

WRIGHT OUT OF TIME

BOOK TWO: EVIL'S RESIDENCE

A Glitch brought here.
Something darker
wants keep him.



**POWER
TO THE
READER!**



R. C. CRESPO

Wright Out of Time

Book 2: Evils Residence

R.C. Crespo

Wright Out of Time – Series Copyright
Book One of the Cresponia Universe
Book One of Wright’s Will Series

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First Edition: 2025
Cover art © 2025 by Rael Crespo
Interior design by Cresponia StoryWorks

For my mother—

Thank you for the magic you placed in my hands long before I knew what storytelling was.

You were the one who picked up Star Fox for the SNES after my dramatic little tirade, and before that TMNT: Turtles in Time. Those weren't just games—they were sparks. Worlds. Portals. And you bought them anyway, even when they were \$70 then (the equivalent of \$120 today), because you saw how much they meant to me.

Thank you for feeding the hobby that became a passion, and the passion that led me here—to writing stories inspired by all the adventures you helped put in my life.

This book exists because you believed in me long before I knew how to believe in myself.

Thanks, Mom.

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Chapter 1 - False Alarms and Evil Eyes

The siren didn't just blare—it drilled. Red strobes carved the basement into stop-motion frames as kids flooded the stairs in a stampede of sneakers, shouted names, and clattering controller cords. A beanbag clung to someone's back like a giant blue barnacle. Another kid sprinted two steps hugging a CRT, reconsidered, set it down like a sleeping dog, and bolted.

“Left—left—go left!” Sabrina yelled, goggles bouncing at her collarbone as she caught William's sleeve and Yeldarb's wrist.

“I am protecting the rear!” Yeldarb boomed, which in practice meant his shoulders became a human snowplow for panicked seventh-graders. “Single file! Two singles!”

They spilled into the main hall. The alarm ricocheted hard enough to turn the air grainy. It made William's ribs buzz. Under the mechanical scream, another sound threaded through: a thin, tuneful whistle, calm as a metronome.

Snakes.

He stood where the corridor bent, mop drifting lazy figure eights, a lighthouse in a storm. His eyes lifted, found William through the chaos. For a breath the whole building thinned—sirens, red light, running feet—and William saw only lips shape: There is no fire.

His feet wanted to stop. Sabrina tugged. “Come on!”

He gave Snakes one small nod—question/answer/pact—and let the tide pull him on.

They stuck tight by instinct. Around them the Home did a passable impression of a sinking ship—doors slamming, staff voices echoing from far off, kids bleating questions as if answers could smother noise. They reached the corner where a glass-covered alarm box gaped open, its lever yanked down like an insult.

“There,” Sabrina said, already angling in. “Epicenter.”

“Do not touch!” Yeldarb warned—and reached anyway.

Sabrina caught his wrist an inch short. “Wait. Look.”

Under the strobe, the plastic gleamed wrong.

Not just shine—sheen.

William leaned close, and the siren receded half a step to make room for his focus. A slick, pearly film caught the light and threw it back in tiny, oily rainbows.

“That's... soap?” he said.

Sabrina didn't answer right away. She dipped a fingertip near the edge—careful not to touch it—then leaned in and gave a sharp, testing sniff.

“...Not soap,” she said finally, brow tightening. “It's one of those marker gels.”

Yeldarb scowled at the lever like it personally offended him. “Who does this?”

“People who want someone to blame for fines,” Sabrina muttered. She angled her head, watching the residue shift under the strobe. “It leaves a trace you can't see unless you hit it with the right light.”

William blinked. “How do you know all that?”

Sabrina shrugged one shoulder, cheeks tinting with a mix of pride and guilt.

“I... read about it in a security compliance manual I wasn't supposed to have. Long story.”

She gestured at the lever.

“There. That's definitely it.”

A faint smear glittered on the cinderblock. Another a few feet along.
A breadcrumb trail for clever kids instead of hungry birds.

Sabrina followed it without waiting, palm hovering near the wall to catch each little glint. William and Yeldarb fell in behind her—the siren sawing their spines while their world narrowed to tiny clues and smaller breaths.

They reached the junction and Sabrina pivoted, eyes scanning. The trail didn't end—it slipped around a corner into the darker maintenance wing. The red strobe barely reached back there; every pulse made the shadows breathe.

Sabrina angled her head toward a half-open door at the end of the service hall.

“Bathroom,” she whispered.

Not the main one—this was the old single-stall, the one kids used when they didn't want to be seen. A sliver of movement flicked behind the door. Not enough for a face—just enough for suspicion.

Sabrina moved first. Slow. Quiet.

William followed, and Yeldarb's bulk shadowed both of them.

The closer they got, the clearer the sounds became:

Wet paper towels tearing.

Breaths coming fast.

A whispered “Come off—come off—”

Sabrina braced a hand on the frame and nudged the door wider.

Inside, under the weak emergency light, four shapes crowded the cramped room—pressed shoulder-to-shoulder in the ugly intimacy of shared blame.

Bobby. Tommy. Danny.

And Warren—hands outstretched over the tiny sink—scrubbing his palms with a wad of soaked paper towels like he could erase skin if he wanted it enough.

“Off—off—just—come off—” Warren hissed, scrubbing until the paper pilled. He turned his hands, scrubbed harder, turned them again.

Tommy snorted. “Keep going, Royal Flush. Maybe if you rub hard enough, a genie grants you basic competence.”

Danny didn't talk. He kept his back to the door, eyes trained on the hall like a guard dog who'd already picked the throat he'd tear out first.

Bobby leaned on the wall, grin all teeth. “Relax, man. You panicked and pulled out your hand too late. Happens to geniuses.”

Warren shot him a look that would have burned with a little more oxygen. “You said—” The rest strangled itself, swallowed by the paper towel.

Sabrina inhaled sharply through her teeth. Yeldarb took a step—a sincere battering ram gearing up.

Sabrina's arm barred his chest without looking. “No.”

“We cannot let them slander truth!” Yeldarb whispered hotly. “They cause chaos—our home pays—”

“And if we go in there,” Sabrina murmured, eyes fixed on the quartet, “what happens?”

“Justice,” he said, like naming a star.

“What happens next,” she pressed. “After shouting? When staff find four idiots in a bathroom with glitter glue on a lever—and three of us *not* supposed to be here?”

Yeldarb stalled, jaw tightening like a stubborn hinge.

William didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until it left him. The alarm kept sawing the air. The trail gleamed behind him like a road they shouldn't have taken. Warren rubbed his hands raw. Tommy's mean laugh chewed at the walls. Bobby patted Warren's cheek like property.

A quiet settled inside William that didn't match the hallway or the siren. The roar of the tournament, the purple flare, the clean hit of belonging—the alarm had ripped all of it away. Watching this, something new clicked in:

how easily the wrong people turned fear into a tool,
and how fast a place like Harrison bled for other people's games.

"Play it cool," Sabrina said. "We didn't see them. We didn't see anything."

"Guts do not hide," Yeldarb muttered.

"Guts don't get blamed for fines either," she said, softer. "Trust me."

William looked one last time—from Warren's red hands, to Bobby's lazy lean, to Danny's stillness.

Once, pity would have won.

Then Tommy gag-laughed again, and Bobby tapped Warren's cheek like he owned him. Pity snuffed itself out.

"Cool," William said. "It is."

