

Chapter 1: The One-Hour Life (Revised)

The airlock hissed its countdown, a mechanical serpent coiling around Jim Vance's lungs.

45:00.

Dr. Jim Vance pressed his gloved hands against the cold inner door, feeling the faint vibrations of the decontamination jets finishing their cycle. The solvent smell seeped through the suit's filters as a ghost-memory more than a scent. It was the only thing that still felt normal.

Everything else—the dead comms, the empty labs, the dozen former colleagues now toddling and staring into corners—belonged to a world that had slid off its rails and kept falling.

Six weeks.

Six weeks since the world went silent.

Six weeks since the Nursery Flu had torn through the planet at the speed of breath.

When the first cases appeared, they'd thought respiratory failure. Of course they had. New flu, frantic headlines, ventilator shortages—all the old grooves from pandemics past. The CDC lab in Atlanta had sealed its BSL-4 unit like it had for Ebola, Nipah, Marburg. The protocols had been written for things that killed your lungs, not your mind.

The protocols had been wrong.

Alistair proved that.

Alistair, their brilliant, smugly charming virologist, had been so proud of his Level 3 filtration mask. He'd joked that the only thing getting through that thing was his ego. He'd gone out into the service corridor to secure the external comms antenna in the early days of the panic, walking through the pressurized dock like it was a light drizzle.

He came back laughing, tapped his mask, declared himself "sterile as an angel," and insisted the suit was clean.

Twelve hours later, Jim found him sitting cross-legged on the breakroom floor, gumming a cracker and laughing at the ceiling lights, forty-five years of accumulated knowledge erased in a perfect, terrible absence.

The others followed, one by one. Not from going outside, but from everything that came back inside with them.

Boot treads that weren't incinerated. A glove that touched the wrong surface for half a second. A coffee mug that didn't go into the burn bin because someone was tired and thought, I'll get it later.

The virus wasn't just contagious.

It was sticky.

And its infectious period wasn't days. It was weeks. Maybe months.

Jim was only alive because of a piece of repurposed military paranoia: a Level A Total Body Isolation Suit with a self-contained breathing apparatus that recycled his air through sealed cartridges instead of pulling it from outside. The SCBA tank lasted exactly sixty minutes.

Each tank, each hour, was a single life.

32:14.

The inner door cycled open with a heavy clang that echoed down the corridor. The countdown ticked, a silent vice in the top-right corner of his visor display.

He stepped into the main facility corridor. Dust danced in the cone of his helmet light. The emergency fluorescents overhead cast a sickly yellow that never changed, never warmed, never dimmed. Permanent twilight.

Today's mission was simple in the way that only life-or-death tasks ever were: reach the power manifold in the East Wing, bypass the tripped automated circuit, and restore power to the water purification system.

Without it, the lab's reserves would be gone in three days.

The suit made him move like a deep-sea diver—slow, deliberate, each step calculated. The rubber soles squeaked softly on linoleum. He checked the facility schematic in the corner of his display; a ring of red dots marked the last known locations of his regressed colleagues.

He knew where all twelve Toddlers were. He repeated the mental checklist like a prayer.

Lin – Sector C.

Chen – Dorm Two.

Frank – Containment Annex.

Maya – Personal Quarters...

The list anchored him as much as it haunted him.

A dull thump... thump... thump reverberated through the hallway.

Jim glanced right as he passed the security station. There, in the spill of blue emergency light, Dr. Lin sat on the floor, batting the base of a fire extinguisher rhythmically against the wall. Her hair, once carefully twisted into a bun, hung loose like a child's. Every third hit made her giggle.

He kept his eyes forward.

Talking to them didn't help. They didn't understand. Any attempt at interaction only agitated them—raised their heart rates, increased their breathing, scattered more of the invisible virus into the air.

"Aviate, navigate, communicate," he murmured into his helmet, the old mantra fogging the inside of the visor.

29:02.

Flashback: The Sky Lesson

The first time he'd heard that phrase, he'd been twenty-four, taking a break from graduate school epidemiology models and statistical noise for something radically analog.

Flying.

The small municipal airfield had smelled like old fuel, hot asphalt, and fried food from a diner that seemed to exist solely for pilots and mechanics. A thin strip of runway cut through fields of brown grass. The Cessna 172 waiting for him looked both absurdly small and impossibly powerful.

His instructor, an ex-Air Force pilot with sun-creased eyes and a ball cap faded by decades of UV exposure, had leaned on the wing and given him the speech.

"Things go wrong in layers," the instructor had said. "Engines fail. Radios die. Weather changes its mind. When they do, you remember one rule."

He'd held up three fingers.

"Aviate. Navigate. Communicate. In that order. Keep the airplane flying. Figure out where the hell you are and where you're going. Then tell someone. You stop flying the plane while you're fiddling with the radio, you're a crater with good intentions."

