

## Cipher: Breach in Time

### Groom Lake, Nevada – June 14, 1955, 02:00 Hours

Stars blinked above the Nevada desert, timeless and unreadable. Moonlight washed over Hangar 18 at Area 51, its silhouette rising like a fortress chiseled from silence. Static hung thick in the air as Private Timothy Rustand sat alone in the guard shack on the facility's outer edge.

Rustand hunched in his chair and took a quick swig of lukewarm coffee from a tin military-issue cup. "Just once I'd like it to stay hot," he muttered. He wiped his lips on his sleeve, eyes forced wide for a moment.

Tim tapped the Morse key, logging his hourly check-in:

— . . . — — — — / ... - . - - .. — - - / . - . . . — . . . . - . - . - -  
 / . - . . . . . . / - . . - . . . . - . - . - . - / .. / ... - - - — / . - — . . . ..  
 - . — ... / . - . . . . . . / - . . - . . . . . - .

**“Groom Station Alpha. All clear. I say again: all clear,”** he sent, while repeating the words aloud, an old habit from tech school.

Each *dit* and *dah* drilled into the silence. More reflex than thought now. Each chirp a sharp reminder of the endless monotony of guarding secrets he wasn't cleared to know.

He paused, massaging his shoulder to ease his tension. Through the window, the black and diamond-studded sky implied eternity.

***Dit-dah-dit, dah-ditty-dit, dah dit-dit.***

Another series of taps echoed through the shack. This time, no reply came. The silence stretched. Too precise, too sterile. Not human.

“HQ? You CC?” Tim clattered back. “Did you RX that last MSG?”

The radio crackled. Then flatlined into static, as if the silence had swallowed the reply.

Tim frowned and reached for the antenna tuner. The moment he twisted the dial, the radio spat out a sharp burst of static, followed by an odd pattern.

***Dah. Dit-dit. Dah-dah.***

He froze, recognizing the letters. But this wasn't standard

protocol. The signal repeated, deliberate, almost... patient.

A calibration error perhaps, or someone having fun. But unease prickled the back of his neck.

Curiosity got the better of him. He tapped out a response, mimicking the pattern he'd heard. The words didn't get verbalized this time. He couldn't bring himself to say them aloud.

*Dit-dah-dah ditty-dit-dit dah-dah-dah, Dit-dit ditty-dit, Dah ditty-dit-dit dit-dit ditty-dit?*

Another pause... longer this time. The radio snapped alive with a piercing tone, sharp enough to cut bone, followed by a string of rapid, high-speed Morse. The dots and dashes blurred into an incomprehensible rush, far too fast for any human hand to send.

The lights flickered.

The hum deepened. Low, resonant, and unnatural. It rolled through the floor like distant machinery waking up. Tim stiffened, hand hovering near the console, as the desk shook beneath his wrist.

It stopped.

Abrupt and absolute. One moment a scream of code. The next, only the soft hiss of static, like nothing had ever happened.

“HQ this is Alpha,” Tim keyed. “Confirm ur RX.”

“RX Alpha. All clear,” Control keyed back.

Tim rubbed the back of his neck, forcing a shaky laugh. “Must be these old lines.” he complained. He reached for the logbook. But the taps had sounded almost rhythmic. It was as if the interference knew exactly what he was listening for. An echo he couldn’t shake, familiar but impossible. He scribbled a note:

*“Anomalous transmission. Interference?”*

He didn’t think about it again.

But out there, somewhere across the cold vastness of space, the first ripple had been sent.

\* \* \*

He scanned the horizon. The hangar loomed behind him like an impenetrable monolith, its heavy doors closed tight in silent vigil.

Rustand stepped out of the shack and made his way toward his partner. He shifted his weight. The rifle rested loosely in his grip as he approached Sergeant Frank Carter.

Carter flicked ash from his dying cigarette without looking

up. “You check in, kid?”

“Yeah,” Tim muttered. “Got some weird chatter back. Didn’t sound normal to me.” His curiosity weighed on him like the rifle strap on his shoulder. “I’ve got to ask,” Rustand ventured in a low, thoughtful tone, glancing toward his partner, leaning on a weathered crate. “You ever think about what they’ve got sealed up in there?” Carter, his sharp features softened only by the flicker of a match as he re-lit his stubborn cigarette, raised a skeptical eyebrow. He took another long drag. “Nope. And I plan to keep it that way.”

Tim Rustand’s lips twitched, but he couldn’t keep his gaze from drifting toward the hangar. “Come on, Sarge. The security, the way they act so cagey... it’s not just aircraft in there, is it?” His tone carried the echoes of whispered legends and half-heard stories passed down among privates in hushed voices.

Carter’s expression hardened, and he exhaled a stream of smoke, his tone clipped and matter-of-fact. “You keep asking questions like that, and you’re going to find yourself guarding the back end of a supply depot. They’d assign you to watch paint dry if they thought you were too curious.” His voice, though light with humor, carried an undercurrent of caution. A warning born of years of following orders without question.

Rustand hesitated, shifting on his feet as if weighing the gravity of the conversation. “I don’t know. My dad swore there were stories. You know, about things we pulled out of

the sky. Machines that don't belong here." His words were soft, laced with an almost childlike wonder. A wonder that recalled evenings spent around a crackling radio, listening to tall tales of strange happenings.

Carter chuckled, his expression softening as he crushed his cigarette under his boot. "Stories are for people with time on their hands. Out here, you've got a job. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. The only thing flying around tonight is your imagination." His laugh was low and knowing, as if he'd heard a thousand such questions and learned to dismiss them with practiced ease.

Before Rustand could reply, a faint metallic sound, sharp and deliberate, interrupted them. It was a click that split the night's silence with uncanny precision.

Both men froze. Tim's knuckles went white on the rifle. "Did you hear that?" Carter scanned the dark. "Could be a coyote... but that didn't sound like teeth on wire." Rustand's heart hammered, and a wave of nausea mixed with disbelief overtook him as he staggered backward, unable to process the surreal split-second vision.

Carter straightened, his focus intensifying as his eyes scanned the dark horizon. "Stay alert. Could be nothing. Could be trouble." His words were clipped. Like a mantra recited on the edge of an unknown danger.

The wind whispered softly through the sand, carrying with it secrets of distant times and places. And then: time stuttered.

