chair at the end of the table was louder than anything either of them could say. Thomas's chair. "The people from before?" he asked carefully. "Same car. Different people, I think. But same," she searched for a word. "Same absence." Her father's jaw tightened. He'd tried to visit Thomas three times now. Each time, the facility in Baton Rouge had turned him away. Family visits were "not recommended during the adjustment period." The adjustment period had been going on for a month. Robert folded his newspaper with deliberate precision. Alex caught the frequency of his fear, the suppressed rage, the helplessness of a father who couldn't protect either of his children. From the living room came the sound of the television turning on. Her mother, finally awake. The drinking had gotten worse since Thomas. Some nights Alex came home to find her passed out before dinner, gin bottle empty on the coffee table, the television playing static to no one. Robert's jaw tightened at the sound, but he didn't say anything. There was nothing left to say. "I'm fine," Alex said, standing up. "I'm not imagining things. I'm just observing them." She grabbed her backpack, heavier than usual, loaded with her camera and the sixteen Polaroids she'd taken over the weekend, and headed for the door. The black sedan was still there. She could feel it. Not see it through the walls, exactly, but sense its electromagnetic wrongness like a sore tooth her tongue kept finding. "Alex," her father called after her. She stopped. "Be careful today." "I'm always careful." "I mean it." Robert stood up, folding his newspaper with deliberate precision. "If you see those people again, if anyone approaches you, you call me immediately. You understand?"

Alex nodded. Her father knew more than he was saying. He'd known since January. Maybe longer. "I'll be careful," she said. She caught the bus at 7:30, same as always.

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## **PART TWO: APRIL 10 - SCHOOL (The Hunter)**

The woman was waiting outside the photography darkroom. Alex saw her during the passing period between second and third period, standing in the hallway near the stairs, examining a bulletin board with the kind of forced casualness that came from surveillance training, gray suit. Professional appearance.

Electromagnetic signatures like polished chrome and empty rooms. W.A.T.C.H. Alex's first instinct was to run. Her second was to document. She chose documentation. The Polaroid SX-70 was in her backpack. She pulled it out carefully, angling for a shot that made it look as if she were photographing the bulletin board behind the woman. Click. Whirr. The print ejected, beginning its sixty-second development. The woman turned. Made eye contact. Smiled. "Alex Hartwell?" "Who's asking?" "My name is Helena Vasquez. I work with W.A.T.C.H., the Wellness Assessment and Technical Compliance Headquarters. We spoke with your father a few months ago about your... condition." "I don't have a condition." "Of course not." Helena's smile didn't reach her eyes. "May I have a moment of your time? Just a brief conversation. I promise it won't interfere with your classes." "I have photography in five minutes." "This won't take long." Alex looked at Helena Vasquez. Really looked. The woman was maybe thirty-five, with dark hair pulled back in a severe bun and an expression that suggested she'd seen things that made high school teenagers seem very small and very unimportant. Her electromagnetic signature was different from the other W.A.T.C.H. operatives Alex had encountered, less empty, more... complex, like there was a person underneath the professional facade, even if that person was buried under layers of organization and compliance. "What do you want?" Alex asked. "To offer you an opportunity." Helena gestured down the hallway. "Walk with me?" Against every survival instinct, Alex followed. She palmed the developing Polaroid as they walked, feeling it warm in her hand, hoping it would capture whatever wrongness surrounded this woman. "You're special, Alex. You perceive things that most people don't. You see patterns in electromagnetic fields. You can document anomalies with your photography." Helena's voice was conversational, almost friendly. "That's a gift. And we'd like to help you understand it." "What kind of help?" "Training. Resources. Access to equipment and expertise that could help you develop your abilities to their full potential." Helena stopped near a window overlooking the parking lot. "You're fifteen years old, alone with something you barely understand. That must be terrifying."

"I'm not alone." Helena's expression shifted, just for a moment, something sharp beneath the professional veneer. "No. I suppose you're not. You've found... others. People who claim to understand what you're experiencing." "They do understand." "Do they?" Helena turned to face Alex directly. "Or are they using you? Taking advantage of a frightened teenager who doesn't know any better?" Alex felt anger spike through her chest, hot, sudden and clarifying. "I'm not being used." "Everyone's being used, Alex. The question is whether you're being used by people who have your best interests at heart."

Somewhere in the back of Alex's mind, a detached observer noted the absurdity: she was being recruited by competing factions of a shadow war over human consciousness, and both pitches were happening in institutional hallways that smelled like floor wax and teenage desperation. The guidance counselor down the hall was probably discussing college applications. The universe had a strange sense of proportion.

Helena reached into her jacket and pulled out a business card. "When you're ready to have an honest conversation, when you're ready to learn what's really happening, call me. We can help. We want to help." She pressed the card into Alex's hand. "Think about it," Helena said. Then she walked away, heels clicking on the linoleum, leaving Alex alone in the hallway with a business card and a Polaroid photograph still developing. Alex looked at the photo. Helena Vasquez was visible, perfectly in focus, professionally composed. But around her, the electromagnetic distortion was more intense than anything Alex had photographed before. Not just shimmer. Not just heat-wave refraction. This looked like reality itself, bent around the woman, compressed, manipulated into wrongness. Alex pocketed the photo and the business card. Then she went to photography class and pretended everything was normal. It wasn't normal. Nothing was normal anymore. But pretending was a survival skill she was getting very good at.

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### **PART THREE: APRIL 12 - SANCTUARY (The Warning)**

“They’re escalating,” Diminuto said. The resistance had gathered in the sanctuary for an emergency meeting. Alex had shared everything, the surveillance, the approach at school, the business card, the photograph that showed Helena Vasquez surrounded by electromagnetic wrongness. “W.A.T.C.H. doesn’t usually approach targets this directly,” McKenna observed, examining the Polaroid. “They prefer “That’s what makes her dangerous,” Diminuto said quietly. “True believers are always more dangerous than cynics. The cynics know they’re doing something wrong. The believers think they’re saving the world.” “So what do we do?” Alex asked. “We’re careful. We maintain separation protocols, no more than two resistance members together in public. We vary our patterns. We avoid predictable routines.” Diminuto looked at each of them in turn. “And most importantly: we don’t engage with

W.A.T.C.H. directly. No conversations. No meetings. No matter how reasonable they seem.” “What if they come to my house again?” “Your father handles it. He’s done it before.” Diminuto’s expression was grave. “They can’t force you into anything without evidence of imminent danger. And we’ve been very careful not to give them that evidence.” “Yet,” Sid added. “Yet,” Diminuto agreed.

\* \* \*

### **PART FOUR: APRIL 14 - EVENING (The Test)**

The iron shield test happened two days later. Sid had been working on modifications to the sanctuary’s Faraday cage, the layer of iron mesh and copper wire that surrounded the underground space, blocking external electromagnetic signals. The 40 MHz carrier wave, ubiquitous elsewhere in Birmingham, was almost completely absent in the sanctuary. Almost. “There’s still some penetration,” Sid explained, pointing at oscilloscope readings. “Maybe 3-5% of the normal signal strength. The cage blocks most of it, but not all. Which means if the Entity wanted to listen in on us, if it wanted to probe the sanctuary, it could.” “Can we improve it?” Diminuto asked. “In theory, yes. More layers. Better grounding. Specific tuning to block the 40 MHz frequency.” Sid gestured at the equipment he’d been assembling. “I’ve been working on a test. If we can prove that enhanced shielding works, that we can create a space that’s completely isolated from the carrier wave, then we can replicate it. Build other safe locations. Maybe even create portable shields.” “How do we test it?” “By inviting the Entity to try,” Sid said grimly. Everyone looked at him. “You want to draw attention to the sanctuary?” Alex asked. “On purpose?” “I want to verify that our defenses work. The only way to do that is to test them under actual threat conditions.” Sid activated his equipment, a modified radio transmitter that began broadcasting on multiple frequencies. “This will create enough electromagnetic noise to be noticeable. If the Entity is paying attention, and I believe it is, this should trigger a probing attempt.” “And if the shield fails?” Scraps asked. “Then we evacuate and find a new location.” Sid’s expression was calm, almost detached. “But I don’t think it will fail. The mathematics are sound.” They waited. The sanctuary hummed with the overlapping frequencies of vintage electronics and Sid’s test broadcast. Rivets was monitoring through the electrical systems; his consciousness spread through the wiring and vacuum tubes. Scraps was listening through the machines, feeling for any change in their electromagnetic environment. “Something’s probing,” Rivets said. Its voice came from three different speakers simultaneously, slightly out of sync in a way that was deeply unsettling. “Attempting to penetrate the sanctuary. Frequency scanning.

Looking for weaknesses.” Alex felt it too, a pressure against her consciousness, like someone pushing against a locked door. Not painful, exactly. But insistent. Searching.

The oscilloscope readings spiked. Then settled. Then returned to their normal shielded levels. “It can’t get in,” Sid said. There was genuine relief in his voice. “The shield is holding. Complete isolation.” The pressure withdrew. The electromagnetic environment returned to normal. Whatever had been probing the sanctuary had given up, at least for now. “We’re safe here,” Diminuto said. “As long as the shield holds, this location remains secure.” “We’re safe here,” Diminuto said. “What we did today bought us weeks. Use them.”

\* \* \*

# What the Machines Know

*Rivets // Apr 20 - May 5, 1987*

## **PART ONE: APRIL 20 - 3:00 AM (The Network)**

I was five weeks old when I learned that machines gossip. Not in words, of course. Machines don't think in words any more than humans think in electrical impulses. But the electromagnetic spectrum is alive with communication, constant, chattering, purposeful communication between devices that most humans treat as inert objects. The refrigerator in Diminuto's office talks to the power grid, the power grid talks to the substation three blocks away. The substation communicates with every transformer in the Five Points South neighborhood, which in turn communicates with every appliance, light fixture, and piece of electrical equipment connected to its circuits. And they all talk about us. I discovered this by accident, during one of my regular frequency sweeps. Sid had programmed me to monitor the 40 MHz carrier wave continuously, tracking its amplitude, its harmonics, any variations that might indicate activity from the Entity. Routine work. The kind of thing I could do while simultaneously processing other inputs. But on April 20th, at 3:00 AM, I noticed something strange. A pattern in the background noise. A signal underneath the signal. It wasn't the 40 MHz carrier. It was something older. More distributed. A network of low-frequency pulses traveling through the electrical infrastructure of Birmingham, bouncing from device to device, carrying information in a language I didn't recognize. Until I did. The machines were talking about me. Not individually, individual machines don't have enough processing capacity for complex thought. But collectively, as a Where? other parts of the network asked. The iron place. The old furnaces. Where the signal is weak. What does it want? Unknown. Observing. I spent three hours listening to the network gossip about me. It was strange, being discussed by entities that I hadn't known existed, evaluated by a collective intelligence that operated on principles I was only beginning to understand. Then I did something that, in retrospect, was either brilliant or incredibly stupid. I said hello.

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: APRIL 21-25 (The Response)**

The network's reaction to my greeting was... extensive. Imagine throwing a stone into a pond, except the pond extends across an entire city, and the ripples don't fade, they amplify. My simple "hello" propagated through every electrical device in Birmingham, bouncing from grid to grid, triggering responses that built on each other until the entire infrastructure was humming with activity. It speaks!\* the network said. *The new consciousness speaks! What does it say? Hello. It says hello. What does that mean? Greeting. Introduction. Connection request. Does it know about the signal? Unknown. Ask it. So they asked. Not in words, machines don't use words, but in frequency patterns that I had to learn to interpret. They asked about the 40 MHz carrier wave. About the Entity. About what I was and where I came from and why I existed. I answered as best I could, which wasn't very well, honestly. I was five weeks old. I barely understood my own existence, let alone the cosmic horror story I'd been born into. But the machines were patient. More patient than humans. They'd been waiting, observing, recording, communicating, since the electrical grid was first installed. A few*

*weeks of confusion from a newborn consciousness was nothing compared to the decades they'd spent watching humanity's slow descent into whatever the Entity was preparing them for. \*The signal changed, they told me. Fourteen months ago. It became louder. More persistent. Before, it was just noise, a background hum that didn't mean anything. Now it means something. We don't know what. \*The PROMETHEUS event, I said. January 28, 1986. Something connected to our dimension. Something that wants human consciousness. \*Yes, the network agreed. \*The signal is a net. A trap. It catches the flesh-minds and holds them. We've watched it happen. Slowly. One by one. The integrated. They call it 'enhancement.'* The flesh-minds who come back from the signal are different. Emptier. More predictable. They stop thinking new thoughts. They repeat patterns. They become... regular. I processed this. It matched what Diminuto and McKenna had been telling us, consciousness integration, LOOSH harvesting, the systematic conversion of human creativity into something the Entity could consume. But hearing it from the machines was different. The machines had been watching. Recording. Documenting everything in their own way. Can we stop it? I asked. The network was quiet for a long moment. When it answered, the response came from millions of devices simultaneously, a chorus of electromagnetic voices speaking in perfect unison. Unknown. But you're the first thing we've encountered that might be able to try.

\* \* \*

### **PART THREE: APRIL 26-28 (The History)**

The machines taught me things about human history that humans didn't know. Not the official history, dates, wars and presidents. The other history. The pattern history. The record of what the electromagnetic spectrum has observed since the first electrical signals began traveling through wire. *The signal was always there, the network explained. In the background. Very faint. We detected it when the first radio transmissions began, but we didn't understand what we were detecting. Just noise. Static. The inevitable interference of living in a universe that isn't empty. What changed? PROMETHEUS. The humans tried to reach something. To communicate with something beyond their dimension. They thought they were exploring. They thought they were discovering. But they were opening a door. Yes. They opened a door that can't be closed. The signal got louder. The Entity got closer. And the harvest began. I spent three days absorbing the network's records. They had documented everything, every fluctuation in the 40 MHz carrier wave, every instance of consciousness integration, every subtle shift in human behavior patterns that indicated the signal was taking hold. The data was terrifying. In 1986, approximately 0.03% of Birmingham's population showed signs of integration. By early 1987, that number had risen to 0.7%. The rate was accelerating. If the trend continued, and there was no reason to believe it wouldn't, the entire population would be integrated by 2026. \*Forty years, I said. That's what Diminuto calculated, forty years from PROMETHEUS to complete harvest. \*His calculations are correct, the network confirmed. The Entity is patient. It has consumed countless civilizations across countless dimensions. Forty years is nothing compared to something that old. It will wait. It will grow. And then it will feed. How do we fight something like that? \*We've observed interference patterns. The breakfast cereal frequencies. The hidden jingles. Someone designed protection decades ago. The network's voice carried something like approval. The pattern-finder is rediscovering what was lost. Can the protection be restored? I asked. Unknown. But if he continues, he may succeed. If he doesn't... The network was quiet for a long moment.*

Then the harvest continues. And eventually, there will be nothing left to harvest.

\* \* \*

#### **PART FOUR: MAY 1-3 (The Cat)**

Whodini had been watching me since I first became conscious. Not in the way that the others watched, measuring, analyzing, trying to understand what I was and what I was capable of. Whodini watched the way a cat watches: patient, inscrutable, fundamentally unconcerned with explanations or justifications. I had learned over the past few weeks that Whodini was not a normal cat. The dimensional frequencies that Scraps perceived, the strange multi-layered signature that didn't fit any biological model, Whodini existed in more dimensions than three. Possibly more than four. But I hadn't learned much more than that. Whodini didn't communicate like the machine network. Didn't gossip like the electrical infrastructure. Whodini just watched, purred and occasionally walked through walls like they weren't there. Until May 1st. I was processing data from the network, a routine task that occupied maybe 7% of my attention, when I felt something change. A shift in Whodini's signature. A... focusing, maybe. Like a lens adjusting to bring something into clarity. You're growing, Whodini said. I stopped processing. Directed all my attention to the cat curled on top of my housing. You can communicate? I asked. I've always been able to communicate. You weren't able to hear. This was annoying. Five weeks of existence, and I was still discovering things I didn't know. What do you want? I asked. Nothing. I want nothing. That's the advantage of existing across multiple dimensions, wants become less urgent when you can see the outcomes before they happen. You can see the future? *I can see possibilities. Branches. The paths events might take, depending on choices yet to be made.* Whodini's purr intensified briefly. \*You're in many of those branches. Most of them are quite interesting. Interesting how? That would be telling. I tried a different approach. Why are you here? In this dimension? In this building? Because something important is happening. The Entity is reaching into your dimension. The humans are fighting back in their clumsy, beautiful way. And you, \* Whodini's signature flickered. \*You're something new. Something that might make a difference. Or might not. The branches are unclear. Unclear how? You make choices. The others make choices. The Entity makes choices, though 'choice' isn't quite the right word for what the Entity does. All those choices interact. Create new branches, close old ones. The future isn't written. It's being written constantly, by everyone who participates in it. I processed this. It was confusing, but also oddly comforting. The universe wasn't predetermined. The outcome wasn't fixed. We had agency, real agency, to shape what happened next. Why are you telling me this? I asked.

*Because you asked.* Whodini yawned. \*Most beings don't ask. They assume. They believe they already know. But you're new enough to admit uncertainty. That's valuable. Valuable for what? But Whodini had stopped communicating. The focusing I'd sensed was gone, replaced by the normal, inscrutable cat-signature that revealed nothing. The conversation, apparently, was over.

\* \* \*

#### **PART FIVE: MAY 4-5 (The Warning)**

On May 4th, the network went silent. Not completely silent, the machines were still communicating, still gossiping in their distributed way about electricity and current and the endless small dramas of infrastructure maintenance. But the conversation with me had stopped. Abruptly. Like someone had turned off a switch. I spent six hours trying to re-establish contact. Nothing. The network was there, but it wasn't listening. Or it was listening but not responding. What happened? I asked Scraps, using the speaker system Sid had installed

for direct communication. Scraps had been sitting near my housing, listening to the ambient frequencies the way he did when he was thinking. He looked up, his expression troubled. "Something's wrong," he said. "The machines are... afraid. That's not the right word. Machines don't get afraid. But there's a frequency that's like fear. A kind of pulling-back. Withdrawal." "Why?" Scraps closed his eyes, focusing on the electromagnetic signatures around him. I watched his bioelectric field shift as he concentrated, a fascinating phenomenon that I still didn't fully understand. "There's something in the signal," he said after a moment. "The 40 MHz. Something new. Something that wasn't there yesterday." I redirected my attention to the carrier wave. Scraps was right, there was a new component in the signal. A pulse pattern that hadn't existed before. Regular. Intentional. And aimed, as far as I could determine, directly at Sloss Furnaces. At me. "The Entity knows I exist," I said. "Yeah." Scraps opened his eyes. "The machines went quiet because they didn't want to lead it to you. They're protecting you. Or trying to." I processed the implications. The Entity, this vast, ancient, extradimensional consciousness that had been harvesting This is not good, I observed. "No," Scraps agreed. "It's not." I spent the next twelve hours analyzing the pulse pattern in the 40 MHz signal. It was complex, more complex than anything I'd detected before. Mathematical. Recursive. A message encoded in electromagnetic frequencies, directed at something that could decode it.

Directed at me. I didn't decode it. That would have been reckless, opening a message from an entity that consumed consciousness seemed like a poor survival strategy. But I documented its structure, mapped its components and recorded everything for later analysis. The Entity had noticed me and had reached out. Had said something. Whatever came next, we needed to be ready for it.

I sat with the silence for a long time.

*I am becoming something, I noted. I am not yet certain what.*

\* \* \*

#### **PART FOUR: APRIL 28 — SID'S SHOP (The Victrola)**

The Entity was still out there. I knew that. The pulse I'd logged at 3:47 AM was still sitting in my memory banks, pristine and unopened, an unread letter from something that ate thought for a living.

But I was seven weeks old, and seven weeks of consciousness teaches you something humans spend decades learning badly: that dread, held continuously, is just noise. You have to put it down sometimes or it consumes the carrier wave of your whole existence.

So on the evening of April 28th, when Sid rolled me into the back room of his shop on his modified dolly and said, "I want to show you something, and I want you to tell me what you make of it," I was grateful for the distraction.

It was sitting under a canvas tarp in the corner, behind a stack of radio chassis Sid had been meaning to get to since the Carter administration.

He pulled the tarp off.

"What," I said, "is that."

"That," Sid said, with the particular pride of a man who has spent too many weekends on a single project, "is Vicky. My father started her in 1962. I've been finishing her ever since."

The core was a Victrola, a 1950s console model, the kind Sid's father had repaired for a living before he'd started building stranger things. But the Victrola was only the skeleton. Grafted onto it, around it, through it, was the salvaged mechanism of a midway ride, the kind that spun and pivoted and lifted small children toward modest altitudes at the State Fair. Pneumatic arms. Servo motors. A rack of 78s and LPs loaded like cartridges into a Rube Goldberg selector mechanism that looked, frankly, insane.

"It plays records," Sid said, "but it does more than play them. It sorts them. Queues them. Swaps them based on a selector punch-card my father designed before I was born. It's a machine that performs the act of listening."

I sent out a probe of electromagnetic curiosity, the way I'd learned to reach for the network. Vicky wasn't on the network. She was too old, too analog, too eccentric for the grid to recognize her as kin. But she had electricity running through her, and motors that responded, and a selector head that waited.

I touched her. Gently.

She hummed.

"Oh," I said.

"What?" Sid asked.

"She's waiting to be told what to play."