Up there, during his first real lesson at the controls, Jim learned exactly what that meant.

They'd climbed to a few thousand feet, the town shrinking to a child's diorama beneath them, everything suddenly laid out and knowable in a way ground maps never matched. Roads became threads. The river was a smeared ribbon of light. For the first time in years he felt something like joy that wasn't attached to a dataset.

Then the plane had hit turbulence.

A sudden downdraft grabbed the wings and shoved the Cessna down hard. The horizon dropped out of the window. His stomach lurched. His fingers went white-knuckled on the yoke.

Altitude bled from the altimeter in a spinning blur.

Panic rushed his thoughts: engine? stall? did we hit wake? are we—

"Fly the plane, Jim," the instructor said calmly beside him, one hand lightly resting on the panel, not grabbing, not correcting. "Aviate first. Feel it. Nose up a little, add some power. Don't think your way out of it—fly your way out."

Jim had forced his eyes off the falling numbers and onto the wings, the nose, the attitude indicator. His hands obeyed before his brain fully caught up. Nose up. Throttle in. Level the wings.

The aircraft responded, shuddering at the edge of its envelope, then smoothing into steady lift again.

The altimeter stopped dropping.

The instructor grinned. "There you go. Navigate and communicate come after you stop plummeting."

Jim had laughed, shaky and exhilarated, the adrenaline coming out as something almost like tears.

"It's the same in medicine," the instructor had added later, back on the ground. "You people get lost in the big picture, the models, the projections. But in the room? Step one is keep the patient breathing. Everything else is negotiable."

At the time, it had just been a good line.

Now it was his operating system.

Back to the Corridor

Jim blinked, dragged back to the here-and-now by the soft whine of his suit's respirator cycling. Lin's fire extinguisher thunked again in the distance, a dull metronome for the dead world.

"Aviate," he muttered. "Keep the tank going. Keep the suit intact. Put one boot in front of the other."

He checked the timer.

24:19.

He moved on.

Rounding the corner into the East Wing, he stopped so abruptly the servos in the suit whined.

Someone was sitting on a low metal stool in the middle of the main artery to the power manifold, staring down at his own hands as if trying to remember what they were for.

Frank.

Facility security chief. Ex-military. Grizzled, square-shouldered, the sort of man who once seemed incapable of retiring, much less regressing.

He was supposed to be sealed in a containment block behind a double-walled barrier Jim had cobbled together in the first frantic days. But on the schematic in Jim's visor, the virtual wall had a thin gray gap near the ceiling—where an old, forgotten air duct had been ripped out during a retrofit months earlier.

A breach.

"Shit," Jim whispered inside the helmet.

Frank looked up at the sound of movement. His eyes didn't show recognition—no flash of "Oh, it's you"—just vague interest. He smiled, simple and guileless, cheeks rounding with the expression. He jabbed one chubby finger at his own chest.

"Hungry," he mumbled.

His first and only word since the regression.

Jim's lungs tightened. Not from oxygen scarcity, but from something heavier.

Behind Frank, past the stool, the corridor continued down to the power manifold access hatch. The path he needed. The one his boots had to touch.

Between the tank, the distance, and the repair work, he had maybe twenty minutes of workable time left.

20:05.

He had to get to the manifold. Had to restore water.

But Frank was sitting exactly where he didn't dare walk. If Frank moved, he might stumble. Reach out. Touch the suit. Brush against the floor. Flick one microscopic speck of viral particulate onto the waxed linoleum in front of Jim's boot.

Six weeks of absolute vigilance would mean nothing.

He swallowed, hard.

"Aviate," he told himself. "Keep the system running."

"Navigate," he added, eyes scanning the corridor. "Find another path."

"Communicate... later."

He checked the schematic. There was a service conduit that paralleled this corridor, a narrow maintenance run crowded with pipes and cables. It bypassed the main artery and fed directly into the manifold chamber.

Normally it would have been a last resort, an OSHA violation waiting to happen.

Today it was a lifeline.

He backed away slowly, not turning his back on Frank until he was safely around the corner. Frank had already forgotten him, gaze sliding back to his hands. Jim heard a soft, delighted noise as the man discovered his boots all over again.

Jim reached the access hatch for the service conduit—a waist-high metal panel with four heavy latches. He ducked, knees protesting inside the suit, and popped them one by one.

The first latch squealed.

The lights went out.

Toddlers in the Dark

For a second, he thought the power had failed entirely, that some cascade event he hadn't predicted had finally taken out the last of the facility's backup systems.

Then he realized his mistake.

The corridor lights went dark.

His suit light remained on.

But in those first four heartbeats, his brain misfired in pure animal panic. The world vanished, leaving only the hiss of his own breath in his ears and the pulse hammering in his throat.

The darkness swallowed everything beyond his visor.