They turned together and slipped back into the hallway, letting the alarm shove them toward the noise of the crowd. Paper towels squeaked behind them. Someone muttered "be careful next time," as if that were a plan and not a confession.

They didn't look back.

They had a trail, a truth, and—for now—a better use for both than a public fight.

The sirens finally strangled themselves, leaving a long, dying beep hanging in the air like aftertaste. Emergency lights still pulsed, painting everyone in red fatigue. Kids milled in clusters, half in pajamas, half in victory sweat, whispering who-did-it and will-we-be-expelled-for-smelling-like-smoke.

Spencer arrived at the far end, red-faced and disheveled, wearing what had once hoped to be heroic: an ill-fitting firefighter pajamas—cartoon flames licking the calves and a sequined badge that read Hot Stuff. He stomped forward, clipboard brandished like a shield.

"Everyone accounted for?!" he shouted, voice cracking on "everyone." The kids tried not to laugh and failed. Wolf-whistles trailed him.

"Every crisis deserves a clown," Sabrina murmured.

Yeldarb saluted as if greeting a general. "All safe! We evacuated with courage and minimal tripping!"

"Good. Excellent. Courage is... noted," Spencer said, tugging at his too-tight collar. "What happened?"

"Someone pulled the alarm," Sabrina said evenly. "Lever near the basement entrance. Looked like a panic pull from the stuff that spit outta it."

"Figures," Spencer sighed. "Every time things get quiet..." He rubbed his temple. "All right, no one near the basement until maintenance checks the circuits. Last thing we need—"

"—is fines," said a voice like ice sliding into a glass.

Ellis Dee appeared the way Ellis always did—no footstep, no warning, simply **there**. Sweater vest immaculate, clipboard tucked against his ribs like something surgical. The emergency lights gave his glasses a faint red sheen, turning his eyes into two polite voids.

“Curious thing,” Ellis said softly, as if speaking to the air itself, “how a fire alarm can sound without a fire.”

His gaze slid over the hallway—slow, patient, cataloging.

No anger.

Something worse: **interest.**

William felt his throat tighten.

Sabrina didn’t flinch, but a small muscle jumped along her jaw.

Yeldarb tried to stand taller.

Ellis continued, voice mild enough to make the words sting.

“False alarms,” he said, “carry consequences. They pull staff from their duties... disrupt schedules... create unnecessary confusion.”

His eyes settled briefly—too briefly—on William, as if testing the temperature of a stove without committing to the touch.

“In moments like these,” Ellis went on, “we learn who is... attentive. Who follows procedure. Who does not.”

The hallway seemed to shrink around them.

Yeldarb inhaled, building toward a speech with all the subtlety of a marching band.

Sabrina pinched his sleeve—light, surgical—and the speech died stillborn.

She lifted her chin and smiled the thinnest smile.

“We’d tell you if we knew, Mr. Dee. We were busy evacuating like model citizens.”

Ellis’s expression didn’t shift so much as settle into place.

“Of course,” he said.

A pleasant note.

A quiet verdict.

“Of course you were.”

He nodded toward the box. “The ‘stuff’ is you found is called residue—clever compound. Invisible under normal light.” He produced a slim blacklight pen like a magician palming a coin and flicked it on. The lever pulsed faint blue. He turned the light on the trio. “Hands.”

William hesitated a fraction too long. Satisfaction clicked behind Ellis’s eyes like a tumbler catching.

They held their hands out. The purple beam washed across knuckles and lifelines. Nothing but nerves and sweat.

“You’re clear,” Ellis said—cool, disappointed. “I saw the lever on my way to Spencer. Thought I’d make myself useful.”

“Thank you,” Spencer said, already sagging. “Helpful.”

“Always.” Ellis stepped back, folding his arms, patient as a spider.

Spencer rallied. “All right, everybody—back to rooms. I’ll file the report.” He tried for a grin. “And great job evacuating! Really nailed the running part.”

Laughter rippled. Tension bled.

They’d just turned away when Ellis’s voice carried, measured and surgical: “Spencer—we should still look into any reports of unauthorized electronics use at night. We don’t need fines because of a few bad eggs.”

The words hung. Spencer nodded vaguely, already drowning in logistics, but William felt the heat between his shoulder blades. When he glanced back, Ellis wasn’t smiling. He was studying—as if William were a stain that would show if you picked the right light.

They kept walking until Xenia's office hummed ahead, its fluorescent buzz more accusation than illumination.

"He knows," Sabrina said.

"He guesses," Yeldarb corrected. "Without proof, there is no guilt."

"Tell that to Ellis," she muttered. "He collects theories like stamps."

William barely heard them. The way Ellis spoke—no anger, only curiosity—stuck like burrs. Anger flares and burns out. Curiosity waits.

They were about to pass the open office when Xenia's voice cracked out. "—five thousand dollars? Are you kidding me?"

They froze. Sabrina pressed a finger to her lips and edged nearer.

Inside, Xenia stood with one hand to her forehead, phone pinned to her shoulder. "I understand, but this is the third false alarm this year," she said, voice frayed. "We don't have that kind of money. I can talk to the board—yes. Yes, I'll call our benefactor." A pause. "Just... don't file it yet. Give me until Friday."

She hung up and stared at the phone like it should apologize. Then she sat hard. The chair's creak was louder than a siren.

"Five thousand," Sabrina whispered. "That's months of food and electric."

"Our home will suffer for a prank," Yeldarb said, fists flexing. "This cannot stand."

"And Ellis thinks it was us," William said.

Guilt snapped hot across his skin. The tournament had drawn power; the alarm wasn't theirs. It was Warren's fear, Bobby's pressure—cruelty flicked like a match and left to run. But the tangle was real: Ellis's suspicion, Xenia's panic, their secret.

He swallowed the impulse to tell. He'd grown up under systems that stamped INVALID over people like his mom, and every snitch made the stamp darker. He wasn't joining that choir.

They slid away on quieter feet. Each step thudded like guilt had mass.

"You three look like you just missed a Steam sale."

Autumn leaned against the wall ahead, arms crossed, expression half amusement, half concern. Harsh light softened for her; she always seemed to bring weather that could be trusted.

Sabrina managed a thin smile. "You could say that."

"Fire drill drama?" Autumn guessed.

"False alarm, real fine, and an inspector who suspects everything," Yeldarb sighed.

"Ellis," she said knowingly. "Dee's nuts—thinks everything's a conspiracy until it proves otherwise."

"You sure Spencer can smooth this?" Sabrina asked, chin tilting toward Xenia's office.

"Xenia breaks down; Xenia builds back up," Autumn said, matter-of-fact. "Place survives because she refuses not to."

The knot in William's chest loosened a notch.

"As for Ellis," she added, "keep your hands clean and your heads down. He needs proof to pounce. Don't give him any."

Yeldarb nodded solemnly. "Understood."

"Good. And try to sleep," she said, pushing off the wall. "You all look like haunted toasters."

William laughed—small, startled. Sabrina smiled despite herself. Even Yeldarb's mouth twitched.

They moved on, the red glow conceding back to ordinary white.

For now, the fire was out. The heat lingered.

The halls settled to squeaks of sneakers and tired fluorescent hum. The stain of tension remained, like something scrubbed but not gone.

“If Bobby and his meat puppets get away with this,” Sabrina muttered, toeing a scuff mark, “I’m inventing a drone to egg them in gym. Raw. From altitude.”