Rustand rested his hand against his side to catch his breath. He felt – vulnerable. For an instant, something painfully uncomfortable prickled at his senses. It was as if the world had skipped a frame, like a film reel that jumped, distorting reality. The distant buzz of the generators, a constant presence in the night, skipped a beat. A sudden, jarring break in the familiar background noise that made both men’s skin prickle.

Rustand turned toward Carter, and what he saw defied logic. Carter was there, but he was not alone. In that split second, Rustand saw two Carters: one standing as he had been moments before, his fingers brushing the holster of his sidearm; the other, a ghostly, fractionally ahead version of Carter, had already drawn his weapon – his mouth open as if to issue a silent, urgent warning.

Then: snap. In the blink of an eye, only one Carter remained.

But the moment lingered, like a scene replaying itself out of sync.

Rustand blinked rapidly, the sensation different from déjà vu – more like an intentional reset, as though reality had deliberately skipped. As if something wanted the moment to repeat – until someone noticed. He swallowed, uncertain whether the signal was watching him, or simply waiting.

It was as if the laws of quantum entanglement were unfolding before his eyes. Echoes of spooky action at a distance vibrated through him. In that instant, Carter’s inexplicable

duplication and sudden erasure felt like a ripple in one stretched fabric of reality. Distance and time no longer seemed to follow the rules.

Rustand froze. The hum of the generators faltered. Not only in sound, but in pressure. The air felt impossibly thick. It pressed around him as if he were moving underwater. Carter looked directly at him. His eyes were sharp, full of concern, as if he too had experienced something indescribable.

“Rustand, you all right?” Carter called out. The words reached him a second too late, like an echo from a half-remembered dream.

A low hum, deep and resonant, vibrated through the ground beneath him. Tim’s breath caught in his throat. The hum intensified, and the metal desk shuddered beside him. He noted with a mix of fear and incredulity that Carter’s posture had shifted, his fingers now brushing the grip of his sidearm. But Rustand swore he had already seen that exact moment unfold before his eyes. A cold, static-like sensation electrified his spine, a feeling as though his body had skipped forward while he struggled to catch up. It was as if time itself had faltered, leaving him stranded between two seconds.

Rustand’s boots crunched once on the gravel – then stilled. He hadn’t taken another step, but the world around him had shifted, like a room that had been rearranged in the dark. The air didn’t shift. It bent. Ever so slightly. Like something had leaned in too close and pulled the world with it. He froze. The wind had been steady. Now it pushed back in tiny bursts,

like it couldn't make up its mind. There was a flicker, like the blinking of stars. And yet - not light. Not heat. Something else. Like space forgot what shape it was supposed to be. He looked at Carter, but Carter was still scanning forward, unaware. How was he not feeling this? Rustand's fingers curled tighter on the rifle grip.

"Something's... not right," he intoned. He wasn't sure who he was talking to.

The earpiece in his helmet buzzed, coughed, then died. Cold silence filled its place.

His left foot twitched. Not because he moved it. It had shifted forward, like someone had cut a frame out of time and pasted him into the next one.

He held his breath. Waited.

Then the shimmer passed again. This time, he felt it in his teeth.

His balance swayed. Not from motion, but from the weight of what he couldn't see.

Whatever this was, it hadn't merely touched him. It had folded reality around him. And it wasn't done yet.

The wind that had been a constant, gentle wind, became a carrier of a strange echo of sounds that had not yet happened, the future and present intertwined. Then in that eerie silence,

Rustand heard Carter's voice again. Not once, but twice. "Stay alert. Could be nothing. Could be trouble."

Carter's voice was first heard during the real-time conversation, but a second, nearly identical version of the message was received immediately after the first one, as if it had been sent as a ghost echo – as if someone had recorded it onto an audio tape and put it out of sync, poorly, yet in a rather chilling manner. Rustand stopped breathing, the panic was intense. He looked, expecting Carter to react with visible alarm, but the sergeant remained unfazed. He flicked his cigarette away and rubbed his temple as if nothing unusual had happened. "You hear that?" Rustand whispered, his voice trembling with a mixture of disbelief and fear.

"Hear what?" Carter replied with a scowl, his tone clipped and full of uncertainty.

Rustand's boots betrayed him. The ground beneath his feet felt unsteady, not as if the earth was shifting or moving, but as if he was standing on a memory of the present and not the present itself. He blinked in rapid fire, confused, and found himself 10 feet in front of where he was moments before.

The sensation was surreal. The rifle strap dug into his shoulder. Rustand blinked, but the scene refused to catch up. His brain hit a wall. It wasn't confusion, it was more like the whole world had been tilted and no one warned him.

His foot was forward. He hadn't stepped.

“I... what?” he whispered.

His voice came out strained, like it belonged to someone else. He turned toward Carter, but Carter stood frozen in a way that didn't look natural. Not stillness, but suspension. Like time had hiccuped.

Rustand reached for the ground to steady himself. His palm scraped gravel before he braced; jolting him back into the moment.

Then he was back. The same position. Same breath. Rifle clenched. A sharp pulse drummed behind his eyes. Something had snapped him into place, but it wasn't gravity.

“Carter,” he croaked. “I was...”

The words broke apart as another ripple passed through the air.

Carter's head lifted. He straightened fast, boots shifting back. His eyes locked on Rustand.

“You...” Carter forced out words. “You moved.”

“I didn't,” Rustand muttered. “But I wasn't here either.”

He heard it. It sounded absurd, even to him. But Carter didn't question it. He had already drawn his sidearm.

Rustand didn't move. He couldn't trust the ground beneath

him.

Carter's face tightened. "You blinked. One second you were five feet ahead."

Rustand gave a small nod. "Felt like both. Like I stepped out of sync."

Silence pressed in. Then came the sound.

Click.

Not boots. Not gravel. Something cleaner. Intentional.

Carter turned sharply. His voice lowered. "That wasn't us."

Rustand stayed still. His mouth was dry.

A second click followed. Closer this time.

Their eyes met. No one spoke.

Then the shadows shifted.

Carter's voice was low, almost hushed. "Tell me you saw that."

Rustand didn't answer right away. "I saw it... I just don't know what I saw."

Carter shook his head, eyes scanning the horizon. "No time

to process it. Not now.”

Rustand exhaled shakily. “That was plain wrong.”

“Keep it together,” Carter said, though his voice betrayed a crack of unease. “We’ll deal with the nightmare later.”

Rustand nodded, trying to push the moment down, deep. “If there’s a later.”

