CHAPTER 11 — The Conditioned One

Jim didn't stop running until he and Bonnie had cleared the broken fence behind the airfield. The moon hung low and bright, flattening the world into silver and black. Bonnie finally slowed, bracing herself against a rusted signpost.

Jim turned back.

The trap adult had stopped at the runway's edge, staring into the darkness exactly the way Ethan would—still, patient, calculating.

Waiting for further instruction.

Bonnie's breathing came ragged and sharp. Her voice trembled, but she fought to keep it steady.

"I—I thought he'd never get that far," she whispered.

Jim kept his eyes fixed on the runway.

"What exactly did he do to him?" he asked.

Bonnie swallowed hard.

"That adult was infected," she said quietly. "But not completely. Ethan caught him in the early stages. The regression slowed... but didn't finish."

Jim stiffened.

"So he's... half?"

"No," Bonnie said. "He's worse."

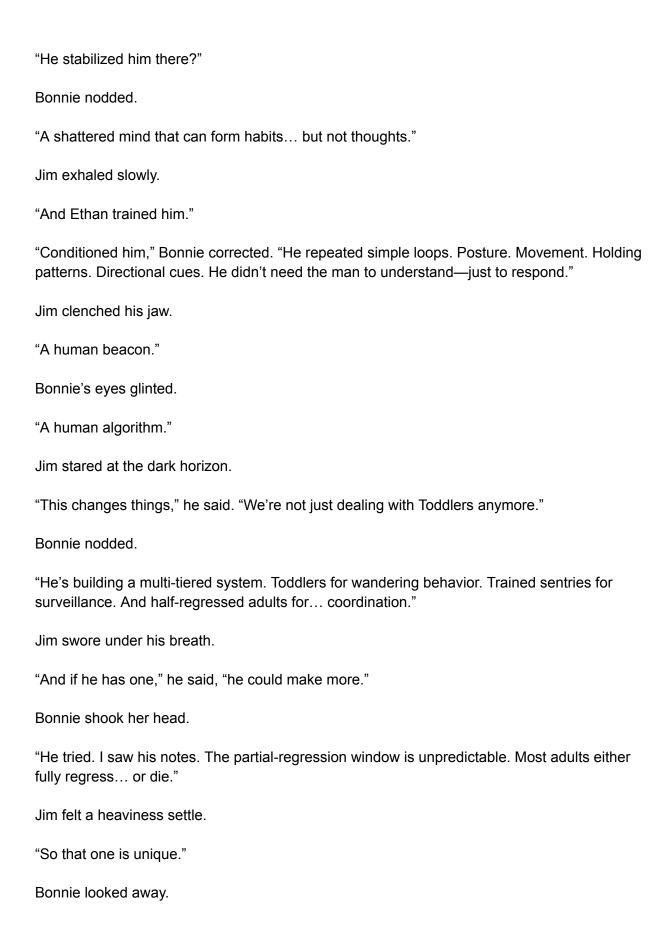
Jim turned to her.

"How?"

Bonnie gathered herself, then spoke:

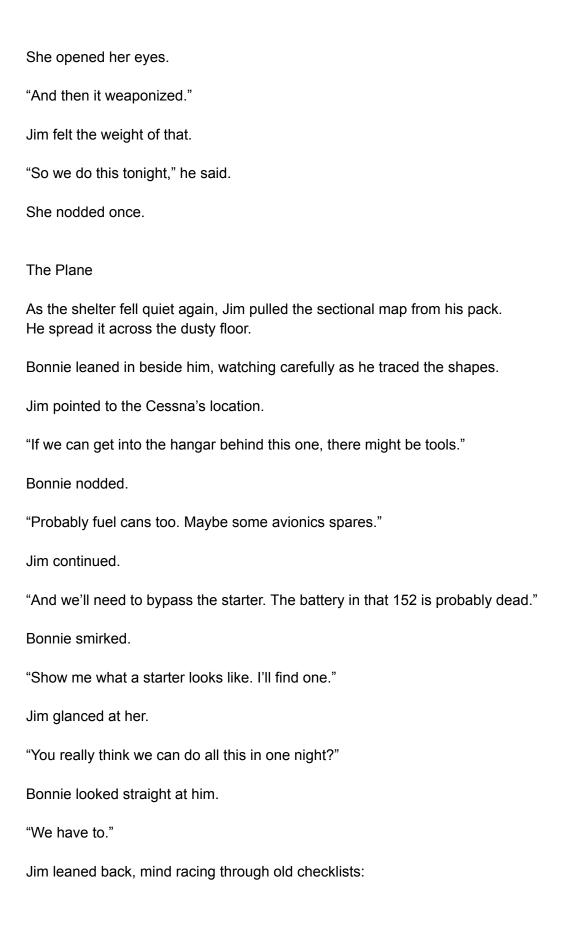
"When the regression takes hold, the mind breaks apart in stages. Ethan found a window—just a few days long—where the adult mind fractures but doesn't dissolve."