“No,” Yeldarb declared. “Eggs are too merciful. We challenge them—no consoles, bare hands, fair fight! Guts versus—how you say—lack of guts!”

“Right,” Sabrina said. “Because nothing says ‘heroic justice’ like three weeks’ detention.”

“Then we hide our victory,” he said proudly. “Anonymous honor!”

“Or,” William said, “we drop hints with someone. Ellis. Xenia. Spencer. Let adults handle it.”

Three looks hit him at once—Autumn’s had joined them like a shadow; hers was the steady one.

“No,” she said, gentle iron. “Don’t get your noses dirty. Keep out of it.”

“But—”

“Trust me,” she said, not unkindly. “Some messes are for people who know where the mop bucket is.”

Her eyes flicked to him, a promise, not a threat.

They walked. Yeldarb hummed off-key victory music. Sabrina groaned and smiled anyway.

“So,” she said, bumping William’s arm, “about that Evil Sakura thing. Where did that even come from?”

He froze mid-step. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’ve played every Alpha 2 ever made—even TJX!’s dumpster bootlegs. None of them do... that. You turned the game inside out.”

Autumn stopped. “Evil Sakura?” she said, interest sharpening. “There’s no ‘Evil’ in that build.”

Air stilled. William’s stomach flipped.

He rubbed his neck. “I was mashing. Glitch or something.”

Autumn studied him. Not judgment—assessment. Puzzle piece in hand, picture changing. A small smile. “A glitch,” she echoed. “That happens to look like a fully animated character with custom moves and effects?”

“Lucky mash?” he offered weakly.

“There’s more to you than meets the eye, William Wright,” she said, warmth behind the knowing edge.

“Great,” Sabrina groaned. “Now she’s quoting Saturday morning cartoons.”

“I’m quoting observation,” Autumn said. “Which is more dangerous.”

They reached William’s door. Paint flaked near the handle; a tiny smiley face carved years ago had been worn down by time.

Sabrina stretched. “We didn’t burn down, no one got arrested, and TJX! didn’t flood the basement with ravioli. I’m calling it a win.”

“Small win,” Yeldarb corrected. “Tomorrow, revenge.”

“Tonight, sleep,” Sabrina yawned. “Then revenge.”

They grinned at William. For a second, it felt almost normal.

“Night, Will,” Sabrina said. “And don’t spiral about Ellis. He’s a conspiracy nut—annoying, harmless if you don’t run a secret society.”

“I’ll try,” he said.

They peeled off, leaving him with Autumn in the dim.

“You handled yourself,” she said, tone shifting grounded. “Most kids talk when Ellis breathes down their necks.”

“I’ve had practice keeping secrets,” he said.

“Want to trade one?” she asked.

He hesitated, then nodded. “My mom used to say everyone carries a spark,” he said, voice gone quiet. “Some people just hide theirs better. She... gave everything to protect mine.”

Autumn didn’t interrupt. She listened the way a wall holds a house up.

“She said sparks can change the world,” he finished. “But only if they survive long enough to be seen.”

“Sounds like she’s a good mom,” Autumn said.

“She was...,” he said, the past tense catching. “...is Somewhere.”

“You’ll see her again,” she said, like weather.

He almost believed her.

She tipped her chin toward the small black phone in his hand. “That the relic you risked a tournament for?”

“Yeah,” he said. “My dad’s old phone. Hoping it has... something. Photos. Messages.”

“May I?” she asked.

He passed it carefully. She turned it over, curious. “No model I’ve seen,” she said. “And I’ve seen weird. USB-C, though.” She handed it back. “I’ve got a spare cable and a brick. I’ll bring them to breakfast.”

He blinked. “Seriously?”

“I keep spares,” she said simply. “And you look like you could use a win.”

Warmth rose under his ribs—the good kind. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she said. “Wait till it charges.”

They stood a beat in quiet understanding. Then she pushed off the wall. “Get some rest, Will. Big day. Ellis will be sniffing.”

“Goodnight, Autumn.”

“Goodnight, Glitch Boy.”

The door closed on a kind silence. Night air slipped through the cracked window, cool and clean. Moonlight pooled in silver patches like pieces of calm.

He sat on the bed with the phone in his hands. The day replayed—alarm and Ellis’s scalpel voice; Xenia’s fear; Autumn’s steadiness; Sabrina’s laugh; Yeldarb’s ridiculous oaths. Friends. The word didn’t feel borrowed anymore.

He looked at the blank screen. Lifeless, not hopeless. Tomorrow, with a charger, he could wake it. Find whatever his father had left. A picture. A message. A map.

“Tomorrow,” he whispered.

The word felt like a promise.

He slid the phone under his pillow, lay back, and let his eyes close. The Home creaked, a soft, tired sound. Somewhere distant, someone laughed in their sleep. And for the first time since waking in this strange, fractured past, William drifted off not with fear, but with a fragile, honest hope—his spark quiet, not gone, beginning to hum again where it mattered most.

Chapter 2 – Two Wrights Can’t Fix a Wrong

The cafeteria smelled like toast, powdered eggs, and the faint metallic tang of overworked wiring. Morning sun striped the room in gold and shadow. William sat between Yeldarb and Sabrina, stirring oatmeal that tasted like wet cardboard with aspirations.

“I still hear the siren in my dreams,” Yeldarb announced. “I wake ready for battle.”

Sabrina smirked. “You’d sleep through an earthquake unless it insulted your mother personally.”

“My mother’s honor,” he said, hand to heart, “is earthquake-proof.”

William smiled, but the sound around him felt padded—like the room had been wrapped in insulation. Ellis’s cool eyes still hovered in the periphery of his thoughts.

“Good news for anyone who likes progress and breakfast at the same time,” Autumn said, sliding to their table with a coffee in one hand and a small charger brick with a coiled USB-C cable in the other. The smile she wore looked tired but earned. “As promised.”

Sabrina’s eyes widened. “You actually found one?”

“Spencer loses them the second they’re not in his hand,” Autumn said. “I collect them before they become budget line items. Figure this one belongs to—” she tapped the cable against William’s tray “—Glitch boy.”

Before he could thank her, Rohan dropped into the opposite seat like a glitch in human form. “What’s this—ooh, relic resuscitation. Dibs if it summons a robot ghost.”

“It will not,” Yeldarb said, solemn. “But if it does, we will fight with honor.”

Elaine Brook padded up, cereal bowl listing in one hand, milk down her sleeve. She peered at the black phone peeking from William’s pocket. “Does it talk?”

“Not yet,” Sabrina said. “If it does, I’m getting a clipboard.”

From the next table, Maximilian Doob glanced over his sketchbook. “That phone has... vibes. Like it’s more than it looks.”

Everyone stared.

He shrugged. “Just saying.”

William exhaled, shaky and hopeful at once. “Let’s go see what we can unlock.”

Back in his room, blinds drawn, lamp warm and amber, the group leaned over the desk like conspirators. Autumn plugged in the brick with a clean click, seated the cable in the phone’s port, and stepped back like she’d placed a fuse.

The screen stirred—no logo, just a tide of color rolling from blue to gold to white, then a soft chime. Minimal icons slid into place: Archive. Media Vault. Games (Local).

Sabrina inched close. “Not Android. Not iOS.” She flicked to a system panel, eyes widening. “Custom Linux kernel. And—holy storage—thirty-two terabytes? Who needs that much?”

“Does it have Tetris?” Yeldarb asked faithfully.