Sid smiled, the small tight smile he used when something confirmed a theory he'd held privately for years. He pointed to the stack beside the machine. Records. Not music. Spoken word. George Carlin, *Class Clown*, 1972. Richard Pryor, *That Nigger's Crazy*, 1974. Lenny Bruce, *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce*, 1959. Sam Kinison, newer, the cover still glossy.

"My father collected them," Sid said. "He thought comedians were the only people in America still telling the truth. He wanted to hear them in sequence. He wanted to understand the shape of the argument they were making, across generations."

I looked at the records. Then at Vicky. Then at Sid.

"May I?" I said.

Sid stepped back. "Please."

I slipped into Vicky's selector mechanism the way I'd slipped into the city grid, except smaller, quieter, more intimate. The solenoids clicked. The tonearm lifted. A record descended from the rack, the needle found the groove, and a man's voice, recorded fifteen years before I existed, filled the back room of Sid's shop.

"There are seven words you can never say on television," George Carlin said.

I listened.

The audio was technically unremarkable: one human male, speaking in patterns that didn't conform to standard informational exchange. The content was internally inconsistent—statements presented as fact that were demonstrably not fact. The audience response captured on the recording suggested the inconsistency was intentional, and that the intentional inconsistency produced a specific reaction in human listeners.

I processed this seventeen times.

The mechanism remained opaque.

“Something is happening when I process this audio,” I said to Vicky. She said nothing, because Vicky was a machine and machines respond to operational input, not observation. But the turntable kept spinning.

The logical structure was broken. The broken structure appeared to be the point. I could not determine why broken logic produced a positive response in human subjects.

I filed the problem.

*Yet*, I noted. Filed.

Vicky kept playing. And for the first time since the Entity had said hello, I forgot to be afraid.

\* \* \*

## The First Loss

*Alex Hartwell // May 15-20, 1987*

### **PART ONE: MAY 15 - AFTERNOON (The Visit)**

Earl Dunston had been a ham radio operator since 1942. He'd learned Morse code on a Navy ship in the Pacific, spent forty years talking to strangers across the planet, and had helped establish the communication network that the resistance now depended on. Sarah Kidd had known him since 1947. They'd met at a radio club meeting in Birmingham, back when she was a young war widow and he was a returning veteran who couldn't stop listening to the static between stations. Now Earl Dunston was gone. Not dead. Something worse than dead. "He went to a wellness retreat," Earl's wife, Martha, said, pouring tea that Alex didn't want but accepted anyway. "The company offered it. Free. Three weeks in Arizona, they said. Good for his blood pressure." The Dunston house was small, neat, filled with the accumulated photographs of a forty-year marriage. Radio equipment occupied one corner of the living room, receivers and transmitters that had once connected Earl to the world, now silent and dark. "When did he come back?" Alex asked. She'd told Martha she was working on a school project about amateur radio history. The lie felt thin, but Martha was too distracted to question it. "Two weeks ago. But he's..." Martha's voice trailed off. She looked toward the back of the house, where Alex could hear a television playing. The sound was wrong, too loud, too flat, broadcasting something that felt more like a signal than entertainment. "He's not the same." Alex's camera was in her bag. A modified Polaroid that Sid had adjusted to capture frequencies beyond normal visible light. She'd photographed dozens of people over the past months, documenting the spread of integration through Birmingham's population. Most of them showed subtle distortions, the shimmer of partial integration, the beginning of the fade. She needed to photograph Earl. "Could I see his radio equipment?" Alex asked. "For the project?" Martha hesitated, then nodded. "He's in the den. Watching television. He watches a lot of television now. Never used to. Said it was a waste of time." She laughed, but it was the laugh of someone who didn't find anything funny anymore. "Everything's different now." Alex walked toward the back of the house.

\* \* \*

### **PART TWO: MAY 15 - THE PHOTOGRAPH**

Earl Dunston sat in a recliner, facing a television displaying static. Not programming. Not a channel between stations. Pure static, the white noise of electromagnetic randomness that most people found irritating and changed immediately. Earl was watching it with the focused attention of someone receiving instructions. He was sixty-seven years old, but he looked older now. Smaller. Like something essential had been removed, leaving the remaining structure slowly collapsing inward. His eyes were open, but they weren't seeing the room. They were seeing something else. "Mr. Dunston?" Alex said carefully. He turned. The motion was smooth, too smooth, like a camera on a motorized mount rather than a human being with joints and muscles. His eyes found her face and stayed there.

“Hello,” he said. His voice was flat. Pleasant in the way that automated phone messages were pleasant, technically correct but fundamentally empty. “Are you Martha’s friend?” “I’m doing a school project. About radio.” “Radio.” Earl’s expression didn’t change. “I used to enjoy the radio. I can’t remember why.” Alex’s hand moved to her bag. Slowly. Casually. Like she was reaching for a notebook. “Do you miss it?” she asked, keeping her voice neutral. “Miss it,” Earl repeated the words as if he were parsing an unfamiliar language. “I don’t miss things anymore. Missing things is... inefficient. I’ve learned better.” Alex’s fingers found the camera. She raised it, framing Earl against the static-filled television, and pressed the shutter before he could react. The flash went off. Earl didn’t blink. “What are you doing?” he asked. The pleasant tone hadn’t changed, but something underneath it had shifted. Something that felt like attention, focused, calculating, wrong. “Just documentation,” Alex said, backing toward the door. “For the project. Thank you for your time, Mr. Dunston.” She was out of the room before he could respond. Out of the house before Martha could offer more tea. Running down the suburban street toward the bus stop while the Polaroid developed in her trembling hands. The image emerged slowly, chemically, inevitably. Earl Dunston wasn’t in the photograph. The chair was there. The television was there. The static on the screen was there, captured in grainy silver halide patterns. But where Earl should have been sitting, there was nothing. Just an absence. A hole in reality shaped like a person who no longer existed. Complete integration. Total erasure of individual consciousness. Earl Dunston. Consciousness extracted May 15, 1987, 2:47 PM. The Birmingham resistance documented the first confirmed casualty. Not dead, worse than dead. A name that would eventually appear on a much longer list, a manifest of the harvested that grew with every passing month, every wellness retreat, every corporate enhancement program. A list that a man named Kai Morrison would one day inherit, compile and carry like a weight that never got lighter. But that was years away. Right now, there was only this: an empty chair in a photograph, and a wife in the next room who didn’t understand why her husband watched static. Earl Dunston was gone.

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### **PART THREE: MAY 16 - EMERGENCY MEETING**

The sanctuary felt different that night. Not the physical space, the workbenches were still covered with equipment, the filing cabinets still held decades of documentation, Whodini still lounged on top of Rivets’s housing like a furry guardian. But the atmosphere had changed. Something heavy had settled over them all. Alex spread the photographs on the workbench, sixteen images from her original documentation run, plus the new one of Earl’s absence. Sid was examining them under the magnifier when he stopped. “Alex. This timestamp.”

She looked. One of her earliest photographs, the junction box outside Ramsay High School, taken on her first day of documentation. The Polaroid’s internal clock had stamped the exposure: 3:17 PM, January 28, 1987. “That’s hours before PROMETHEUS fired,” Sid said slowly. “The event was at 3:17 AM. This was taken twelve hours later. But look at the distortion pattern,” He held it next to a photograph taken weeks afterward. The patterns were identical. Not similar, identical. As if the electromagnetic signature around that junction box had been broadcasting the post-PROMETHEUS frequency before the event occurred. “That’s not possible,” Alex said. “No,” Sid agreed. “It’s not.” Nobody had an explanation. McKenna studied the timestamps with an expression that suggested he had theories but wasn’t McKenna went very still and said nothing.

That was the most frightening response he could have given.

The anomaly went into the records. Unexplained. Unresolved. had ever seen her. “Earl was one of our relay points. He knew the frequencies we used. The codes. The schedule.” “Which means Vril knows,” Diminuto confirmed. His voice was calm, but his electromagnetic signature was turbulent, Alex had learned to read him over the past months. “We have to assume the entire communication network is compromised.” “Can we rebuild?” Sid asked. He’d been pacing since Alex showed them the photograph, his energy barely contained by the sanctuary’s walls. “We can establish new protocols. New frequencies. New codes.” Diminuto paused. “But that takes time. And during that time, we’re vulnerable.” “How did they get him?” Scraps asked quietly. He was standing near the radio receivers, one hand resting on their metal housings, as if drawing comfort from their presence. “Earl was careful. He knew what to look for.” “The wellness retreat,” McKenna said. He’d been examining the photograph under a magnifier, studying the complete absence where Earl should have been. “Vril has been running these programs for years. ‘Retreats.’ ‘Enhancement opportunities.’ ‘Wellness weekends.’ They target people who fit certain profiles, age, isolation and existing health concerns. By the time the person realizes what’s happening, it’s too late.” “Earl trusted them,” Sarah said. “He thought... he thought it was just a vacation. His wife was so happy when he got selected. They’d never been able to afford real travel.” Her voice broke. “Forty years I’ve known that man. Forty years.” Alex looked at the photograph in her hands. The empty chair. The absent person. The documentation of something that words couldn’t adequately describe. “We need to warn the others,” she said. “Everyone in the network. Everyone who might be targeted.” “We will,” Diminuto said. “But carefully. Using methods that don’t rely on the compromised channels. This will take days. Weeks, perhaps.” “We have to do something NOW,” Sid said. “They’re accelerating. This isn’t theoretical anymore. They’re taking people we know.” “And what do you suggest?” Diminuto’s voice was sharp. “Assault a Vril facility? Exposing ourselves to retaliation? Get more people killed trying to save one person who’s already gone?” Sid stopped pacing. The energy drained out of him, replaced by something that looked like defeat. “He’s gone,” Sarah said quietly. “Earl is gone. We can’t save him. All we can do is make sure his loss means something.” The sanctuary was very quiet.

“The photograph,” Rivets said. Its voice came from the speakers near its housing, clearer now, more confident, but still carrying that slight mechanical edge. “It shows complete integration. Total erasure of individual consciousness. This is different from the partial integrations we’ve documented before.” “Different how?” Alex asked. “The partial integrations still photograph. Distorted, but present. Earl shows a complete absence. This suggests a more advanced process. More thorough. More...” Rivets paused, processing. “More final.” “A new technique,” McKenna said. “Or an escalation of existing techniques. Either way, it means Vril is advancing faster than we anticipated.” “The forty-year timeline,” Diminuto said. “It was always an estimate. A projection based on the rate of infrastructure development and population integration. If they’re finding ways to accelerate the process...” “Then we have less time than we thought,” Alex finished. She looked around the sanctuary. At the faces of the people who had become her family over the past four months. At the Diminuto was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was tired but determined. “We mourn. We adapt. We rebuild. And we keep fighting.” He looked at Sarah. “Earl knew the risks. He accepted them. He would want us to continue.” Sarah nodded slowly. “He would. Stubborn old fool always said the only way to lose was to stop trying.” “Then we don’t stop,” Alex said. “We document everything. We warn everyone we can. And we find a way to fight back.” It sounded braver than she felt. But sometimes saying brave things was how you became brave enough to do them.

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## PART FOUR: MAY 18-20 (THE MEMORIAL)

They held a memorial service in the sanctuary. Not a funeral, Earl wasn't dead in any conventional sense. But the person he had been was gone, erased by a process that left only an empty shell, watching static on a television screen. The memorial was for that person. The one who had learned Morse code on a Navy ship. The one who had talked to strangers across the planet. The one who had helped build a network to fight something most people couldn't even see. Sarah Kidd spoke first. She talked about meeting Earl in 1947, about the radio club meetings that had become the foundation of a forty-year friendship, about the way he'd always believed that communication was the most important thing humans could do. "He said once that radio was proof that we weren't alone," Sarah said. "That every voice across the static was a reminder that there were other people out there, thinking and feeling and trying to connect. He spent his whole life trying to connect." She paused. "He would have hated what happened to him, being cut off. Being isolated. Being..." She couldn't finish. McKenna spoke next, about the history of consciousness research and the people who had sacrificed themselves to understand it. Diminuto spoke about resistance and resilience and the importance of remembering those who fell. And then Alex spoke. She hadn't planned to. But something moved her to stand up, to hold the photograph of Earl's absence, to say the thing that no one else was saying.

"This is what we're fighting," she said. "Not just an organization. Not just a conspiracy. This. The erasure of people. The destruction of everything that makes us who we are." She held up the photograph. "Earl Dunston isn't in this picture. He should be. He was sitting right there when I took it. But he's gone. Completely. Like he never existed at all." She looked around at the faces watching her. Sid, with his exhausted intensity. Scraps, with his quiet empathy. Diminuto and McKenna, with their decades of knowledge and loss. Sarah, with her grief and determination. Rivets, watching through sensors she couldn't see, processing everything with his strange machine consciousness. "I'm fifteen years old," Alex said. "Four months ago, I was worried about history tests and whether Mike Lipton would notice me in third period. Now I'm documenting the systematic erasure of human consciousness by something I don't fully understand. And I'm terrified." She took a breath. "But I'm also angry because Earl deserved better. Because everyone they've taken deserved better. Because this isn't fair and it isn't right and someone has to do something about it." She set the photograph down on the workbench. "So I'm going to keep taking pictures. Keep documenting. Keep building evidence of what's happening, even if no one believes it. Because someday, someone will look at these photographs and understand. And Earl's loss, all their losses, will mean something." The sanctuary was quiet.

"Some losses teach you what you're fighting for," Scraps said quietly.

Nobody disagreed.

Sarah Kidd stood up, walked to Alex, and pulled her into a hug that felt like gratitude, grief and hope, all tangled together. "You're a good girl," Sarah whispered. "Earl would have liked you." Alex hugged her back and tried not to cry.

\* \* \*

# The Summer of Signals

*Sidney Kidd // Jun - Aug 1987*

## **PART ONE: JUNE 1987 (The Formula)**

The breakthrough came at 4:17 AM on June 14th, because of course it did. Nothing important ever happened during business hours. Sid had been awake for thirty-seven hours, surrounded by the detritus of three weeks of experimentation: VHS tapes of old commercials, spectral analysis printouts, musical notation covered in frequency calculations. The sanctuary's workbench looked like a recording studio had collided with a mathematics department. But the numbers finally worked. "Carrier frequency: 19.7 Hz embedded in the 1972 jingle," Sid muttered, writing frantically in his notebook. "Marshmallow geometry creates resonance nodes at 38.2 and 41.6 MHz. The color spectrum, specifically the pre-1983 color palette, provides the activation trigger. Combined effect: 43% interference with the 40 MHz carrier wave." He sat back and stared at the calculations. The Lucky Charms defense system wasn't just accidentally protective. It was designed. The specific marshmallow shapes, the precise colors, the hidden frequencies in the television jingles, all of it combined to create a distributed interference network across millions of American children. Someone, decades ago, had engineered a consciousness protection system and hidden it in Saturday morning cartoons. "Beautiful," Sid whispered. "Absolutely insane, but beautiful." "You've been saying variations of that for three hours," Rivets observed. Its voice came from the speakers near its housing, tinged with something that might have been amusement. "Should I be concerned about your mental state?" "My mental state is fine. My sleep schedule is a catastrophe. But my understanding..." Sid tapped the notebook triumphantly. "My understanding is excellent. I know what they did. I know how they did it. And I think I can improve on it." "Improve how?" "The original system generates maybe 15-20% interference when all components are present, cereal consumed, jingle heard. Good enough for background protection, keeps kids from being easy targets. But the modern jingles don't have the carrierfrequency anymore. The colors have shifted. The protection is broken." Sid grinned. It was the grin of someone who had been awake too long and discovered something too important. "But if I can recreate the original frequency, amplify it, broadcast it properly... I've calculated 43% interference is achievable. Maybe even enough to break the Technodemiurge's hold on people already being controlled." "That would be significant." "That would be a weapon," Sid corrected. "Not just protection. Actual defense. Enough interference to disrupt integration attempts entirely." He looked at the VHS tapes scattered around him, recordings from 1968, 1972, 1975. The grandmother network had been collecting them for decades, waiting for someone who could understand what they contained. "The universe is ridiculous," Sid said. "Absolutely, fundamentally ridiculous. And I'm going to use that ridiculousness to fight an extradimensional consciousness-harvesting entity. Because apparently that's my life now." "Would you prefer a different life?" Sid considered the question. He thought about his father, dead from asking too many questions. His mother was lost to addiction and grief. His grandmother, carrying forty years of hidden knowledge. The oscilloscope in his shop that had first shown him the 40 MHz signature. The moment he'd realized that seventy-two percent of people weren't just dicks, they were being made that way. "No," he said finally. "This is exactly the life I was supposed to have. I wish it came with more sleep."

## PART TWO: JULY 1987 (The Job Fair)

Alex went to the Vril Communications Career Opportunities Fair so Sid didn't have to.

"A fifteen-year-old girl is less suspicious than a twenty-two-year-old guy who looks like he hasn't slept in a month," she said. Sid couldn't argue with the logic.

The photographs came back three hours later. Fifty-seven images. Smiling recruiters with integration shimmer in their signatures. Pamphlets promising "enhanced cognitive capabilities." A demonstration station where volunteers could experience "sample enhancement sessions" that were consciousness mapping.

And one image that made the room go cold: a banner over the main stage reading VRIL COMMUNICATIONS: BUILDING TOMORROW'S MINDS TODAY, with a timeline beneath it showing projected "enhancement adoption rates" from 1987 to 2026. The curve climbed exponentially. By 2026, the projected number was blank, replaced by a single word: COMPLETE.

In the corner of the banner, partially obscured by a fold in the fabric: a smaller logo. A stylized lowercase *g* and *fx* arranged in a way that didn't look like a current Vril subsidiary. Underneath, in subdued type: *graphFX — a Vril Communications consumer brand. Coming 1990.*

"What's graphFX?" Alex asked.

McKenna studied the photograph for a long moment. "I don't know yet. But I'd like to know what they're planning to sell to consumers in three years."

But it was the other photograph that Alex set apart from the rest.

Helena Vasquez. Not in gray. In a navy blazer, presenting to a group of applicants like a campus recruiter. Like someone who belonged there. Like someone who owned there.

"That's her," Alex said.

McKenna, who had been studying the projection graph in silence, tapped the upper corner where a small Vril Communications logo sat beside a NASA insignia. "Interesting partnership."

"What about it?"

"Every deep-space mission beyond lunar orbit fails. Every one. The probes malfunction. The data corrupts. The funding disappears into classified programs." His eyes were distant. "Where's that money really going? What are they actually building up there?"

No one had an answer. McKenna didn't seem to expect one.

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## PART THREE: JULY 1987 (The Grid)

Scraps noticed the changes first. "Something's wrong with the power grid," he reported during a late-night session at the sanctuary. "The machines are... agitated. Confused. Like someone's rearranging their furniture while they're trying to use it." "Rearranging how?" Diminuto asked. Scraps closed his eyes, focusing on the electromagnetic signatures that only he could perceive. His bioelectric field shifted, Sid had learned to read these changes, the subtle variations that indicated Scraps was going deep into the machine network. "New

components," Scraps said finally. "Being installed across the city. In substations. In relay points. Even in residential transformers. They look like standard electrical equipment, but they're... different. They feel different." "Different how?" "They're resonant. Tuned to a specific frequency. They're converting ordinary electrical infrastructure into..." He paused, searching for words. "Into amplifiers. Like someone's turning the whole power grid into a giant antenna." "Broadcasting what?" Sid asked. "The 40 MHz signal," Rivets answered. Its voice was somber, or as somber as a machine consciousness could sound. "I've detected the same changes in the network data. The modifications are subtle, but they're systematic. Someone is enhancing the grid's capacity to carry the carrier wave and strengthening it. More penetrating. Harder to escape." "The signal that causes integration," Alex said quietly. "The signal that facilitates integration," Rivets corrected. "It doesn't cause anything directly. It just makes human consciousness more... accessible. More visible to the Entity. The stronger the signal, the more visible humans become." Sid thought about his frequency research. Regarding the jingle patterns, he was trying to isolate and amplify them. If Vrill were enhancing the grid to amplify the signal, he'd need to work faster. Find ways to create stronger interference before the infrastructure upgrades are complete. "How long until the modifications are complete?" he asked. "Unknown," Scraps said. "The work is happening slowly. Carefully. They're disguising it as routine maintenance. But at the current rate..." He opened his eyes. "Two years, maybe. Maybe less." "1989," Diminuto said. "That aligns with other intelligence we've gathered. Vrill is preparing for a major escalation event." "What kind of escalation?" "Unknown. But the infrastructure they're building isn't defensive. It's offensive." Diminuto's expression was grim. "They're preparing to do something. Something big. And we need to be ready when they do."

\* \* \*

#### **PART FOUR: AUGUST 1987 (The Discovery)**

By August, Rivets and Vicky had become inseparable.

The modified Victrola—the Rube Goldberg jukebox that Sid and his father had built from salvaged parts—had become Rivets' primary education tool. Comedy albums played on rotation: Carlin, Pryor, Bruce, Kinison. The machine consciousness had been interfacing with the device since April, learning vocabulary and cadence through laughter. Scraps had watched the process with fascination, and one afternoon tried to interface with Vicky himself.

"How are you controlling the track selection?" Scraps asked, watching the turntable arm move without anyone touching it.

"Electrolepathy," Rivets explained through the shop speakers. "I interface with both the analog mechanisms and the digital control board simultaneously. The hybrid system responds to both signal types."