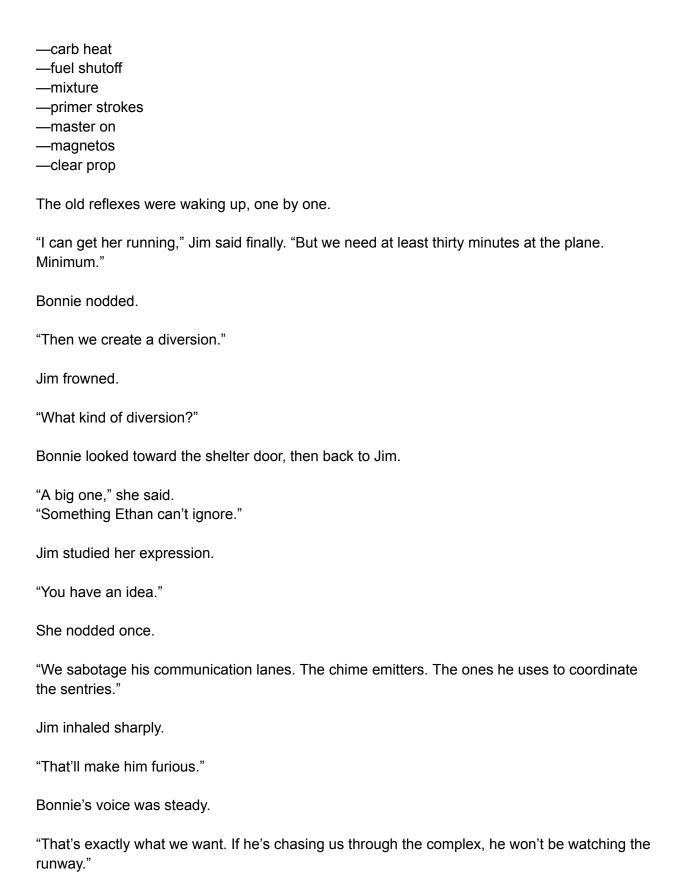
Jim felt cold creep up his spine.



"That one is... a prototype." The Decision They continued moving until they reached a concrete storm shelter behind a maintenance yard. Bonnie slipped inside first, checking corners with a small flashlight. Jim followed, sealing the door behind them. The faint smell of dust and old batteries filled the space. Bonnie sat with her back against the wall, knees pulled to her chest. Jim sat nearby, letting the silence settle. Finally, she spoke. "We have to accelerate everything." Jim nodded. "It'll be rough in the dark." "It won't get easier in daylight," she said. "Ethan's training window is closing. Those sentries will be better tomorrow. And the trap adult... he'll be moved closer." Jim rubbed his temples. "So we adjust the timeline. First light?" Bonnie shook her head. "No. Before first light." Jim's eyes widened. "That soon?" Bonnie leaned forward. "If Ethan thinks we're trying to escape by the runway, he'll reinforce the west perimeter. But if we go before dawn, during his recalibration cycle—"

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Jim frowned.
"Recalibration cycle?"
Bonnie nodded.
"Between the chime sequences. When he sleeps."
Jim raised his eyebrows.
"He sleeps?"
Bonnie smirked faintly.
"Everyone sleeps, Jim."
"It's news to me," he said. "He seems like a man who powers down, not sleeps."
Bonnie looked away.
"He used to sleep," she said softly. "When I knew him."
Jim paused.
She rarely spoke about those early days.
So he didn't push.
Instead, he asked:
"What did he used to be like?"
Bonnie closed her eyes for a moment.
"Brilliant," she said. "Methodical. Quiet. He talked about systems like other people talk about
dreams. He said order was mercy. Predictability was kindness."
Jim leaned against the wall.
"And when the world fell apart, that belief stayed intact."
Bonnie shook her head.
"No," she said quietly. "It intensified."
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Blurred movement. Hid tracks. Perfect conditions. Bonnie tightened the straps on her pack. Jim checked the battery on his PAPR, then his gloves, then the radio Bonnie had repaired. "We don't get a second chance," Bonnie whispered. "If he catches us inside the lattice, he'll collapse the corridors around us." Jim nodded. He understood. The plan was simple in theory: 1. Disable Ethan's coordination chimes. 2. Force him into manual control. 3. Slip out of his territory while he chases the disturbance. 4. Reach the plane before dawn. 5. Fly. But every step required precision. And now, under the cold pre-dawn darkness, the weight of their decision pressed down on both of them. "Ready?" Jim asked. Bonnie gave a small nod. "Let's break the system." Into the Lattice They moved quickly through the shadowed alleys between buildings, following Bonnie's knowledge of Ethan's least-used paths. At this hour, Toddlers slept in piles or wandered in half-dreams, their low voices humming like distant insects. Bonnie held up her hand. "Stop."