\* \* \*

Beyond the fence perimeter and shadowed depths of the hangar, five intruders – dressed in black – moved with unnerving precision. They moved like predators. Each step exact, like they’d rehearsed this breach a hundred times before. Each step was planned. Every movement sharp, efficient, and cold.

In an instant, Carter and Rustand were on their weapons, their rifles up and level, with a primitive urge to survive erasing any of the confusion that might otherwise have clouded their minds. Rustand backed up against the wall. Carter gave a two finger salute, a subtle hand signal that he’d been living and fighting in the shadows for years. Rustand exhaled through his nose, slow and planned. Whatever the anomaly was, he decided for the time being it could wait. The present danger required attention. The hangar was massive,

shadowy, and threatening, sitting right there in the darkness, with its doors shut tight. And now, there was no question of it: they were not alone.

The first of the intruders - a wiry man with piercing blue eyes, and clearly the leader - moved as though he had already memorized every inch of the terrain. In his hand he held a small, smooth cylinder, its edges worn and pitted as if it had seen countless secret operations before. The device was from a forgotten era, from the future.

Right behind him, a squat, stocky man shifted restlessly, his burly hands flexing against the grip of his weapon. "I don't like this," he muttered, his voice barely rising above a breath. "Feels wrong."

The slender woman with a scar across her cheek shot him a piercing look. "Shut up and move," she ordered curtly, her delicate fingers twitching in a familiar, soldier-like habit. The reflex of someone who constantly checked her weapon even in moments of relative calm.

The fourth member of the group, a tall, broad-shouldered man, remained silent. He did not need words. His inscrutable expression and the confident set of his jaw spoke volumes. Clad in gear that blended with the surrounding shadows, he looked as though he already knew secrets that the others could only guess at. In a measured, almost ritualistic manner, he pressed a switch on a compact device strapped to his arm.

A soft, deliberate vibration pulsed outward in an unseen

wave; a signal of readiness or a warning to unseen watchers. The entire team paused for a full second, collectively holding their breath as if waiting for fate to decide their next move. Then nothing happened.

The leader exhaled slowly, breaking the silence. “Clear. We’re good.” His tone was smooth, confident – a stark contrast to the palpable tension that still vibrated in the air.

The youngest member of the team, a man with a perpetual look of nervous energy, let out a shaky breath. “Did you feel it outside?” he croaked, his voice tight with apprehension.

The woman with the scar nodded as she adjusted the strap of her pack. “Yeah. Like a misfire.” Her fingers fidgeted with the edge of the pack, a reflex that betrayed more unease than her voice did.

“Too close,” the leader muttered, his gaze flicking toward the perimeter where Carter and Rustand continued their patrol, looking intently for the silent intrusion unfolding beyond the hangar’s shadow.

“Lucky for them,” the leader added under his breath, a wry smile tugging at the corners of his lips as he contemplated the situation.

The tall, silent man tilted his head, brow furrowed. “They didn’t register it?” His voice was almost a murmur. Too calm for the weight behind the question.

The leader shook his head. “No, but they felt it. That’s the edge of the radius. The scientists at the facility call it ‘localized chronal shear.’” His explanation was brief, yet ominous. It implied the intruders were operating on the fringes of a temporal anomaly.

The tall man shifted his weight, visibly uncomfortable. “If they’d been closer...?” he ventured, his voice trailing off in uncertainty.

The leader snapped his fingers. Perhaps too sharply. His confidence seemed strained. “Then we’d have a bigger problem.” He growled sharply. “Move. Now.”

“Still too unstable,” the scarred woman shook her head and muttered, a note of frustration creeping into her tone.

The leader’s knuckles whitened around the worn cylinder. He hesitated briefly, then signaled the others to move. “Enough. Move out.” With that, the intruders dispersed, their blackened uniforms merging with the deep shadows of the hangar as they advanced steadily toward their target.

Behind them, in the warm, starlit Nevada night, the last wisps of a mysterious time ripple dissipated silently into the desert air; unseen, unfelt.

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The five intruders moved rapidly, the lead figure raising a cylindrical device already humming with restrained energy. The beam whispered out, and the fence vanished - not burned, not cut, but erased, as if edited out of the present. One by one, they crossed the threshold, not so much entering as resuming something already set in motion. They carried with them an assortment of advanced equipment: cylindrical devices that hummed with hidden energy, communication tools that defied the technology of the era, and weaponry modified for stealth and rapid action. Their target: a spacecraft, a vessel of mystery and enigma, shrouded in its own secrets.

“Eyes sharp,” muttered the wiry leader, his piercing blue eyes scanning the surroundings with calculated intensity. He gestured silently for the others to fan out, their black uniforms absorbing the darkness as they moved in perfect unison.

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Carter and Rustand were on high alert as they made their way around the hangar perimeter. Something was definitely off, and nothing made sense anymore.

The intruders approached the hangar. The wiry leader held up the cylindrical device and pressed a small button on its surface. A faint, almost imperceptible purr filled the air, followed by a sudden ripple; an invisible shockwave of energy that spread outward in a perfect circle, bending the moment around it. A two-meter section of the hangar door vanished

into mist. The four armed guards at the entrance froze mid-step, eyes wide with confusion, before collapsing where they stood, dropped cold by the silent force.

On the other side of the complex, Rustand staggered slightly and gripped a wooden crate to stable himself. “What the... did you feel that?”

Carter had already turned toward the hangar. “Yeah. Like a punch without the sound.”

“That wasn’t wind,” Rustand said, adjusting his grip on the rifle. “That was... something else.”

Carter took off at a sprint. “Let’s move. Now.”

They ran.

“GO,” the leader ordered, his voice low but carrying the weight of command.

With that single word, the team surged forward, their boots making barely a whisper on the cold concrete as they slipped through the breach and swept into the hangar.

And there it sat: silent and ominous.

The spacecraft loomed before them: a mysterious glowing, greenish-teal vessel whose surface was etched with intricate, interlocking symbols that danced across its metallic skin. It appeared otherworldly, an eerie blend of futuristic design

and enigmatic antiquity, its details as mesmerizing as they were perplexing.

Nearby, a small desk cluttered with papers and outdated equipment caught the leader's eye. "Bingo," he murmured, his voice low and conspiratorial as his eyes caught the faded gleam of an American-made Morse code keyboard lying incongruously among the clutter. "We've found it, as they said. This goes with us." Swiftly and without hesitation, he unplugged the device and tucked it under his arm. A precious relic that held the key to secrets long buried.