“It has everything.” She scrolled—emulators spanning decades, libraries dense with music and video, toolkits that didn’t belong in a phone. Her voice turned breathless. “MvC3, Street Fighter 6, Tekken 8—if this runs those games, it runs anything.”

William’s chest tightened. Awe edged into intrusion. It was his father’s phone—his family’s legacy wrapped in glass and silicon—and watching hands skim its surface felt like strangers opening drawers.

“Hey,” he said, softer than he meant to. “Slow down.”

Sabrina froze mid-swipe. “Right. Sorry.” She powered the screen off and offered it back with both hands, like an apology. “It’s just... a lot.”

He took it. The little hum from the wall—steady, patient—sounded like a promise.

“Quick peek,” Rohan said, unable to stop himself. “If that miracle brick’s packing arcade gold, the basement could use an infusion.”

“Rohan,” Sabrina warned.

“For tournament preservation!” He tapped back to the home screen—

—and the air around the phone fuzzed. Not sound. Texture. A flicker of pixels that wasn’t on. The screen didn’t even flicker—it just *became*, the glow swelling without ever crossing from “off” to “on.”

“Booting auxiliary program,” a bright, manufactured voice chirped. “GaMII interface online.”

A low-resolution avatar shimmered into existence—too many polygons, neon edges, a grin one texture patch too wide. Like a corporate mascot that fell through a time tunnel and picked up sarcasm on the way out.

“New party members detected,” it said, head tilting. “Confirm: chaos gremlins or tutorial NPCs?”

Yeldarb pointed. “It speaks.”

Sabrina blinked. “It’s not just a shell. It’s... responsive.”

Maximilian leaned in, delighted. “Do you dream?”

“Only when the electric sheep unionize,” GaMII replied cheerfully.

Autumn made a face. “That’s... upsetting.”

Rohan clapped. “It’s Clippy but with a GPU.”

“Correction,” GaMII said, winking, “Clippy from a *superior* timeline.”

Even William smiled despite the pressure behind his ribs. Hearing a voice from his father’s old device—witty, awake, alive—made something ache in a way he wasn’t ready for.

“GaMII,” Autumn asked, steady and curious, “what’s your job?”

“To play, to archive, to assist,” it said, then stuttered—voice thinning, then swelling, as though its signal came from somewhere much farther than the tablet’s casing. “Also to—”

The avatar jerked sideways, pixels splitting, eyes going blank for half a second.

“Also to—”

The sound elongated, warped.

“—mmm—r... ind... re...”

“GaMII?” Sabrina whispered.

The avatar snapped upright again, smile too wide.

“Recommend hydration! Biological users run sub-optimal when crispy.”

“That is not what you were about to say,” Autumn said slowly.

“Irrelevant,” GaMII chirped. “Subroutine corrupted. Please contact your nearest Linux Plus-certified technician! Until then: would you like a fun fact? Cats—”

The avatar glitched again. This time the voice went small and almost human.

“Patterns... repeat.”

The room stilled.

Sabrina frowned. “Repeat how? Repeat what?”

“Unknown,” GaMII said, tone abruptly bright again. “This user lacks clearance!”

William's stomach dropped.
His father hadn't programmed *that*.
Couldn't have.

Autumn angled her head, reading him instead of the screen. "Hey," she said softly.
"Breathe."

"Yeah." He forced a vague laugh. "Probably some weird creativity app my dad was playing with. He and my mom... liked stories."

GaMII's voice, faint and playful, leaked out like a coin under a door:
"Reminder: sleep is not off, Master Wright."

They all heard the name.
They all pretended not to.

"Okay," Autumn said, gently breaking the spell. "We'll give you some space. We're right outside."

They filed out. The lamp hummed. The charger pulsed blue—then a heartbeat of red—then blue again.

William stared at the dark screen until his reflection blurred.
Somewhere in the circuitry, a voice softened.
"Welcome back," it whispered—so quiet he almost believed he imagined it.

Alehante Securities rose like a blade, mirror glass reflecting contractual sky. The lobby smelled faintly of lemon and money. Elevators didn't ding; they whispered open like secrets.

Nick Wright straightened his tie in the mirrored panel, stopped halfway, and smirked at the effort. Rumpled was part of the charm, people told him. He never asked which people.

Ernesto Alehante's office was a terrarium for apex predators—three glass walls, one bonsai with the posture of a champion wrestler. Ernesto stood with his back to the skyline, the light sharpening his outline into something myth-making. Only his eyes moved: quick, assessing, bright as calculated heat.

"Nick," he said. No handshake; no need. "Thank you for coming."

"You sign my checks," Nick said lightly. "If you asked, I'd swim."

"A practical instinct." Ernesto gestured for him to sit. Nick took the chair in his own way, which was the only way he knew how.

"We're discussing the Home," Ernesto said. The capital letter was audible. "False alarms are not victimless."

"No argument," Nick said.

"I don't want a culprit," Ernesto continued. "I want clarity. Trends. Indicators."

Nick let that last word sit between them. Ernesto's indicators were never academic—they were always about people, leverage, pressure points.

"The foundation exists to protect the vulnerable and cultivate excellence," Ernesto said. "Harrison should be a pipeline, not a pit. And a pipeline must be evaluated. Stress-tested."

Nick offered a mild smile. "And if the pipeline produces? You invest."

Ernesto's gaze held him steady. Measured. Cool.

"My children," he said, as if auditing a spreadsheet, "demonstrate a range of outcomes. Performance... varies. Some excel in predictable ways. Others squander advantages. It is informative."

Nick nodded once. "And you think the kids at Harrison won't squander theirs."

“I think,” Ernesto said carefully, “that unpredictability is an asset in high-pressure environments. Resilience. Adaptability. Initiative. Leadership when structure fails.”

Not magic. Not Spark.

But something shaped dangerously close to both.

“We’ll assess discreetly,” Ernesto said. “Anyone who demonstrates those traits—anyone who rises under pressure—should be noted.”

“Under the banner of security,” Nick said.

Ernesto inclined his head. “Correct. Early identification prevents future risk... and cultivates future value.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Nick said. “Staff, kids. I’ll report back.”

“Report everything,” Ernesto said, cuff-links catching light like tiny suns. “And don’t confuse kindness with accuracy.”

The elevator doors closed around Nick, granting him his first private exhale.

The Harrison Home wore last night’s panic like a wrinkled shirt. Spencer met Nick in a tie he’d clearly knotted in a toaster reflection. Xenia arrived mid-briefing, did not sit, and presented facts like bricks. “Three minutes to evacuate. All accounted for. No heat, no smoke. Fine incoming. We’ll handle it.”

“Any idea who pulled it?” Nick asked.

“A hundred frayed nerves,” Xenia said. “Or three attention-seekers. Speculation is a luxury.”

“Leave speculation to me,” Spencer said brightly. “I’m an expert.”

TJX! delivered an oration that detoured into selling a smoke-sniffing ravioli sensor. Nick wrote “no” and underlined it twice.

Ellis Dee arrived exactly ten seconds after Nick decided he wouldn’t. He set a notebook down the way surgeons set scalpels.

“Mr. Wright,” Ellis said, voice pleasantly neutral. “A pleasure.”

“Mutual,” Nick lied. “You were here.”

“No heat, no combustion,” Ellis said. “A purposeful pull is likely. Alternatively, a surge—excessive, unauthorized electronics—could trip a faulty sensor.” The suggestion was a silk garrote. “The lever was coated with deterrent gel. Several students tested negative.” He smiled with his mouth. “A careful perpetrator, then. Or a wider net.”