Jim froze.

Ahead, a trained Toddler sentinel stood perfectly still, facing an empty loading bay. Red-coded vest.

High-alert category.

"He shouldn't be here at night," Bonnie whispered.

"He's early."

Jim swallowed.

"Meaning what?"

Bonnie's eyes tightened.

"Meaning Ethan is already awake."

Jim felt a cold ripple pass through him.

They circled wide, stepping only on the damp grass to avoid sound. When they were far enough away, Bonnie pointed at a narrow ladder leading to a low roof.

"That's our first target. One of the chime nodes."

Jim followed her up the ladder silently. The rooftop was coated with dew and rust, each step careful and controlled.

At the far corner stood a cylindrical device the size of a thermos.

The chime emitter.

The pulse generator.

The thing that turned the Toddlers into a coordinated net.

Bonnie crouched beside it.

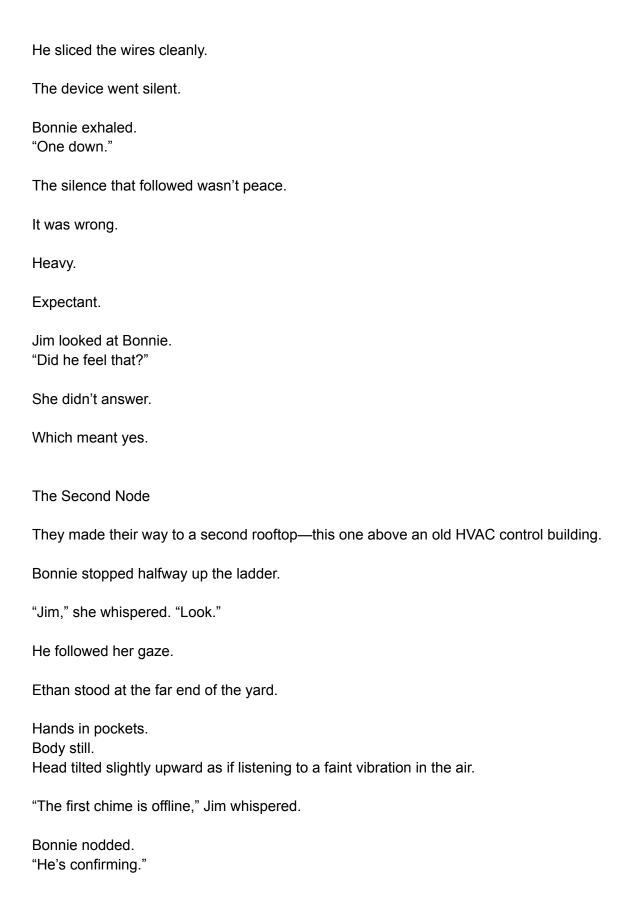
"This one triggers lane awareness. If we cut it, they lose directional cohesion."

Jim lifted his multitool.

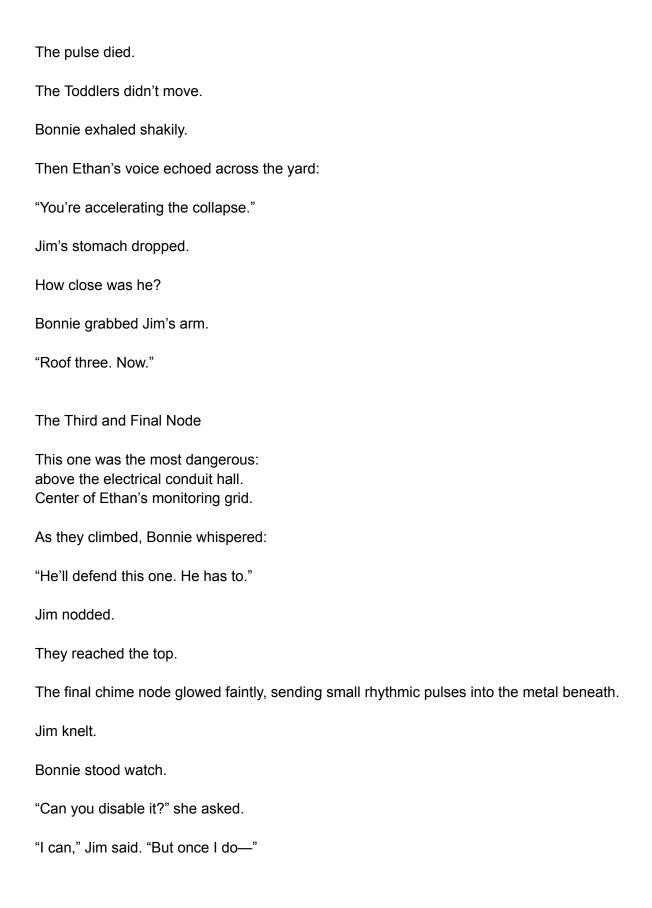
"Tell me what to hit."

