

CHAPTER 4 — PART I

The suit always felt heavier on the days he chose to go out.

Suiting up for water, for power, for filters—that was survival. Routine. But today was different. Today he wasn't leaving the CDC compound for maintenance. He was leaving to find a mind.

Jim locked the torso ring into place and felt the helmet seal engage with a mechanical click that echoed inside the shell. The HUD blinked, then steadied. Oxygen levels green. Internal pressure stable.

In the lower right corner, the timer appeared:

60:00

He flexed his fingers in the heavy gloves, cycling through the checklist. Regulators. Scrubbers. Internal comms. External mic muted. Fifty minutes of real usable air if everything went right. Forty-five if it didn't.

He hit the airlock control. The chamber cycled with its usual hum of pumps and ultraviolet flashes. The outer door sighed open into late afternoon light—washed out, silent, uncanny.

56:42

The yard felt wrong. Not dangerous—wrong. A man slumped in a parked car toyed with the seat belt buckle, smiling faintly. A woman stood by a light pole, forehead pressed against the rusted metal. The regressed, the “Toddlers,” drifted like loose threads in an unraveling world.

Jim kept wide of them, boots tracing the disinfected lane markers he'd pressure-washed months ago. No smell reached him—only the steady hiss of his own respirator.

Beyond the lot squatted the CDC's forgotten sibling: the Auxiliary Utilities Plant. A windowless concrete block with pipes snaking into the ground, built for emergencies decades before the Viress.

He angled toward it.

The concrete pad in front of the plant door stopped him cold.

It was clean.

Not untouched—maintained. Wind-borne dust coated every horizontal surface on campus, including the CDC's airlock. But this small rectangle was swept bare down to the pores of the concrete.

“That’s not weather,” Jim murmured.

49:08

He tried the door. It opened easily, too easily. Inside, the echo changed—padded, muffled, the air deadened in a way he couldn’t parse through the suit.

He swept his helmet light across the corridor.

And froze.

The floor shone faintly. The linoleum had been wiped—recently. Identical plastic buckets sat upside-down along the baseboards in perfect intervals. The scuff marks on the walls were... patterned. Repeated. Deliberate.

“Someone’s been here.”

A faint sound reached him—soft, irregular.

Slap... slap... slap...

Bare feet on tile.

He followed the noise.

Tape lines appeared on the floor—yellow, branching like traffic patterns, turning corners sharply, leading deeper into the plant. They weren’t industrial markings. Someone had laid them carefully, trimming edges with precision.

The corridor opened into the main floor—a vast chamber of machinery and shadow.

Jim stepped through and stopped just inside the threshold.

Fifteen to twenty adults milled in the center of the room.

Barefoot. Slack-faced. Docile.

And moving in lanes.

Yellow tape divided the floor into long segments. Soft rubber mats in bright colors lined one wall. Overhead, LEDs glowed warm and inviting above a sloped corner where the concrete dipped toward a large grate.

A waste zone.

Someone had built a potty-training system for adults whose minds had regressed to toddlers.

Sawdust lay in thick arcs around the drain. Some of it was fresh—too fresh to be more than an hour old. Rubber squeegees rested against a steel column. A wheeled tub half-filled with cloudy water sat nearby.

“Oh God,” Jim whispered.

39:17

One of the adults—a woman in a tattered lab coat—approached the sawdust bin, plunged her hands in, and trudged toward the drain, scattering the material in ritual arcs. No understanding. Just conditioned repetition.

Another man dragged a small mop across the floor, pushing in uneven strokes along a lane of tape.

These weren’t random movements.

They were tasks.

They’d been shaped—herded, rewarded, guided by warmth, light, sound, and soft textures.

Ethan—whoever he was—had turned living adults into a sanitation system.

A herd.

A workforce.

Jim backed into the shadow of the doorway and felt his heart hammer against the ribs of the suit.

Where there was order, there was a mind behind it.

A capable one.

A frightening one.

CHAPTER 4 — PART II

Jim stayed pressed into the doorway's shadow, trying to steady his breath despite the confined helmet. Every instinct screamed at him to retreat—but the part of him still trained to analyze, to understand, pushed him forward.