I've lost it, he thought. I've lost the lab. I've lost the water. I've lost control.

Something soft brushed his shin.

He almost screamed.

The rational part of him shouted over the terror: The suit is sealed. The suit is sealed. The suit is sealed.

Tiny bare feet pattered on linoleum somewhere to his left. Something—or someone—giggled. A quiet, delighted sound. Palms slapped lightly against the wall. A second giggle joined the first, then a hiccuping laugh.

A cluster of invisible, regressed adults, moving through the dark.

Jim held perfectly still, every muscle locked. Moving meant bumping into them. Bumping into them meant they might grab him, touch him, smear god knew what on his boots.

“Aviate,” he whispered so softly the helmet mic barely picked it up. “Breathe. Just breathe.”

He focused on the mechanical rhythm of the SCBA system: intake, scrub, release. Clean, closed-loop air. Untouchable.

A child's hand—no, an adult hand with a child's intent—tapped his calf, curious about the glossy material.

He flinched but didn't step back.

“Go on,” he thought. “There's nothing for you here.”

The emergency system ticked through its logic. After three seconds of total dark, red strip lights along the floor flicked on, painting the corridor in a dim, arterial glow. Overhead fixtures came back one row at a time, buzzing reluctantly to life.

The world reassembled itself.

Three of them were near him in the corridor.

One—a woman who had once led a brilliant team in computational modeling—sat in the middle of the hall, clapping at the flickering lights. A second man shuffled along the wall, dragging his fingertips over rough concrete, fascinated by the texture change. The third, who'd tapped his leg, now stared at her own reflection in the curved visor of his helmet, a string of drool suspended from her lip.

None of them had any idea who he was.

"Navigate," Jim breathed, forcing himself to move again, stepping wide to avoid their bare feet, the damp patches on the floor where they'd slopped drinking water earlier. "Find the route. Get to the manifold."

He slipped into the narrow maintenance conduit and pulled the hatch shut behind him. The suit light bounced off pipes and gauges, transforming the world into a claustrophobic tangle of metal and shadow.

His timer ticked down:

16:31.

The Manifold

By the time he reached the power manifold box, his shoulders ached from twisting through the conduit. Sweat slicked the base of his neck, trapped and recycled in the suit's climate system.

The manifold waited in a cramped sub-room, a chest-high array of breakers and relays and diagnostic lights. A single red indicator glowed accusingly.

He opened the panel with a screwdriver from his belt kit. The acrid smell of singed plastic drifted up. The automated circuitry had done exactly what it was designed to do: isolate a fault and shut down the water purification system preemptively, rather than risk a cascading failure.

It was waiting for an engineer to push a confirmation button, flip a bypass, and tell it what to do next.

The facility's last engineer was currently in the main corridor, laughing at the lights.

Jim's gloved fingers moved with surgical care. He traced the fault to a particular board, pulled it, and bridged around it with a manual bypass. The system hummed faintly as power rerouted.

Green indicators sprang to life. Somewhere deeper in the structure, he heard the distant thrum of pumps spinning up—the sound of water beginning to move again.

He exhaled slowly. “Aviate,” he said. “System stable.”

He checked his timer.

07:48.

No time to savor the victory. No time for a triumphant speech to the empty room. The trip back through the maintenance conduit and the gauntlet of Toddlers would eat almost all of that.

He reversed his path, crawling, twisting, the suit’s outer shell scraping pipes and brackets. Each scuff sounded louder than it should, like a warning shot in a graveyard.

By the time he eased the corridor hatch open again, the red floor strips were still glowing, but the overheads had settled back into their steady, sickly yellow. The three regressed scientists had drifted away like dust motes.

He hugged the wall, keeping his boots in the same tracks he’d used coming out. Every deviation was a new set of surfaces, a new roll of the dice.

As he neared the security station, the thump... thump... thump of Lin’s fire extinguisher returned, absurdly comforting.

He risked a glance through the plexiglass window. Lin sat on the floor, legs splayed, happily pushing the extinguisher back and forth like a metal toy.

His gaze flicked further down the corridor.

Frank was gone from the stool.

The gap on the schematic glowed accusingly.

Jim’s heart rate jumped. He scanned for any trace—smudges on the floor, a shadow in a doorway, the faint noise of clumsy footsteps.

Nothing.

He didn’t have time to hunt for him.

“Communicate later,” he told himself. “You still have to live long enough to feel guilty.”

He made it back to the airlock with 02:10 showing in the corner of his visor.

He slapped the cycle button with more force than was strictly necessary. The outer door sealed. Decontamination jets blasted the suit with solvent and UV. The inner door irised open to the small, sterile chamber that had become his entire world.

The timer hit 00:54 as he stepped inside.

He shut the inner hatch, leaned back against it, and let his head thunk gently against the metal.