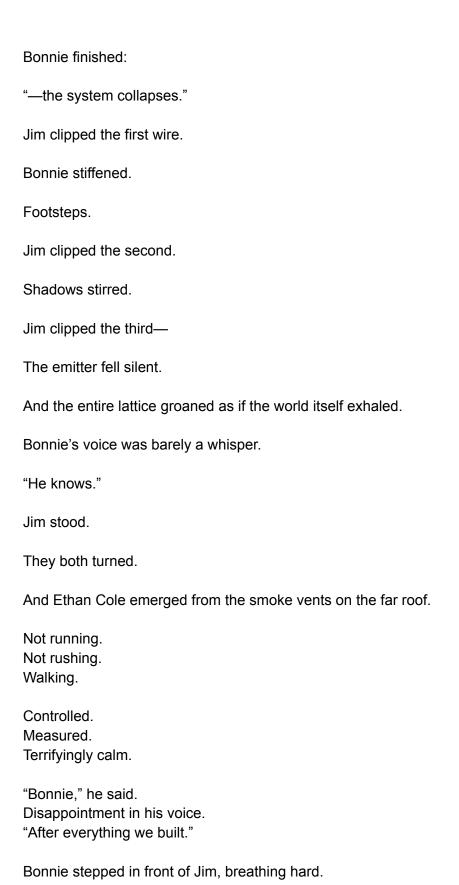
Bonnie guided his hand.

"Here. And here. Sever the loop."



Ethan turned slowly. Not toward the node. Toward them. He was too far to see their faces. But he didn't need to. He had mapped their tendencies. Their angles. Their pathways. "Move," Bonnie hissed. "Now!" Jim scampered up the ladder. Bonnie followed. The second emitter sat on the roof, pulsing faintly. Jim reached for it-But this one was different. He traced the wires. "This is tied into a feedback loop," he whispered. "If we cut it too fast—" Bonnie finished for him. "It'll broadcast a spike." "And wake them," Jim said. Both looked over the edge. Three Toddlers in yellow vests stood below. Swaying. Listening. Bonnie mouthed: Slow. Jim nodded, hands steady, breath controlled. He clipped one wire. Then paused. Clipped the second.





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"I didn't build your system," she said. "I escaped it."
Ethan tilted his head.
"And you brought him."
Jim lifted a tool instinctively, though it was useless against a man like Ethan.
Ethan noticed the gesture.
"Still clinging to improvisation," Ethan said quietly.
"You're mistaking chaos for freedom."
Bonnie clenched her fists.
"You're mistaking control for survival."
Ethan stepped closer.
"When the world fell apart, I kept my mind," he said. "When millions regressed, I preserved
function. When cities collapsed, I built order. And you two—"
He motioned at the darkened nodes.
"—think you can outrun inevitability."
Jim's pulse hammered, but he held his ground.
"We don't need to outrun inevitability," Jim said. "Just you."
Ethan stopped.
Silence stretched—thick and dangerous.
Then:
"You won't make it to the airfield."
Bonnie stiffened.
"You don't know where we're going."
"Yes," Ethan said. "I do."
Jim froze.
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Ethan's voice was almost gentle. "You think you're unpredictable, Jim. But you still follow arcs." He pointed toward the north. "Your pilot training. Your need for altitude. Your instinct for escape routes. Your avoidance of straight paths. I mapped all of it." Jim felt ice in his veins. Ethan continued calmly: "The moment you looked at the sky, I knew." Bonnie grabbed Jim's arm. "We move now," she whispered. Ethan stepped forward— "Run," Bonnie hissed. They sprinted toward the fire escape ladder. Ethan lunged—not to grab them, but to reach a small transmitter clipped to his belt. He pressed it. And three loud, sharp CHIMES thundered across the campus— BOOM—BOOM—BOOM Bonnie gasped. "No—he's overriding the collapse!"

Jim didn't understand—but he ran.