He skirted the room's perimeter, keeping as much distance as possible from the drifting adults. The suit made his movements slow, deliberate. Any fall, any brush of a hand, any breach of the seals would mean the end of him as he was.

Tape lanes guided him along the wall toward a service corridor. The farther he moved from the central chamber, the cleaner everything became. The walls here showed fewer smears. The floors, while scuffed, were nearly dust-free. Buckets reappeared at intervals, some holding neatly folded rags.

Someone had a rotation.

Someone had a routine.

He followed the cleaner corridor to a junction. The right path ended in a heavy steel door with a large manual latch. Above it, painted in block letters, he read:

AGENCY IS FINITE
RESOURCES ARE NOT

Below that, in smaller text:

THE CHILDREN WAIT FOR THE SIGNAL

Jim stared at the stenciled words, a cold thread tightening in his chest. Whoever had written this wasn't panicked. The lettering was straight, even, measured. Philosophy—not desperation.

He reached toward the painted motto, hand stopping short of the surface by instinct.

"Someone decided the future," he whispered, "and it didn't include restoring these people."

28:11

He turned away and continued down the left-hand corridor. After a few steps he saw something carved into the paint, scratched with a metal edge or tool.

DON'T TRUST HIM

The final letters wavered, as if the writer's hand had trembled.

Jim leaned in, studying the cuts. Different handwriting. Different energy. Not controlled. Not stenciled. A warning, not a mission statement.

His pulse jumped.

Her?

The voice he'd heard on the radio—shredded, panicked—could have come from someone hiding here. Someone resisting.

Or someone hunted.

He moved on.

The corridor opened into a small galley. A long table had been pushed to one side. Plastic bowls sat in two neat rows—clean, stacked with intention. On the counter, two metal spoons were missing from the tidy line. A drying rack held an upside-down mug and a smaller measuring cup.

Two utensils gone. Two drinking vessels used.

Not one person.

Two.

He turned his helmet light across the counters. No food left out. No clutter. A space that had been used recently but deliberately—much like the rest of the facility.

Jim's breath rasped softly inside the faceplate.

Not just an engineer.

Not just a system-builder.

A caretaker of sorts.

A manager of bodies and routines.

And maybe a jailer.

24:37

Time was shortening. He needed to retreat soon or risk suffocating in the suit before reaching the clean rooms.

He hurried back toward the main floor—faster now, suit joints whining softly. The moment he stepped back into the industrial chamber, he froze again.

The adults were drifting through their lanes, moving toward the feeding troughs now. A soft bell chimed, and several turned their heads toward the sound.

Then one broke away.

A man in his thirties, hair sticking up in soft spikes, padded directly toward Jim along the tape line. His steps were slow but determined, his eyes bright with simple curiosity. He giggled when he saw Jim's reflective visor.

"No," Jim whispered. "Not this close—"

The man raised a hand toward the smooth dome of the helmet.

Jim took one step back—too fast. The heel of his boot caught the raised floor lip. Gravity lurched. The suit's weight shifted.

For one nauseating second he felt himself begin to fall.

He twisted, slamming a palm into the concrete wall. The edge of his climate unit clipped the door frame with a sharp clang that made his HUD flicker. He fought for balance, forcing his weight backward.

The young man stopped half a meter away, fascinated by the reflection.

He leaned forward—one more inch and he would touch the visor.

Then the bell chimed again.

The man's head snapped toward the sound. His hand dropped. He made a delighted noise and ambled off toward the feeding area.

Jim exhaled shakily.

His HUD blinked a brief CO₂ warning before stabilizing.

He backed out, keeping the wall to his right, and slipped into the side corridor. He didn't stop moving until he reached the plant's exterior door.

The sunlight hit him like a physical blow.

The man in the car still played with the seat belt latch. The woman by the pole still picked at rust flakes. Nothing out here had changed.

But Jim had.

09:51

He took the quickest route back across the lot, boots thudding, heart pounding. Every drifting adult felt like a mine waiting to be triggered.

Halfway across, a faint crackle buzzed in his headset.

He froze.

The external mic was still muted.