"Control panel's here," another intruder said, motioning toward a section of the spacecraft's hull that appeared less uniform than the rest. The leader stepped forward, placing the cylindrical device against the surface. Almost immediately, it emitted a soft, rhythmic buzz, and with a subtle mechanical click, a hidden panel slid open. Inside, rows of strange, glowing symbols pulsed with a steady rhythm, reminiscent of a human heartbeat. A silent, mesmerizing cadence that hinted at a language older than time.

"Here goes nothing," the leader muttered, his voice a blend of determination and excitement as he manipulated the interface with a deft combination of instinct and memorized instructions. The symbols shifted and reorganized on the screen, their glow intensifying in a hypnotic dance of light and shadow.

"What do we need that old World War Two souvenir for?" the youngest assailant interjected, his tone laced with in-

credulity. “Let’s dump it and get out of here. It’s slowing us down!”

The wiry leader shot him a withering glare. “Do you think we’re the first ones to touch this technology? This thing wasn’t built. It was recovered.” The military’s been sitting on it for decades without realizing what they had.”

The scarred woman ran her slender fingers reverently over the device, studying the worn symbols beneath its surface. “This thing,” she hesitated, “It doesn’t just translate signals. It interfaces with the other technology.”

The leader’s grip on the device tightened imperceptibly as he responded in a near-whisper, “YES. The Morse Code Unit is the cipher key, and it must go with us!”

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### **Groom Lake, Nevada – June 14, 1955, 02:05 Hours**

Inside the hangar, the air had grown impossibly still, as though the atmosphere was holding its breath. The five intruders moved with silent speed, their boots making not a sound as they weaved through crates and abandoned machinery. The young member of the team banged into a crate and let out a silent cry of pain.

At a control panel near the vessel, the leader unlatched his

pack and then carefully removed the unassuming Morse code device. The metal box, weathered and marked with the faded insignia of the U.S. military, held an aura of enigmatic history.

The young assailant frowned in puzzlement as he tapped the device with his gloved fingers. “I still don’t get it... why this thing? Shouldn’t we be using something more modern?” he asked, his tone equal parts genuine confusion and frustration.

The scarred woman beside him shot him a sideways glance. “You think this ship works on ‘modern’ tech?” she replied angrily.

“Enough,” Barked the leader. He knelt beside the spacecraft’s control interface and placed the Morse code unit carefully on a flat surface, below a seam in the metal. With deft, precise movements, he twisted a dial on the side of the device. The brief respite allowed the young operative to steal a quick bitter espresso shot from his hidden flask and tend to his bleeding gashed knee. His eyes shifted up quickly when a sharp tone briefly assaulted his ears.

And then it was back to the action.

The spacecraft responded. A thin blue light scanned the Morse unit, its flickering glow dancing across the weathered exterior before disappearing into the hull. A series of vibrations cascaded outward from the control panel, each one matching the exact rhythm of a coded transmission.

The leader's jaw tightened as he observed, "It's recognizing the frequency."

The tall, broad-shouldered man, silent and imposing, finally broke his silence. "This is much more than a code unit," he stated in a deep, resonant tone.

The youngest member of the team glared in confusion. "What do you mean?" he demanded, gesturing toward the alien, intricate surface of the spacecraft.

The leader's eyes never left the vessel as he tapped the device again. "This thing isn't what it appears to be," he blurted in frustration. "The military had no idea what they were dealing with when they recovered it." With a click of a small toggle switch, another pulse of energy raced up the spacecraft's hull, causing a section to slide open with a quiet, almost reverent hiss.

"Repurposed," he muttered under his breath.

The youngest's brow furrowed with urgency. "Repurposed from what?" he pressed, his voice trembling with both curiosity and concern.

A heavy silence hung between them before the broad-shouldered man spoke again, his tone imbued with reverence. "Something older than radio waves," he intoned.

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Behind them, the unconscious guards stirred, the quiet murmur of movement a stark reminder of the narrow margin between success and failure. Carter and Rustand reached the opening right as two of the guards were shaking off the hit, eyes wide with residual shock.

“You all right?” Carter asked, crouching beside one.

“I think so,” the man said, voice groggy. “What... what did they hit us with?”

“No idea,” Carter said, helping another guard to his feet. “But they’re inside...and they’ve got something big.”

They stepped through the hole, weapons raised, breath catching as their eyes locked on the ship.

“Holy cats...” one of the guards muttered. “That thing real?”

Rustand stared, wide-eyed. “I used to laugh at the alien stories.” He swallowed. “Ain’t laughing now.”

The youngest assailant cast a nervous glance over his shoulder. “We’re out of time,” he hissed urgently.

“Almost there,” the leader barked, his voice edged with tension as he aggressively pressed on.

The hangar doors groaned open, and a flood of pale light spilled in; headlights from an approaching vehicle flared through the haze, and the unmistakable sound of boots

striking the ground echoed through the cavernous space.

“We’ve got company,” hissed one of the assailants, her tone laced with panic.

The leader muttered under his breath, “Prepare to defend the ship. This doesn’t end here.”

A gunshot shattered the tense silence. A bullet ricocheted off the spacecraft’s hull with a metallic clang, fired by a guard who hadn’t waited for orders.

A second shot followed. Then a third.

And then something went wrong.

One of the guards near the bay entrance, a young man barely more than a recruit, staggered backward without being hit. His rifle clattered to the floor. For a split second, he looked confused, as if his body no longer matched the instructions his brain was giving it. His mouth opened, but no words came. His skin drained to a gray pallor.

His veins darkened. Not bruised, not broken. Darkened, visibly, like ink being drawn up through invisible threads.

He reached for his face, but his hands twitched mid-air and locked in place. The air around him wavered. There was no light, no noise, but space itself seemed to ripple inward toward his chest.

The soldier let out a choking sound that didn't match pain. It sounded like something being unwritten. His entire form jittered like a poor video signal. Then he folded in on himself, not bending or falling, but compressing into a narrow column of distortion, like a figure drawn through a collapsing lens.

And then he was gone.

No body. No blood. Just a half-second image of where he had been.

The nearest guard screamed in terror. The tall intruder gasped and fell to one knee, staring in utter shock.

Even the leader hesitated.

No one spoke. No one could grasp the horror they had just witnessed.