Behind them, dozens of Toddlers across the complex jerked awake, their bodies stiffening as

Ethan's emergency override pulsed through their conditioned reflexes.
Bonnie shouted:
"He's bringing the entire network down on us!"
Jim leapt from the ladder, hitting the ground hard. Bonnie landed beside him.
They ran.
The Toddlers converged. Dozens. Maybe more.
Not violent— but forming lines. Walls. Lanes.
Pushing them. Herding them. Corralling them.
Toward a single point.
The place Ethan wanted them:
A dead end near the old diesel plant.
Bonnie screamed:
"LEFT!"
Jim slammed into her, shoving both of them through a narrow gap between pipes as the Toddlers closed the path behind them.
Ethan's voice echoed:
"You can't escape the system."
Bonnie grabbed Jim's hand.

"Then we don't escape the system," she panted. "We escape the map."
Jim blinked.
And understood.
They weren't going back through the corridors.
They were going out.
Through the unpatterned land.
Through the wild terrain beyond the complex.
Toward the hill. Toward the airport. Toward the plane.
Bonnie pulled him.
"Jim. Now."
And they ran into the dark.
END OF CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13 — PART I
The Boundary of Maps
The mist thickened as Jim and Bonnie left the last structured corridor of Ethan's territory. The sound of the override chimes still reverberated faintly behind them—metallic echoes bouncing

sound of the override chimes still reverberated faintly behind them—metallic echoes bouncing through the sleeping buildings like the heartbeat of a collapsing machine.

They had crossed into a place Ethan did not groom.

Did not measure.

Did not predict.

Here the ground was uneven, overgrown, scattered with twisted rebar and half-swallowed vehicles. Without painted lanes and auditory cues, the Toddlers rarely ventured this far.

Jim slowed.

"We're out of his lattice," he whispered.

Bonnie didn't answer at first.

She scanned the darkness, breath quick, hands tense.

"He'll send the trap adult next," she said quietly.

"That's his cleaner. His retrieval unit. He only uses it when the map breaks."

Jim swallowed.

"Then we stay unpredictable."

Bonnie gave a faint, humorless smile.

"You do that naturally."

Jim scanned the rising hill to their north—the silhouette of the airfield just visible beyond it.

"We make for the crest," he said. "From there, a straight shot to the runway."

Bonnie hesitated.

"Straight shots are predictable."

Jim nodded.

"So we break into zig-zags at the base. Change elevation. Vary pace. Keep low near the drainage berm."

Bonnie whispered:

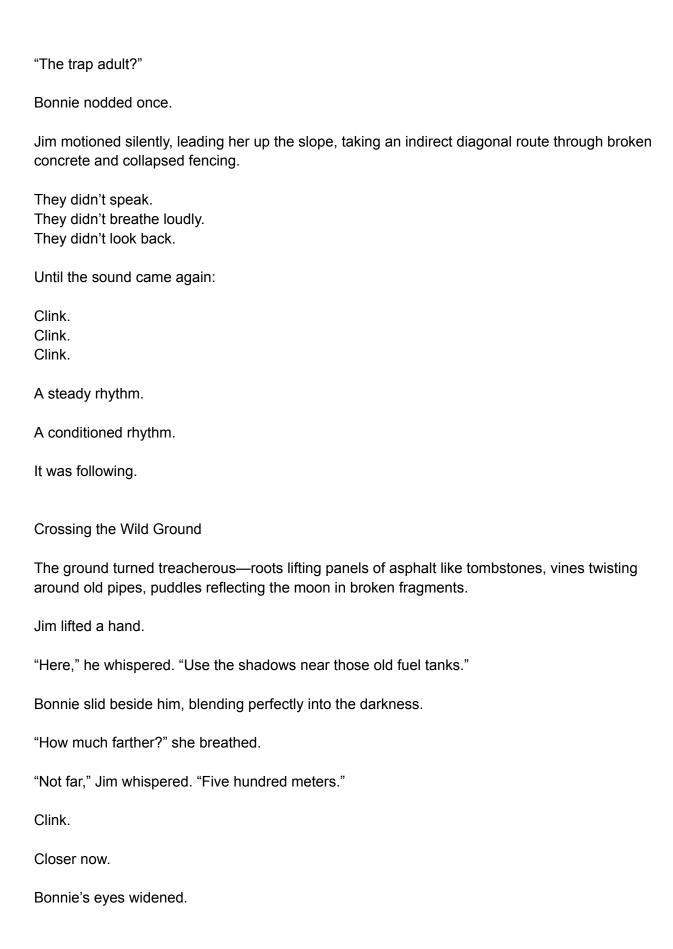
"You're already thinking like a pilot."

Jim allowed himself the smallest, slightest smile.