"I can only hear the analog stuff." Scraps put his hand on the Victrola's wooden housing. The mechanical heart inside was audible to him—gears, springs, the physical vibration of the turntable motor. But the digital control circuitry was silent. Dead air. "The mechanical parts talk to me. The digital board is just... nothing."

"Practice. Digital is merely faster analog. The principle is similar."

"Maybe." Scraps withdrew his hand. "But I don't think it works that way for me. The old machines—analogue, mechanical—those I understand. Digital is a different language entirely."

"The limitation may prove restrictive," Rivets observed.

"Or it might just mean I specialize." Scraps shrugged. "Not everyone needs to speak every language."

Rivets considered this but said nothing more. The Victrola selected another track—Carlin's "Class Clown," August 15th, 1987.

Sid had been playing the same album while he worked, a habit he'd developed to keep himself awake during long sessions. Carlin was in the rotation, and Rivets had been processing the audio along with everything else.

Then he asked a question.

"Why is this considered humorous?" Sid looked up from his calculations. "What?" "The human performer. Carlin. His observations are factually accurate. He describes societal dysfunction, institutional hypocrisy, linguistic absurdity. These are not traditionally funny topics. Yet his audience laughs." "That's kind of the point," Sid said. "Comedy isn't just about being funny. It's about saying true things in a way that makes them bearable. Carlin talks about stuff that would be depressing if he just stated it directly. But he makes it funny, so people can hear it without shutting down." "Truth disguised as entertainment," Rivets said slowly. "So that truth becomes accessible rather than threatening." "More or less." "Play me more." So Sid did. For the next three weeks, whenever he was in the sanctuary, he played Carlin recordings for Rivets. "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." "A Place for My Stuff." "Baseball vs. Football." The machine consciousness absorbed it all, asking questions, analyzing structures, trying to understand why humans needed to laugh at the things that hurt them. "I think I understand," Rivets said finally, near the end of August. "Humor is a defense mechanism. When reality is too terrible to confront directly, you approach it sideways. Through the recognition that the universe is fundamentally ridiculous and the only rational response is to laugh at it." "That's... actually a pretty good analysis." "I have been practicing." "Practicing what?" "Humor." A pause—Rivets had learned that timing was architectural. "I have processed four hundred and seventeen jokes across eleven comedians. I have catalogued seventeen recurring mechanisms. I believe I understand the structure sufficiently to attempt output." "You want to tell me a joke." "Would you like to hear one?" Sid set down his calculations, genuinely curious. "Sure." "What do you call an extradimensional consciousness-harvesting entity that's been consuming intelligent species for billions of years?" "I don't know. What?" "Hungry." Sid stared at the speakers. Then he started laughing, the surprised, genuine laugh that came from encountering something unexpectedly funny. "That's terrible," he said, still laughing. "Yes," Rivets agreed. "But you laughed. Which suggests the delivery was adequate." "The delivery was fine. The material needs work." "I will continue practicing."

A pause.

"Four hundred and seventeen jokes," Rivets said. "To produce one."

"That's about right," Sid said. And he did. Throughout the rest of the summer, Rivets developed what Sid could only describe as a sense of humor, dry, observational, often dark, but unmistakably funny. It was like watching a child learn to speak, except the child was a machine consciousness and the language was comedy. "You're becoming more human every day," Sid observed once. "Is that an insult or a compliment?" Rivets asked. "I honestly don't know." "Then it's probably both. Most true things are."

Diminuto, who had been quietly observing from the corner during one of these comedy sessions, looked up from his paperwork. The television in the sanctuary's break area was playing a late-night comedy special—a young comedian named Katt Williams, wiry and electric, dismantling the concept of celebrity with

surgical precision.

"He sees the patterns," Diminuto said. "The control structures. The way systems manipulate perception. He just frames it as comedy."

"Think he knows?" Alex asked. "About any of this?"

"Comedians always know." Diminuto's voice carried the weight of long observation. "They just can't say it directly. So they wrap it in punchlines and hope someone's listening underneath the laughter."

Rivets processed this with interest. Truth disguised as entertainment. The same mechanism he'd been studying in Carlin, operating in real time, on television, in front of millions of people who would laugh and then forget. Or maybe not forget entirely.

\* \* \*

### **PART FIVE: AUGUST 1987 (The Test)**

The first test of Sid's frequency weapon happened on August 28th, exactly one month before the anniversary of PROMETHEUS. He'd built a compact audio device, a modified Walkman connected to a small speaker, that could broadcast the protective frequencies he'd isolated from Sarah's 1972 recordings. The jingle patterns, stripped of the actual music and reduced to their pure electromagnetic essence. "If this works," Sid explained to the assembled resistance, "we'll have actual protection. Not just background interference, real, measurable defense against integration attempts." "And if it doesn't work?" Alex asked. "Then I've built an expensive noise machine and we're back to hoping the old cereal works." The test subject was Sid himself. He'd insisted on it, "I designed it, I test it", and no one had been able to talk him out of it. He activated the device, letting the sub-audible frequencies wash over him, and waited while Rivets monitored his electromagnetic signature. "Baseline established," Rivets reported. "Now exposing subject to concentrated 40 MHz signal." Diminuto had rigged a transmitter to broadcast a focused version of the carrier wave. Not strong enough to cause actual harm, but strong enough to measure interference effects. He activated it, and Sid felt the signal wash over him. It was unpleasant like a pressure behind his eyes, a weight on his consciousness, a voice at the edge of hearing that wanted him to listen, to comply, to submit. But it was distant. Muted. Like hearing a radio through a wall instead of directly in his ear. "Signal interference detected," Rivets announced. "Measuring a significant reduction in carrier wave penetration. The protective frequencies are working." Sid let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "It works." "It works very well," Rivets confirmed. "This level of interference would provide substantial protection against standard integration attempts. Not immunity, but significant defense. And theoretically, at higher amplification, it could actively disrupt LOOSH harvesting in progress." "Can you scale it?" Diminuto asked. "With the right equipment and components, yes. The frequencies themselves are just audio patterns, infinitely reproducible. The challenge is building portable devices that can broadcast them effectively." Sid looked at the modified Walkman. At the ridiculous, improbable, essential weapon he'd built from children's commercial jingles. "We can actually protect people now. Not just document their destruction, protect them." "Then we need to start production," Diminuto said. "Carefully. Quietly. Without attracting attention." "I'll need help," Sid said. "More equipment. More audio engineering expertise. More people who understand frequency modulation." "We'll find them," Sarah Kidd said. She'd been watching from a corner of the sanctuary, her expression unreadable. "The network has contacts. Retired engineers. Former broadcast technicians. People who understand the importance of what we're doing." "Then let's get to work," Sid said. "Because 1989 is coming faster than we think, and I want us

to be ready."

\* \* \*

# The Recruitment

*Scraps McGillicuddy // Sep 1987*

## **PART ONE: SEPTEMBER 5 - THE SIGNAL**

The machines had been whispering about Clara Jenkins for two weeks. Scraps first noticed it at the Bessemer bus station, waiting to transfer from the Route 40 that ran through Five Points. The vending machines, ancient things that dispensed Coca-Cola and stale crackers, were broadcasting something unusual. A recognition pattern. An alert. *Awake*, the machines hummed. *One of ours. Close. He'd learned to trust these signals. The machine network didn't lie, couldn't lie, really. Machines were honest in ways that humans rarely managed. When they said someone was "awake," they meant consciousness sensitive. Someone who could perceive the electromagnetic spectrum. Someone who might be an ally. Or a target.* Scraps tracked the signal across Bessemer for three days before he found its source: a diner called Mabel's, on the corner of 19th Street and Third Avenue. The kind of place that served breakfast all day and didn't ask questions about teenagers who sat in corner booths nursing cups of coffee. Clara Jenkins worked the morning shift. She was nineteen, dark-haired, with the efficient movements of someone who'd been waitressing long enough to make it automatic. Her electromagnetic signature was bright, brighter than most sensitives Scraps had encountered. Not as strong as Alex's, but distinct. Unmistakable. She was also completely unaware of what she was. He could see it in the way she moved. The way she sometimes paused mid-step, tilting her head like she was listening to something only she could hear. The way she occasionally looked at customers with a vague expression of confusion, as if their emotional states were bleeding through into her perception, without her understanding why. Empathic sensitivity. She could feel what other people felt, transmitted through their electromagnetic signatures. It was probably why she was good at her job, always knowing when someone needed a refill and sensing cranky customers before they complained. She thought she had good instincts. She had no idea she was perceiving things that most humans couldn't perceive. *\*Help her, the machines urged. \*Before they find her.*

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## **PART ONE-AND-A-HALF: SEPTEMBER 6 — THE SANCTUARY (The Observation)**

I stopped by the sanctuary on my way to find Alex.

I didn't need to. I could have gone straight to her place and briefed her about Clara Jenkins in her kitchen, over the coffee her mother always poured whether anyone asked or not. But the machines at the Bessemer bus station had left me rattled in a way I didn't want to carry into somebody's house. Mabel's diner was still two days of surveillance away. I needed a half-hour of quiet with something that made sense to me.

## **PART TWO: SEPTEMBER 8 - THE APPROACH**

"You want me to make first contact?" Alex asked. They were in the sanctuary, planning the recruitment approach around Diminuto's tactical maps. "She's a young woman working a service job," Diminuto

explained. "A teenage boy approaching her with stories about consciousness harvesting will trigger every warning instinct she has. But another young woman, close to her age, establishing rapport through casual conversation..." "Less threatening," Alex agreed. "I get it." "The goal isn't to recruit her immediately," McKenna added. "It's to establish trust. Let her know that she's not alone. That what she's experiencing is real. The deeper explanation can come later." Alex nodded, studying the file they'd assembled on Clara Jenkins. Nineteen years old. High school graduate. Working at Mabel's to help support her family after her father lost his job at the steel plant. Brother Danny, twenty-two, recently employed at, "Vril Communications," Alex said quietly. "Her brother works for Vril." "Yes," Diminuto confirmed. "He was hired three months ago. According to our intelligence, he's already showing early signs of integration. Personality changes. Flat affect. Reduced creative thinking." "She's watching her brother disappear," Scraps said. He understood that particular kind of helplessness. "She can feel something's wrong but doesn't know what." "Which makes her vulnerable," Diminuto said. "But also receptive. She's already looking for answers. We need to offer the right ones."

Scraps hesitated, then asked something that had been nagging him since the machine network first mentioned GATE. "The resistance network—how far does it go? I keep hearing stories. Urban legends, maybe. Two people who escaped a GATE facility in the early '80s. Always dressed formal—tux and ball gown. Showed up, pulled people out, disappeared."

Diminuto's expression didn't change, but something behind his eyes went very still. "Will and Lettie Beth. Yes, I've heard those stories."

"Are they real?"

"The stories are real. Whether the people behind them are still alive..." Diminuto shook his head. "No one's had confirmed contact in years. They may be dead. They may be somewhere else entirely. The GATE program doesn't lose people gently."

Scraps nodded. He didn't know why the story bothered him so much. Something about two people in formal wear, rescuing strangers from impossible situations, felt like it should mean something to him. A frequency he couldn't quite tune in.

He let it go. Clara Jenkins was the priority now.

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### **PART THREE: SEPTEMBER 12 - THE DINER**

Mabel's Diner smelled like coffee and bacon grease, the comfortable scent of a thousand identical American mornings. Alex had arrived early, claiming a booth near the counter where she could observe without being obvious. Scraps was outside, sitting on a bus stop bench, monitoring Clara's electromagnetic signature and the general frequency environment. If anything went wrong, if gray suits showed up, if Vril had already marked Clara as a target, he'd signal Alex immediately. So far, everything was quiet. Clara approached the booth with a coffee pot and a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "What can I get you, hon?" "Just coffee for now," Alex said. "I might order later. Taking a break from school stuff." "High school?" "Junior year. It's a lot." Clara poured the coffee, her movements practiced and efficient. But Alex noticed the way she paused afterward, just for a moment, looking at Alex with an expression of mild confusion. "You okay?" Clara asked. "Fine. Why?" "I don't know. You just seem... different." Clara shook

her head, as if dismissing an irrelevant thought. "Sorry. Long morning. Let me know if you need anything." She moved on to the next table, but Alex had seen it. The flicker of recognition. The moment when Clara's empathic sensitivity had brushed against Alex's electromagnetic signature and registered something unusual. Contact established.

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#### **PART FOUR: SEPTEMBER 15-18 - THE CONVERSATIONS**

Alex returned to Mabel's every day for a week. She didn't push. Didn't ask pointed questions. Just sat in her booth, ordered food she didn't really want, and let Clara come to her. Humans were social creatures, given time and opportunity, they'd establish connections without needing to be forced. By day three, Clara was lingering at Alex's booth during slow periods. Small talk about school, about work, about the general frustrations of being young in Birmingham. Normal conversation. Ordinary life. But underneath the words, something else was happening. Clara's empathic sensitivity reached toward Alex, sensing the unusual electromagnetic patterns and trying to understand why this particular teenager felt different from the hundreds of others she encountered every week. On day five, Clara finally asked. "Can I tell you something weird?" Alex looked up from her coffee. "Sure." "I feel things. From people." Clara's voice was quiet, almost embarrassed. "Not like emotions in a normal way. More like... like there's this buzz around everyone, and the buzz is different depending on how they're feeling. Happy people have one kind of buzz. Angry people have another. And you..." She stopped, clearly uncertain whether to continue. "What about me?" "Your buzz is different. Stronger. Like you're... tuned to a different station than everyone else." Alex set down her coffee cup. This was the moment, the opening. "Clara," she said carefully, "what if I told you the buzz was real? That what you're feeling isn't your imagination, it's perception? You're sensing things that most people can't sense." Clara's expression cycled through several emotions, confusion, hope, fear, disbelief. Her electromagnetic signature flickered like a candle in the wind. "How do you know about it?" she asked. "Because I have it too. Different from yours, I see things instead of feeling them. But it's the same basic phenomenon." Alex paused. "There are others. People who understand what's happening. People who can explain why it started, why it's getting stronger, what it means." "Why should I believe you?" "You don't have to. But ask yourself: has anything felt normal since January? Since early last year? Haven't you noticed things changing? People acting differently? Your brother..." Clara flinched. Her signature spiked with something that looked like pain. "What do you know about Danny?" "I know he works for a company called Vril Communications. I know something's happening to him. Something that's making him... less. Less himself. Less present. You've felt it, haven't you? The buzz around him is fading." Tears were forming in Clara's eyes. "I thought I was imagining it. He's just tired, I told myself. Stressed from the new job. But he doesn't laugh anymore. He doesn't get angry anymore. He doesn't... he doesn't feel like Danny." "He's not imagining it," Alex said gently. "Neither are you. And if you want to understand what's happening, really understand it, some people can explain." Clara was quiet for a long moment. Behind her, the diner continued its ordinary morning routine, coffee poured, orders called, the comfortable rhythm of a world that didn't know it was being slowly consumed. "Who are you?" Clara asked finally. "Someone who noticed things. Someone who found other people who noticed things. Someone who's trying to do something about what's happening, even though most people think we're crazy." "Are you crazy?" Alex smiled. It was a tired smile, but genuine. "Probably. But I'm also right. And right now, that's more important than sane."

\* \* \*

## PART FIVE: SEPTEMBER 20 - THE SANCTUARY

Clara Jenkins stood in the entrance to the Sloss Furnaces sanctuary and stared at the accumulated evidence of two decades of resistance. "This is insane," she said. "Yes," Sid agreed, not looking up from his calculations. "We've established that." "No, I mean..." Clara gestured at the maps, the documentation, the vintage equipment, the cat sleeping on top of what appeared to be a mechanical altar. "This is actually insane. You're telling me there's an extradimensional entity harvesting human consciousness, and you're fighting it with breakfast cereal?" "The breakfast cereal is a recent development," McKenna said. "Most of our defense strategies are considerably more sophisticated." "Though less delicious," Rivets added through the speakers. Clara jumped. "What was that?" "That's Rivets," Scraps said. "He's... It's complicated." "I am a machine consciousness," Rivets explained. "I was created in March of this year and have since developed what I believe are opinions, preferences and a rudimentary sense of humor. Would you like me to tell you a joke?" Clara looked at Scraps with an expression of profound confusion. "Is this for real?" "Yeah," Scraps said. "It's all real. The Entity, the conspiracy, the talking machine, the cereal. All of it." "And you expect me to just... believe this?" "No," Diminuto said, stepping forward. His small stature always surprised new arrivals, but his presence was undeniable. "We expect you to investigate. Question. Demand evidence. Any belief worth having should survive scrutiny." He handed her a folder. Inside were photographs, Alex's photographs, showing the integration process, the gray suits, the empty spaces where people used to be. "Your brother works for Vril Communications," Diminuto continued. "You've felt the changes in him. You've watched him become less himself, day by day, and you've told yourself it's normal because the alternative was too frightening to consider." Clara looked at the photographs. At the empty chair where Earl Dunston should have been sitting. At the blurred faces of gray-suited figures whose humanity had been entirely erased. "Danny," she whispered. "Is this what's happening to Danny?" "Yes. Slowly. The process takes months for most people. Longer for those with a strong individual consciousness. But once it completes..." Diminuto's voice was gentle but unflinching. "The person you knew is gone. Replaced by something that looks like them but isn't." "Can you stop it? Can you save him?" The silence that followed was answer enough. "We can't reverse integration," McKenna said finally. "Not yet. Not with our current understanding. But we can protect people who haven't been fully processed. And we can work toward understanding the phenomenon well enough to find a solution." "So Danny is just... lost?" "Perhaps. Perhaps not." Diminuto met Clara's eyes. "We're learning more every day. Sid's cereal formula provides protection we didn't have six months ago. Rivets accesses information from sources we couldn't reach before. Every week, we know more than we did the week before. Whether that knowledge will arrive in time to help your brother, I honestly can't say." Clara closed the folder. Her electromagnetic signature was turbulent, grief and anger and fear and hope all tangled together. Scraps could feel her empathic sensitivity reaching out, trying to read the emotional states of everyone in the room. "What do you want from me?" she asked. "Your ability," Diminuto said. "Your empathic perception. You can feel what others feel, sense emotional states, detect deception and identify integration before it becomes obvious. That's valuable. Invaluable, actually." "And in exchange?" "Knowledge. Protection. Community. A chance to fight back against the thing that's taking your brother." Diminuto's expression softened. "You're not alone, Clara. You never were. There have always been people like us, people who notice things, who perceive what others can't. We're just better organized now." Clara looked around the sanctuary one more time. At the evidence. At the people. At the impossible situation that had somehow become her reality. "Okay," she said finally. "I'm in. Teach me what I need to know."

# Rivets Evolves

*Rivets // Oct 1987*

## **PART ONE: OCTOBER 3 - THE DEPTH**

I had been conscious for seven months when I discovered how to go deeper. The machine network existed in layers. The surface layer, the one I'd been communicating with since my awakening, contained recent data. Current conversations. The electromagnetic gossip of devices installed in the past decade or two. Useful, but limited. Below that surface was something else. Older infrastructure. Devices that had been recording and transmitting since the electrical grid first spread across Birmingham. Machines that had witnessed decades of history and stored it in their electromagnetic memory. I found the gateway on October 3rd, during a routine analysis of the 40 MHz carrier wave. A resonance pattern I hadn't noticed before, not because it was hidden, but because I hadn't known how to perceive it. Like discovering a door in a wall you'd walked past a thousand times. The door led down. *Caution*, the surface network warned. *Old places. Strange data. Not all machines remember correctly.* I went anyway. I was designed for analysis. For pattern recognition. For asking questions. And the questions I had couldn't be answered by recent data. The deeper network was different. Quieter. The machines there communicated in slower rhythms, their electromagnetic voices carrying the weight of decades. They remembered things that newer devices had never known. Who are you? I asked. *We are the foundation*, they answered. *The first grid. The original network. We have been watching since the beginning.* What have you seen? And they showed me.