Then another round slammed into the side of the vessel, and the standoff shattered, giving way to chaos once more.

“Cease fire!” Carter shouted, but the spell was broken.

The intruders responded with lethal precision. No hesitation. No wasted motion. In seconds, two more guards were down, their bodies crumpling before they hit the floor. Carter turned to shout again. A round caught him square in the chest, and he dropped without a sound.

Rustand dove behind a support beam, heart hammering, ears ringing.

The intruders moved like machines, sweeping the area with cold efficiency. Another guard went down with a short cry, a pattern of red sprayed against a stack of wooden crates, his weapon clattering uselessly to the ground.

The youngest member of the team ducked behind a nearby rusting diesel fuel tank, clenching the Morse code unit tightly as if it were a lifeline. “What now?” he shouted over the dissonant clamor of gunfire.

“We finish what we started,” the leader commanded with fierce resolve.

With a sudden, explosive motion, he slammed his hand against the interface, and the spacecraft shuddered violently to life. Lights along its surface flickered erratically, casting eerie, shifting shadows that danced across the hangar’s walls. The subtle vibrations of the machinery grew louder, resonating in their chests like a rallying cry, as the ship’s surface distorted in a subtle liquifaction. An effect so fleeting it defied comprehension.

A seam split open across the side of the craft, unveiling a darkened passage illuminated by a low, internal glow. Vapor hissed outward in serpentine coils as the hatch widened, revealing a mechano-organic interior that pulsed with a faint, rhythmic thrum. Walls that breathed softly, their surfaces threaded with bio-luminescent veins and metallic

tendons. The leader didn't hesitate. He vaulted into the opening, swallowed by the living glow. The others followed, boots pounding the deck as tracer fire stitched the ground behind them, ricochets flaring like fireflies. As the last figure dove through, the hatch irised shut with a hiss, sealing them inside as the vessel slowly rose from the concrete.

Then, amid a sudden burst of gunfire outside the craft, the leader climbed into the command chair and brought the control panel to life. His fingers deftly moved over the glowing interface panel, with a grace that defied a 1950's understanding of keyboards and computer interfaces. With a series of rapid keystrokes that suggested a rehearsed instinct, he entered a sequence as if guided by a force beyond human will. The spacecraft's engines roared to life, sending a searing wave of heat cascading through the hangar. The guards outside, momentarily overwhelmed by the spectacle, fell back and shielded their faces as the ship levitated. A silent, surreal defiance of gravity as it hovered mere inches off the ground.

"Next stop... Andromeda!" the youngest intruder quipped nervously, the tremor in his voice belying the gravity of their mission.

The spacecraft tilted upward; its imposing nose aimed directly toward the hangar's ceiling. A sudden, explosive burst of energy erupted from its engines, ripping through the roof and sending a cascade of debris raining down like confetti. The vessel rocketed upward, its view through the fractured roof warping and bending, as if reality were

being stretched, distorted, and reassembled in a moment of temporal defiance.

Outside, three remaining guards stood in stunned silence, their eyes fixed upward as the spacecraft disappeared into the vast, starless night. Only a trail of distorted, shimmering light remained. A ghostly fingerprint against the backdrop of an indifferent universe. The stars wavered, like even they weren't sure what had happened by the ship's departure. While the smoldering remnants of the hangar flickered, caught in a liminal space between what had been and what was yet to come.

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Inside the ship, the crew gathered themselves with a palpable mix of awe and disbelief. The leader exhaled slowly, his grip on the control console finally easing as if releasing a long-held secret. "It worked," he muttered to himself, his voice came out like a breath, not quite a sentence. The words came out rough, half victory, half burden, with the weight of what lay ahead.

The youngest assailant stared at the glowing Morse unit in his hand, uncertainty flickering across his face. Its surface now glowed faintly, the embedded symbols shifting imperceptibly as if alive with the pulse of an ancient heartbeat. "So what about this relic?" he asked, his voice tinged with equal parts curiosity and urgency. "What's it for? Doesn't this

ship have communication capabilities?”

“Keep it close,” the leader replied, his eyes never leaving the swirling vortex of light that now beckoned from beyond the hangar. “You’ll understand when we get there.”

“And what about those glowing tubes over there? What are those supposed to do?” the young assailant pressed, his voice a mixture of impatience and wonder.

“Enough talk,” the leader tersely replied, his voice brooking no delay. “We need to move!”

His fingers danced over the clear screen in front of him, making final adjustments with a precision that bordered on instinct. For a moment, a flicker of light swept through the ship’s cabin. It was a skipped frame in the continuum of their reality, noticed only by the leader’s discerning eyes.

Without another word, the spacecraft advanced silently. Its surface warped into the bizarre, distorted reflection of a funhouse mirror. As the vessel accelerated, the stars outside blurred into streaks of luminescence, and the Alcubierre warp drive engaged, propelling them at speeds surpassing the limits of conventional physics. For a fleeting, almost imperceptible moment, time itself halted. The infinite vastness of the cosmos stretching out before them, every second elongated and imbued with the gravity of destiny. In one final, heart-stopping moment, they were gone.

\* \* \*

Rustand watched, stunned, as the craft tore through the roof and vanished into the sky. Gone in a blink, no more than a flicker against the stars. He raced to his partner's lifeless body, grimacing as he moved. Rustand dropped to his knees, one hand clamped over the burning gash along his ribs, the other hovering inches above Carter's lifeless body. Blood smeared his palm, warm and sticky. Smoke curled in the air, bitter as regret. "Carter! Stay with me!" He screamed in agony - but knew it was already too late. Carter was gone.

He tried to close Carter's eyes, but they stayed half-lidded, glassy. His breath hitched. A low moan escaped before he could swallow it.

Above him, the night sky was silent again.

He looked up, eyes straining toward the empty space where the craft had torn through the roof and become a dot in the sky in a blink. Not even a vapor trail remained. Only a faint echo of ruptured metal and a hum that still rang in his bones.

His gaze caught on the wall-mounted clock across the hangar. Its hands were frozen at 02:17.

He blinked hard. Looked again. Still 02:17.

"What just happened?" he whispered, voice raw, barely there.  
"What was that thing?"

No one answered. No one could.

He was alone.

## 2

# Cipher: Cold War Convergence

**Geneva, Switzerland – November 19, 1985, 0200 Hours**

The room was unassuming at first glance, an ordinary conference hall with paneled walls, a long-polished table, and faintly glowing lights. But for Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, it was anything but ordinary. The two leaders sat at opposite ends of the table, their faces lit by the soft glow of dim lighting that shimmered across the air between them.