Nick returned the smile. “You’re remarkably helpful.”

“I am invested in the Home’s longevity,” Ellis said. “Institutions live longer than children.”

“Charming,” Nick said.

“They also lie very well,” Ellis added, gentle as snow.

“Especially about fun,” Spencer called from the doorway, definitely not eavesdropping.

Ellis inclined his head. “Especially.”

Nick took a stool and let small storms pass through. One boy swore he’d been asleep and tried to sell a screwdriver. A girl asked if he could fix the alarm because she thought it deserved a better life. Three separate kids accused “the Patriots table,” which Nick enjoyed more than was professional. Two blamed TJX!, which was either plausible or fashionable.

He kept the flow. Shake, listen, thank, next. He watched for heat under words, for the little crackle he’d learned to recognize right before a story changed direction. He was hunting talent because Ernesto had asked for it—and because, inconveniently, his gut agreed.

Spencer eventually arrived with the last name on the short list and a grin like he'd arranged the coincidence.

"William Wright," he declared, "meet Nick Wright."

Nick stood before he even thought to. Something in his chest tightened—quick, inexplicable, like a dropped elevator.

The kid looked up at him.

And for half a second, the world... **tilted.**

A flicker—

a heat behind Nick's ribs,

a thread thrumming between them,

a feeling like remembering a dream you hadn't had yet.

Ridiculous.

Impossible.

Gone in an instant.

Nick smoothed it over with a smile he hoped passed for casual.

"Small world," he said lightly.

But his pulse didn't get the message.

It kept pounding like it was trying to tell him something he wasn't ready to hear.

William's smile landed a second late, then held. "Small weird world."

They found the quietest office the Home could produce—frosted window, humming vent. Nick sat with the clipboard but not between them.

"Full disclosure," he said. "I'm not a cop. I'm the guy people hire so things don't become cop problems."

William's laugh was quick and short. "Good job to have."

"Good guy to be," Nick said, and meant it.

They warmed the water first. Where are you from? Around. How do you like it here? Different. William described the Home like a machine a careful person keeps running: the parts that work; the parts that whistle; the parts you oil just because.

"You plan repairs for things you don't own," Nick said.

"I do," William said, and neither of them treated it like a joke.

They orbited the alarm. William didn't point. He didn't dance either. His caution didn't read like fear; it read like protection—for the place, for the kids, for something bigger than himself. He carried a secret the way careful people carry glass.

"You're steady," Nick said. "Even now."

William's smile wrinkled and smoothed. "Practice."

They looked at each other a heartbeat too long. Nick asked a stupid lightning round to break it. Favorite food?

"Anything that's not covered in cheese," William said.

"Anything that is covered in cheese," Nick shot back. "Equal-opportunity offender."

They both smiled. The vent hummed like a resolved chord.

They shook hands to end it—warm grip, steady—and a tiny nip of static jumped their palms. They both laughed.

"Carpet," William said.

"Clearly I'm shocked," Nick said, and let it land like a joke instead of a shiver of recognition.

He left unsettled, not by suspicion, but by a familiarity with nowhere to park. In the hall, Ellis watched him pass with the patient interest of a cat considering surface tension.

Evening bruised the sky over Harrisburg. Neon buzzed. A bar's lighting forgave everything. Nick loosened his tie in a beer tap's reflection and called a number labeled with a joke that didn't fit his mouth anymore.

"Nick!" The voice came grinning through the line. "My favorite counselor. I've got a booth and three bad ideas."

"Perfect," Nick said. "I had a weird day."

"Don't you always?" The laugh warmed to theatrical. "Come witness my good fortune and society's decline."

The host slid him into a leather cave in the back. Eldorado Alehante rose like a brand unveiling—designer tee, tasteful chain, immaculate as an argument designed to be won. He spread his arms, a revolutionary with a reserved table.

"Counselor!" Eldorado crowed. "Welcome to the people's studio annex."

Nick slid in. A drink arrived as if the day had been building toward it. He lifted it. "Before I report to your father, I need a little hellfire."

"Consider yourself subscribed and bell-rung," Eldorado said, clinking. "Tonight's praxis is simple. We deconstruct hypocrisy and drink for the working class."

"You first," Nick said, dry.

Eldorado smiled like a blade reflecting gold. "I do it all first."

Nick drank. Somewhere uptown, Ernesto sharpened invisible knives. Somewhere across town, a boy pressed a black phone under his pillow like it could anchor him in a world that kept shifting.

Two Wrights. Wrong place. Wrong time. And between them, a storm already learning their names.

Chapter 3 – Invalid Investigation

Nick woke to silence so sharp it felt accusatory.

The sunlight cut through the blinds in perfect, surgical lines—beams dissecting a room that was too clean to belong to the man groaning in its center. His apartment was a study in contradiction: spotless counters, color-coded file binders, floors you could eat off, and a couch that looked like it had been salvaged from a frat house brawl.

Discipline wrapped around chaos. He needed one to pretend the other wasn't winning.

His head throbbed like a bad argument he'd lost long ago.

Beside the couch, an empty bottle of Mid-tier scotch leaned against a stack of case folders—Ernesto's projects, all labeled in his meticulous handwriting: Harrison Home Investigation, Pending Review. The words wobbled when Nick squinted at them.

He exhaled slowly, the hangover settling like a bad secret. His suit jacket hung neatly over the back of a chair, pressed and folded like it didn't know who it worked for. His shirt, however, had been reduced to a makeshift pillow.

The irony wasn't lost on him.

A room this neat didn't erase the mess he'd made out of himself.

He staggered to the kitchen, bare feet on cold tile, and poured water from the filter pitcher into a chipped mug. The mug said #1 Public Defender, though the public had long since stopped defending him. He took a swallow that tasted like regret and lemon-scented counter spray.

The hangover fog came in layers—first dull pain, then sharp guilt. Flashes of last night pushed through:

Eldorado Alehante leaning across a bar booth, smile a weapon, eyes gleaming with self-congratulation.

Drinks that came too fast and too strong.

The word Invalids echoing in that golden boy drawl, half joke, half sermon.

And then the walk home, where every step reminded him that his moral compass was probably stuck spinning.

His phone buzzed. Once. Twice.

He checked the screen and immediately regretted it.

ERNESTO ALEHANTE

No greeting. Just a command.

“Office. 45 minutes. Bring results.”

No signature, no punctuation, no patience.

The kind of message that didn't invite interpretation.

Nick rubbed his face, muttering, “Good morning to you too, boss.”

The words were meant to sound light, but they came out flat.

He looked around at the order he'd built around himself—the alphabetized records, the polished desk, the single drooping plant that somehow clung to life. He'd always told himself the cleanliness helped him think. The truth was uglier: it kept him from thinking too much.

He set the mug down and stared at his reflection in the dark window. The faint outline of a man who still looked too young to be this tired stared back. The stubble was new, the hesitation older.

“Well,” he muttered to the reflection, “let's go get invalidated.”

The Suit Ritual came next.