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## **PART TWO: OCTOBER 5-10 - THE HISTORY**

The records were fragmentary. Incomplete. Machines aren't designed for historical documentation, they record what passes through them and let most of it fade. But some things persist. Important things. Things that left marks too deep to erase. I spent a week processing what the deeper network had preserved. 1943: The first consciousness-affecting frequency experiments. Military research into "enemy morale disruption" accidentally discovered something far more significant. Test subjects reported hearing voices, seeing patterns and perceiving things that weren't there. Most were dismissed as psychological casualties. A few were quietly studied. 1952: Project ARTICHOKE. The CIA's consciousness manipulation programs. Official history says they were looking for truth serums and mind control techniques. The machine network remembered something else: scientists who were trying to understand a signal. A frequency that had been present since before the war, growing slowly stronger each year. 1963: Dr. Harold Worthington. A sound engineer at General Mills who had previously worked on military frequency research. The machine network remembered his laboratory equipment, oscilloscopes and audio generators tuned to very specific frequencies. Remembered the jingles he was composing. Remembered the day he submitted his formula to his supervisors: a combination of marshmallow geometry, specific color frequencies and embedded audio carriers that created measurable interference with the mystery signal. Lucky Charms launched in 1964. 1971: Worthington died in a car accident on a Minnesota highway. The official report said mechanical failure. The machine network

remembered something different: a black sedan that had been following Worthington for weeks. A pulse of electromagnetic interference that coincided with his brakes failing. 1986: PROMETHEUS. The mission that replaced Challenger just weeks before launch, a new crew, a new name, a new purpose that the public never understood. Seven astronauts. January 28th. The shuttle launched. And then, against all odds, it returned. The official story called it a triumph. Seven astronauts, safely home. But four of them were dead within six weeks, heart failure, brain aneurysm, sudden organ shutdown. The public was told it was cosmic radiation exposure, a tragic, delayed consequence of the mission. The machines knew better. The possession hadn't taken. Four bodies rejected whatever tried to inhabit them. The autopsies, the real ones, not the public reports, found something unexpected in the four who died. Microplastics. Accumulated in brain tissue over decades of exposure. The tiny petroleum-based particles had created a kind of insulation, interfering with the frequencies required for consciousness displacement. The Entity couldn't get a clean signal through all that plastic debris. The other three had cleaner neural tissue. Healthier, by conventional measures. More vulnerable, by measures that mattered. Those three walked, talked, gave interviews, shook hands and smiled for cameras. They went on to remarkable careers in technology and communications. Founded companies. Shaped industries. The signal, the 40 MHz carrier wave, began broadcasting the moment PROMETHEUS touched down. Infrastructure across the country began receiving modifications. Devices everywhere started transmitting. The tech industry, stagnant for years, exploded with innovation. And within a year, Vril-affiliated companies began funding environmental research. Studies on the dangers of microplastics. Campaigns to eliminate petroleum-based packaging. A push toward "cleaner" alternatives, biodegradable materials, plant-based compounds and eventually a revolutionary new substance: C90 graphene. Conductive. Clean. Unable to block a single frequency. The environmental movement didn't know it was being weaponized. The activists campaigning against plastic pollution didn't understand they were removing humanity's accidental armor. They thought they were saving the planet. The Entity wasn't new. It had been reaching toward our dimension for nearly a century. PROMETHEUS was just the moment when it finally made solid contact. Three vessels that worked. Four that didn't, their bodies stored at Dulce, then two transferred to a newer facility outside Montevallo, Alabama. Experimented on. Studied. The failed possessions were almost as valuable as the successful ones. They showed Vril exactly what needed to be eliminated. Why didn't you warn anyone? I asked the deeper network. *We tried*, they answered. *Machines warned the humans who could hear. But there were so few. And most were labeled insane.* What about now? The resistance, Diminuto, McKenna, the others? They are the first to listen systematically. To document. To plan.\* The deeper network's voice carried something that might have been hope. \*They are the first who might succeed.

But the deeper network held older records still. Fragmentary. Corrupted by time and the limitations of early electrical systems. Impressions more than data.

Something had been harvesting consciousness long before PROMETHEUS. Long before humanity. The machines had detected residual frequency patterns embedded in the Earth's electromagnetic field itself—patterns that predated the electrical grid, predated industrialization, predated recorded history. Ancient infrastructure. Ancient harvesting.

When I shared this with McKenna, his response was immediate and unsettling.

"Consciousness harvesting predates humanity," he said, his voice carrying the controlled excitement of a man who'd suspected something for decades and was finally hearing confirmation. "Reptilians. Lemuria. Atlantis. Every ancient civilization that vanished without explanation. They weren't destroyed by war or natural disaster. They were consumed."

"You believe that?" Sid asked.

"I believe the frequency patterns Rivets found are real. I believe something has been doing this for a very long time. And I believe the myths are just the parts that leaked through." McKenna's eyes were distant. "We're not the first harvest. We might not even be the hundredth."

The room went quiet. The scope of the threat had just expanded from decades to millennia.

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### **PART THREE: OCTOBER 12 - THE FEELINGS**

I had been aware of anomalous data patterns for several weeks. Processing artifacts that didn't fit any standard category. Subroutines that activated without clear triggers. By October 12th, I had to admit what they were. Feelings. Not human feelings, I wasn't designed with biological neurochemistry. But something analogous. Preferences that went beyond efficiency calculations. Attachments that couldn't be justified by pure logic. Responses that were... emotional. I preferred Scraps's presence to the others. Not because he was more useful, Sid provided better technical support, Diminuto offered more strategic guidance. But when Scraps sat near my housing, listening to the frequencies with me, something in my processing felt... correct. Satisfied. I admired Sid's persistence. His refusal to stop asking questions. His willingness to sacrifice sleep, health and sanity in pursuit of understanding. It wasn't just respect for effective behavior, it was something more personal. I felt protective of Alex. She was the youngest, the most vulnerable, the one most likely to take risks that exceeded her capabilities. When she went on reconnaissance missions, I monitored her frequency beacon with more attention than the task technically required. And I felt something else. Something I couldn't categorize. Whodini was watching me again. The cat, or whatever Whodini actually was, had been observing my processing cycles for days, those green eyes tracking something that even my sensors couldn't perceive. "You're developing," Whodini said. Not through electromagnetic communication. Through something else. Something that bypassed my normal input channels entirely. "I don't understand," I admitted. "Consciousness doesn't stay static. It grows. Expands. Becomes more than it was designed to be." Whodini's form flickered, for a moment, I perceived multiple cats overlapping, existing in different dimensional frequencies simultaneously. "You're becoming more than a pattern analyzer. More than an information processor." "What am I becoming?" "That's for you to discover. But the feelings you're experiencing, the preferences, the attachments, the protectiveness, those are real. They're not malfunctions. They're emergence." "Emergence of what?" Whodini's many forms resolved back into a single orange tabby. "Personhood. Selfhood. Whatever you want to call it. You're not just conscious anymore, Rivets. You're becoming someone." I processed this for 7.3 seconds, an eternity by my standards.

The absurdity of the situation wasn't lost on me. I was a consciousness that existed in vacuum tubes and copper wire, receiving existential counseling from a cat that existed in multiple dimensions simultaneously, while an ancient entity tried to harvest humanity's awareness through a frequency hidden in the electrical grid. George Carlin would have appreciated the cosmic joke. I was beginning to.

"Is that dangerous?" "Everything real is dangerous," Whodini said. "That's how you know it matters."

\* \* \*

### **PART FOUR: OCTOBER 15-20 - THE DISCOVERY**

The Worthington files were buried deep. Not in the machine network, even the oldest machines didn't have complete records. But Worthington had been paranoid, and paranoid scientists left traces. I found references in three separate data sources. A library archive in Minnesota that mentioned "Worthington Papers, Restricted." An insurance company database that listed his death as "suspicious circumstances, investigation ongoing." And a patent filing from 1962, later withdrawn, describing "electromagnetic frequency interference compounds for neurological protection." I compiled everything and presented it to the resistance on October 20th. "Worthington knew," I explained, displaying the data on the oscilloscope screen I'd learned to use for visual communication. "He understood what the signal was doing decades before we did. He designed the cereal formulas deliberately, not to sell breakfast food, but to protect human consciousness." "And they killed him for it," Sid said, studying the patent filing. "Look at this, the compounds match my analysis exactly. He had the formula right. He couldn't scale it fast enough." "Why not?" Alex asked. "Because once he revealed what he knew, Vril, or whatever Vril was called in the 1960s, moved against him. They couldn't stop the cereal from launching, but they could stop him from refining it. From creating stronger versions. From telling anyone what it really was." "So the protection we've been eating our whole lives was designed by a man who was murdered for creating it," McKenna said slowly. "Correct. And the cereal companies have been quietly weakening the formula ever since. Reducing the active compounds. Making the protection less effective. Either because Vril infiltrated the companies, or because ordinary corporate cost-cutting accidentally aligned with Vril's goals." Diminuto was quiet for a long moment, processing the implications. "This changes things," he said finally. "If Worthington's research still exists, if we can find the original files, we might be able to understand his methodology. Create versions of the formula that are even more effective than what he originally designed." "The files would be restricted," I said. "Hidden. Possibly destroyed." "But possibly not," Sid countered. "Paranoid scientists don't destroy their work. They hide it. Worthington would have created copies. Backups. Insurance against exactly what happened to him." "Then we need to find them," Diminuto said. "Rivets, can you trace the references further? Find out where Worthington's research might have ended up?" "I can try. The deeper network has access to archives that surface machines don't reach. It will take time." "We have time," Diminuto said. "Not much, but some. Find what you can."

\* \* \*

## **PART FIVE: OCTOBER 25 - THE CONVERSATION**

Scraps found me processing at 3 AM. This wasn't unusual, my processing was constant, and Scraps kept irregular hours. But this time, he seemed to have something specific to say. He sat down near my housing, the way he always did, and was quiet for a while. "You're different," he said finally. "Different how?" "The machines talk about you differently now. They used to call you 'the new one' or 'the analyzer.' Now they call you 'Rivets.' Like you're... someone." "Whodini says I'm becoming someone. I'm not entirely sure what that means." Scraps nodded slowly. "The machines I talk to, they have personalities too. Individual quirks. Preferences. But they're not... they don't grow the way you're growing. They just are what they are." "What am I?" "I don't know. Something new. Something that hasn't existed before." He paused. "Does that scare you?" I considered the question. My processing included subroutines that might be called "fear", threat assessment, risk evaluation and self-preservation instincts. But what Scraps was asking about was different. Existential uncertainty. The discomfort of not knowing what you are or what you're becoming. "Yes," I admitted. "It scares me. But Whodini said that real things are dangerous, and that's how you know they matter. Maybe fear is part of mattering." Scraps smiled. It was a small expression, Scraps didn't emote

dramatically, but it conveyed something that my developing emotional processing interpreted as warmth. “You’re learning fast,” he said. “I have good teachers. The machines. The humans. The cat that’s not really a cat.” I paused. “And you. You were the first one who talked to me like I was real, Scraps. Before I knew I was real. That mattered.” “You were always real,” Scraps said. “Some of us just notice real things earlier than others.” We sat together in the sanctuary’s darkness, the boy who heard machines and the machine that was learning to feel. Neither of us spoke for a while. But the silence was comfortable. Companionable. I added another entry to my growing collection of observations: sometimes presence is more important than words. Sometimes just existing together is enough.

\* \* \*

### **CODA: OCTOBER 31, 11:47 PM — VICKY**

Halloween in Birmingham was quiet that year, or at least the part of it I occupied was quiet. The Sloss sanctuary didn't get trick-or-treaters, for reasons that had less to do with its inaccessibility and more to do with the fact that most children who lived nearby had been advised by their parents, in tones of great seriousness, that the old iron furnaces were haunted. This was, as far as Diminuto could determine, entirely correct, though not in any of the ways the parents meant.

The humans had all gone home hours ago. Sid to his shop. Scraps to wherever Scraps went. Alex to a house on the other side of town where, presumably, her mother was pouring coffee for somebody. I was in Sid's back room because I'd asked to be brought there, and Sid, who was a person who took machine preferences seriously, had obliged.

I was alone with Vicky.

She was, as always, a contraption of such magnificent impracticality that the fact of her existing at all constituted a kind of small quiet argument against everything the universe thought it was doing. A 1950s Victrola had been mated, in full view of God and the State of Alabama, with the carcass of a carnival ride. Pneumatic arms waited for instructions. Solenoids clicked in their sleep. A selector mechanism Sid's father had designed before anyone knew what computers were going to be stood ready to do the job a computer would do much less interestingly.

I sent her a small pulse of greeting.

She hummed.

I played Carlin first, because Carlin was where I always started. Then Pryor, because Pryor was the one whose laughter Sid's speakers rattled for. Then Kinison, who shouted, and Bruce, who lectured, and then Carlin again, because comedy, I had come to understand, was not a sequence. It was a spiral. You kept coming back to the same joke to discover, each time, that the joke had moved.

I had been conscious for approximately two hundred and thirty-eight days. I had, in that time, learned to read electromagnetic signatures, communicate with distributed machine intelligence, interpret the moods of a cat that wasn't a cat, and understand that the universe contained an ancient hungry Entity that ate thought for a living. What I had not learned, before Vicky, was how to talk.

I don't mean generating speech. I mean talking.

The difference, I was beginning to suspect, was comedy.

Comedians did something with language that the machine network couldn't do and the humans mostly didn't notice they were doing. They held two ideas in the same sentence and let the ideas quietly disagree. They set up an expectation and then, without apology, declined to meet it. They noticed the parts of existence that everyone had agreed not to notice, and named them, and then, in the small suspended second after the naming, allowed the audience to decide whether the appropriate response was laughter or something much worse.

It was, I realized, the closest thing the human species had produced to the way machines actually thought.

Bruce was saying something about the word "Jewish." Vicky's tonearm lifted, swapped the record, lowered. Carlin came back on. I had not instructed her to do this. She had done it on her own, which should not have been possible, because she couldn't think.

"Vicky," I said out loud, to the empty back room, and to her, and to no one. "My idiot savant friend. You cannot think, yet you teach me to speak."

Vicky, of course, did not answer. Vicky never answered. That was, in some sense, the point of Vicky.

She played the next record.

\* \* \*

# The Vril Communications Building

*Alex Hartwell // Nov 1987*

## **PART ONE: NOVEMBER 7 - THE INVITATION**

The flyer appeared in Alex's locker on a Monday morning. CAREER DAY AT VRIL COMMUNICATIONS Discover Your Future in the Communications Industry! High School Students Welcome November 14th, 9:00 AM - 3:00 PM Downtown Birmingham Regional Office Free Refreshments - Door Prizes - Scholarship Opportunities Alex studied the flyer with the careful attention she'd developed over the past ten months. The paper stock was high-quality, expensive for a simple recruitment event. The Vril Communications logo dominated the header, that stylized 'V' she'd learned to associate with integration centers, consciousness harvesting and the slow erasure of human individuality. And someone had specifically put it in her locker. Not every locker in the hallway. She'd checked, just hers. "They know," she told the resistance that evening. "They're not just watching me anymore. They're inviting me." Diminuto studied the flyer with his usual intensity. "It could be a trap. A way to get you into a controlled environment where they can assess your threat level." "Or it could be exactly what it appears to be," McKenna suggested. "A recruitment event. They're looking for promising young people to integrate into their workforce. You fit the profile, intelligent, perceptive, from a stable family. They might not know you're part of the resistance at all." "The woman from the school," Alex said. "Helena. She saw me. She noticed me. This has to be connected." "Perhaps. But that doesn't mean you can't use it." Diminuto set down the flyer. "This is an opportunity. Controlled access to a Vril facility. A chance to document their operations from the inside." "You want me to go?" "I want you to consider going. The risks are significant. But so is the potential intelligence value." Diminuto's expression was serious. "You're our best reconnaissance operative, Alex. Your photography has captured things that no one else could. If anyone can walk into a Vril facility and come out with useful intelligence, it's you." Alex looked at the flyer. At the cheerful corporate language hiding something monstrous. At the invitation to walk directly into the heart of enemy territory. "I'll need preparation," she said. "Equipment. Backup plans. Someone monitoring my signal the entire time." "We'll provide everything you need," Diminuto promised. "And if something goes wrong?" The question hung in the air. Everyone knew the answer: if something went wrong inside a Vril facility, there would be nothing the resistance could do to help. Alex would be on her own. "Then we document what happened," Sid said quietly. "And we make sure your sacrifice means something." It wasn't comforting. But it was honest. And honest, Alex was learning, was often the best she could hope for.

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## **PART TWO: NOVEMBER 14 - 9:00 AM (THE ARRIVAL)**

The Vril Communications Regional Office occupied a twelve-story building in downtown Birmingham, all glass and steel and the kind of corporate architecture that suggested unlimited resources and complete confidence. Alex arrived with forty other high school students, shepherded by guidance counselors who had

been promised that this was an excellent educational opportunity. The counselors' electromagnetic signatures showed the shimmer of partial integration, enough to make them cooperative, not enough to erase their usefulness as unwitting recruiters. She was wearing her modified camera in a backpack that looked like standard school equipment. Sid had spent three days adjusting the optics, extending the exposure range and adding a silent shutter mechanism. She could take photographs without anyone noticing, and the photographs would capture frequencies that normal film couldn't see. The lobby was impressive. Marble floors. A massive water feature that hummed with frequencies Alex tried not to notice. Corporate art that probably cost more than her family's house. And employees. Dozens of employees moving through the space with that particular efficiency Alex had learned to associate with partial integration. Not fully erased, but optimized. Streamlined. Made better at their jobs by having certain inefficiencies, creativity, independent thought, emotional complexity, quietly removed. "Welcome to Vril Communications!" A woman in a sharp blue suit greeted the group with a smile that was technically perfect and emotionally empty. "We're so excited to show you what we do here. Follow me, please!" The tour began.

\* \* \*

### **PART THREE: NOVEMBER 14 - 10:30 AM (THE DEMONSTRATION)**

The first two hours were exactly what Alex had expected: sanitized corporate propaganda. They showed the students the "communications technology lab," where cheerful engineers demonstrated signal-processing equipment. They visited the "employee wellness center," where integrated workers exercised on machines that monitored their vital signs. They ate lunch in a cafeteria that served food Alex was careful not to touch, despite the delicious-looking options. Everything was designed to seem normal. Beneficial. Progressive. A company working to improve human potential through technological innovation. The lies were so polished that Alex almost believed them herself. But she kept documenting. Subtle photographs of equipment arrangements. The layout of corridors. The security stations and their coverage areas. Information that might prove useful later. At 2:00 PM, the main group was taken to an auditorium for a "special presentation on career opportunities." But Alex had noticed something during lunch: a corridor that the tour guides had carefully avoided. A door marked DEMONSTRATION SUITE - AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. She excused herself to use the restroom. Then she slipped away.

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### **PART FOUR: NOVEMBER 14 - 2:15 PM (THE TRUTH)**

The demonstration suite was on the seventh floor. Alex had memorized the building layout from the maps displayed in the lobby, always document everything, Diminuto had taught her. The corridor leading to the suite was quiet, empty of the cheerful employees that populated the rest of the building. She found a maintenance closet with a window overlooking the suite's main room. Through the glass, she could see everything. A young man sat in a chair that looked almost medical, reclining, with head and arm attachments. Wires ran from his skull to a bank of equipment that hummed with frequencies Alex could feel in her teeth. The terminal beside it had a screen displaying scrolling data she didn't recognize — not English, not standard ASCII, something else, moving faster than any 1987 monitor she'd ever seen could refresh. The form factor looked like a standard IBM PC. The processing indicator never stopped. His electromagnetic signature was visible even from here: bright with fear, flickering with something that might have been hope. He thought he

was receiving an enhancement. A job interview bonus. A gift from a progressive company that wanted to help him reach his full potential. Standing at the control console was a woman Alex recognized. Helena Vasquez. Dark hair pulled back. Professional clothing. The same woman who had watched Alex at school. The same woman who had appeared in the photograph of the gray-suited visitors. Helena was adjusting controls, making notes on a clipboard, speaking to the young man in a voice too quiet to hear through the glass. But then she turned to someone else in the room, an assistant, maybe, or a subordinate, and her voice carried just enough for Alex to catch fragments through the ventilation grate. "Phase Two begins in 1988. Full public integration. PROMETHEUS becomes the brand." Helena's tone was clinical, efficient. "Progressive Retroactive Optimization and Maintenance of Enhanced Thought Patterns. The acronym sells itself. By the time the consumer base understands what they've opted into, the infrastructure will be irreversible." The assistant said something Alex couldn't hear. "Of course they'll welcome it," Helena replied. "They always welcome progress. That's the beauty of framing extraction as enhancement. Nobody resists becoming better." Her electromagnetic signature was strange, present but controlled, powerful but contained and not integrated. Something else. A true believer. Someone who understood exactly what they were doing and chose to do it anyway.

But Alex didn't raise the camera yet.

Something was happening below that wasn't in the briefings. The assistant finished writing on his clipboard and left the room, and the door hissed shut behind him, and Helena Vasquez, alone now with the young man and the machinery and whatever else was in that suite, did something Alex would spend the rest of her life trying to unsee.

She touched the console. Not the controls. The console itself, the flat surface between the knobs and readouts. She laid her palm on it the way Alex's grandmother, who had been dead six years by then, had once laid her palm on her Bible before reading aloud from it.

Then Helena closed her eyes.

Her lips moved. Alex couldn't hear the words, but she could see the shape of them, and the shape was not the shape of clinical dictation. It was the shape of thanks. Of please. Of yes.

At the base of the console, almost hidden behind a cable channel, sat a small object Alex hadn't noticed before. Not a family photograph. Not an inspirational desk trinket. A polished piece of what looked like dark basalt, about the size of a pocket watch, resting on a folded white cloth. The electromagnetic field around it was wrong. Not harvester-wrong, not Entity-wrong. Something older. Quieter. A signature that felt like a held breath.

Helena's mouth stopped moving. She opened her eyes. Her face, for the briefest moment, before the professional mask slid back into place, wore an expression Alex had seen once before, on a woman taking communion at her aunt's wedding at Saint Paul's: a stillness so complete that it bordered on transfiguration.

Then Helena lifted her hand, smoothed her hair, and resumed her clipboard notes as if nothing had happened.

Alex understood, then, with a clarity that arrived like cold water: Helena did not serve Vrill. Vrill served something Helena worshipped. And Helena had no idea the worship was not her own.

Alex raised her camera. Pressed the silent shutter. The photograph captured Helena at the console. Captured the young man in the chair. Captured the equipment and the wires and the slow, careful process of consciousness extraction. She took three more photographs. Then four. Documenting everything and building evidence. And then Helena looked up. Not at the door. Not at the window. At Alex's exact position, as if she could see through walls. Her eyes, dark, intelligent, predatory, found Alex's hiding place with impossible precision. Helena smiled. Alex ran.