The internal radio—Chen's old handheld, patched into the suit's system—had powered on by itself.

"...not... safe..."

A woman's voice. Weak. Distorted. Real.

He fumbled with the gain.

"...he's... using... if you're... get out..."

Hiss swallowed the rest.

Jim stood motionless for one second too long, torn between answering and running.

07:37

There was no time. He moved.

The airlock accepted him with hydraulic indifference. Sprays, UV, solvent mist—every second felt too slow. He stepped into the inner chamber and tore off his helmet the instant the safe-to-breathe tone chimed.

Cool air hit his face. The room swam, then steadied.

Images cascaded behind his eyes:

Tape lines.

Sawdust arcs.

Bare feet pattering.

A woman's trembling carved warning.

A stenciled creed about agency.

Twenty adults herded without cruelty or comprehension.

And behind it all—

...he's using them... please...

Jim sank onto the bench, one glove dangling from his fingertips.

The virus was no longer the only enemy.

Somewhere within a half-mile of his safe haven was a man who had built a functioning society out of broken minds.

A system.

A philosophy.

A rival adult.

Jim swallowed hard, staring at the sealed inner door.

"Ethan Cole," he whispered.

The name he'd seen once in an old maintenance roster.

A name he'd never meant to remember.

Now it burned.

And somewhere close by, a woman was still alive—and warning him for a reason.

CHAPTER 5 — PART I

The Breath Between Worlds

Jim spent the rest of the evening logging data, but none of it made sense.

The samples he had collected from the suits, the air, the plant doorframe—they told one story.

His mind told another.

Every few minutes he looked toward the entry vestibule, half expecting the radio to crackle again with that shredded voice. But the handheld remained silent, its LED blinking a steady green as if mocking him.

He forced himself to work.

He had to.
Routine kept the panic at bay.

Still, the same questions circled him like wolves:

Who is she?
How long has she been near Ethan?
Is she warning me... or leading me?
And why hasn't Ethan found her?

He didn't sleep well.
When he did drift off, he dreamed of tape lines stretching endlessly in yellow and black, of bare feet slapping along concrete corridors, of sawdust scattering like sand through the fingers of a retreating tide.

And always at the boundary of the dream, a faint voice whispering:

"...stop... he's... watching..."

The Morning After

Jim woke with his jaw clenched so tightly he had to massage it open. He rinsed his face with recycled water, swallowed a nutrient packet without tasting it, and stared at the wall where he kept his notes.

Three pages.

One for the plant system.
One for Ethan Cole.
One for the woman.

Patterns, sketches, annotations.
And on the last page, underlined twice:

DON'T TRUST HIM — scratched handwriting.
Female?
Alive.
Close.
Hiding.

He took a slow breath.

He needed more information.

More context.

More signs of organized activity near the campus perimeter.

He suited up again.

60:00

The weight of the helmet felt heavier this time. He paused before the airlock control, the memory of the young man reaching toward the visor still a hot needle in his spine.

Still, he pressed the button.

The outer world greeted him with the same washed sky, the same wandering regressed adults, the same silence that felt like it was waiting for something.

He didn't go back toward the plant.

Not today.

Today he skirted the far edge of the CDC campus, moving parallel to the old access road, toward where the beacon signal triangulated.

It was faint out here, but real.

Someone was powering it.

Not the girl—her radio was too damaged and intermittent.

Not a random survivor—the signal's pulse structure was engineered, methodical.

Which left one possibility.

Ethan Cole.

The Displaced Air

Jim walked for nearly ten minutes before something caught his attention.

A sense, more than a sight.

The air felt... disturbed. Like someone had recently passed through.

He slowed.

Checked his timer.

48:44

A rustle reached him from beyond a row of overgrown bushes.

Soft.

Intentional.

Not the flailing movement of a regressed adult.

His pulse quickened.

He stepped closer, helmet tilted, listening.

The sound came again.

Like someone shifting their weight carefully on a patch of gravel.

Jim froze, hardly daring to breathe.

Another sound followed—
a quick inhale,
sharp and small,
like someone stifling panic.

A human breath.

Not infected.

Not shambling.

Controlled.

Someone was hiding.