A cold shower.
A clean shave that missed a patch on the jawline.
A charcoal suit jacket pressed to within an inch of its life.
A navy shirt—because navy looked competent without being smug—and shoes buffed to near-military shine.
He fixed his tie. Undid it. Tried again.
He hadn't worn one in months. The knot came out uneven.
“Perfect,” he said to the mirror. “Professionally asymmetrical.”
By the time he stepped out into the hall, the migraine had dulled into something manageable—like guilt with boundaries. He pocketed his phone, grabbed the leather briefcase that always felt heavier than the documents inside, and stepped into the corridor of his pristine apartment complex.
Outside, the morning was painfully bright. The sky was the exact color of Ernesto Alehante's suits: cold, precise, and impossible to stain.
Nick slipped on his sunglasses, muttered a curse about the sun, and headed for his car—his gait steady, his stomach not.
Somewhere between the garage and the ignition, he forced a grin.
He'd learned that from Eldorado.
When you couldn't beat the hangover, wear it like confidence.

The Alehante Securities tower stood like a mirror sharpened into a threat—glass and steel spearing upward, catching the morning light and bending it into something sterile. The kind of place where even reflections felt audited.

Nick parked in the underground garage, palmed his ID at the security gate, and rode the elevator up thirty-two floors in silence. The elevator music was smooth jazz—an instrumental of “Daybreak by Micheal Haggins,” which felt both ironic and cruel.

The doors opened not to a receptionist, but to Eldorado Alehante—the human embodiment of everything wrong with inherited wealth, currently leaning against the marble reception desk like he was posing for his own statue.

He was dressed half like a CEO, half like a Twitch thumbnail: gold-trimmed bomber jacket over an Armani t-shirt, designer joggers, and a pair of pristine sneakers that probably cost more than Nick's car. His hair—slick, black, and arranged with the precision of a crime scene—caught the light like a halo dipped in ego.

“Nick!” he called, arms out like they hadn't seen each other in decades instead of last night. His voice echoed through the sterile hall. “You survived the tequila gauntlet. Legendary.”

Nick forced a grin, which was the only safe way to react to Eldorado at any hour before noon. “Barely. You buy the good stuff just to make your friends regret living.”

“That's how you test loyalty, brother,” Eldorado said solemnly, then immediately brightened. “Walk with me! I'm late for a board meeting I'm not supposed to talk in.”

He turned before Nick could answer, leading him past a row of glass offices that looked like art installations—perfect desks, perfect suits, people pretending to look busy when really they were listening.

“So,” Eldorado continued, “Dad's got me managing the East Coast branch now. The whole division. Can you believe that? All those numbers, all those shareholders, all that... paperwork.” He made a gagging noise. “It's soul death, man. I'm meant for creation, not... quarterly reports.”

“Creation?” Nick echoed.

“Content creation,” Eldorado corrected with all the seriousness of a prophet naming his calling. “My Patrolmen stream has two-point-three million subs! I spread awareness, man. I fight the real fight—against invalid thinking.”

Nick arched a brow. “Invalid thinking?”

Eldorado gestured expansively, as if revealing a mural only he could see. “You know, people who say dumb stuff. Complainers. Haters. NPCs who think success is random. I enlighten them. Help them see the algorithmic truth.”

Nick smiled thinly. “You sound like your dad.”

“Ha! That’s the meanest thing anyone’s ever said to me,” Eldorado said with genuine horror.

They entered the main corridor, where the Alehante crest—two interlocked A’s encased in a ring of circuit lines—glowed softly on the wall. The floors gleamed, every light calibrated to feel expensive.

Nick kept pace beside him, hands in his pockets. “You know, I’m here to give your father my report.”

“Oh yeah, the charity project, right? The Home for Invalids.” Eldorado waved a dismissive hand. “Why Dad wastes money on that place is beyond me. He says it’s about outreach, but it’s basically a lab for failures.”

Nick stopped walking. “You mean kids.”

Eldorado turned, confused. “I mean future consumers. You think those brats are ever gonna make something of themselves? It’s genius, really. He feeds them, schools them, gives them purpose—and they grow up thinking the system is always gonna be there for them. Perfect loyalty loop. Future Alehante interns, man. All part of the network.”

Nick studied him quietly. With Eldorado, it was always the same: moments of crystal-clear insight wrapped in so much self-delusion he never heard himself.

“You don’t think it’s a little... predatory?” Nick asked.

Eldorado scoffed. “Predatory? Nah, man. That’s called leadership. And anyway, it’s not like any of them have any genuine value. They’re all the same—mindless meatbags.”

Nick hesitated, then said lightly, “Couple of them might surprise you. I saw some... grit down there. Hunger. The kind that doesn’t go away.”

Eldorado slowed a half-step. “Grit?”

“Yeah,” Nick said, shrugging it off. “One or two have real potential. Your dad might notice them.”

For a fraction of a second, something sharp flickered across Eldorado’s perfect smile. Jealousy? Fear? Insecurity? Then he laughed it off, loud and easy.

“Oh, come on,” he said. “Dad’s not replacing me. I’m golden child material, remember? The name’s practically branding.” He straightened his jacket collar, reclaiming his swagger. “Besides, the world doesn’t need another me. It’s not ready.”

Nick chuckled. “Truer words, my friend.”

They stopped at the executive elevators—doors that opened for facial recognition. Eldorado stepped in, the lights scanning across his jawline, approving him like a machine that didn’t know better.

“Well,” he said, checking his watch, “I’d invite you to watch the board meeting, but it’s the business equivalent of a funeral for ambition. I’ve got to dip early anyway—streaming at noon. ‘Patrolmen: The Purge of the Weak-Minded.’ It’s a themed episode. Very educational.”

He threw a lazy salute as the doors closed. “See you, Counselor! Keep my dad from adopting anyone invalid!”

Nick watched the elevator descend, the faint reflection of his own tired grin caught in the mirrored steel.

“Yeah,” he said to the empty lobby. “I’ll do my best.”

The reflection didn’t smile back.

The receptionist didn’t speak when Nick arrived. She simply pressed a button and gestured toward the glass corridor that led to the Apex Office.

That was what everyone in the building called Ernesto Alehante’s personal floor—half a cathedral, half a vault.

Nick walked through it with the uneasy calm of a man entering both. The air was unnaturally cool. Everything—chairs, tables, even the walls—gleamed with antiseptic precision. There was no art, no warmth, only the slow mechanical hum of power made manifest.

At the far end, framed by the skyline like a deity caught mid-reverie, sat Ernesto Alehante.

He didn’t look up when Nick entered. He was reading a report that probably decided the fate of someone richer than God and twice as frightened. His tailored suit—charcoal with an undercurrent of graphite sheen—fit so perfectly it might as well have been carved around him.

The only color in the room came from the faint glow of his glass desk—embedded circuits tracing Alehante Securities’ logo in slow, breathing pulses.

“Sit,” Ernesto said without greeting.

Nick obeyed.

“Report,” Ernesto said. Not how are you, not coffee? Just the single word, delivered like a command prompt.

Nick cleared his throat. “Harrison Home for Youth—visited three days, interviewed staff, spoke with several residents. I’ve written full profiles, but I can summarize.”

Ernesto gave a small, disinterested nod.

Nick opened his folder, each name a case file in miniature. “First—Sabrina Plumber. Bright. Exceptionally creative. Technically gifted, emotionally volatile. Could build something brilliant—or burn it down.”

Ernesto’s eyes flicked up, faintly irritated. “Plumber. That’s the one with the—” He motioned vaguely to his own face, as though the words Bell’s Palsy were too impolite to say aloud.

“Yes,” Nick said evenly.