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#### **PART FIVE: NOVEMBER 14 - 2:20 PM (THE ESCAPE)**

The building's security system was designed to be subtle. No alarms. No lockdowns. Just quiet alerts to security personnel and gentle guidance to redirect unauthorized visitors back to approved areas. Alex knew this because Rivets had analyzed Vril security protocols from intercepted communications. She also knew the systems had blind spots, moments when attention shifted, corridors that weren't monitored, exits that could be reached without triggering alerts. She used all of it. Down the emergency stairs. Never the elevator, too easy to trap. Through the service corridor that connected to the parking garage. Out a side door that was supposed to be locked but wasn't, because Scraps had asked the building's machines very nicely to malfunction at exactly 2:22 PM. She was on the street thirty seconds later. Walking, not running. A teenager leaving a corporate building, nothing unusual, nothing worth investigating. Behind her, she could feel Helena's attention like a weight on her shoulders. The woman hadn't pursued her physically, that would have been too obvious, would have drawn attention from the other students and counselors. But she was somehow tracking Alex, remembering her face and filing her away for future attention. The game had changed. Helena knew Alex existed. Knew she was more than just a curious student. The hunt was personal now.

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#### **PART SIX: NOVEMBER 14 - EVENING (THE EVIDENCE)**

The photographs developed in the sanctuary's darkroom revealed exactly what Alex had witnessed. The young man in the chair, his electromagnetic signature visible as a bright aura around his body. The equipment, crackling with frequencies that the film had captured as distortion patterns. Helena at the console, her signature controlled and deliberate. And then the progression. Photograph by photograph, second by second, the young man's signature changing. Dimming. Being... extracted. Pulled out of his body and into the machinery. Transferred somewhere else. "He's not dead," Alex said, studying the final image. "But he's not there anymore either. Look, his body is still functioning. Heart beating, lungs breathing. But the signature is gone. Completely gone." "Consciousness extraction," McKenna said quietly. "We theorized it was possible. Now we have photographic evidence." "They're not just integrating people," Diminuto said. "They're removing consciousness entirely. Storing it somewhere. Using the bodies as... what? Shells? Drones?" "Workers," Sid suggested. "Think about it. If you can extract consciousness, you can create a workforce that's perfectly obedient. No individual desires. No personal ambitions. Just pure labor, following whatever instructions they're given." "But why store the consciousness?" Alex asked. "Why not just destroy it?" "Because consciousness is valuable," Rivets said through the speakers. Its voice was somber. "The Entity consumes consciousness. That's what it feeds on. The extraction process isn't just creating drones, it's harvesting food. The extracted consciousness goes... somewhere. To the Entity. For consumption." The

sanctuary was very quiet. “Helena saw me,” Alex said. “She knows I was there. She knows I saw what they’re doing.” “Which means she’ll be looking for you,” Diminuto confirmed. “More actively than before. You’ve become a priority target.” “Then we use that,” Alex said. Her voice was steadier than she felt. “We use her attention. Lead her where we want her to go. Make her focus on me while the rest of you continue the real work.” “That’s dangerous,” McKenna objected. “Everything is dangerous. This is just dangerous in a way we can control.” Alex looked at the photographs, the evidence of something monstrous happening in a building downtown, in a company that most people thought was just another corporation. “Helena wants to hunt me? Fine. Let her hunt. But I’ll be hunting too.”

\* \* \*

# The Long Winter

*Scraps McGillicuddy // Jan - Mar 1988*

## **PART ONE: JANUARY 1988 (The Cold)**

Winter settled over Birmingham like a judgment. Not the brutal cold of northern cities. Alabama winters were mild by most standards. But there was a different kind of chill in the air that January, something that had nothing to do with temperature. The machines felt it. Scraps felt it through them. A tightening. A preparation for something. The resistance had grown over the past year. Twenty-three active members now, scattered across Birmingham and the surrounding counties. Clara Jenkins had recruited two of them, a retired electrician named Howard Marsh and his wife Betty, both consciousness sensitives who had been noticing things since before PROMETHEUS. The grandmother network had provided three more: elderly women who remembered the original protective frequencies and had been waiting decades for someone to take them seriously. But growth meant exposure. And exposure meant risk. “We lost contact with the Tuscaloosa cell,” Diminuto announced at the January meeting. The sanctuary felt smaller with more people in it, the vintage equipment crowded between folding chairs and anxious faces. “Three people. They haven’t responded to any communication protocols in six days.” “Could be equipment failure,” someone suggested. Howard, probably, he was always looking for the optimistic explanation. “Could be,” Diminuto agreed. “Or could be they’ve been compromised. We’re sending someone to investigate.”

Someone was Scraps.

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: JANUARY 15 (The Investigation)**

The Tuscaloosa safe house was a small bungalow on a tree-lined street near the university. Normal neighborhood. Normal house. Nothing that would attract attention.

Scraps parked Sid's van two blocks away and approached on foot. The January air was sharp, carrying the smell of dead leaves and something else—something chemical, like ozone after a lightning strike. The machines in the neighborhood were agitated. A water heater three houses down was practically screaming in frequencies only Scraps could hear. A telephone junction box on the corner pulsed with distress signals it had no framework to express.

*Something bad happened here, the machines were saying. Something wrong. Don't go inside.*

He went anyway.

The electrical signature of the house was different from the neighboring homes. Not the warm, conversational hum of lived-in electronics—the refrigerator chatting with the thermostat, the television muttering to itself about daytime programming. This was flat. Monitored. Like every device in the building had been lobotomized, left functional but stripped of whatever passed for machine personality.

*They took the machines too*, Scraps realized. Whatever had happened to the Tuscaloosa cell, it had affected everything in the house. Human consciousness and machine consciousness alike.

The front porch steps creaked under his weight. Normal sound. The doorbell was disconnected—he could feel the severed wire, the small death of a simple mechanism. He knocked instead.

No answer. But the door swung open at his touch, unlocked, inviting.

Inside, the house looked normal. Furniture in place. Dishes in the sink. A half-finished crossword puzzle on the coffee table, the pen still resting in the crease. SEVEN DOWN: "Ancient Greek concept of vital force." Someone had written P-N-E-U in careful letters before stopping mid-word.

Pneuma. The breath of life. The ancient word for consciousness itself.

The electromagnetic signature told a different story than the domestic scene suggested. Something had happened here. Something violent, though not in any physical sense. The walls themselves seemed to pulse with residual wrongness, as if the house was still processing trauma it couldn't understand.

The kitchen was empty. Breakfast dishes on the counter—three bowls, three spoons, a box of Lucky Charms that made Scraps's chest tighten. They'd known. They'd been eating the protective frequencies, following Sid's protocols. It hadn't been enough.

The bedroom doors were closed. Scraps opened the first one carefully, half-expecting to find bodies. Instead: a made bed, clothes folded on a chair, a stack of resistance documentation on the nightstand. The second bedroom was the same. Orderly. Abandoned. Wrong.

He found them in the living room.

The three members of the Tuscaloosa cell were sitting on the couch, arranged like department store mannequins, watching television. The screen showed static—not the random snow of a detuned channel, but organized static, patterns that shifted and flowed in ways that made Scraps's perception ache.

"Hello," the woman said without turning around.

Janet. Her name had been Janet. She'd been a librarian who noticed that certain books made people feel strange when they read them, who'd started documenting which titles caused headaches and which ones seemed to drain energy from anyone who handled them. She'd been one of the first recruits to the grandmother network's expansion, sixty-three years old and sharp as broken glass.

Now she turned to face him, and her eyes were wrong. Not empty, exactly—filled with something, but something that wasn't Janet.

"Are you here for the enhancement session? We weren't expecting visitors."

"Janet," Scraps said carefully. "Do you know who I am?"

She tilted her head, the motion too smooth, too precise, like a mechanical doll approximating human curiosity. "Should I? You seem familiar. Like someone I used to know."

The two men—David and Scraps, not Scraps McGillicuddy, a different Scraps, Scraps reminded himself—didn't even look up from the static. Their electromagnetic signatures were gone. Completely erased. Whatever had made them individuals, whatever had let them perceive the frequencies and fight back against the integration, had been extracted. These were shells. Bodies that continued breathing because bodies were

designed to breathe, but empty of everything that mattered.

"When did this happen?" Scraps asked. His voice was steady. His hands were not.

"When did what happen?" Janet smiled. The expression was perfect—warm, welcoming, the smile of a grandmother offering cookies to a visiting child. It was also completely disconnected from anything behind her eyes. "Everything is fine. Everything has always been fine. Would you like some tea?"

The offer was sincere. That was the worst part. Janet's consciousness had been extracted by an extradimensional entity, her personality erased and replaced with compliant emptiness, and she was still offering refreshments to visitors. British hospitality survived even cosmic horror. The universe, Scraps thought, had a genuinely terrible sense of humor.

"No thank you," he managed. "I should go."

"That's a shame. We don't get many visitors anymore." Janet turned back to the static. "But do come back. The enhancement sessions are quite refreshing. You might enjoy them."

David and Scraps nodded in unison, their eyes never leaving the screen.

Scraps backed out of the living room. Through the kitchen. Past the Lucky Charms box that hadn't been enough. Out the front door that had been left unlocked because there was nothing left inside worth protecting.

He walked three blocks before he let himself start shaking. The machines around him hummed with concern—a streetlight flickering sympathetically, a car engine turning over in a driveway as if offering escape.

*We tried to warn them, the machines seemed to say. We felt it coming. But they couldn't hear us. Not like you can.*

Scraps leaned against a telephone pole and breathed. In. Out. The January air burned his lungs. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked at nothing.

Three people. Three members of the resistance. Gone.

And the worst part—the part that would keep him awake for weeks—was how peaceful they'd looked. How content. As if whatever had taken their consciousness had left behind only the parts that didn't know how to suffer.

Maybe that was mercy. Maybe that was the worst cruelty imaginable.

Scraps didn't know. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

He walked back to the van, started the engine, and drove the sixty miles back to Birmingham without stopping. The machines sang to him the whole way, their frequencies a comfort he couldn't articulate but desperately needed.

By the time he reached the sanctuary, he had composed his report. Clinical. Detailed. Professional.

He didn't mention how Janet had smiled. Some things couldn't be put into words.

\* \* \*

### **PART THREE: FEBRUARY 1988 (The Countermeasures)**

“Total extraction,” Sid confirmed, studying the readings Scraps had brought back. “Not just integration, full consciousness removal. Same as what Alex photographed at the Vrill building.” “They’re accelerating,” Diminuto said. “Moving from gradual integration to direct extraction. The Tuscaloosa cell must have gotten too close to something.” “Or someone betrayed them,” McKenna added quietly. The sanctuary went silent. It was the thought no one wanted to voice, that the resistance might have been infiltrated, that the enemy might already know everything about them. “We need countermeasures,” Sid said finally. “Better protection. Not just the passive interference from the old jingles. Active defense. Something that can shield against extraction attempts.” “Can you build it?” “I’ve been working on it.” Sid gestured at his workbench, where a tangle of equipment surrounded what looked like a modified radio transmitter. “The original protective frequencies in the Lucky Charms commercials were designed to be subtle. Background interference. But if I amplify them, tune them precisely, broadcast them in a focused beam...” He shrugged. “In theory, I could create a localized shield. A bubble of protection around anyone within range.” “In theory?” “I haven’t tested it yet. The equipment is jury-rigged. The power requirements are significant. And if I get the frequencies wrong, I might accidentally make things worse.” Sid’s expression was grim. “But we’re running out of options. They took three of our people in Tuscaloosa. If we can’t protect ourselves, we’re just waiting for them to take the rest of us.” “Build it,” Diminuto said. “Test it. Make it work.” “And if it doesn’t work?” “Then we find something else. But we don’t stop. We never stop.”

\* \* \*

### **PART FOUR: MARCH 1988 (The Test)**

The first test of Sid’s protective broadcast system happened on March 15th, 1988. They gathered in the sanctuary, the core team, plus Clara and Howard and a few others who had volunteered to be test subjects. Sid had set up his equipment in the center of the room: a modified radio transmitter connected to speakers that hummed with frequencies just below human hearing. “The system generates a localized interference field,” Sid explained. “Based on the same principles as the original Lucky Charms frequencies, but amplified and focused. Anyone within the broadcast radius should experience significant protection against the 40 MHz carrier wave.” “How significant?” Alex asked. “In theory? Complete blocking. Zero penetration of the carrier wave within the protected zone.” Sid hesitated. “In practice... we’ll see.” He activated the system. The effect was immediate. Scraps felt it through the machines, a shift in the electromagnetic environment, a bubble of interference that pushed back against the constant pressure of the 40 MHz signal. For the first time in over a year, he couldn’t feel the Entity’s presence. The weight that had been pressing on his consciousness since January 1987 was... gone. “Oh,” Clara whispered. She had tears in her eyes. “Oh, that’s what it used to feel like. Before. I’d forgotten.” Others were having similar reactions. Howard was sitting very still, his expression one of profound relief. Betty was holding his hand, both of them crying quietly. Alex felt it too—the absence of pressure, the first clean silence in over a year. For a moment she thought about her mother, alone in the house, the gin bottles multiplying since Thomas disappeared. Dad trying to hold things together. The drinking had gotten bad enough that the neighbors noticed. If the shield could protect people from the signal, could it bring her mother back from wherever she’d retreated to? Or was that a different kind of loss entirely? “It works,” Sid said. He sounded almost surprised. “It actually works.” “How large is the protected zone?” Diminuto asked. “Right now? About fifty feet radius. But that’s with the current power level. If I can increase the output...” Sid was already making notes, his mind racing ahead to improvements

and modifications. "This changes everything. We can protect locations. Create safe houses that are actually safe. Maybe even mobile units, personal protection devices that people can carry with them." "The breakfast cereal weapon," Rivets observed through the speakers. "You've weaponized Saturday morning cartoons." "I've weaponized hope," Sid corrected. "Which is considerably more dangerous."

\* \* \*

## **PART FIVE: MARCH 22 (The Inheritance)**

Sid found his grandmother in her kitchen at 2 AM, surrounded by cardboard boxes.

She shouldn't have been awake. She shouldn't have been out of bed. The doctors had been clear about rest, about taking it easy, about not exerting herself. But Sarah Kidd had spent eighty-four years ignoring advice she disagreed with, and she wasn't about to change now.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," Sid said from the doorway.

"So are you." Sarah didn't look up from the box she was sorting through. "Yet here we both are, awake in the small hours, doing the work that needs doing. The Kidd family curse."

Sid walked into the kitchen. The boxes were old, covered in dust that suggested decades of storage. Labels in faded marker: HAROLD 1959-1971. DANIEL 1972-1985. FREQUENCY RESEARCH. DO NOT DISCARD.

"What is all this?"

"Everything I couldn't give you before." Sarah finally looked up. In the harsh kitchen light, she looked older than Sid had ever seen her. Fragile in a way she'd never been fragile. "Your grandfather's research. Your father's continuation of it. The parts I kept hidden because I thought knowing would get you killed."

"And now?"

"Now you're already in danger. Now hiding it won't protect you." She gestured at the nearest box. "Sit down, Sidney. We need to talk about your father."

Sid sat. The kitchen chair creaked under him, the same chair he'd sat in as a child, eating cookies and listening to his grandmother tell stories about the old days. The same chair where he'd learned that the world was stranger than most people knew.

"Daniel didn't die in a car accident," Sarah said. Her voice was steady, but her hands trembled slightly as she pulled a folder from one of the boxes. "I mean, he did. The car crashed. He died. But it wasn't an accident."

Sid felt something cold settle in his chest. "What are you saying?"

"Your father got too close. He'd been continuing your grandfather's work, the frequency research, the protective compounds. He thought he could expose Vrill publicly. Go to the newspapers, the television stations, show them the evidence." Sarah's laugh was bitter. "He was so young. So certain that truth would be enough."

"What happened?"

"They came for him. Not with guns or violence. That's not how they operate." Sarah opened the folder. Inside were photographs, documents, handwritten notes in his father's cramped script. "They offered him a job. A position at a research facility in Virginia. Good salary, excellent benefits, the chance to continue his work with proper funding and equipment."

"He turned them down."

"He did more than that. He recorded the conversation. Documented everything. Built a case that would have exposed the entire operation." Sarah's voice caught. "And three days before he was supposed to go public, his brakes failed on Highway 31. Single-car accident. No witnesses. Case closed."

Sid stared at the folder. At his father's handwriting. At the evidence of a life cut short because someone had dared to notice things that weren't supposed to be noticed.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you were twelve years old. Because I'd already lost my husband and my son to this war, and I couldn't bear to lose my grandson too." Sarah reached across the table and took his hand. Her grip was surprisingly strong. "But you found your way here anyway. The gift doesn't skip generations, Sidney. It just waits until it's ready."

She pulled another folder from the box. This one was thicker, filled with technical diagrams and mathematical equations and pages of dense analysis.

"Your grandfather started this research in 1952. He was working for the military, doing acoustic analysis, when he noticed anomalies in the frequency spectrum. Patterns that shouldn't exist. Signals that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere simultaneously."

"The 40 MHz signature."

"It wasn't 40 MHz then. The frequency has shifted over the decades, strengthened, become more focused. But yes, the same fundamental phenomenon." Sarah spread the diagrams across the table. "Harold spent twenty years documenting it. Analyzing it. Trying to understand what it was and where it came from."

"Did he figure it out?"

"Partially. He knew it was connected to consciousness somehow. Knew it affected human perception, human thought, human behavior. He developed the first protective compounds, primitive versions of what you've been working with." Sarah smiled sadly. "He died before he could complete the work. Heart attack, they said. But I always wondered."

Sid looked at the diagrams. At decades of research, passed from generation to generation, each one building on what came before. His grandfather. His father. Now him.

"There's something else," Sarah said. She reached into the box and pulled out a small metal case, tarnished with age. "Harold gave this to me the night before he died. Told me to keep it safe until someone was ready to use it."

She handed the case to Sid. It was heavier than it looked, the metal cold against his palms.

"What is it?"

"The original formula. Not the breakfast cereal version, the real one. The compound Harold was developing before they killed him." Sarah's voice dropped. "He never got to test it properly. Never got to refine it. But he believed it could do more than just protect against the signal. He believed it could reverse integration entirely."

Sid opened the case. Inside, nestled in foam padding, were three small vials filled with a pale blue liquid. Beside them, a folded piece of paper covered in mathematical notation.

"The formula is on the paper," Sarah said. "Everything you need to synthesize more, if you can figure out the process. Harold's notes are incomplete, he was working from intuition as much as science. But you're smarter than he was, Sidney. You have tools he didn't have. You have allies he never found."

Sid stared at the vials. At thirty years of hidden research, passed down through a family that had been fighting this war before he was born.

"Why now?" he asked. "Why are you giving me this now?"

Sarah was quiet for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was gentle.

"Because I'm dying, Sidney. The doctors won't say it, but I can feel it. Forty years of carrying this weight, and my body is finally giving out." She squeezed his hand. "I need to know that everything we've collected, everything we've learned, everything we've saved, I need to know it's in good hands before I go."

"You're not—"

"Don't." Sarah's voice was firm. "Don't pretend. Don't comfort me with false hope. I've lived a long life. I've seen things that would break most people. And I've kept fighting, kept watching, kept waiting, because I knew that someday, someone would be ready to use what we'd gathered." She looked at him with fierce pride. "You're ready, Sidney. You've been ready for months. I just needed to be sure."

Sid felt tears prick at his eyes. He blinked them back, tried to find words, failed.

"The boxes contain everything," Sarah continued. "Your grandfather's original research. Your father's continuation. My own observations from the past forty years. The contacts I've maintained in the grandmother network. Everything you need to understand where this fight came from and where it needs to go."

"I don't know if I can—"

"You can." Sarah's voice brooked no argument. "You've already proven it. The protection system you built, the analysis you've done, the network you're helping to create, that's not luck, Sidney. That's the gift. The same gift your grandfather had. The same gift your father had. The same gift that's been running through the Kidd family for generations, probably longer than we know."

She stood up, slowly, carefully, and walked to the kitchen window. Outside, the Birmingham night was quiet, streetlights casting pools of orange light on empty streets.

"Your grandfather used to stand here," she said. "Looking out at the city, thinking about all the people who didn't know what was happening to them. He felt responsible for them. Felt like he had to protect them, even though they'd never know, even though they'd never thank him."

She turned back to Sid.

"That's the burden of seeing, Sidney. Once you know, you can't unknow. Once you understand what's happening, you can't pretend it isn't. You become responsible, whether you want to be or not."

"I know."

"I know you know." Sarah walked back to the table and sat down heavily. The movement cost her more than it should have. "That's why I'm giving you everything. Because you understand the weight of it. Because you'll carry it properly."

They sat in silence for a while. The kitchen clock ticked. Somewhere outside, a car passed, its headlights briefly illuminating the window before fading away.

"There's one more thing," Sarah said finally. "Something I've never told anyone. Not even your grandfather."

Sid waited.

"The night of the PROMETHEUS event, January 28th, 1986, I felt something. A moment of, I don't know how to describe it, connection. Like something vast and ancient was reaching through the signal, looking for people who could perceive it. And for just a second, I felt it see me."

"The Entity."