“Hello?” Jim said quietly, knowing they might not hear him clearly through the filtered external pickup. “I’m not a threat.”

The bushes remained still.

Then—
a faint crackle in his headset.

“...don’t... stay away... he’s close...”

Her voice.

But very near.

Not radio distortion this time.

Actual proximity.

Jim turned slowly, scanning the tree line, the shadows beneath the service pipes, the old maintenance sheds.

Nothing moved.

Yet he felt eyes on him.

Not hostile.

Desperate.

If she was this close, she had been following him.

Tracking him.

Testing whether he was like Ethan.

He swallowed.

"I'm not with him," he said. "If you can hear me—I'm alone. And I'm not here to hurt anyone."

Silence.

Then a faint click—like someone adjusting a damaged handheld radio.

"...he... watches... patterns... don't follow the lines..."

The words cut out abruptly, as if she had covered the mic with her hand.

Jim's breath hitched.

Patterns.

She was talking about Ethan's behavior.

About his control system.

About the tape lanes and rails and behavioral funnels.

If he followed them, Ethan would know exactly where he was.

Jim backed away slowly, avoiding the linear paths of broken asphalt and trimmed grass.

He turned toward the north service yard—

And froze.

A single figure stood at the far end, partially hidden behind the corner of a brick substation building. A silhouette. Human. Upright.

Watching him.

Then the figure stepped back and vanished.

Jim's heartbeat spiked.

47:05

Too far for a good look.

Too close to dismiss.

Was it Ethan?

Or her?

He couldn't tell.

He moved toward the place the figure had stood—carefully, staying off straight corridors, avoiding open sightlines. Every instinct from pilot training resurfaced:

Never fly predictable.

Never move in straight vectors.

Never let the adversary set the geometry.

He reached the substation.

Empty.

But something else caught his eye.

On the doorframe, low and nearly hidden beneath a peeling sticker, was a fingerprint smear—not dirty, but clean. As if someone with washed hands had steadied themselves there recently.

He touched nothing.
Just looked.

“Someone’s moving in and out of here,” he whispered.

Someone who wasn’t a Toddler.

Someone who understood stealth.

Someone watching Ethan.

Or Jim.

Or both.

The Silent Corridor of Pipes

He continued deeper into the service yard until he reached an old storm drain channel—steel grates laid across concrete. The smell of old rust and stagnant water reached the filters faintly.

He swept his light along the grate—

And stopped.

Shoe prints.

Adult-sized.

Recent.

Not shuffling.

Not irregular.

Deliberate.

A second set beside them—lighter, smaller.

Two adults.

One with a heavier step.

One with a careful, quiet gait.

Ethan and the woman?

Or the woman shadowing him?
Or two survivors working together?

Before he could examine more, a sudden clang echoed from the pipes overhead—metal on metal.

Jim spun, helmet light slicing the shadows—

And once again saw only empty space.

But this time, the empty space felt occupied.

Someone had moved.
Someone had retreated.
Someone who did not want him getting closer.

His timer beeped a soft warning.

42:31

He was too far from the CDC building to linger.
He needed to get back while he still had a safety margin.

He turned toward the compound—

And his radio gave one last whisper:

“...careful... he sets trails... he—”

Static crushed the rest.

Jim backed away, eyes scanning the yard, throat tight inside the helmet.

He didn't know where she was.

But she knew exactly where he was.

And she wasn't alone out here.

END OF CHAPTER 5 — PART I

CHAPTER 5 — PART II

Lines That Lead Backward

Jim returned to the CDC airlock on a razor-thin cushion of time:

07:02,

04:55,

02:11,

00:38 before the chamber cycled.

His hands shook as he unsealed the helmet. He wiped sweat from his forehead and tried to banish the image of the silhouette behind the substation.

Was it Ethan?

The woman?

Both?

He didn't know.

But someone had moved like an adult—
quiet, aware, intentional.

And they were tracking him.

Inside Again

Jim sat at the bench long after the suit was off, listening to the faint hum of the building's systems. His mind played back the day:

the rustle in the bushes

her whispered warning

the figure watching him

the shoe prints of two adults

the clang above him in the pipes

None of it aligned with the regressed.