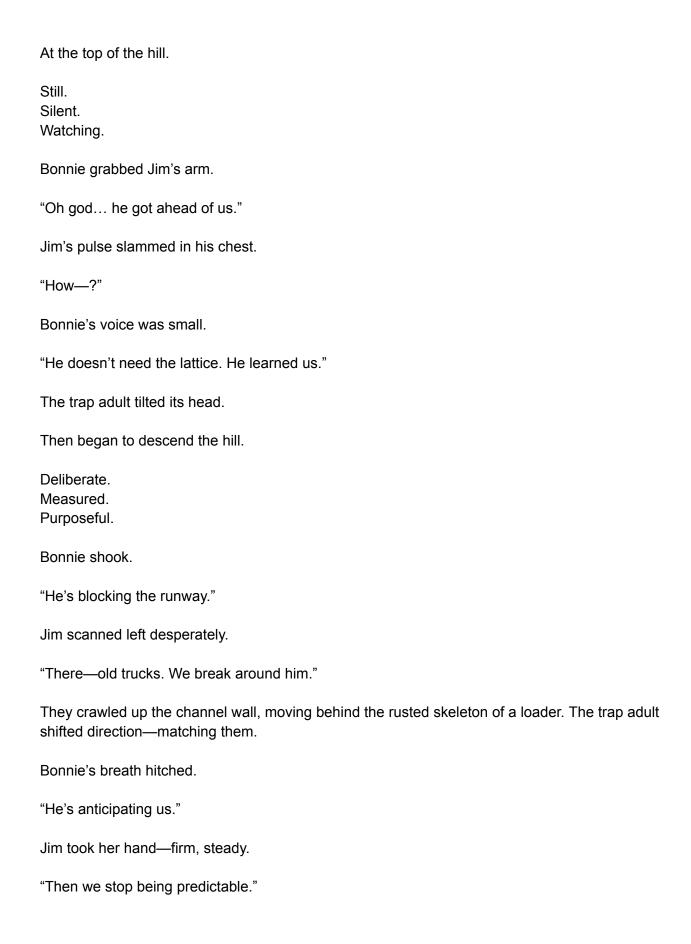
But it faded as a faint metallic clink echoed through the brush to their right.

Bonnie stiffened.

"That's not Ethan," she whispered. "That's him."

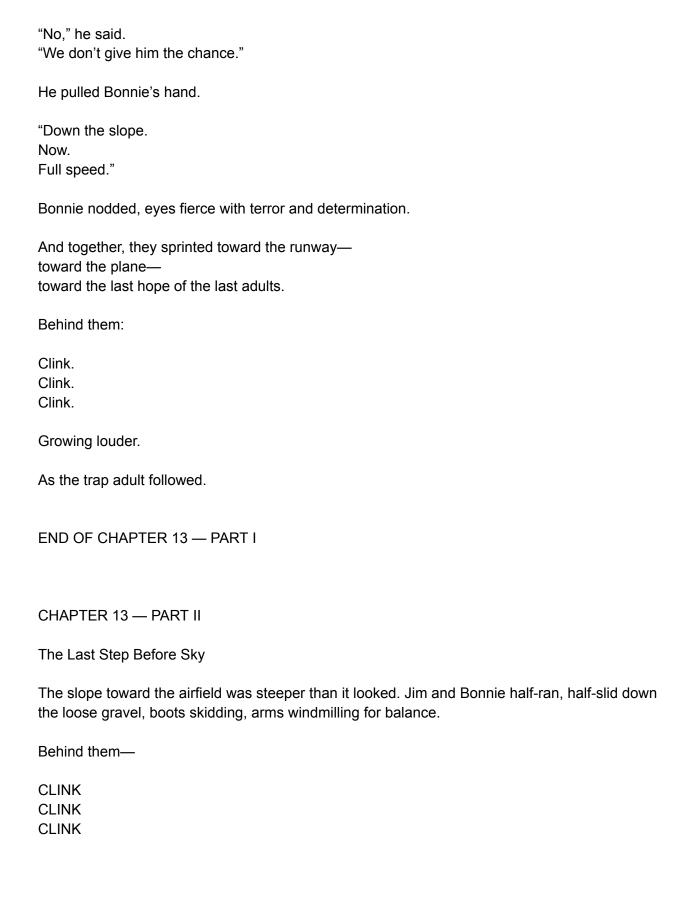






He pointed to the broken rubble slope to their left. "A pilot trick," he whispered. "Gain altitude where no one expects you to." Bonnie followed. They scrambled up the rubble, rocks sliding beneath their feet. The trap adult adjusted—slower this time, confused by the new angle. Bonnie whispered: "It's working—he's not mapped for vertical changes." Jim pulled her higher. "Keep climbing." Near the crest, Jim looked back. The trap adult stumbled once. Twice. Then reoriented. And began the climb. Faster. Bonnie gasped. "Jim—he's mimicking us." Jim's stomach dropped. This wasn't just a trained lure. This was a learning algorithm. In human form. Ethan's prototype evolving in real time. Jim gripped Bonnie's wrist.