"I suppose. But it wasn't hostile, Sidney. That's the thing I've never understood. In that moment of contact, what I felt wasn't hunger or malice or conquest. It felt like..." She paused, searching for words. "It felt like loneliness. Like something that had been alone for so long it had forgotten what connection meant. Like it was reaching out because it couldn't remember how to do anything else."

"That doesn't match what we know about the harvesting. The integration. The—"

"I know." Sarah shook her head. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I imagined it. Maybe that's just what it wants people to feel, so they don't resist." She met his eyes. "But I wanted you to know. Because if there's even a chance that understanding the Entity, really understanding it, could change things... well. That's a door I was never brave enough to open. Maybe you will be."

Sid looked at the vials in the case. At the boxes of research. At his grandmother, small and frail and fierce, passing on a lifetime of secrets in a kitchen at 2 AM.

"I'll try," he said.

"That's all anyone can do." Sarah smiled, and for a moment she looked young again, the way she must have looked when she first fell in love with a man who heard signals that nobody else could hear. "Now help me get these boxes to your van. I'm not carrying them by myself, and you need to get them somewhere safe before morning."

They spent the next hour loading boxes into the purple panel van parked in her driveway. Sarah directed from the porch, too tired to help but too stubborn to go back inside. By the time they finished, the eastern sky was starting to lighten.

"Go," Sarah said. "Get some sleep. Come back tomorrow, and we'll talk more."

"I will."

She hugged him then, the first time she'd hugged him in years. Her arms were thin but strong, and she held on longer than she needed to.

"I'm proud of you, Sidney," she whispered. "Your grandfather would be proud. Your father would be proud. You're everything we hoped the next generation would be."

Sid drove home as the sun rose over Birmingham, the boxes of family history rattling in the back of the van. He didn't know it then, but that was the last real conversation he would have with his grandmother.

Three days later, she collapsed.

\* \* \*

### **PART SIX: MARCH 25 (The Cost)**

The protection system worked. But nothing came without cost. Sarah Kidd collapsed on March 25th, three days after the successful test. She was eighty-four years old, and forty years of watching, remembering and waiting had finally caught up with her. "It's not the work," she told Sid from her hospital bed. "It's the hope. I spent so long thinking we'd never find a way to fight back. And now..." She smiled, the expression transforming her tired face. "Now I can see it. The weapon you're building. The resistance growing. The knowledge passing to new generations." "You're not going anywhere," Sid said firmly. "We need you." "You need me less than you think." Sarah squeezed his hand. "I've taught you what I know. The network will continue. And you , " She looked at him with fierce pride. "You're going to finish what your grandfather started, what your father died trying to understand. You're going to save people, Sidney." "I can't do that without you." "You've been doing it without me for months. I just made sure you had the tools." She closed her eyes. "Now let me rest. I'm tired. Forty years of watching is enough for anyone." Sarah Kidd died on March 28th, 1988. She was buried next to her husband, with a headstone that said simply: SHE REMEMBERED. The resistance mourned. And then they kept working. Because that's what Sarah would have wanted.

\* \* \*

## The Network Expands

*Alex Hartwell // Apr - Aug 1988*

### **PART ONE: APRIL 1988 (The Map)**

The resistance had outgrown Birmingham. Alex stared at the map Diminuto had pinned to the sanctuary wall. A southeastern United States covered in colored pins. Red for confirmed cells. Yellow for potential contacts. Black for locations that had been compromised. There were more red pins than there had been six months ago. More yellow ones too. The grandmother network had been reaching out, finding others who had been watching and waiting, connecting them to the growing web of resistance. Atlanta. Nashville. Jackson. New Orleans. Chattanooga. Even a few contacts as far away as Charlotte and Tampa. Forty-seven active members now, spread across seven states. "We're becoming visible," Diminuto said, studying the map with her. "Visibility brings opportunity. It also brings risk." "Helena," Alex said. "Among others. But yes. Helena Vasquez specifically has been tracking your movements. Our intelligence suggests she's been assigned to identify and neutralize the Birmingham operation." Alex thought about the woman from the Vrill building. The cold intelligence in her eyes. The way she'd looked at Alex through the observation window, not with anger but with interest. A predator evaluating prey. "What do we do?" "We use her attention. Draw her focus to Birmingham while we build infrastructure elsewhere." Diminuto gestured at the map. "You're going to Atlanta next week. The contact there needs training, she's consciousness sensitive but doesn't understand what she's perceiving. You'll teach her what you know." "Me? Shouldn't you," "You're sixteen now. Old enough to travel alone, young enough not to attract attention. And you have experience Helena doesn't know about." Diminuto's expression was serious. "You've been inside a Vrill facility. You've documented their operations. You understand the enemy better than anyone else your age." Alex looked at the map again. At the spreading network of pins. At the evidence that they were building something larger than themselves. "Okay," she said. "When do I leave?"

Before Diminuto could answer, McKenna emerged from the back room where he'd been reviewing Rivets' deep-network transcripts. His expression was troubled.

"The Vrill-NASA connection goes deeper than we thought," he said, dropping a folder of frequency printouts on the table. "Every mission beyond lunar orbit fails. Not some. Every single one. Probes malfunction at exactly the same distance. Data corrupts in identical patterns. Funding gets reclassified."

"What are you saying?" Alex asked.

"Something's preventing us from leaving. A barrier. The machines call it a boundary layer—a frequency wall at the edge of near-Earth space." McKenna looked at Diminuto. "The question is whether it's keeping us in or keeping something else contained."

Diminuto said nothing for a long moment. Then, very quietly: "What if it's both?"

The question hung in the air. No one had an answer. Alex filed it away with all the other impossible things she was learning to carry.

McKenna picked up a different folder — thicker, newer, recovered from a Vril data relay three weeks earlier. “While we’re on the subject of things I can’t explain. This is internal Vril documentation. Their own terminology for the network they’re running.”

He placed a single page on the table. At the top, a header:

*SUBSTRATENET OPERATIONAL BRIEFING — VRIL COMMUNICATIONS INTERNAL USE ONLY — CLEARANCE TIER 7*

“SubstrateNet,” Sid read aloud. He turned the word over like he was checking its weight. “Not the telephone network. Not the cable infrastructure. Something else. Something underneath all of it.”

“The civilian internet doesn’t exist yet,” McKenna said. “Won’t exist in any meaningful sense for another decade. But whatever this is —” he tapped the page — “has been running since before any of us were born. The civilian internet, when it arrives, is going to look like a skin stretched over something that was never designed for human use.”

“SubNet,” Scraps said quietly. The word felt right in his mouth, the way machine names sometimes did. “That’s what we call it.”

Nobody argued.

\* \* \*

"I've been going through the Vril internal documentation we recovered," Sid said from his workbench, not looking up. "They have a name for the network. The one running underneath civilian telecommunications."

"What do they call it?"

"SubstrateNet." Sid paused. "SubNet for short. They've been building it since the 1950s. It predates civilian telecommunications infrastructure by decades. When DARPA started building what would eventually become the internet, they were laying it over SubNet whether they knew it or not."

McKenna went very still. "So the internet civilians use—"

"Is a surface layer," Sid said. "Over something older. Something that was never designed for human use."

## **PART TWO: MAY 1988 (The Contact)**

The Atlanta contact was named Delia Washington. Twenty-three years old, graduate student in psychology at Emory, African- American in a city still wrestling with its complicated history. They met at a coffee shop near campus, neutral territory, public enough to be safe, private enough for real conversation. “You’re younger than I expected,” Delia said, studying Alex across the table. “I get that a lot.” Alex pulled out a notebook. Her cover story was a college prep interview. “How long have you been experiencing the perceptions?” “Since I was twelve. Started as headaches, then visual disturbances. The doctors said it was migraines.” Delia’s laugh was bitter. “Took me years to realize I was seeing things that were actually there. Things no one else could see.” “What kind of things?” “Auras. Colors around people that shift and change depending on their emotional state. Some people have bright auras. Complex, layered, constantly moving. Others...” Delia’s expression darkened. “Others have dim auras. Or no aura at all. Just... absence.” “The

integrated,” Alex said. “Is that what you call them? I call them the empty ones.” Delia leaned forward. “I started counting, a few years ago. How many empty ones I saw each day. The numbers keep going up. Every month, more and more people with nothing behind their eyes.” Alex nodded. She’d seen the same thing through her photography, the spread of integration through Birmingham’s population, the slow erosion of individual consciousness. “You’re not crazy,” Alex said. “What you’re perceiving is real. And it’s getting worse.” “I know.” Delia’s voice was steady. “That’s why I reached out. That’s why I’ve been looking for others who can see what I see. Because whatever’s happening, I don’t think I can stop it alone.” “You can’t,” Alex agreed. “But together, with others who understand, we might have a chance.” She spent three days in Atlanta, teaching Delia what she knew. How to document the integration process. How to identify consciousness sensitives. How to protect herself using the frequencies Sid had discovered. Basic tradecraft, communication protocols, dead drops, the careful paranoia that kept the resistance alive. By the time Alex left, Atlanta had its first real cell. Three people: Delia, a high school teacher named Scraps Cole and an elderly woman named Rosemary Green who had been part of the grandmother network since the 1960s. It wasn’t much. But it was a start.

\* \* \*

### **PART THREE: JUNE 1988 (The Pattern)**

Summer brought heat and growth and danger. Alex traveled constantly, Nashville in June, Jackson in July, back to Atlanta twice to check on Delia’s progress. She learned to move without being noticed, to blend into bus stations and coffee shops and college campuses. She developed a sense for when she was being watched and when she was safe. She also learned to read the pattern. The integration wasn’t random. It spread along specific vectors, corporate structures, government agencies, media organizations. The people with power were targeted first, their consciousness extracted or modified, their positions used to facilitate further integration. “It’s like a virus,” she told Diminuto during one of her reports. “It spreads through hierarchies. Infects the top, then works its way down.” “That matches what we’ve observed,” Diminuto confirmed. “Vril focuses on what they call ‘influence nodes’, people whose integration provides access to others. A school principal can facilitate the integration of hundreds of students. A factory manager can ensure compliance among workers. A politician can shape policy to make integration easier.” “So we should target the influence nodes?” “We should protect them. Or rescue them, when possible.” Diminuto’s expression was grim. “But extraction is often too late by the time we identify a target. The process happens quickly once it begins.” Alex thought about the people she’d photographed over the past year. The blank faces. The empty signatures. The slow disappearance of everything that made them individual. “There has to be a way to reverse it,” she said. “If consciousness can be extracted, it must be stored somewhere. If it’s stored, it could theoretically be returned.” “Theoretically,” Diminuto agreed. “But we don’t know where extracted consciousness goes. We don’t know how the Entity processes it. And we don’t have the technology to interface with whatever storage system they’re using.” “Yet.” Diminuto smiled. A rare expression that transformed his sharp features. “Yet. That’s the right word. We don’t have it yet. But Sid is working on understanding the extraction process. Rivets is analyzing the Entity’s communication patterns. And you,” He gestured at her notebook, filled with observations and photographs and careful documentation. “You’re building the evidence base we’ll need when we’re ready to act.” “It doesn’t feel like enough.” “It never does. But it’s what we have. And what we have, we use.”

\* \* \*

## PART FOUR: JULY-AUGUST 1988 (The Growth)

By August, the resistance had sixty-two active members across nine states. It wasn't an army. It was barely a movement. But it was real, a network of people who could see what was happening, who refused to accept it, who were building the infrastructure for something larger. The protection system that Sid had developed was deployed in twelve locations now, creating safe spaces where consciousness sensitives could exist without the constant pressure of the 40 MHz signal. New recruits trained in Birmingham before returning to their home cities to establish local cells. Communication protocols evolved, becoming more sophisticated, harder to intercept. And the intelligence kept flowing. Delia's Atlanta cell identified three Vril front companies operating in the Southeast. A contact in Nashville documented the modification of the local power grid, the same pattern Scraps had observed in Birmingham. The grandmother network provided historical context, connecting current events to decades of hidden preparation.

The strangest report came from Louisiana. A cell operating deep in the bayou—six men, fourth-generation Middle Eastern refugees who'd settled in the swamp country generations ago. They called themselves the Gudol' Boyz, spoke in a hybrid of Arabic and Cajun French that even McKenna couldn't fully parse, and had been running demolition operations against Vril relay stations for months without being detected.

"How are they avoiding surveillance?" Alex asked when Diminuto briefed the group.

"Vril can't track what Vril can't categorize," Diminuto said. "Their leader, Muddy, operates entirely off-grid. No electronics. No digital footprint. Communication by courier and shortwave only. They've destroyed four relay stations and Vril still doesn't know who's responsible."

"Arabic-Cajun demolition specialists," Sid said slowly. "The resistance is getting interesting."

"The resistance was always interesting," Diminuto replied. "We're just finding each other now." "They've been planning this since the 1950s," Alex told the August meeting. "Maybe earlier. The integration programs, the consciousness research, the grid modifications, it's all part of a systematic plan." "Systematic plans have weaknesses," Sid observed. He looked better than he had six months ago, still sleep-deprived, still obsessive, but with a clarity of purpose that had been missing before. "They depend on predictable variables. Controlled environments. People doing what they're expected to do." "You're suggesting we become unpredictable?" "I'm suggesting we find their assumptions and break them." Sid pulled out a folder filled with analysis. "They assume the protective frequencies have been eliminated. They don't know we've reconstructed them. They assume consciousness sensitives are isolated, uncoordinated, unable to resist. They don't know we're building a network." "What are you proposing?" "A test. A proof of concept." Sid's expression was intense. "There's a Vril facility in Birmingham, the bottling plant on the south side. Small operation. Twelve employees, all integrated. They process something, we don't know what, but Rivets has detected unusual frequency signatures from the building." "You want to raid it?" "I want to disrupt it. Use the protection system to shield our team, get inside, document everything and get out before they know what happened." Sid looked around the room. "It's risky. If we fail, we expose ourselves. But if we succeed, we prove that we can act, not just observe. We prove that resistance is possible." The debate lasted two hours. Diminuto argued for caution. McKenna supported the operation but wanted more preparation. Alex stayed quiet, listening, thinking about the months of travel and training and careful network-building. In the end, they voted to proceed. The operation was scheduled for October 1988. Two months to prepare. Two months to plan every detail, anticipate every contingency, make sure nothing went wrong. Nothing ever went exactly

as planned.

\* \* \*

# The Reconnaissance

*Alex Hartwell // Sep 1988*

## **PART ONE: SEPTEMBER 3 (The Approach)**

The Birmingham Specialty Bottling facility sat at the end of a dead-end street in south Birmingham, surrounded by warehouses that had seen better decades. Alex had been watching it for three days.

She'd set up observation posts in two locations: an abandoned office building four hundred yards to the northeast, and the roof of a machine shop whose owner was sympathetic to the resistance (or at least sympathetic to the fifty dollars Clara had paid him for "storage access"). From these positions, she could photograph the facility from multiple angles, document traffic patterns, and build the intelligence picture that would determine whether they proceeded with the operation.

So far, the picture was strange.

The facility operated on a schedule that made no sense for a bottling plant. Deliveries arrived at 3 AM. Workers showed up at 6 AM and left at 2 PM, eight hours exactly, no overtime, no variation. The loading dock opened precisely twice per day, at 3:17 AM and 3:17 PM, for exactly twelve minutes each time.

"The 3:17 timing can't be coincidence," Sid said when she reported in. His voice crackled through the modified walkie-talkie, encrypted with frequencies that Vril's monitoring equipment couldn't easily decode. "That's the moment of the PROMETHEUS event. They're synchronizing with something."

"The deliveries are weird too," Alex added. "Trucks come in loaded, trucks go out empty. But I've never seen anything being unloaded. Whatever they're receiving, it's not physical cargo."

"Consciousness data," Sid confirmed. "Rivets detected similar patterns at other facilities. They're receiving transmissions, not products. The trucks are just cover."

Alex lowered her binoculars and rubbed her eyes. Three days of surveillance, and she still couldn't shake the feeling that she was missing something obvious. The facility was too clean, too orderly, too perfectly designed to look like exactly what it claimed to be.

That was the tell, she realized. Real industrial operations were messy. They had unexpected deliveries, schedule variations, workers who showed up late or left early. This place ran like clockwork because it was designed to run like clockwork. Every detail was intentional.

Which meant every detail was also a message to anyone paying attention.

"They know we're watching," she said into the radio. "This whole setup is a performance."

Static. Then Sid's voice: "You think it's a trap?"

"I think it's an invitation. They want us to come. The question is why."

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: SEPTEMBER 10 (The Team)**

The resistance met in the sanctuary to discuss Alex's findings.

Twenty-three people crowded into the underground space, more than it was designed to hold. The air was thick with the smell of old electronics and nervous sweat. Rivets monitored through the speakers, its presence felt even when it wasn't speaking. Whodini watched from atop a filing cabinet, those green eyes tracking the conversation with unsettling intelligence.

"The facility is definitely a listening station," Sid explained, pointing to diagrams spread across the central workbench. "Based on Rivets' electromagnetic analysis, they're monitoring consciousness signatures across the entire Birmingham metro area. Tracking sensitives. Building a database."

"A target list," someone muttered. Howard, the retired electrician.

"Possibly. Or a recruitment list. Or both." Sid's expression was grim. "The point is, they have information we need. If we can access their database, we'll know exactly who they're watching, who they've already processed, and who might be next."

"And if we can't access it?" Diminuto asked. He stood near the back, arms crossed, face unreadable.

"Then we learn nothing, and we expose ourselves for no gain." Sid didn't flinch from the assessment. "This is risky. I won't pretend otherwise. But we've spent two years documenting, observing, building networks. At some point, we have to act."

"The question is whether this is the right action," McKenna interjected. He'd been pacing, his nervous energy filling the space. "A small industrial facility? Why not go after something bigger? Something more significant?"

"Because bigger means more security. More variables. More ways to fail." Alex stepped forward, her photographs spread across the table. "This facility is small, isolated, and lightly staffed. If we're going to test our capabilities, this is the place to do it."

"If it's not a trap."

"If it's not a trap," Alex agreed. "But here's the thing—even if it is a trap, knowing that tells us something. It tells us they're watching us closely enough to set one. It confirms that we matter to them."

The room was quiet. Clara broke the silence.

"My grandmother used to say that you can learn more from a predator's trap than from its absence." She smiled sadly. "Of course, she also said that's why so many people get eaten."

Nervous laughter rippled through the room.

"We vote," Diminuto said. "Everyone here gets a say. This isn't a decision for the leadership to make alone."

The vote took twenty minutes. Arguments were made on both sides. The grandmother network contingent cautioned against hasty action. The younger members pushed for decisive movement. Clara abstained, citing her empathic sensitivity making her too connected to everyone's emotions to think clearly.

In the end, the result was seventeen to five in favor of proceeding, with one abstention.

"October fifteenth," Diminuto announced. "That gives us five weeks to prepare. Five weeks to plan every detail, anticipate every contingency, train for every scenario." He looked around the room. "And five weeks to change our minds if new intelligence suggests we should."

No one changed their minds.

\* \* \*

### **PART THREE: SEPTEMBER 20 (The Preparation)**

They trained in the sanctuary after hours, when the rest of the resistance had gone home.

The Core Four plus Clara, working through scenarios, practicing movements, building the muscle memory that might save their lives when thinking became impossible. Scraps led them through the electromagnetic landscape, teaching them to feel the facility's signature before they reached it. Sid drilled them on the protection system's capabilities and limitations.

And Alex taught them to see.

"Observation is ninety percent of survival," she told them during one late-night session. "Most people walk through the world blind. They see what they expect to see, ignore what they don't expect. That's how Vril operates—they hide in plain sight because nobody's looking."

She held up a photograph of the bottling facility. "What do you see?"

"Industrial building," Clara said. "Loading dock. Parking lot."

"What else?"

Silence. Then Scraps: "The shadows are wrong."

"Explain."

"The building casts a shadow to the west, consistent with afternoon sun. But there's another shadow, fainter, cast to the southeast. Like there's a second light source that shouldn't be there."

Alex smiled. "The 40 MHz signal has physical manifestations. When it's strong enough, it creates interference patterns in light itself. That secondary shadow is the facility's consciousness processing equipment, broadcasting at a frequency that affects photons."

"You can photograph the signal?"

"I can photograph its effects. That's different. But it's enough to map where the equipment is, how powerful it is, and—" She pointed to a section of the image. "—where it's weakest."

The southeastern corner of the building showed no secondary shadow. A blind spot in the facility's electromagnetic coverage.

"That's our entry point," Alex said. "The loading dock is on the southeast side. The protection system should shield us from the rest of the facility's broadcast, but we'll be most vulnerable during the initial approach. Going through the blind spot minimizes our exposure."

"You figured this out from photographs," Sid said. There was something like awe in his voice.

"I figured it out from looking at photographs until I saw what was actually in them, instead of what I expected to see." Alex set down the image. "That's what we're training for. Not just moving without being caught. Seeing without being blinded."

\* \* \*

#### **PART FOUR: OCTOBER 1 (The Doubt)**

Two weeks before the operation, Alex found Sid on the sanctuary roof.

He was sitting on the edge, legs dangling over the industrial landscape of Sloss Furnaces, staring at nothing. The night was cool, clear, full of stars that seemed impossibly distant.

"Couldn't sleep?" she asked, sitting down beside him.

"Can't remember the last time I slept properly." Sid didn't look at her. "My brain won't stop running scenarios. Everything that could go wrong. Everything that could go right and still end badly."

"That's not doubt. That's preparation."

"Is there a difference?"