Somebody out there was thinking.

Reacting.

Choosing.

And they were close.

He checked the handheld radio.
The battery light glowed weakly—
but the unit remained silent.

He set it down, exhaling shakily.

Then he noticed something.

The radio hadn't been where he left it.

It had been moved slightly.
Turned.
As if someone had picked it up delicately
and put it back down.

His stomach tightened.

Someone could have slipped into the outer corridor while he was in the lab.
Someone quick.
Someone quiet.
Someone watching Ethan's patterns.

Someone watching Jim's.

He moved to the security panel.
Checked the motion logs.

Nothing.
Dead static.
No entries.

Which meant—

They knew where the blind spots were.

His pulse hammered.

This was no random survivor.
This was someone trained.
Disciplined.
A ghost in the ruins.

Three hours later...

Jim couldn't sit still.

He needed answers.

He needed contact with the woman.

Or he needed confirmation that the shadow behind the substation was Ethan.

So he suited up again, but in the lighter version:

not full SCBA—

a half-mask PAPR plus the outer hood.

Risky, but far more mobile.

He stayed within the CDC perimeter this time, following one of the old walkways between buildings. He kept off the painted paths, avoiding anything that looked like it could be part of a pattern.

He knew now what she meant:

Ethan watches patterns.

He sets trails.

He funnels movement like airflow.

Jim would not be funneled.

The Trap

He reached Building 12A, an old storage annex he hadn't entered since the collapse. Its doors hung half-open, one hinge rusted through. Dust lay thick inside the entryway...

Except in the center.

A perfectly clean square.

Swept.

Bare.

Purposeful.

Jim felt the hairs on his arms rise beneath the suit.

A corridor of recently moved footprints—deliberate, heel-to-toe strides—led deeper into the building.

He raised his light.
Turned slowly.

Something glinted on the far wall.

A small metal plate.

He moved closer.

Stamped into its surface:

FOLLOW THE LINES
IF YOU WANT TO LIVE

Jim froze.

This wasn't the woman.
This was Ethan.
The same chilled precision.
The same clipped, logical tone.

He turned to leave—

A clatter erupted on the roof overhead.

Jim's heart lurched. He stepped back, helmet light swinging wildly—

A shape dropped from the rooftop edge and landed behind him with a heavy thud.

Jim spun—

And saw nothing.

The shape had already melted into darkness, slipping behind the rows of shelving.

He backed toward the door, pulse hammering.

A faint whisper crackled in his ear, urgent and terrified:

"...get out... he's there... MOVE—"

Then the radio cut sharply.

A different voice followed—
not through the radio,
but echoing faintly in the annex:

A man's voice.

Calm.
Measured.
Cold.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

Jim’s chest tightened.

He swept the beam of his helmet-light across the shadows—

Footsteps echoed behind him.

Not rushing.
Not panicked.

Controlled.

Deliberate.

He took a step back, breath stuttering.

He wasn’t alone in the building.

And he wasn’t in control.

Ethan Cole was here.
Close enough to speak.
Close enough to watch.
Close enough to touch the walls he had shaped like a living maze.

Jim didn’t wait.

He sprinted for the exit.

He didn’t look behind him—
but he could hear the footsteps,
matching his pace,
then stopping suddenly...

As if Ethan had already mapped exactly how far Jim would go.

He burst through the annex door and into the fading daylight.

Silence.

Just his own ragged breath.

The building behind him remained still.

Too still.

Back at the Airlock

He slammed the cycle button and staggered into the chamber. Sweat dripped from his temples. His hands shook.

Somewhere between the clatter on the roof and the whisper of the woman's voice, Jim realized the horrifying truth:

Ethan wasn't just using them.

He was evolving them.

Refining patterns.

Studying responses.

Testing behaviors.

The auxiliary plant wasn't the end.

It was the beginning.

A prototype.

Jim sank to the bench, head in his hands.

He whispered, voice shaking:

"He's not building a nursery.

He's building a system."

And somewhere out there, the woman—
the ghost in the bushes—
was trying to stop him.

Or trying to escape him.

Or both.

END OF CHAPTER 5 — PART II