The hum of the water filtration system reached him through three walls. A low, steady sound.

Life, for three more days.

Interlude: The Fate of the Un-Isolated

In the early weeks, as the Nursery Flu's pattern emerged but before the full horror settled in, there had been stories—half-heard, staticky transmissions over Chen's ham radio—of people who thought they had beaten it.

The Prepper in rural Montana.

He'd fortified a bunker with food, guns, and a water source. He'd sealed it the day the first major cities went dark, patting himself on the back in the dim light of his generator room.

Two months later, his neighbor—a former financial analyst with soft hands and softer habits—wandered onto his property. The neighbor stared up at the clouds, smiling faintly, his shirt half-buttoned.

The Prepper, armed and masked, felt a surge of pity. He wore a simple surgical mask, convinced that distance and fabric were enough. He brought the man into his garage, gave him food, a blanket, a place to sleep.

Two days later, the Prepper was stacking ammunition cans into a colorful pyramid, giggling while he tried to balance the last one on top.

The Lighthouse Keeper off the coast of Maine.

Safe for three months, cut off by rough sea and bad radio conditions. He watched the mainland glow dim, then go dark. He thought he'd won by default.

Then a small fishing trawler drifted into the rocks, crewed by three silent adults with slack faces and beltless pants dragging at their hips. The Keeper rowed out, cursing the bad luck and the damage to his light.

He hauled one “survivor” aboard.

He did not incinerate the man’s clothes. He did not know the virus lingered on skin, in hair, in the crusted salt at the corners of a stranger’s mouth.

Within hours, he had brought the infected man into the tight, warm air of the lighthouse.

By the time he realized something was wrong with his own thoughts, he was sitting on the floor, happily trying to fit his hand through the beam housing, laughing when the light turned the world into a spinning blur.

The few who survived the initial wave by accident of isolation were all taken the same way: error, pity, or the assumption that the danger had an expiration date they could see.

They did not understand that they were living in the drift of a weaponized message that clung to dust and fabric and skin for months.

Only Jim, cornered in his sterile bubble with a dwindling supply of one-hour lives, had survived long enough to understand the real equation:

The virus wasn’t the monster.

The lapse was.

He heard the distant thrum of the newly revived filtration system and unlatched his helmet. Cool, recirculated air kissed his sweaty scalp.

He set the empty SCBA tank on the charging rack, its steel surface nicked and scuffed from a hundred desperate runs.

He had survived one more hour.

Tomorrow, if the batteries held and the pumps didn’t burn out, he would strap on another tank, step back into the contaminated nursery of the world, and live one more.

One hour at a time.

Chapter 2: The Ghost of a Cure

The moment the helmet locked onto the charging clamp, Jim felt the shift—the strange, disorienting lightness that came with stepping out of the SCBA suit. After an hour inside, the

world always felt too open, as if one breath without the visor might erase him from the earth as surely as the Flu itself.

He peeled back the suit's outer layer and stepped into the BSL-4 chamber, its sterilized surfaces gleaming under harsh white lights. Here, at least, the air was clean, filtered, and tested every hour by machines that still obeyed him.

He walked to the sequencing console, the one machine in the facility that had become his confessional, his courtroom, and his battlefield.

He fed it a fresh sample.

RNA from Alistair—taken before the regression fully set in, before the man became a giggling infant in a large adult body.

The sequencer hummed, the faint vibration traveling through the floor into Jim's boots. To him, that hum was the closest thing the world had to a heartbeat.

He watched the lines of genetic code populate the screen, bright bars of color dancing across the analysis display. It was a complicated, beautifully structured chain of instructions—too elegant to be an accident, too cruel to be a mistake.

His hands tightened around the edge of the console.

"This is no virus," he whispered. "It's a message."

The Perversion of mRNA

To the untrained eye, the RNA strands would look like an indecipherable rainbow. But Jim saw the intent.

Most viruses copy themselves recklessly. They break things, overwhelm systems, hijack machinery. This thing did none of that. It didn't integrate into the genome. It barely replicated.

Instead, it delivered a payload—one that behaved less like an infection and more like a biological command.

It told the brain to self-destruct—selectively.

Frontal cortex.

Parietal lobe.

Language centers.

Executive function.

The parts that made a human adult.

The parts that made society possible.

The virus didn't touch the brainstem. Didn't touch hunger. Didn't touch the limbic system. It left behind a living, breathing body... and erased the person.

Jim pulled up the structural diagrams he'd been working on for weeks. Tiny models glowed on the screen—protein coats, ribonucleic spirals, delivery vesicles. The more he studied, the more the dread grew.

The protein coat was nearly indestructible. It bonded to surfaces with frightening stability. It resisted UV better than anything natural. It could survive on dust particles, on clothing fibers, on condensation droplets.

He clicked a record prompt on the console.