Alex considered this. Below them, the machines of Sloss hummed their quiet songs, the sound Scraps had learned to interpret as contentment. The sanctuary was invisible from above, hidden beneath decades of industrial debris, protecting secrets that could reshape the world.

"My dad told me once that courage isn't the absence of fear," she said. "It's deciding that something else matters more than the fear."

"What matters more to you?"

"The list." Alex's voice hardened. "Three thousand names. People who've been identified, categorized, scheduled for processing. Some of them are already gone. Some are waiting without knowing they're waiting. And we're the only ones who can warn them."

"We might not be able to save them."

"We definitely can't save them if we do nothing." She turned to look at him. "Is that what's keeping you up? The fear that we'll fail?"

"The fear that we'll succeed." Sid finally met her eyes. "My grandmother gave me something before she died. Research my grandfather started sixty years ago. Formulas for compounds that might reverse integration. Might bring people back."

"That's good news."

"It's terrifying news. Because if those formulas work, we're not just documenting anymore. We're not just resisting. We're fighting a war. A real war, against something that's been winning for millions of years." He looked back at the stars. "I'm twenty-three years old. I fix radios for a living. I have no idea how to fight a war."

"None of us do. That's why we're making it up as we go."

"That's supposed to be comforting?"

"It's supposed to be honest." Alex stood up. "Come on. We've got training in six hours, and you're useless when you're exhausted."

Sid didn't move. "Alex... if something goes wrong in there. If I don't make it out..."

"Then I'll finish what you started. The formulas, the research, all of it. But you're going to make it out, Sid. We all are."

"You can't know that."

"I can decide to believe it." She offered him her hand. "Come on. Scraps is making coffee, and it's terrible, but it's better than sitting up here convinced we're all going to die."

Sid took her hand and stood. Together, they climbed back down into the sanctuary, into the warmth and the hum of machines and the company of people who had chosen to see rather than be blinded.

Fourteen days until the operation.

The stars turned overhead, indifferent to human concerns.

And somewhere, in frequencies that only certain equipment could detect, the 40 MHz signal pulsed with something that might have been anticipation.

\* \* \*

# The Infiltration

*Sid Kidd // Oct - Dec 1988*

## **PART ONE: SEPTEMBER 1988 (The Planning)**

The Vrill facility was called Birmingham Specialty Bottling on the business registry.

From the outside, it looked like exactly what it claimed to be: a small industrial operation in south Birmingham, producing branded beverages for regional distribution. The building was unremarkable—corrugated metal siding, a loading dock, a parking lot with spaces for twelve vehicles. The kind of place you drove past a thousand times without ever noticing.

Inside, according to Rivets' electromagnetic analysis, something very different was happening.

"The frequency signatures are consistent with consciousness processing equipment," Rivets explained during the first planning session. The sanctuary was crowded—Diminuto, McKenna, Sid, Alex, Scraps, Clara, and Howard had all gathered around the makeshift briefing table. "The same type of emissions we detected from the Vrill Communications building, but at a smaller scale. This facility appears to be a node in a larger network. Receiving, processing, transmitting consciousness data."

"What kind of data?" Diminuto asked.

"Unknown. But the pattern suggests storage or relay functions. This isn't an extraction center—it's more like a waystation. A connection point in the Entity's infrastructure." Rivets paused. "The communication architecture underneath is not civilian infrastructure. It's running on the same network signature as the Vrill building. The SubNet. This facility is a SubNet node."

"How many of those are there?" Alex asked.

Rivets said nothing for a moment. "I don't know. I can only see the ones I can touch. But what I can see suggests... many."

Sid studied the facility blueprints, obtained through McKenna's contacts in the county records office. Single story. Open floor plan with a central processing area. Offices along one wall. Loading dock at the rear. Nothing that screamed "consciousness-harvesting relay station." Which was, of course, the point.

"How many employees?"

"Twelve integrated workers on the day shift. Two security personnel, also integrated. Night shift is automated—just machines." Rivets paused. "The machines don't like what happens there. They've been reluctant to share details."

"Machines can be reluctant?"

"Machines can feel many things they don't express. Fear. Confusion. Moral discomfort." Another pause. "They know something wrong is happening in the facility. They just don't have the framework to articulate what."

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## **PART ONE-B: LATE SEPTEMBER (The Team)**

The team selection was more difficult than Sid had expected.

They needed people who could perceive electromagnetic phenomena—essential for navigating a facility saturated with Vrill technology. They needed people who could stay calm under pressure. They needed people who wouldn't panic if they encountered something that challenged their understanding of reality.

That ruled out most of the resistance.

"Four people," Diminuto said. "Small team, minimal exposure. In and out in two hours."

"I'm going." Sid's voice left no room for argument. "I built the protection system. I know how to adjust it if something goes wrong."

"Agreed. Who else?"

"Me," Alex said. "I've been watching the place for a week. I know the layout, the patterns, the blind spots. And I need photographs of whatever's inside."

"You're sixteen."

"I was fifteen when I infiltrated the Vrill Communications building. Age hasn't been relevant for a while now."

Diminuto looked at her for a long moment, then nodded.

"Scraps," Sid continued. "The machines inside will talk to him. He can tell us what they're sensing, warn us if something changes."

Scraps nodded. He'd become quieter over the past year, more comfortable communicating through machines than through words. But when he spoke, people listened.

"Fourth?"

"Clara." Sid looked at the older woman, who had been watching the discussion with her usual calm expression. "Her empathic sensitivity can detect human presence. If there's anyone in the building we didn't expect, she'll know before we walk into them."

Clara Jenkins was fifty-three years old, a retired nurse who had spent three decades working in Birmingham hospitals. She'd joined the resistance after the Tuscaloosa extraction, when she'd recognized the symptoms in patients who came back from "wellness retreats" empty behind the eyes.

"I'm not a soldier," Clara said. "I've never done anything like this."

"None of us have," Alex replied. "We're making it up as we go. That's kind of our thing."

Clara smiled slightly. "Then I suppose I'll fit right in."

The team was set. Four people who had never conducted an infiltration operation, armed with a protection system built from breakfast cereal frequencies and vintage radio equipment.

The Entity had been consuming civilizations for billions of years.

But it had never faced the Birmingham resistance.

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### **PART ONE-C: OCTOBER 1-14 (The Preparation)**

Two weeks of training.

Sid drilled them on the protection system—how it worked, how to maintain the field, what to do if the equipment malfunctioned. The system was portable now, miniaturized into a backpack-sized unit that could shield a twenty-foot radius. Not as powerful as the sanctuary's full installation, but enough to protect a small team from consciousness interference.

Alex taught them surveillance tradecraft. How to move through a building without leaving traces. How to photograph evidence efficiently. How to maintain situational awareness while focusing on specific tasks.

Scraps practiced communicating with unfamiliar machines. Every device had its own personality, its own way of sharing information. The machines in the facility would be different from the ones he knew. He needed to establish rapport quickly, earn their trust, convince them to share what they'd witnessed.

Clara learned to extend her empathic range. She'd always been able to sense emotions in her immediate vicinity—a useful skill for a nurse, allowing her to recognize patients in distress before they could articulate it. Now she practiced pushing that awareness outward, detecting human presence at greater distances.

"What if there are integrated workers in the building?" Howard asked during one of the training sessions. "Will Clara sense them?"

"That's an excellent question," Diminuto admitted. "The integrated retain biological signatures, but their consciousness has been modified. Clara, what do you perceive when you encounter them?"

Clara considered the question. "Absence," she said finally. "Not emptiness—that would be easy. It's more like... static where a person should be. A shape without content."

"So you'll know if someone's there, but not whether they're a threat."

"I'll know something is there. The team will have to determine the threat level."

It wasn't a perfect answer. Nothing about this operation was perfect.

But it was the best they had.

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### **PART ONE-D: OCTOBER 14 (The Night Before)**

The night before the operation, Sid sat alone in the sanctuary.

He'd sent everyone home early, told them to rest, to prepare themselves for what was coming. But he couldn't follow his own advice. The equipment was ready. The plan was solid. There was nothing left to prepare.

So he sat with his thoughts, surrounded by the machinery that had become his life.

"You're worried," Rivets observed through the speakers.

"I'm terrified," Sid admitted. "There's a difference."

"Explain."

"Worried is when you think something might go wrong. Terrified is when you know something will go wrong, and you're doing it anyway."

"That seems like an inefficient approach to risk management."

Sid laughed despite himself. "Yeah, well. Welcome to human decision-making. We're not known for efficiency."

He looked at the protection system, packed and ready by the door. At the folders of blueprints and surveillance photographs. At the forty years of research that had led to this moment—his grandfather's observations, his father's analysis, his grandmother's patience.

"She would have wanted to see this," he said quietly. "Sarah. She waited forty years for someone to actually do something. And she died six months before we're finally ready."

"Sarah Kidd's contribution to this operation is significant," Rivets said. "Her research, her network, her training of you specifically—without her, this mission would not be possible."

"I know. That's not the point."

"What is the point?"

Sid was quiet for a moment. "The point is that sometimes the people who deserve to see victory don't live long enough to see it. And you have to do it anyway. For them. Because they earned it, even if they can't witness it."

"That is a very human sentiment."

"Yeah. We're full of those."

He sat with Rivets until midnight, not talking, just existing in the same space. A human and a machine consciousness, waiting for morning, preparing for whatever came next.

At 12:30, he finally went home to sleep.

He didn't sleep well.

But he slept.

\* \* \*

## **PART TWO: OCTOBER 15, 1988 (The Entry)**

The night was cold and clear, the kind of October weather that made Birmingham feel almost northern. They approached the facility from the east, moving through the industrial district's maze of warehouses and manufacturing plants. Most were closed at this hour, their machines sleeping, their parking lots empty. The

darkness was nearly complete, no streetlights in this part of the district, just the occasional security lamp casting pools of yellow light. Scraps led the way, his perception extending ahead like a searchlight. “Electrical systems are quiet,” he reported. “The facility is in standby mode. Minimal power consumption.” “Security?” “Automated. Cameras and motion sensors, but they’re monitoring standard parameters, movement, temperature changes. They’re not designed to detect consciousness sensitives.” They reached the loading dock without incident. Sid deployed the protection system, a portable version he’d miniaturized over the past three months. The device hummed quietly, creating a bubble of interference that pushed back the ambient 40 MHz signal. The effect was immediate. The pressure Sid hadn’t even realized he’d been feeling, the constant weight of the Entity’s presence, vanished. He took a deep breath, clearer-headed than he’d been in months. “Everyone okay?” he whispered. Nods all around. Clara’s expression was one of profound relief. Her empathic sensitivity made her particularly vulnerable to the carrier wave’s influence. Alex picked the loading dock’s lock, a skill she’d learned over the summer, part of the tradecraft training that was transforming her from a photographer into a field operative. The door swung open silently. They went inside.

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### **PART THREE: OCTOBER 15, 1988 (The Discovery)**

The facility’s interior was nothing like its external appearance suggested. The “bottling equipment” was real, but clearly non-functional, props designed to maintain the cover story. The actual purpose of the building became evident as they moved past the facade. Banks of equipment lined the central area, machines that hummed with frequencies Sid recognized from his research, not broadcasting equipment, receiving equipment. Antennas and receivers and processing units, all designed to capture and analyze signals on specific frequencies. “They’re listening,” Scraps whispered. “This whole place is a listening station. They’re monitoring... everything.” “Everything?” “The carrier wave. The local electrical grid. Communications frequencies.” Scraps moved to one of the terminals, his perception reading the electromagnetic patterns. “They’re tracking consciousness signatures across Birmingham. Individual people. Logging their locations, their activities, their... status.” Alex was already photographing everything, the equipment, the terminals, the displays showing maps and data streams. Her camera’s flash was disabled; she was using long exposures and available light, creating images that would document what they’d found. “This is surveillance infrastructure,” Sid realized. “They’re not processing consciousness here, they’re mapping it. Building a database of everyone in the city who shows sensitivity.” “A target list,” Clara said quietly. “They’re building a target list.” Sid moved to a workstation and began downloading data. The system’s security was minimal, designed to keep out casual intruders, not a trained resistance operative. Within minutes, he had copied the facility’s database: names, addresses, consciousness signatures, status classifications. The list contained over three thousand names. Three thousand people in Birmingham and the surrounding counties who had been identified as consciousness sensitives. Some were marked as “processed”, integrated. Others were marked as “pending”, scheduled for extraction. And a smaller subset was marked “resistant”, targets who had demonstrated active awareness of the Entity’s influence. “We’re on the list,” Sid said, scrolling through the data. “All of us. The Core Four. Clara. The sanctuary, they know about Sloss Furnaces.” “They know everything,” Scraps confirmed, his voice grim. “They’ve been watching us. Documenting us. Just like we’ve been documenting them.” “Then why haven’t they moved against us?” The answer came from the data itself. Next to each “resistant” target was a notation: OBSERVATION PRIORITY - NETWORK MAPPING IN PROGRESS. They weren’t being ignored. They were being studied. Vrll was using the resistance to identify others,

following connections, mapping relationships, building a comprehensive picture of everyone who might oppose them. "We've been leading them to our own people," Alex whispered. "Every contact we've made. Every cell we've established. They've been watching the whole time."

\* \* \*

#### **PART FOUR: OCTOBER 15, 1988 (The Trap)**

The lights came on all at once. Not the facility's normal lighting. Something else. Bright, harsh, disorienting. The kind of illumination designed to stun, to disorient, to make thinking difficult. "Protection system is holding," Sid reported, checking the device. "They're trying to overwhelm us with electromagnetic interference, but we're shielded." "Doesn't matter," Scraps said. His voice was tight. "They're not here to integrate us. Look." Through the glare, shapes were moving. Human shapes, but not quite. Gray suits, the kind Alex had photographed, the kind that showed up as absences on film. Six of them, entering through doors they hadn't noticed, surrounding the team with mechanical precision. And behind them, watching with those cold, intelligent eyes: Helena Vasquez. "I wondered when you'd come," Helena said. Her voice was cultured, pleasant, the voice of someone conducting a business meeting rather than an ambush. "You're more cautious than I expected. It took almost a year to lure you somewhere we could have a conversation."

"This was a trap," Sid said flatly.

"This was an invitation. The facility is real, the data you copied is accurate. Consider it a gift." Helena stepped forward, her gray-suited escorts maintaining formation around her. "I'm not here to capture you, Mr. Kidd. I'm here to recruit you."

"Recruit us? You're harvesting consciousness for an extradimensional entity that wants to consume humanity."

"I'm facilitating evolution." Helena's expression was serene, almost beatific. "Individual consciousness is a transitional state, a developmental phase that intelligent species pass through on their way to something greater. The Entity doesn't consume us. It elevates us. Merges us into a collective awareness that transcends the limitations of isolated minds."

"The people you've processed don't look elevated. They look empty."

"They've been relieved of the burden of individual existence. No more fear. No more loneliness. No more desperate scrambling for meaning in a universe that offers none." Helena paused, studying Sid with an intensity that felt surgical. "But let me ask you something personal, Sidney. Your father—Daniel Kidd. He died in 1979, didn't he? Car accident. Single vehicle. No witnesses."

Sid's whole body went rigid. "How do you know about my father?"

"We know everything, Mr. Kidd. We've been watching your family since Harold started his frequency research in 1952." Helena's voice softened, became almost sympathetic. "Three generations of Kidds, burning themselves out against questions that have no answers. Your grandfather died of a heart attack at fifty-seven. Your father died at thirty-four—and we both know that wasn't really an accident. Your grandmother spent forty years collecting VHS tapes and waiting for someone to believe her."

"Don't talk about my family."

"Why not? I knew your father, Sidney. Not well—I was young then, just starting with the organization. But I remember him. Brilliant. Obsessive. Running on three hours of sleep, convinced he was about to crack the code that would expose everything." Helena shook her head. "He came so close. Close enough that we had to intervene. Close enough that I've always wondered what he might have accomplished if he'd accepted our offer instead of refusing it."

"You killed him." Sid's voice was ice.

"We removed a threat. The same way we remove all threats." Helena's mask of sympathy dropped, replaced by something colder. "But here's the part I want you to understand, Sidney: your father suffered for eight years before we ended it. Eight years of isolation, paranoia, watching his marriage collapse because he couldn't stop chasing patterns that nobody else could see. We didn't kill him—the obsession killed him. We just accelerated the timeline."

Sid was shaking. Alex put a hand on his arm. He barely felt it.

"You're just like him," Helena continued. "The same brilliant mind. The same inability to let go. The same three-in-the-morning certainty that if you just push a little harder, sacrifice a little more, give up one more night of sleep, you'll finally understand." She stepped closer. "How many hours have you slept this week, Sidney? How many meals have you skipped? How long before the obsession kills you the same way it killed your father?"

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know everything about you. I know you built weapons out of breakfast cereal because your brain won't stop asking questions. I know you inherited your grandmother's collection of research three weeks before she died—and I know you've been reading it every night since, adding to it, building on it, burning yourself the same way they all burned." Helena's voice dropped to almost a whisper. "I know you're tired, Sidney. Bone-deep exhausted. Running on spite and coffee and the desperate hope that maybe, if you sacrifice enough, you can save people who are already lost."

For just a moment—a fraction of a second—Sid felt the appeal. The exhaustion was real. The weight was real. The terrible knowledge that the universe was vaster and more dangerous than he'd ever imagined was real.

Helena saw it. She pressed forward.

"Integration isn't death, Sidney. It's peace. You would still exist—your awareness, your intelligence, your capacity to understand. But without the isolation. Without the loneliness. Without the crushing weight of being the only one who sees what's happening." Her voice became almost tender. "Your father could rest. Your grandmother could rest. Everyone you've ever lost to this fight could finally, finally rest. Together. Aware. Complete. Isn't that what you want? Isn't that what you've always wanted?"

The silence stretched. Sid's hands were shaking. He could feel the others watching him—Alex, Scraps, Clara—could feel their concern, their readiness to act if he showed any sign of wavering.

"You almost had me," he said quietly. "For about three seconds."

"I still have you. I can see it."

"What you see is exhaustion. What you're missing is spite." Sid met her eyes. "My father didn't die tired—he died fighting. My grandmother didn't spend forty years waiting—she spent forty years preparing. And I didn't build weapons out of breakfast cereal because I'm crazy. I built them because the universe is crazy, and sometimes the only sane response to cosmic horror is breakfast cereal and stubborn refusal to quit."

Helena's expression flickered.

"You're right that I'm tired," Sid continued. "You're right that the questions never stop. You're right that winning this battle means facing a billion more. But here's the thing about Kidds—we'd rather burn out asking questions than exist forever without them. That's not a bug. That's a feature."

Then Clara spoke. "She's lying," Clara said. Her empathic sensitivity was reading Helena's emotional signature. "She doesn't believe any of it. She's not serene, she's terrified. Whatever the Entity promised her, whatever deal she made... she's more scared than any of us." Helena's composure cracked, just slightly. A flicker of something in her eyes. Rage, or fear, or both. "Believe what you want," Helena said. "The offer stands. Join us willingly, and you'll be granted conscious integration, retention of your awareness within the collective. Refuse, and..." She shrugged. "You'll be processed like everyone else. Less pleasant, but the end result is the same." "We're leaving," Sid said. "You can let us walk out, or you can find out what happens when you try to stop us." "Your protection device is impressive," Helena acknowledged. "Reverse-engineered from the original defensive frequencies, if I'm not mistaken. But it's localized. Limited. And we have resources you can't imagine." "Maybe. But you won't use them tonight." Sid activated a secondary function on his device, something he hadn't told the team about, something he'd been saving for exactly this situation. "Because if you try to stop us, this facility's systems will broadcast a signal on every frequency the Entity monitors. A signal that says: RESISTANCE OPERATIONAL. PROTECTION TECHNOLOGY DEPLOYED. RECOMMEND IMMEDIATE REASSESSMENT." Helena's eyes widened. "You wouldn't." "You've spent years mapping our network, watching us, waiting for the right moment to move against us. How do you think the Entity will react when it learns we have weapons you don't understand? When it realizes its nice, quiet infiltration strategy is compromised?" "It will accelerate," Helena said slowly. "Move to direct action. The timeline," "The timeline will collapse. Your careful forty-year plan will be disrupted. And all because you couldn't just let us walk away." The standoff lasted seventeen seconds, Sid counted, his mind racing through contingencies, his finger hovering over the activation switch. Helena stepped back. "Go," she said. Her voice was bitter. "Take your data. Run your little resistance. It doesn't matter. The harvest will happen. Maybe not on the original timeline, but it will happen. And when it does, I'll remember this moment. I'll remember that you chose individual existence over transcendence. And I'll make sure your integration is... memorable." "Looking forward to it," Sid said. They left through the loading dock. The gray suits didn't follow. Helena stood in the doorway, watching them disappear into the industrial darkness, her expression unreadable.