Ernesto shook his head. “Imperfect symmetry reflects imperfect control. Pass.”

Nick’s jaw tightened. “Noted.”

He moved on. “Bobby Wolf. Wealthy background. Entitled. Knows how to weaponize charm. Good with strategy, less so with empathy.”

“Ah,” Ernesto murmured. “The ambition of the upper class—still the most renewable energy source. Keep him on a long leash. A wolf can be useful if he knows who feeds him.”

Nick nodded, flipping a page. “Elaine Brook. Young. Insightful. Sees more than she should. She’s intuitive—”

“Child,” Ernesto interrupted. “Potential means nothing without leverage. Next.”

Nick didn’t sigh, but he wanted to. “Autumn Sands. Natural leader. Sharp instincts. Has presence. The younger kids listen to her. I’d call it a... spark.”

That caught Ernesto's attention. His fingers stopped their precise movement across the desk's surface. He tilted his head, eyes narrowing with faint curiosity. "A spark," he repeated, tasting the word.

"Yes," Nick said. "But she's nearly aged out of the program. If you're looking for longevity—"

Ernesto waved a hand. "Aging out is inefficiency. The world requires renewal, not relics." He leaned back, temple to fingertips. "You said spark. Did you see others?"

Nick hesitated. He'd been saving this name for last.

"One more," he said. "William Wright."

Ernesto's gaze sharpened, as if the name had resonance. "Relation?"

"None that I know of." Nick swallowed, feeling something strange—protective? defensive?—curl under his ribs. "He's young, but there's something different about him. Not just intelligence. Leadership. He defends others. There's instinct in it—like he's lived twice already. I can't explain it, but... he has something."

Ernesto studied him for a long moment. "And you feel... drawn to him?"

Nick blinked. "Drawn? I wouldn't say—"

"You hesitate," Ernesto said, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. "That's good. Intuition has value. You've always been more observant than your peers."

Nick shifted in his seat. Compliments from Ernesto were never free—they were the opening bids in a negotiation he didn't yet understand.

Ernesto steepled his fingers. "I'd like you to remain on this project. Exclusively."

Nick frowned. "Exclusively? I've got half a dozen clients waiting on—"

Ernesto was already lifting his phone. "Which firm is yours? Wilkes, Darrow & Baines, correct?"

"Yes, but—"

"Good," Ernesto said, dialing before Nick could protest. The call connected instantly on speaker. "This is Ernesto Alehante. I'd like to make a donation to your firm's endowment fund. Fifty thousand dollars. Consider it a retainer for Mr. Wright's full attention for the next month."

On the other end, Nick heard a pause—then the sound of a partner's sycophantic laugh. "Mr. Alehante, that's—well, that's incredibly generous. Of course. We'll rearrange his docket immediately."

Ernesto's lips barely moved. "Do that."

He ended the call.

Nick sat frozen, the weight of what had just happened pressing down like static. "You just—bought out my time."

"I optimized it," Ernesto corrected. "You serve me now, without distraction. Consider it a promotion."

Nick wanted to say something biting. Instead, he said, "You didn't even ask if I was available."

Ernesto smiled faintly. "I don't ask for things I already own."

That was the moment the scale of it hit Nick—not just the money, but the effortless way Ernesto wielded it. His company had started as a security firm, a niche consultancy protecting private clients. Now it was a multi-national leviathan—security, data analytics, defense contracts, education programs, research labs. Everything fed back into the same gleaming orbit.

And Ernesto sat at its center, utterly calm, utterly aware of his own gravity.

“Keep your eyes on that boy,” Ernesto said finally, his tone dropping to something colder. “If he truly has what you say—a spark—then he’s not an orphan. He’s an investment.”

Nick rose, briefcase in hand, and nodded because it was the only safe thing to do.

“Understood,” he said quietly.

Ernesto stood and smoothed an invisible wrinkle from his suit. It was the kind of movement that looked polite until you realized it meant you were done here.

“Your next phase,” he said, turning toward the panoramic window that looked out over Harrisburg like a general surveying his conquered territory. “You’ll embed at the Harrison Home for Youth. Quietly. A consultant position—educational liaison, legal aid, whatever Spencer will believe. Observe, document, report. Especially on the boy.”

“William,” Nick said softly, though he didn’t know why the name came out half as reverent as it did.

Ernesto nodded once. “Yes. The Wright boy. Your familiarity might help you earn his trust. Call it a coincidence,” he added, eyes flicking back over his shoulder, “or something more... symmetrical.”

Nick shifted. “And the others?”

“Collateral data,” Ernesto said, his tone flattening the humanity right out of the sentence. “Patterns of behavior, hierarchy, potential influence. I want to know who they follow—and why. The strong gather gravity around them. I intend to measure it.”

Nick’s throat tightened. “And Spencer agreed to this?”

“Of course.” Ernesto turned back to his desk. “He was delighted. People like Spencer mistake kindness for relevance. It’s a useful flaw. You’ll start tomorrow.”

“That soon?”

Ernesto gave him a look that managed to be both amused and disappointed. “The clock is always ticking, Nicholas. You, of all people, should understand the cost of wasted time.”

Nick managed a nod, though his pulse had started to climb. “Understood.”

Ernesto dismissed him with a simple phrase—something that felt like a benediction and a threat in one:

“Don’t fail this investment.”

The elevator ride down felt longer than the trip up.

Nick didn’t remember pressing the button, didn’t notice the lobby blur past, didn’t even register stepping out into the cool city air until the doors hissed shut behind him.

His mind was still echoing Ernesto’s words. Observe, document, report.

That was all this was supposed to be—another job, another paycheck with moral fine print. He’d done worse for less. And yet...

He rubbed his hand along the back of his neck, frowning. There was that tingle again. Not just nerves—something stranger. Familiar, even comforting, in a way that made no sense.

You’re overthinking it, he told himself. He’s just a kid. It’s just work.

But the words didn’t stick. The thought of going back there—seeing that boy again—made the base of his spine hum like a low electrical current.

He exhaled. “Fifty grand for a month,” he muttered. “Should’ve asked for hazard pay.”

His phone rang.

Nick glanced at the screen and groaned. SPENCER SARZH.

He thumbed it on. “Spencer—”

A voice blasted through the receiver like a marching band with a sugar high.

♪ “WELCOME TO THE FAMILY, NEW BEST FRIEND! YOU’RE GONNA LOVE IT HERE, NICK WRIGHT MANNN!” ♪

Nick winced, pulling the phone an inch from his ear. “Oh, good. You wrote a theme song.”

Spencer’s voice was bursting with joy. “I did! I did! Ernesto said you’re joining the team! You don’t know how long I’ve been begging for proper legal counsel! This place runs on duct tape and positive thinking, and the duct tape’s unionizing!”

Nick blinked, trying to keep up. “Right. Fantastic. When do I start?”

“Oh, we’re already setting up your desk! I ordered you a personalized mug! It says ‘I’m WRIGHT at Home!’ Get it? Because—”

Nick cut him off gently. “Yeah, I get it.”

Spencer laughed anyway, delighted at his own pun. “You’re gonna fit right in! Oh, and fair warning—Ellis Dee’s been circling the copier again. Nobody stop him this time, we’ll just let the toner explode. Builds character.”

Nick pressed the bridge of his nose, sighing. “Looking forward to it.”

The call ended with Spencer humming his homemade jingle again, fading into static.