> **"Observation: The Nursery Flu is essentially a weaponized mRNA delivery platform.

Not designed to kill.
Designed to reset."**

He paused.

The word "reset" felt like a betrayal, as if describing the end of his species in the language of software updates made the whole thing obscene.

He corrected himself.

> "Designed to annihilate adulthood."

He stopped the recording.

He stared at the structural model again, at the way the viral casing clasped around the RNA like a pearl locked in armor.

His jaw clenched.

The damned thing didn't even look predatory. It looked clean. Efficient. Purposeful. Whoever engineered this had understood exactly what to preserve and what to destroy.

A biological scalpel, not a bomb.

And worst of all?

It worked beautifully.

The Reckoning

Jim turned to the board where he'd written the names of his colleagues. Twelve names. Twelve red dots on the schematic behind it.

He remembered their final lucid moments—each terrible in its own way.

Lin, who had cracked through her regression for a single catastrophic half-minute. Her voice had trembled: "It's quiet. Too quiet. We're shells. There's nothing left where we used to be."

Chen, who had survived longer than anyone, immaculate with protocol—until he drank from a coffee mug Frank had wandered past days earlier.

Maya, meticulous, lonely, undone by her desire for a book that reminded her of normal life.

Each one lost not by recklessness, but by humanity—coffee, kindness, a moment of longing for the old world.

Jim closed his eyes.

He replayed the last days when he still had other voices in the facility. The panic, the arguments, the breakdown of trust as each person realized the stakes and the timeline.

He had told them all: Don't touch anything.
They had nodded, desperate to believe.

But they were scientists, not monks. They reached for familiar comforts—books, snacks, tools, rituals that made them feel human.

The virus punished every single lapse.

He leaned over the console and whispered, "I wasn't strong enough to save you."

And maybe he wasn't wrong.

But the truth was harsher, and deeper.

They weren't the crew for this apocalypse.

He was.

The SCBA suit had saved him, yes.

But so had something else: his own obsessive, brutal discipline. His willingness to abandon comfort, ritual, softness.

His willingness to reduce life to a checklist of one-hour survivals.

Aviate.

Navigate.

Communicate.

The mantra returned unbidden.

Except he hadn't communicated with another adult mind in over a hundred days.

That absence pressed down on him harder than the suit ever had.

Ghost Stations

Chen's old ham radio—now stripped for parts—had once brought voices into the lab. Frantic operators across the world, reporting the same collapse:

A surgeon in São Paulo, who calmly narrated the moment her anesthesiology team regressed mid-procedure.

A trucker outside Kansas City who found a rest stop full of adults sitting cross-legged on the floor, drooling happily.

A research station in Norway where the last engineer was broadcasting while hiding in a ventilation duct, whispering that the "children" were wandering the halls.

All of them gone now.

Silence was the final broadcast.

Jim kept Chen's handset on the counter. He hadn't turned it on in weeks.

He didn't dare.

The last time he had listened, the noise had made him scream—because he had realized the static was better than hearing nothing at all.

The Ghost Inside the Code

The sequencer beeped softly.

Jim looked up.

A new line of code had populated the display: an anomalous fragment, a repeating motif in the viral genome he hadn't noticed before. A kind of "checksum"—a digital term, but applicable—ensuring the payload executed properly in the neural tissue.

He furrowed his brow.

Redundant code was rare in engineered organisms. It meant something. A signature. Or a failsafe.

He zoomed in.

The motif repeated with almost artistic symmetry.

His pulse quickened.

"What the hell are you?" he whispered.

Then, quieter: "Who the hell built you?"

His mind spiraled through possibilities—rogue labs, extremist biotechnologies, black budget military research, industrial sabotage, extremist philosophies.

No theory was satisfying.

No motive made sense.

Unless—

Unless the goal had never been destruction.

What if the goal had been rewriting?

Resetting?

Clearing the slate?

A terrible thought chilled him:

What if this isn't the end of humanity?

What if it's a reboot?

He leaned back in the chair, breath coming fast, and for one brief, disorienting moment he felt the room tilt, as if gravity had forgotten its job.

His fingers curled into fists.

“No,” he whispered fiercely. “No. Humanity wasn’t broken.”

He stood abruptly and slammed his fist against the metal countertop, the clang echoing through the sterile chamber.

“You don’t get to decide what version we run.”

His own voice startled him.

It sounded like an adult’s voice.

Sharp.

Focused.

Angry.

He was suddenly, painfully aware that he hadn’t heard another adult voice—except his own—since Lin’s doomed moment of clarity.

That realization hollowed him.

For a moment, he almost wished he could regress—erase the crushing weight of memory, identity, responsibility.

But he couldn’t.

He was the last adult.

And adulthood wouldn’t let him fall.

A New Alarm

The console chimed again.