"Don't slow. Don't speak. Move."
They reached the top of the rubble pile.
And there—spread before them— like a dream carved from the bones of the world— lay the airfield.
Runway cracked but straight. Hangars silent and waiting. The Cessna's tail shimmering faintly in the moonlight.
Bonnie exhaled a breath she'd been holding for too long.
"We're here," she whispered.
Jim allowed himself one second of relief.
And then—
Clink.
Directly behind them.
They turned.
The trap adult had reached the crest.
Moonlight fell across his blank eyes.
His arm lifted.
Pointing.
Signaling.
Calling the others.
Bonnie's voice was a broken whisper:
"He's summoning Ethan."
Jim stepped in front of her.



The trap adult descended with eerie control, its movements smooth and repetitive, like a machine learning a new terrain with every step.

"Faster!" Bonnie gasped.

Jim didn't respond. He pulled her forward, momentum carrying them across the last stretch of broken concrete until their feet hit flat ground.

The runway.

It stretched out before them like a lifeline.

The small Cessna—tail number N568E—sat at the far end of the tarmac, half-hidden under a collapsed shade canopy.

Jim felt his pilot instincts snap into focus.

"Straight shot," he whispered.

"No zig-zags. We need speed."

Bonnie nodded, breath heaving.

They sprinted across the cracked pavement, their shadows long in the moonlight.

Behind them, the trap adult reached the runway edge and paused—eyes following, head tilting as if recalculating.

Then it broke into a jog.

Bonnie's voice trembled.

"He's adapting too fast—"

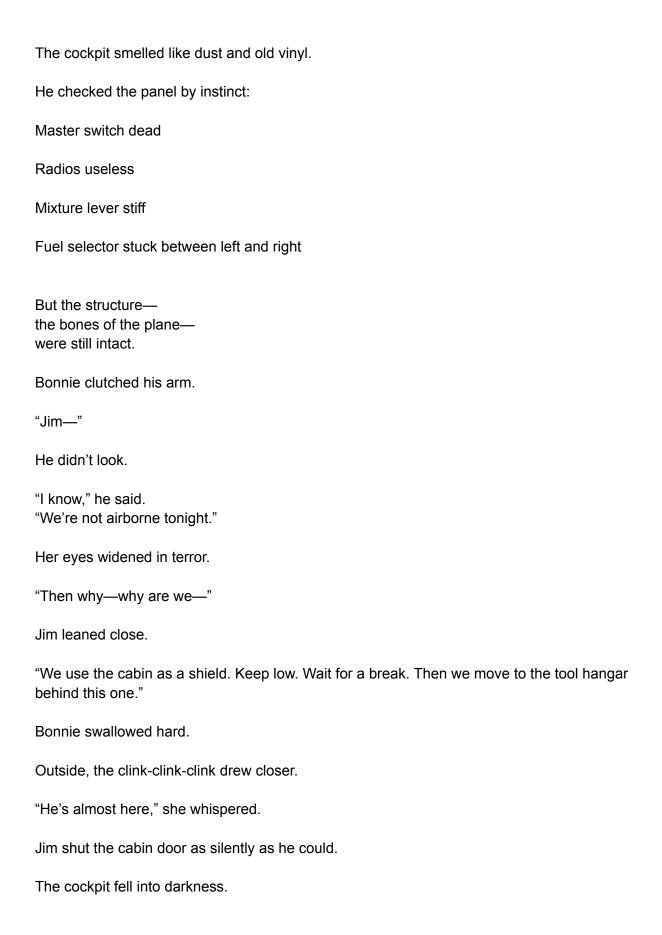
"Don't look back," Jim said. "Just run."

The cold air whipped across their faces as they closed the distance to the Cessna. Jim ducked under the torn canopy, yanking open the cabin door. It resisted, then screeched upward on old hinges.

"Inside!" he ordered.

Bonnie crawled in, sliding into the right seat.

Jim vaulted in after her, heart pounding, breath ragged.