Despite their political differences, an uneasy camaraderie hung in the air. Both men knew the gravity of the moment and the rare convergence of circumstances that had brought them here. Outside the perception of their respective governments, away from advisors and diplomatic scripts, this meeting had been orchestrated by forces greater than either of their nations; a select, unseen group whose influence spanned continents and ideologies.

Reagan adjusted his suit jacket and leaned forward, his characteristic Hollywood charm momentarily replaced by the sober demeanor of a man grappling with a reality he could barely fathom. "Mikhail," he began, his voice steady, "it's not merely about the Strategic Defense Initiative. We're talking about something far larger than our nations. Larger than anything humanity's ever faced."

Reagan nodded, gesturing to the projections between them. Images flickered; grainy photographs of unidentified aerial phenomena, schematics for advanced propulsion systems, and cryptic diagrams with notes in languages that spanned centuries.

Gorbachev's sharp eyes studied Reagan, his expression inscrutable. "I'm not convinced; this sounds too fantastical even for our times. We must be missing something," he said, his voice tinged with skepticism. His accent, heavy yet precise, filled the otherwise quiet room.

"These aren't stories or figments of imagination," Reagan said. "They've been here long before us. And they're tied to something we've only begun to understand." He hesitated, his words catching on the weight of their proposition. "We're talking about a force that's embedded itself in human history. Technological, manipulative, and beyond our grasp."

Gorbachev leaned back, folding his hands in his lap. He exuded calm, but the slight furrow in his brow betrayed his unease. "And what is this force? Aliens? Beings from another world?"

Reagan smiled faintly, though the expression lacked humor. “That’s the convenient explanation, isn’t it? UFOs. Extraterrestrials. They keep people distracted, always looking up at the stars while the real threat is right here on Earth.”

The room fell silent. The flicker of artificial light cast long shadows across the walls.

“Da. Almost like the diversion our two countries created back in the fall of ’83, eh, Mr. President?”

“Yes,” said Reagan. “And I felt horrible that the KAL007 plane had to be the decoy. But it worked.”

“It couldn’t be avoided, dear comrade,” the Soviet President said softly. He paused, then continued, “So you’re saying it’s not aliens?” His voice was quiet, but deliberate. “Then what?”

“The others... they’ve all seen it,” Reagan said, his voice lower now. “Bits and pieces. Enough to know this thing didn’t start with us. It’s been nudging us forward. Maybe forever. The Tower of Babel. The printing press. Railroads. It leaves fingerprints.”

Gorbachev’s lips pressed into a thin line. “And now it’s accelerating,” he said. “These ‘fingerprints,’ they’ve become more frequent. More visible.”

Reagan nodded. “Precisely. And our Strategic Defense Initiative? It’s not about defending against missiles. It’s

about preparing for a force we barely comprehend.”

Gorbachev stood, pacing slowly as he processed Reagan’s words. “Why bring me here? Why tell me this? We are adversaries, Mr. President. The Cold War...”

“That’s a smokescreen,” Reagan cut in. “C’mon, Mikhail... you know it, I know it. They pulled us in because we’re the only ones who won’t choke on red tape when the truth gets ugly.” “And what is the truth, Ronald?” Gorbachev asked, his gaze piercing.

Reagan exhaled slowly. The pause wasn’t hesitation. It was calibration. He traced a finger along the edge of a manila folder, unopened between them. “There’s a compartmentalized archive,” he said, “one even our own defense establishment barely touches. Artifacts recovered in the fifties, officially labeled as misidentified weather experiments or misattributed Soviet prototypes.”

Gorbachev arched an eyebrow but stayed quiet.

“They weren’t,” Reagan continued. “We ran materials testing across multiple defense labs. No match to known alloys, no match to foreign designs. One sample was completely resistant to corrosion. No oxidation, no wear. It was as if it hadn’t aged a day since it was retrieved.”

Gorbachev folded his hands. “Nyet. That could be fabrication. Misinformation planted to sow panic or provoke escalation.”

Reagan's tone flattened. "That's what some thought. Until we saw similar reports surface during your campaign in Afghanistan. The British encountered something similar during their Cyprus entanglement in '54. Even the French buried findings from a crash site near Dien Bien Phu. Different continents, same inconsistencies."

Gorbachev didn't blink. "And what do you think it means?"

Reagan let the question hang. He tapped once on the folder. "The real surprise wasn't the material. It was the data attached. Locations cross-referenced with intercepted transmissions. Some of the dates didn't align with reality. Not errors... anomalies."

"In what sense?"

"They carried embedded metadata with inconsistent timestamps. One packet claimed a signal was received in Nevada two days before the sender was born. Another indicated a relay from East Berlin that hadn't been constructed yet."

Gorbachev stiffened slightly, but said nothing.

Reagan leaned in. "We dismissed most of it. Blamed clerical mistakes or Soviet disinformation. But some of us started asking the wrong kinds of questions. Questions about the past. About causality."

The silence between them thickened; no longer diplomatic, but philosophical.

“Whatever’s guiding these incidents,” Reagan added, “it’s more than who holds the bigger arsenal. It’s about who understands the pattern.”

Gorbachev asked incredulously, “You mean who understands that history might not only repeat itself... it might already be repeating right now?”

“Right now,” Reagan said pensively, “I’m not sure that either of us have a clue.”

Reagan looked at the table, where a glowing artifact entirely out of place in 1985 sat. The artifact lay on the table between Reagan and Gorbachev, its crystalline lattice shimmering faintly under the dim overhead lights. A blend of organic, quartz-like material and engineered nanotechnology, the object appeared to breathe, its translucent surface shifting subtly between solid and liquid states as though alive. Glyphs and mathematical symbols flickered momentarily across its structure, disappearing as quickly as they appeared, leaving only the impression of something ancient yet far beyond human understanding.

“This,” Reagan said, his voice almost reverent, “is one of the artifacts. It was found decades ago, buried beneath layers of Arctic ice. It’s not man-made. And it’s not from beyond our world, either.”

Gorbachev stared at the projection, his jaw tightening. “Then where did it come from?”

Reagan's gaze dropped to the pulsing crystal.

"That's what scares me," he said. "What if it wasn't from out there?" He leaned forward. "What if it was born here, then sent back? What if it's not from anywhere at all, but from time itself?"