Not a routine alert—something else.

A blinking red indicator on the environmental panel.

Jim stepped forward, scanning the readout.

Viral shed levels in the old ventilation shafts: unchanged.

No decay.

No reduction.
No trend toward safe levels.

Six weeks since collapse.
Zero decline.

“Damn it...”

He paced the room, hands shaking.

If the virus shed persisted this long inside, its behavior outdoors could vary drastically by climate, humidity, temperature. There might be microclimates—cold storage zones—where the virus could remain lethal for far longer than projected.

The six-month window he’d been clinging to—his entire survival plan—depended on uniform decay.

This was not uniform.

He grabbed the console and forced himself to breathe.

“Aviate,” he whispered.
“Navigate.”
“Communicate.”

He considered turning on Chen’s radio.

He considered calling into the static.

He considered opening himself to the possibility that somewhere, someone else was still an adult.

But the risk—the emotional collapse that might follow a silent response—felt too dangerous.

He stepped away from it.

Instead, he turned to the sequencing screen and zoomed further into the repeating motif.

He didn’t know what it meant yet.

But he had the first thread.

A pattern.
A signature.

A door into the mind of whoever—or whatever—had created this thing.

He whispered into the empty room, “You left a fingerprint. I’m going to find you.”

He didn’t realize he was smiling until he felt the unfamiliar pull of skin at the corners of his mouth.

For the first time in weeks, he felt something like purpose.

Something like hope.

Chapter 3: The Last Static

Silence had a texture now.

It wasn’t just the absence of sound; it was a pressure. It sat on Jim’s skin, pushed at the back of his eyes, filled the spaces where other people’s voices used to live. The hum of the air filters and the soft tick of temperature relays were the only things keeping it from crushing him entirely.

He was sitting alone in his BSL-4 lab, elbows on the steel bench, head bowed over a notebook full of tight, obsessive handwriting. Across the room, the sequencing rig ran a background batch, its activity lights blinking in calm, indifferent patterns.

He didn’t need to be here right now. The water pumps were running. The air was clean. He had at least two days before he needed to risk another one-hour life in the suit.

But if he stopped working, stopped structuring his thoughts, the silence got teeth.

His eyes drifted toward the corner of the lab, to the shelf where Chen’s old ham radio sat like an abandoned shrine—handset coiled, knobs dusty but intact.

He had sworn he wasn’t going to turn it on again.

He’d meant it.

For weeks.

Now his gaze returned to it every few minutes, like a tongue checking a broken tooth.

“Aviate,” he told himself quietly. “Navigate. Communicate.”

He'd been doing the first two nonstop.

Sooner or later, he was going to have to attempt the third.

Flashback: The Flood of Voices

In the early days, before the walls sealed and the Toddlers filled the corridors, the radio had been the loudest object in the facility.

Chen had set it up on a rolling cart, dragging it from room to room, headphones around his neck, antenna cable snaking up into the ceiling grid. He'd tuned to the ham bands first, then jumped to shortwave, then to anything that still carried a carrier wave.

It had been chaos.

"...this is Lima-November-two-three, I repeat, the symptoms are cognitive, not respiratory..."

"...they're not dying, they're just— they're gone, man, my sister's trying to climb into the dog's food bowl..."

"...government says it's fine, just a bad flu, but the city's stopped, nobody's driving the trucks, the cars are all parked on the freeway and nobody's in the damn driver's seat..."

"...don't touch them, don't touch them, don't touch anything they touched..."

The world had folded in on itself in real time, carried on crackling waves of fear.

There had been that televised moment, too—before the networks went dark—when a British MP in the middle of a speech had stopped, frowned, and then carefully tried to chew the microphone.

The clip went offline within minutes.

The denial campaign went up within hours.

"Fake," pundits had said. "Deepfake, foreign propaganda, panic porn." Politicians had leaned hard on familiar lines: aggressive flu, contained, supply chains resilient, there is no neurological threat.

Then the radio traffic had started mentioning riots. Looting. Not for food, but for sedatives, restraints, diapers.

You couldn't ventilate a billion people back to adulthood.

You couldn't nurse them through this.

You either contained it ruthlessly, or you drowned in it.

Jim remembered Chen's face, washed pale blue by the glow of the lab monitors, as he'd listened to a panicked operator from Chicago.

"...they're sitting in their cars, Jim. Just sitting. Green lights cycling, nobody moving. Like they're waiting for the grown-ups to show up and tell 'em what to do. But there are no grown-ups..."

The radio had become the soundtrack to the end of the world.

Until, one by one, the voices had blinked out.

Now there was just the box, a coil of wire, and the memory of Chen's fingers spinning dials, looking for someone sane enough to confirm reality.

The Decision

Jim stood up abruptly.

The chair scraped the floor, loud in the small room.