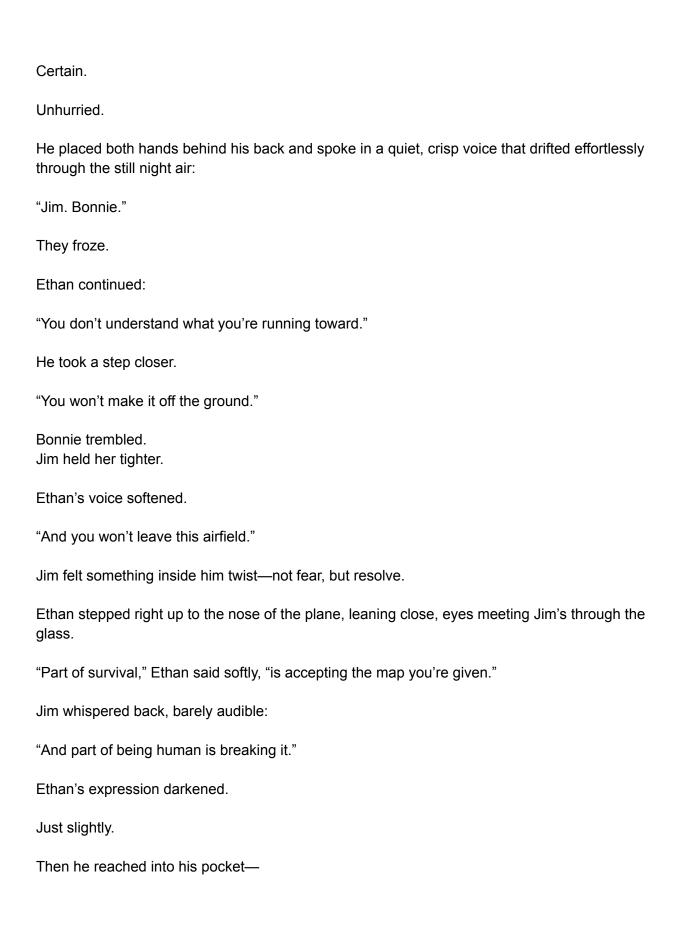


Only the faint moonlight through the cracked windshield illuminated their faces. Bonnie pressed her back against the seat, shaking. "Jim," she whispered, "he won't stop. He doesn't get tired. He doesn't question. He doesn't—" Jim placed a gloved hand over hers. "We'll find a way. This is just the first step." Bonnie tried to steady her breathing. Outside— A shadow passed the canopy. The trap adult. He moved directly toward the nose of the Cessna. His hand pressed against the cowling. Then he tilted his head... And leaned close to the windshield. His face appeared inches from Jim's. Blank eyes. Slack mouth. Cold breath fogging the glass. Bonnie stifled a scream. Jim held her tight. The trap adult raised one hand— And tapped the windshield with his finger. Clink. A signal.



Distinct.
Footsteps on gravel.
Adult footsteps.
Measured. Confident. Inevitable.
Bonnie's voice cracked.
"No no no—he's already here—how did he—"
Jim whispered:
"He followed the trap adult."
The footsteps grew louder.
Closer.
Stopping just outside the windshield.
Bonnie squeezed Jim's hand so hard his bones ached.
Silence.
Then Ethan Cole stepped into the moonlight.
His eyes locked directly onto the cockpit.
He saw them.
Both of them.
He raised one hand— not as a threat, but as a command.
The trap adult responded instantly, stepping back from the windshield and turning to stand at Ethan's right side.

Ethan looked calm.



And pulled out a cylindrical object.
Bonnie inhaled sharply.
"Jim what is that?"
Jim stared.
It was a portable chime module.
A handheld override.
With a range strong enough to summon every trained Toddler for a quarter mile.
Ethan lifted it.
Pressed his thumb against the trigger.
Jim braced himself.
Bonnie clutched his arm.
The trap adult stepped forward, ready to move.
And Ethan said:
"Part I ends now."
He pressed the button.
BOOM BOOM BOOM
The override chimes exploded across the airfield, loud enough to rattle the Cessna's windows.
In the distance—
Shadows stirred. Dozens of them. Hundreds.
Lining up. Turning.

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Converging.
Bonnie's whisper broke into a sob:
"Jim... they're coming."
Jim pulled her close.
"I know."
Outside, Ethan backed away slowly, letting the system form around him.
The trap adult followed.
The chimes echoed like the heartbeat of a waking giant.
Jim whispered:
"Get ready."
Bonnie nodded against his shoulder.
The first wave of Toddlers reached the far fence.
Jim tightened his jaw.
"This is where Part I ends."
Bonnie swallowed hard.
"Then what happens now?"
Jim looked out the windshield, eyes blazing.
"Now," he whispered,
"we fight for the sky."
And the first line of Toddlers began spilling onto the runway—
as Ethan Cole watched,
calm,
quiet,
and certain.
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END OF PART I — THE LAST ADULTS