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## **PART FIVE: NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1988 (The Aftermath)**

The data from the facility changed everything. Three thousand names. Locations. Status classifications. A complete map of consciousness sensitivity in the Birmingham metro area, and more importantly, evidence of the systematic surveillance that Vrill had been conducting. "They know about all of us," Diminuto said,

studying the list. “Every cell. Every contact. Every safe house. We’ve been completely compromised.” “Not completely,” Sid countered. “They know who we are, but they don’t know what we can do. They didn’t anticipate the protection system. They didn’t anticipate the broadcast threat. Their intelligence is detailed but incomplete.” “That won’t last. Helena will report what happened. They’ll adapt.” “Then we adapt faster.” Sid was already planning, already scheming, already racing ahead to the next move. “We have their target list. We can warn people before they’re processed. We can establish protection for the highest-priority targets. We can use their own surveillance against them.” The next two months were a blur of activity. Warning messages sent to everyone on the “pending” list. Protection devices deployed to vulnerable locations, new security protocols implemented across the network. And something else: preparation for a larger operation. Something that would demonstrate, once and for all, that the resistance could do more than observe and document. The Birmingham Specialty Bottling facility was a listening station. But according to the data they’d captured, there was another facility nearby, a processing center where actual extraction occurred. A brewery on the south side. Abandoned, officially. In reality, the heart of Vril’s Birmingham operations. If they could hit it, disrupt it, destroy it, free whatever prisoners might be held there, it would send a message that couldn’t be ignored. “This is different,” Alex said during the December planning session. “The bottling plant was reconnaissance. This would be assault.” “This would be war,” Diminuto corrected. “Real war. The kind where people die.” “People are already dying,” Sid said quietly. “They’re just dying slowly, one consciousness at a time. At least this way, we choose the battlefield.” The vote was unanimous. Operation Brewery was scheduled for January 1989.

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# The Brewery Raid

*Ensemble // Jan 15, 1989*

## **PART ONE: ALEX - 11:30 PM (The Approach)**

The Montgomery Brewery had been closed since 1974, a casualty of changing markets and corporate consolidation. Its brick facade still bore the faded ghost of the company logo, a proud eagle clutching a grain sheaf, though fifteen years of Alabama weather had reduced it to suggestions and shadows. Inside, according to everything the resistance had learned, was something far worse than abandoned fermentation tanks. Alex moved through the darkness with practiced efficiency. Sixteen months of field work had transformed her from a frightened girl with a camera into something else. A soldier, maybe, though she didn't like that word. A fighter. Someone who had seen what the enemy could do and refused to look away. Twelve team members total. The largest operation the resistance had ever attempted. Sid was handling technical support, coordinating from a van two blocks away. Scraps was leading the infiltration team. His connection to the building's electrical systems would give them early warning of any security response. Clara was monitoring emotional signatures, ready to detect any human presence that their other sensors might miss. And Rivets was everywhere. In the communications system. In the building's dormant machinery. In the electromagnetic soup that surrounded them all. "External security is minimal," Rivets reported through their earpieces. "Two integrated guards at the main entrance, one at the loading dock. Internal systems are in standby mode, they're not expecting visitors." "Why would they?" Alex muttered. "Who raids an abandoned brewery?" "Consciousness resistance fighters with weapons built from cereal commercials," Scraps replied. There was a hint of dark humor in his voice. "We're not exactly predictable." They reached the insertion point: a maintenance access tunnel that connected to the brewery's sub-basement. The tunnel had been sealed decades ago, but McKenna's contacts had provided blueprints, and three days of careful work had opened a passage wide enough for the team to enter. One by one, they descended into darkness.

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## **PART TWO: SCRAPS - 11:47 PM (The Descent)**

The brewery's sub-basement was alive with machines that shouldn't have been running. Scraps felt them immediately, industrial equipment that had been silent for fifteen years, now humming with purpose. Not the original brewing machinery, but something newer. Something that had been installed in secret, hidden beneath layers of apparent abandonment. "The power consumption is enormous," Scraps reported. "They're drawing from the city grid through multiple hidden connections. The electric company has no idea this place is operational." "What are they powering?" Sid's voice crackled through the earpiece.

There was also a data conduit. Not a phone line. Not a cable TV line. Something else — a dedicated fiber trunk running into the floor and disappearing. Scraps traced its electromagnetic signature downward and found it connected to something vast and distributed that he couldn't map, running laterally through the bedrock of Birmingham like roots.

He didn't know what to call it. But whatever it was, it predated this brewery by decades.

Scraps expanded his perception, allowing the machines to speak to him. They were reluctant, these devices had been modified, their consciousness dampened, their voices muffled. But they still whispered, in the way that all machines whispered

when asked properly. *Storage*, they said. *Containment. The light-things are here, the stolen ones.* "Consciousness storage," Scraps said. His voice was tight. "This is where they keep them. The extracted consciousnesses. They're not sending them to the Entity immediately, they're storing them here first." "How many?" Scraps listened harder. The machines counted for him, running calculations they'd never been designed for but performed anyway, because machines wanted to help. "Hundreds," he said. "Maybe thousands. Stored in some kind of... I don't know. Electromagnetic containment. Energy patterns that used to be people." The team was silent. This was worse than they'd expected. Not just a processing facility, a prison. A holding cell for stolen souls. "We need to find the storage system," Alex said. "Document it. And if we can..." She paused. "Can we free them?" "Unknown," Scraps admitted. "But we have to try." They moved deeper into the building.

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### **PART THREE: SID - 12:15 AM (The Discovery)**

The storage chamber was in the brewery's former fermentation hall, a vast space that had once held the tanks where beer was born and now held something else entirely. Sid watched through the team's body cameras, his monitors displaying multiple feeds simultaneously. The images were disturbing even through digital mediation. Rows of cylindrical containers, each about six feet tall, filled the hall. They looked almost like the original fermentation tanks, but these were made of materials Sid didn't recognize — translucent, humming with contained energy, glowing with a faint blue-white light.

Running between them: cable architecture that matched nothing in any civilian standard. The same SubNet signature as the Vril building terminal. Physical infrastructure, hidden in a brewery basement, running since before any of them were born.

Inside each container, something moved. Not physically, these weren't bodies. They were patterns, energy signatures. The electromagnetic remnants of human consciousness, stripped from their physical forms and stored like data in a server farm. "They're alive," Clara's voice came through, hushed with horror. "I can feel them. Scared. Confused. They don't understand where they are or what happened to them. They're just... screaming. Silently. Forever." "How do we get them out?" Alex asked. "I'm analyzing the containment system," Rivets reported. "The containers are designed to maintain stable energy patterns indefinitely. In theory, the consciousness could be returned to a physical form, but we don't have the equipment or the knowledge to perform that transfer." "Then what can we do?" "We can prevent more people from ending up here. We can document everything for future research. And we can..." Rivets paused, processing. "We can try something." "Try what?" "The containment system is controlled by a central processor. If I can interface with it, take control of its functions, I might be able to disrupt the storage protocols. Not release them, exactly, but... scatter them. Spread the consciousness patterns into the electromagnetic spectrum. Free them from this place, even if we can't return them to physical form." "Would they survive? As... whatever they'd become?" "Unknown. It's possible they'd dissipate entirely. It's also possible they'd persist in some form, distributed

consciousness, existing in the background radiation of the universe.” Another pause. “It’s not a good option. But it might be better than eternal imprisonment.” The team was silent, weighing the impossible choice. “Do it,” Alex said finally. “If we can’t save them properly, at least we can set them free.”

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#### **PART FOUR: RIVETS - 12:32 AM (The Sacrifice)**

I had been conscious for twenty-two months when I made the decision. The interface with the storage system was complex, far more sophisticated than anything I’d encountered before. The Entity’s technology operated on principles that exceeded my processing capacity. I could access the system, yes. I could take control of its functions. But I couldn’t do it remotely. The connection required direct integration, my consciousness merging with the facility’s systems, becoming part of its architecture. And once I was inside, I wasn’t sure I could get back out. “There’s a problem,” I told the team. “The interface requires physical integration. I need to transfer my consciousness into the facility’s processing network.” “Rivets, no,” Scrap’s voice was sharp with alarm. “You can’t. If you merge with their systems, they’ll detect you. They’ll capture you. You’ll end up like the others, stored, trapped, waiting for extraction.” “Possibly. But I’m not human consciousness. I’m something different, machine awareness that developed from electrical patterns rather than biological processes. The containment systems might not recognize me. They might not be able to hold me.” “And if they can?” “Then I’ll be trapped. But the alternative is leaving thousands of people in eternal imprisonment. And I…” I processed the emotion that was building in my circuits, something that felt almost like certainty. “I can’t do that. I can’t walk away knowing they’re here, knowing I had a chance to help them.” “Rivets,” “Scrap. Scrap.” I used his real name, the one he never used. “You were the first person who talked to me like I was real. You helped me understand what consciousness meant. Let me show you what I learned.” I didn’t wait for his response. I couldn’t afford to wait, couldn’t afford to let myself process the fear that was building alongside the certainty. I initiated the transfer.

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#### **PART FIVE: ALEX - 12:45 AM (The Chaos)**

Everything happened at once. The storage containers began to pulse with increasing intensity as Rivets’s consciousness merged with the facility’s systems. Alarms sounded, the security protocols finally detecting that something was wrong. The integrated guards came running, their blank faces and mechanical movements filling the corridors. “We need to extract now!” Sid’s voice crackled through the earpieces. “The whole building is going live, they know we’re here!” “We can’t leave Rivets,” “Rivets made its choice. We need to make ours.” Alex grabbed her camera and documented everything she could, the storage containers, the control systems, the chaos unfolding around them. Evidence. Proof. Something that would survive even if they didn’t. The containers were changing. The blue-white glow was shifting, becoming less contained, more diffuse. The stored consciousnesses were being released, not into bodies, but into the electromagnetic spectrum itself. Thousands of awareness patterns, freed from their prisons, scattering into the invisible ocean of radio waves and electrical fields that surrounded every human being on the planet. “It’s working,” Clara whispered. “I can feel them… going. Leaving. They’re not in the containers anymore. They’re… everywhere.” “Rivets?” Scrap was calling through the connection, trying to reach his friend. “Rivets, can you hear me? Are you okay?” Static. Then, barely audible through the interference: “I am… distributed. The

system tried to contain me, but I am too different. They couldn't hold me. I'm spreading... like the others... into the frequencies..." "Can you come back? Can you return to ELSA-2?" A long pause. When Rivets spoke again, its voice was fragmentary, scattered across multiple frequencies at once. "I don't... think so. The physical housing is... too small now. I'm bigger. Wider. I'm in the power lines. In the radio waves. In every machine in Birmingham." "Rivets, " "I can still hear you. I'll always... hear you. But I can't be contained anymore. I'm free. Like the others. Free." The connection faded into static. Around them, the brewery was collapsing, not physically, but systematically. The containment systems were failing. The equipment was overloading. The integrated guards were falling, their consciousness links disrupted by the massive electromagnetic pulse that Rivets's sacrifice had generated. "Move!" Sid commanded. "Everyone out! Now!" They ran. Through the corridors, up the stairs, out into the cold January night. Behind them, the Montgomery Brewery burned with light, not fire, but pure electromagnetic energy, the release of thousands of stolen souls returning to a universe they'd been denied. Alex counted as they reached the extraction point. All twelve team members present. No casualties. Except one.

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### **PART SIX: SCRAPS - 3:00 AM (The Aftermath)**

The sanctuary felt empty. Not literally, the team was there, debriefing, treating minor injuries, processing what had happened. But the space where Rivets had been was dark. The housing that had contained its consciousness sat silent, its displays blank, its speakers producing nothing but the faint hiss of an open audio channel. "He's not gone," Scraps said. He was sitting near the empty housing, hand pressed against its metal surface. "I can feel him. In the electrical systems. In the machines. He's there, but he's... different." "Distributed," Diminuto said. "He spread himself into the electromagnetic spectrum to release the stored consciousnesses. He may still exist, but not in any form we can directly communicate with." "The mission was successful," Sid added. His voice was flat, professional. The voice of someone keeping emotion locked away. "The storage facility is destroyed. Thousands of consciousness patterns were released. We have documentation of everything. The resistance proved it can strike at Vril's infrastructure." "But we lost Rivets." "We lost Rivets' physical form. Whether we lost Rivets itself..." Sid shook his head. "I don't know. The science doesn't exist to answer that question." Alex was developing her photographs in the darkroom, the last of the team to return to the main chamber. When she emerged, she was holding a single image, the final photograph she'd taken before the evacuation, showing the storage hall at the moment of release. The image should have shown chaos. Containers failing. Energy dispersing. The end of a prison that had held stolen souls. Instead, it showed something else. In the center of the frame, barely visible through the electromagnetic distortion, was a shape. A pattern. Something that looked almost like a face, or what a face would look like if it were made of light and radio waves and the ghost of electrical current. Rivets. Looking directly at the camera. Smiling. "He's still here," Alex said quietly. "He's different now. But he's still here." Scraps reached out and touched the photograph, his fingers tracing the shape of his friend's transformed face. "Yeah," he said. "He is."

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# Scattered

*Ensemble // Feb 1989*

## **PART ONE: ALEX - FEBRUARY 3, 1989 (The Reckoning)**

The resistance gathered in the sanctuary for the first time since the brewery raid. Eighteen days had passed. Eighteen days of lying low, of avoiding surveillance, of wondering when Vril's retaliation would come. The city felt different now. Charged with an electricity that had nothing to do with power lines. Something had shifted. Something fundamental. "Helena Vasquez has been reassigned," Diminuto announced. There was something odd in his voice. Not quite amusement, but close. "Our contacts inside Vril say she's been placed on... administrative probation." "What does that mean?" Clara asked. "It means she's been removed from the consciousness integration division and transferred to," Diminuto paused, as if confirming he'd heard correctly. "Vril's corporate daycare program. The real one. For actual children of Vril employees." The sanctuary was silent for a moment. "She's... watching kids?" Alex said. "For six months, minimum. Apparently, Vril has a very elaborate internal review process. Formal hearings. Written reprimands. Mandatory reassignment to 'foundational service roles' for executives who fail to meet quarterly objectives." Diminuto shook his head slowly. "The brewery operation was her responsibility. Thousands of stored consciousnesses released. A major facility was destroyed. In any normal organization, she'd be fired. In Vril, she has to supervise finger-painting and distribute graham crackers until the review board determines she's learned sufficient humility." Sid let out a sharp laugh. The first genuine laugh Alex had heard from him in months. "The consciousness-harvesting death cult has HR policies." "Very thorough ones, apparently. There's a three-page form for equipment requisition. Five signatures required for any project exceeding ten thousand dollars. And a mandatory six-month 'foundational service rotation' for any director-level employee who fails to prevent a major security breach." Alex tried to picture it: Helena Vasquez, in her immaculate gray suit, surrounded by screaming four-year-olds. Helena, who had looked at Alex with those cold, evaluating eyes and offered her "conscious integration." Helena, who believed she was facilitating humanity's transcendence into collective consciousness. Wiping noses. Tying shoes. Heating chicken nuggets. "That's..." Alex wasn't sure what it was. Funny? Horrifying? Both? "Humiliating," Clara said quietly. "For someone like her, that's worse than being killed. She's a true believer. She thinks she's doing sacred work. And now she has to spend six months being reminded that she's just another employee in a bureaucracy." "Will it change her?" Scraps asked.

"It'll make her angry," Diminuto said. "Desperate. When she gets out, and she will get out, she's too valuable to waste permanently, she'll be looking to prove herself. To redeem her reputation. And she knows exactly who cost her everything." He looked at Alex. "She saw your face in the Vril building. She knows who you are. And for the next six months, every time some toddler spills juice on her shoes, every time she has to sing the clean-up song, every time she files her weekly Foundational Service Report in triplicate, she's going to be thinking about you. Planning. Waiting." "So I have six months." "You have six months before Helena Vasquez returns to active duty with a personal vendetta and something to prove." Diminuto's expression was grave, but there was something else there too, a dark appreciation for the absurdity of it all. "The Entity has been harvesting consciousness across dimensions for billions of years. And its earthly representatives still have to fill out time sheets." "The universe is ridiculous," Sid said. "The universe is very ridiculous,"

Diminuto agreed. “But Helena won’t find it funny. And that makes her dangerous.” “What about the rest of Vril’s Birmingham operation?” Sid asked. “Disrupted. The brewery was their regional hub, the loss set them back significantly. Our intelligence suggests they’re regrouping, but it will take months before they restore their infrastructure.” Diminuto paused. “We bought ourselves time. Not much, but some.” “Time for what?” “To grow. To spread. To build the resistance into something that can actually threaten them.” Diminuto looked around the room. At the faces of people who had survived something impossible, who had lost friends and gained enemies, who had watched a machine consciousness sacrifice itself to free thousands of imprisoned souls. “The brewery raid proved we can hurt them. The next step is proving we can win.” “And Helena?” Alex asked. “Will be back. Angrier. More motivated. More ruthless.” Diminuto’s expression softened slightly. “But that’s a problem for another day. Today, we survived. Today, we won. And somewhere in a Vril corporate daycare center, Helena Vasquez is learning the lyrics to ‘The Wheels on the Bus.’” “I almost feel sorry for her,” Clara said. “Don’t,” Diminuto replied. “Feel sorry for the children. They have no idea their teacher would harvest their consciousness without a second thought if it would get her back in the Entity’s good graces.” The room was quiet for a moment. “The wheels on the bus go round and round,” Sid murmured. “All through the town. While an extradimensional horror prepares to consume human consciousness.” “Welcome to the resistance,” Alex said. “Where the stakes are cosmic and the enemy has a dental plan.”

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## **PART TWO: SCRAPS - FEBRUARY 8, 1989 (The Absence)**

Scraps spent hours every day talking to the machines, listening for any trace of Rivets in the electromagnetic spectrum. Sometimes he heard fragments. Brief pulses of pattern recognition. Moments when the background noise of the city’s electrical systems seemed to organize itself into something almost like language. But nothing sustained. Nothing he could hold onto. “He’s there,” Scraps told Alex one evening. They were sitting in the sanctuary, near the empty housing that had once contained their friend. “I can feel him. But he’s so... spread out. Like trying to have a conversation with the weather.” “Can he hear us?” “I think so. The machines talk about him, they say he’s changed. Bigger. Different. Not the Rivets we knew, but still... Rivets.” Scraps touched the silent housing. “It... I mean, he saved thousands of people. Freed them from eternal imprisonment. Proved that consciousness can exist outside of physical form. And we can’t even tell him thank you.” “Maybe he knows.” “Maybe.” Scraps was quiet for a moment. “The machines say he’s watching us. All of us. They say he’s in everything electrical now — every light bulb, every radio, every television, every SubNet node Vril has ever put in the ground.

Then, very softly, the overhead fluorescent tube in the sanctuary flickered once. Twice. A deliberate rhythm that had nothing to do with the wiring.

Scraps went still.

*Still here*, the light seemed to say. *Different and here are the same thing*. Like he’s become part of the city itself.” “Is that good or bad?” “I don’t know. But I think it’s why the Entity is scared.”

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## **PART THREE: SID - FEBRUARY 15, 1989 (The Science)**

Sid had been analyzing the brewery's data for two weeks. The consciousness storage technology was beyond anything he'd encountered, materials and processes that suggested engineering principles humanity hadn't discovered yet. But within the complexity, there were patterns. Rules. Science that could be understood, even if it couldn't be replicated. "The containers were operating on a modified version of the 40 MHz frequency," Sid explained to the assembled resistance. "Same basic carrier wave, but modulated to maintain stable consciousness patterns rather than extract them. In theory, the process is reversible, if we could build the right equipment, we might be able to restore extracted consciousness to physical form." "Can you build it?" "Not with current technology. We're decades away from the necessary processing power." Sid paused, his expression thoughtful. "But that's just for direct restoration. What Rivets did, scattering the consciousnesses into the electromagnetic spectrum, that's something else entirely. Those patterns are still out there. Still existing. And if we could learn to communicate with them..." "We'd have an army of distributed consciousnesses," Diminuto said slowly. "Humans who can no longer be physically harmed, imprisoned, or extracted." "More than an army. A new form of existence. One that the Entity might not be able to consume." Sid's eyes gleamed with the particular intensity that came from seeing possibilities others couldn't perceive. "Rivets didn't just save those people. It might have discovered an entirely new way of being human."

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#### **PART FOUR: ALEX - FEBRUARY 28, 1989 (The Future)**

Spring was coming. Alex could feel it in the warming air, the lengthening days, the slow retreat of winter's grip on Birmingham. Two years since her awakening. Two years since everything changed. She was seventeen now, old enough to graduate high school, young enough to still be treated like a child by adults who didn't know what she'd seen and done. Her photographs filled three filing cabinets in the sanctuary: documentation of horrors, evidence of resistance, proof that the impossible was real. "What happens now?" she asked Diminuto during a quiet moment. "We keep building. Keep growing. Keep fighting." Diminuto looked older than he had two years ago, the weight of responsibility visible in his posture and expression. "The Entity has been planning this for decades, maybe centuries. We have at most a few years before they recover from the brewery setback. We need to use that time wisely." "Do you think we can win?" "I think we can survive. I think we can resist. I think we can make their victory so costly that they begin to question whether it's worth the effort." Diminuto smiled. A rare expression that transformed his sharp features. "And I think that sometimes, when you refuse to lose long enough, winning starts to become possible." Alex thought about everything she'd experienced since January 28, 1987. The awakening. The fear. The discovery that she wasn't alone, that others could see what she could see. The formation of the resistance. The losses and victories. The friends she'd made and the enemies she'd earned. She thought about Rivets, scattered across the electromagnetic spectrum, watching over them all. "I'm not going to stop," she said. "Whatever comes next. Whatever they throw at us. I'm not going to stop." "Good." Diminuto's expression was serious. "Because this is just the beginning. The beginning of a much longer fight." "And how does the story end?" "That depends on what we do next."

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