Before he could argue himself out of it, he crossed to the shelf, lifted the radio down, and set it on the main bench. The plastic was faintly tacky from disinfectant wipes that had dried half a season ago.

He plugged the power lead into a filtered outlet.

His fingertip hovered over the switch.

"You're going to regret this," he told himself.

He flipped it on anyway.

The unit crackled, popped, and then flooded his ears with a deep, broad hiss. Atmospheric noise. Ionospheric murmurs. The sound of a planet full of weather and nothing else.

Jim slipped the headphones over his ears, shutting out even the air filters. His world narrowed to a band of static and the dials under his fingers.

He began to tune.

Slowly.

Carefully.

He swept through the bands where Chen had once found life. Military frequencies. Amateur nets. Maritime emergency channels. Airline bands.

Nothing but hiss and occasional ghost-pops where a distant thunderstorm made its presence known.

His heart rate climbed with each empty band, each fruitless sweep. His chest felt tight, as if the SCBA timer was counting down again, only this time the air wasn't what was running out.

It was proof.

Proof that he wasn't the only mind left.

Minutes bled into something that might have been an hour. He had long since stopped checking the wall clock.

"I'm an idiot," he whispered. "I traded silence for worse silence."

He was about to kill the power when something changed in the noise.

A faint, regular pulse ticked beneath the hiss, so subtle he thought at first it was his own heartbeat leaking into his perception.

He froze.

There it was again.

One-two-three... pause... one-two... pause... one-two-three-four...

Not random.

He adjusted the fine-tune knob by fractions, breath held.

The pulse sharpened. A digital tone, compressed, repeating in a rigid envelope. A data burst, not a voice. A beacon.

"Come on," he murmured. "Come on, come on, come on..."

He found the center frequency and held it. The pulse cycled every ten seconds.

He grabbed a notebook and began marking the pattern.

Someone had done this before—Chen, or whoever this beacon had been meant for. A smart operator broadcasting on a stable, low-frequency band with good global reach.

The beacon repeated fourteen times.

On the fifteenth cycle, the pattern broke.

The noise hiccuped, and a voice slid into the narrow gap.

“...repeat... if anyone... can hear... this...”

Female.

The input gain spiked; he scrambled to adjust the volume before the distortion blew his ears out.

“...you are not alone...”

The words dissolved into a smear of static, then recovered for half a second.

“...not safe in the... corridors. He’s using them...”

The last two words were clear as a knife.

Using them.

Then the digital pulse reasserted itself, blank and mechanical, looping again as if nothing had happened.

Jim sat perfectly still, heart pounding so hard it felt like the radio chassis might pick it up.

He rewound it mentally.

You are not alone.

Not safe in the corridors.

He’s using them.

He didn’t realize his hands were shaking until he saw the undulating line his pen had left across the notebook page.

“Say that again,” he whispered into the empty lab. “Please. Just once more.”

He waited through three more cycles.

Nothing but the data pulse.

He checked the radio's input levels. The gain was fine. The signal was steady. Whatever fragment he'd heard wasn't repeating on a loop; it had been live, or at least unscripted.

He swallowed.

"Ham convention, rule one," Chen's long-ago voice murmured in his memory. "You hear a human in trouble, you answer. Doesn't matter if you've got a license. The sky belongs to all of us."

Jim's hand moved to the transmit toggle.

He froze halfway there.

If someone else was alive out there—if there really was another adult—it wasn't just hope.

It was danger.

Whoever "he" was, he had control of corridors. Of people. Of infrastructure. Enough that a stranger's first warning was he's using them.

Jim's survival for six months had been rooted in the opposite: avoiding other people's systems. Other people's plans.

"Aviate," he whispered. "Navigate. Communicate."

He hovered on the third step like a diver on a high ledge.

Finally, he pressed the switch.

"This is Vance," he said, voice rough with disuse. "CDC-2 research facility. Eastern sector. I confirm survival. I confirm presence of regressed adults. If you can hear this, transmit your status. Over."

He let go.

The hiss rushed in.

The beacon ticked through another cycle, oblivious.

He tried again.

"Female voice on this frequency, this is Vance. I heard you. Repeat: you are not alone."

He waited.

Nothing.

Just the indifferent rhythm of the encoded pulse.

Interlude: The Last Operator

For a moment, the lab around him faded, and he imagined the other end of the signal as if it were one of Chen's old stories.

Somewhere, a woman sat in a reinforced room, surrounded by blinking equipment. Maybe a polar station. Maybe an underground bunker. Maybe a control center built to ride out nuclear winter, not neurological apocalypse.

Her fingers hovered over a transmit key much like his. Her face was lit by the blue glow of a screen. Her world was as small as his, measured in cubic meters of habitable space and one thin thread of radio spectrum.

Maybe she'd seen what he hadn't.