A shared memory passed between them. An unsolved breach at Groom Lake decades earlier. Whispers of a vanished craft that neither superpower could fully explain. Each had files on it, fragments pointing to a larger puzzle beyond any Cold War rivalry. Even the best intelligence hinted that what happened in 1955 might be the key to what they faced now.

The weight of the word hung in the air, filling the silence with an almost tangible tension. Gorbachev finally broke the quiet. "If this is true, then the others are more a collective of power brokers. They are something else entirely."

"They see themselves as guardians," Reagan said, his tone skeptical. "But even they admit that what's happening now is beyond their control."

Gorbachev returned to his seat, folding his hands atop the table. "And if this force cannot be controlled? What then?"

Reagan's face darkened. "Then humanity is playing a game it doesn't even realize it's losing."

"This meeting," Gorbachev said finally, his voice low, "will it change anything?"

“It has to,” Reagan replied. “Because if we fail to understand what’s really at stake, it won’t be nations that fall. It will be everything.”

The two men finished staring at each other and got up from the table. Silently.

President Reagan continued, “Mr. Gorbachev, to be clear: we will meet back here in two days. As we have been instructed. The others have requested our presence and wish to include the two of us in their plans. Our countries may be opposed, but this is far bigger than the Cold War. They will explain the expansion plans and more about the technology we’re using... even now, in this meeting spot.”

Gorbachev slowly nodded in agreement, and the two of them broke their gaze, pivoted, and headed to opposite walls of the room. They both dematerialized into the blackness, with an almost imperceptible flicker of light.

In the empty room, the shadowy walls hummed faintly, as though bearing witness to truths too vast for any one moment, or one generation, to contain.

## Cipher: The Signal in the Static

### **SETI Outpost near Groom Lake, Nevada – Present Day, Wednesday, 02:15 Hours**

Officially, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, or SETI, was a decentralized scientific effort. Dozens of connected universities and research centers were quietly listening to the stars for any hint of intelligent life.

But tucked deep in the Nevada desert, behind barbed wire and satellite-blind zones, existed a facility not listed on any organizational chart. Known to its few occupants as the Listening Glass, the SETI outpost near Groom Lake operated under a different charter; one sanctioned, denied, and classified all at once.

Outside, Frank, the ancient security guard, rumored to have come with the original construction – grumbled about “weird hours” as he fumbled with his ring of mismatched keys. It was his third attempt at locking up that night, and

he was no closer to finding the right key than he was to understanding the researchers' odd habits. A thermos of stale coffee dangled from his free hand.

Inside, the control room pulsed with an almost hypnotic glow. The electrostatic hum of machinery set Liam's teeth gently on edge, a constant reminder of humanity's obsession with the unknown. The air was cool and sterile, with the acrid scent of ozone and burnt circuitry. Occasionally, the speakers spat out a faint hiss; data pouring out into the digital void. Liam Mills hunched his lean frame over a cluster of glowing monitors, fingers tapping a quiet rhythm on the desk. To him, this place was more than a workplace; it was a sanctuary for meticulous minds, a refuge for anyone who still believed that something extraordinary might be waiting in the static.

Tonight, though, felt as uneventful as the thousands of nights before it.

Then the pulse arrived.

At first, it blended into the noise; a click, faint and erratic. Liam leaned closer. His eyes locked on the meter, then the scope. The second burst was sharper... planned. His heart picked up pace.

He adjusted the gain manually, bypassing the digital noise suppression. Another click; longer this time. Then more.

Ditty-dit-dah.

He blinked. Morse.

It couldn't be. He rerouted the audio through the analog monitor line and closed his eyes, isolating the timing.

Ditty-dit-dit ditty-dah dah

He whispered aloud, "H... U... M..."

Dit-dah dah-dit dit-dit dah-dit dah

A second wave came. Liam sat forward. "A... N... I... N... T..."

He mouthed the rhythm with his jaw locked tight.

### **HUMAN IN THE DESERT.**

He leaned back, the words hanging in the dim blue light. The clicks continued. "HUMAN IN THE DESERT," he whispered.

Liam frowned. "It's more than Morse. It's efficient. Way too efficient."

He looked over at the screen again. "This doesn't feel alien. It feels... familiar." He paused. "It's almost like it was left here, like it's always been part of the noise, waiting for the right ears to hear it." To anyone else, it would sound like random pulse train noise. But not to him. Not with his grandfather's training. Not after years of decoding Morse by ear.

He knew what it was.

He recognized the signal immediately. But how? Why him?

His dark brown eyes, framed by the faint lines of too many sleepless shifts, scanned the endless streams of data. His notebook lay open beside him, its pages filled with transcriptions of static and blips that had led to nowhere.

Across the room, the empty desk of Gina Alvarez was a bitter reminder that not everyone had to endure this monotony. He stared at his half-empty mug of European coffee, a lifeline to keep his focus sharp.

“Lucky Gina,” he muttered.

The clock ticked past 2:17 a.m., and then, like a whisper in the void, the monotony shattered.

\* \* \*

A faint anomaly flickered on the spectrum analyzer; a sharp, rhythmic pulse threading through the usual static. Liam froze, his head snapping toward the nearest monitor. As the numbers scrolled by, Liam’s hands trembled. Not only from the cold, but from the realization that this wasn’t mere interference. His mind reeled, and his eyes flicked to Gina’s empty workstation, silently hoping for an explanation from a human colleague – who had taken the night off – to ease the chaos. The signal continued, gaining strength and cadence. Liam’s eyes widened, and for a moment, he

forgot the equations as his heart pounded with the thrill of discovery.

As the decrypted sequence glowed on the monitor, Liam's vision blurred and shifted. In a seamless overlay of memory and reality, the lab's sterile light gave way to a warm, amber glow of a long-ago study. Sitting at his grandfather's knee in a room filled with the soft clatter of an old typewriter, and the gentle murmur of secret lessons; he recalled the last of those nights.

The shortwave radio sputtered with distant storms while Grandpa Rustand, cheeks sunken from chemo, tapped a single, shaky string of Morse: DIT-DIT-DIT DAH. "Means 'Victory,' my boy, and to keep listening," the old man wheezed, closing Liam's tiny fist over the brass code key.

Liam smiled as his fingers absentmindedly moved over imaginary keys. He muttered "ditty-dit-dah, this-is-a-vee, Victor" in his best "grandpa voice." He went back to that painful, wonderful place.