Maybe she'd found someone like Ethan Cole before he had a name. A man who looked at the regressed and saw levers instead of victims.

Maybe she'd watched him set a Toddler down in front of a generator, not as company, but as a human barrier. A piece of moving furniture. A living tripwire.

He's using them, she had said.

Not hurting. Not killing.

Using.

That word was almost worse.

It implied intention. A system. A philosophy.

Someone out there had solved the problem of surviving in a world full of infants by turning those infants into tools.

Jim's stomach turned.

Dissecting the Signal

He forced himself back into the present, back into the lab, back into the part of his mind that knew how to pick apart patterns.

He set the radio to record and let the beacon run for five full minutes. Then he killed the volume, unplugged the headphones, and patched the audio output into a laptop whose air-gapped system he'd repurposed for analysis.

Waveforms scrolled across the screen. He zoomed in, marking the precise points where the digital signature rose and fell. Burst length. Interval. Amplitude.

The beacon itself was clean. Precise. Probably automated.

But the moment where the female voice had broken through—there the waveform went wild. Overdriven, ragged.

Someone had overridden the machine.

He isolated the strip that contained speech, filtered the worst of the static, and played it again at lower speed.

"...repeat... if anyone... can hear... this..."

Closer now. The voice had an accent he couldn't pin down. Not thick. Just enough to put tiny edges on certain consonants.

"...you are not alone..."

This time he could hear the tremor in it. Not panic exactly. A kind of exhausted conviction.

Then the noise swelled, and he caught one extra syllable that had been buried the first time.

"...not safe in the... corridors. He's using them. They don't remember what you... do to..."

The word after "you" was lost, chopped off as the automated system cut her out and resumed its mechanical loop.

Jim stopped the playback and sat very still.

They don't remember what you do to them.

Of course they didn't. There was nothing left to form new memories with. Nothing that could consolidate experience into identity.

You could use them like tools, and they would never hold it against you. Never hate you. Never fear you.

Because there was no you to them.

No person.

No continuity.

Just another shape in the environment.

His hands tightened on the edge of the bench until his knuckles ached.

“Is that what you became?” he asked the silent screen. “Whoever you are? Is that where you landed?”

He thought of the laminated note he’d found in the generator log weeks later—he hadn’t found it yet, in his timeline, but some part of the story was already reaching backward, drafting meaning into his path. Agency is finite. Resources are not. The children have been taught to wait for the signal.

He didn’t know those words yet.

But the philosophy behind them was already crystallizing in the ether between his world and the woman’s warning.

Somewhere out there, an adult had decided that in a world of endless, docile bodies and vanishing responsible minds, the only thing that mattered was who got to hold the levers.

Choice

He could smash the radio.

He could pour bleach into the vents, tear out the cables, incinerate the whole cart until it was just warped plastic and slag. He could retreat back into a world of humming pumps and genetic code and pretend no other adults existed.

He almost did.

He even went as far as pulling the bleach bottle down from the shelf, unscrewing the cap. The sharp chlorine scent knifed into his nose, memories of earlier purges flaring—desks, bedding, clothes, all rendered chemically innocent.

He held the bottle over the open back of the radio, fingers tensing.

“No more ghosts,” he whispered.

Then he stopped.

The memory of the woman's voice cut across the impulse like a stabilizing fin.

You are not alone.

He set the bleach down with exaggerated care.

He would not destroy the one thread that said he wasn't the only mind left.

He compromised instead.

He unplugged the power cord and coiled it carefully. He moved the radio back to its shelf in the corner—far enough that he had to deliberately choose to use it, close enough that he could if he needed to.

He wiped the bench clean where it had sat, as if scrubbing away the emotional residue.

Then he returned to the sequencing rig.

On the monitor, the model of the virus's repeating motif still hovered, waiting.

A fingerprint in the code.

A ghost in the genome.

A problem he could work on while the woman's fragmented warning unspooled in his thoughts.

He started a new log entry.

> **"Day 47 since global collapse.

External voice contact: probable. Female. Fragmentary.

Content: explicit reference to someone 'using' regressed adults in corridors. Implies structured human system built on exploitation of cognitively erased population.

Ethical note: If this is true, the threat is no longer just microbial. It is ideological."**

He paused, then added:

> “If there are other adults, I may not be on the same side as all of them.”

He saved the entry.

He sat back and listened—for a moment—to the hum of the equipment, the only constant choir he trusted.

The radio was silent now, dark on its shelf.

But the idea of another voice had already changed the room.

It had tilted the horizon.

It had introduced a new instrument into the symphony that would follow.

Aviate.

Navigate.

Communicate.

For the first time, the third step wasn't hypothetical.

Somewhere beyond the reinforced concrete and contaminated air, another adult mind had spoken into the void.

And somewhere out there, another adult—one who didn't flinch at the word use—might be listening too.