The ICU phone rang. A nurse's voice said the doctors could do no more. In the hallway's antiseptic glare, Liam watched his father crumple to the floor and felt his world narrow to the pulse beating in his palm. The key; still warm from his grandfather's grip, became a vow: decode every mystery the universe dared whisper - and never quit or back down.

*This is a VEE.*

*DITTY -DIT-DAH.*

*BE A VICTOR.*

Whenever the lab lights dimmed and the mingled scents of disinfectant and ozone filled the air, Liam was pulled back to that corridor, frantic to translate a dying man's last transmission before it vanished forever. In that memory, his grandfather leaned close and whispered, "Remember, every number is a secret, every pause a doorway." The memory spliced into the present, blending the timeless cadence of his grandfather's voice with the cold precision of the terminal. As the vision receded, Liam's hand hovered over the keyboard; the moment's significance crystallized around those echoing words.

Liam was pulled back to the present with a start.

"Fascinating... it seems we have eliminated all conventional sources," he muttered, leaning in.

He sat back again, cracking his knuckles; the cold air in the lab clung to his fingers. Something about the signal's clarity unsettled him. It was eerily clinical. Not like the erratic bursts of radio chatter he was used to tracking; this one moved with purpose. Liam keyed in a secondary diagnostic; an old script from grad school that visualized harmonic overlays. It wasn't elegant, but it had never failed him.

The program launched. The signal blossomed on his monitor, unnervingly precise; each vibration stacked like whispers

exploding into a primal scream. Each beat carried a subtle echo; faintly behind the original, as if something were reflecting the message before it finished sending. He leaned in, tension in his jaw said what words didn't.

His fingers reached toward the brass code key on his desk. The metal was cold, familiar. His grandfather's old tool, polished smooth by years of use, now sat beside state-of-the-art signal software. He pressed a thumb against it, grounding himself. "Listen between the clicks," the old man had once said. "That's where the secrets live."

Liam pulled up a thirty-day archive sweep, cross-referencing the signal against other SETI detections. There was nothing. No matching pulsar, no repeating fast radio burst, no signal artifact. This was new. Not merely in content. In presence. It didn't blend with cosmic noise; it cut through it.

He ran a quick spatial check. Strangely, the signal matched a forgotten Cold War satellite path. The scan had been redacted for decades. Only parts had been declassified in recent years. Most of the data was still blacked out. Liam was at a complete loss.

The overlay flickered. The signal's angle of origin aligned with a classified surveillance pass from 1983. He checked it again; the telemetry was solid. The odds of this signal intersecting that specific, archived corridor were impossibly small.

He stood and crossed the room to the physical logbook. SETI

protocol demanded manual documentation for all primary anomalies. Liam flipped to a clean page and began writing. Halfway through the entry, he stopped. The spacing of his notes mirrored the signal cadence; his pen strokes, the same intervals. He looked back at the monitor. The pulse continued. Unchanged, but somehow watching.

He said aloud, “Every time I think I understand the rules, the universe changes the question.” Liam’s smile faded as he stared blankly at his cold European-style espresso. “That’s it, I’m switching to decaf,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair. Out of habit, he tapped a pencil twice on the desk, a nervous tick his old Air Force buddy Sparky used to call “the Morse for trouble.”

Behind him, the signal blinked again. One beat.

He froze. Everything felt oddly distant. Liam stepped back to the terminal and hovered his hand over the keyboard. The screen flickered, once, as if reacting.

He didn’t speak again. The pulse held steady, but something in the silence had shifted. He reached out and tapped the side of the monitor. No reaction. Still, the unease remained.

Liam “didn’t move. The key was still in his grip, thumb rubbing its edge while his other hand hovered over the desk like he wasn’t sure what it was for anymore. He didn’t know why the signal had chosen this time, this sky, or this voice. But he knew it wasn’t random. And it wasn’t over.

His fingers flew across the keys, isolating the frequency and stripping away layers of interference. "I've systematically ruled out any terrestrial origin. The anomaly appears genuine."

The rhythm repeated. Precise, methodical; it was intentional. A successive barrage of dits and dahs flooded his ears as he leapt to a keyboard and intercepted the ancient code. As he typed, he became more excited than he had ever been at the outpost, the code paused, and he stared at what he had just intercepted:

### **HUMAN IN THE DESERT**

His heartbeat hammered. Disbelief tangled sharply with fear. Maybe he was slipping into madness. Memories of childhood nightmares mingled with the stark reality of the hangar.

The message alone shook him to his core. However, the precision of the cadence was truly disturbing. It was a sequence that shouldn't exist anywhere but in his memories.

"No... that can't be right," he whispered, staring at the screen.

He ran diagnostics. Checked for interference. Scanned local and satellite transmissions. There was no rational source, no earthly origin. The signal pulsed again, steady, waiting.

Liam swallowed hard and forced himself to think methodically. He initiated a series of diagnostic tests, determined to

prove the signal was nothing more than a fluke.

First, he scanned nearby aircraft frequencies, cross-referencing them with the signal's timing. Nothing matched.

"Okay," he muttered, adjusting the spectrogram. "What about satellites?"

He pulled up satellite telemetry, overlaying orbital paths with the timestamp of the signal. The spectrogram pulsed steadily, but no satellite aligned with the signal's origin.

"Not a satellite either," he said, his voice tinged with growing curiosity.

Next, he applied ionospheric filters to account for atmospheric distortion. The signal emerged clean and undistorted.

Finally, he triangulated the source. His breath caught as the coordinates resolved on his monitor:

**RA 00h 42m 44.3s | DEC +41° 16' 9"**

He stared at the numbers, feeling totally numb and in shock. "No friggin' way..."

"Andromeda," he intoned, "...the Andromeda Galaxy."

As the signal repeated, Liam began noticing subtle irregular-

ities in the structure. Faint distortions between the bursts of transmission, too deliberate to ignore.

“C’mon... this is too unreal.”

Liam refocused. “Just amazing... a signal within a signal,” he murmured to himself. “It’s got to be there. Only thing that makes sense and aligns with the data.”

He thought back to his grandfather’s lessons about pattern recognition. Hidden messages often lay in the gaps, in the shifts between the obvious. But even as he scrutinized the spectrogram, he couldn’t make out a discernible pattern.

“It’s there,” he mused, his frustration mounting. “I can’t quite see it yet.”