Nick stood there on the sidewalk, phone still in hand, staring up at the mirrored glass tower behind him. His own reflection stared back—rumpled, tired, and about to walk into something far bigger than he wanted to admit.

He pocketed the phone, muttering under his breath, “What in the hell have I just gotten myself into?”

The wind caught his tie, flaring it behind him like a flag for a country that no longer existed.

A rhythmic squeak... scrape... cut through his thoughts. Nick turned.

A janitor pushed a mop bucket across the immaculate plaza—slow, deliberate, completely out of rhythm with the high-frequency corporate district.

Nick blinked.

It was Snakes.

From Harrison.

From the cafeteria.

From *this morning*.

Their eyes met. Snakes didn’t smile, but something in his gaze was... knowing. Older than the bucket he pushed, which sloshed like it remembered a different decade.

“Didn’t I just see you at the Home?” Nick asked before he could stop himself.

Snakes shrugged one shoulder, like the distance between boroughs was a minor inconvenience. “World’s a big place,” he said, “but messes? They’re small. And they like to travel.”

He pushed the mop forward again, the wheels squeaking like a heartbeat with arthritis.

“Funny thing,” Snakes said, voice low enough that the traffic almost swallowed it. “A man spends his life cleaning up other people’s mistakes, he starts to see the shape of ’em before they even hit the floor.”

He looked pointedly from Nick to the Alehante tower, then back.

“Some stains don’t come out,” he added. “But a fella can decide which ones are worth wading through.”

Nick opened his mouth—questions piled behind his teeth—but Snakes was already turning, steering his rattling bucket toward a side service entrance that definitely shouldn't have been open.

“Do you... work here too?” Nick called.

Snakes hummed a tuneless melody without answering. The service door shut behind him like the scene had timed itself.

Nick stared after him, goosebumps flickering across his arms. The encounter slotted uneasily over his already knotted thoughts.

“Which mess is worth wading into?”

Ernesto's voice echoed: *Don't fail this investment.*

But for the first time all morning, the hum at the base of Nick's spine felt less like a warning, and more like a compass needle clicking toward true north.

Chapter 4 - Patch Notes

The cafeteria sounded like a hundred small storms—plastic trays skidding, milk cartons chirping open, someone somewhere declaring war on a waffle. William’s table, wedged between a pillar and the utensil return, felt like an island of conspiracy.

Yeldarb shoveled oatmeal like it had insulted him. “I like the new man of justice,” he announced grandly. “Nick Wright. Strong handshake. He will slay fines with legality.”

“Or bill us for the sword,” Sabrina said, poking at scrambled eggs that had lost the will to be eggs. “He works for Alehante, remember? That’s like a wolf doing community service.”

William kept his eyes on the swirl his spoon was making. The tiny zap from Nick’s handshake kept replaying—nothing, a pop of static—and yet it had tunneled under his ribs and stayed there humming.

Rohan leaned in until his hair threatened to fall into his syrup. “Forget Mr. Ethical Dilemma. We need to talk about your dad’s phone. Rohan’s Game Night needs those sweet, sweet ROMs.”

Chico didn’t look up from his pudding. “It’s Chico’s Basement of Fun. You provide commentary. I provide ecosystem.”

“It’s OUR basement,” Sabrina said. “Plural. No branding. But he’s not wrong,” she added, flicking her gaze to William. “That thing is a black box of wonders. We should catalog it, at least.”

Elaine swung her legs and let milk drip down her sleeve like it was part of breakfast. “Does it have talking animals? I like talking animals.”

Across the room, Bobby Wolf lounged at the Patriots table like it was a throne. Tommy followed his line of sight and snorted. “Glitch Boy’s fan club is convened. You think they’re planning a séance?”

Bobby’s smirk sharpened. “Get your phone out. Let’s see today’s episode of ‘What’s Wrong With Wright.’”

Back at the island, William felt the ground tilt toward a decision. “It was my dad’s,” he said, voice smaller than he meant. “It’s... personal.”

Autumn had been stealing a fry at the speed of guilt. She set it down. “No one’s asking to keep it,” she said softly. “Backups. That’s all.”

From William’s hoodie pocket came a muffled chirp, bright as a jump scare. “Multiple user requests detected! Session initiation recommended for social bonding and archival purposes!” the voice announced. “Also, I’m bored.”

Rohan grinned. “Democracy wins.”

William sighed. The coalition had spoken. “Somewhere private,” he said. “And no one tells anyone who would... you know. Tell.”

“Basement storage,” Sabrina said, already standing. “Laundry wing. Least haunted room on campus.”

“Least,” Rohan echoed. “So we’re due.”

They crammed into a storage room where busted chairs and retired textbooks had gone to sulk. A water heater hummed like a sleeping beast. Sabrina wedged a mop under the knob and tested the door. “There. If this goes weird, we get five seconds’ warning.”

“Five seconds is plenty,” Yeldarb said. “I can accomplish much in five seconds.”

“Including breaking a mop,” Autumn murmured.

William pulled the black phone into the light. Its screen woke with a pooled-ink glow, and GaMII's avatar stretched onto the glass like a cartoon crawling out of a poster.

"Good morning, party members!" the AI chirped, all unsupervised camp counselor energy. "We have requests! We have curiosity! We have... Chico's pyramid scheme of Fun."

"Ecosystem," Chico said without looking at him.

Rohan clapped once. "Okay, magic rectangle. How do we move games off of you—"

GaMII pushed tiny neon glasses up an invisible nose. "Query parsed. However, primary user William Wright is currently experiencing temporal displacement from a future period characterized by significant societal collapse and—"

William snatched the phone. "It's nothing. Just some... story stuff my parents wrote. Family jokes."

Sabrina's eyes didn't move from his face. "You've been weird since you arrived," she said, not unkind. "Not bad-weird. Like you've seen things broken and can't stop checking if this is taped together the same way."

Rohan nodded. "You did first-day calculus on Bobby's crew and came out alive. That's not standard issue."

Yeldarb leaned in, earnest and large. "We are friends. We can hold heavy things."

Autumn said nothing. She just waited, the way you wait without leaning on someone.

The dam cracked. "In my—where I come from—" William began, and the words tumbled out, a whisper that shook. The dugout safehouse and his mom's laugh under a dying light. The metal cuffs stamped INVALID and the way they sang when you disobeyed. Aunt Jessica falling out of the sky with a hammer full of storms. Cassandra's red eyes, Mr. E's jokes that died in static. The night that turned into a tunnel of light.

Elaine's mouth made a little O. "So you're like Marty McFly."

"It wasn't for a sports almanac," William said, a laugh that broke. "My mom... she sent me. To keep me safe."

GaMII—quiet for longer than it ever should be—suddenly brightened like a toaster becoming self-aware.

"Analysis: To align understanding. Applying known 'Back to the Future' paradox framework to model risks and interventions. Presenting reference. Engaging simplified explanation protocol!"

Rohan groaned. "Of course you are."

The screen snapped to a photo—too crisp at the edges, like it had been compressed twice and survived out of spite.

A man with a scruffy beard and an easy, lopsided grin had his arm around a woman with brilliant white hair and warm, tired eyes.

Samantha's smile unlocked something deep and fragile in William's chest.

"Primary parental units," GaMII narrated. "As they will be."

Sabrina leaned in, squinting. "Wait. Hang on." Her gaze ping-ponged between the screen and William. "That's... that's Nick. The lawyer. But older. Messier."

Rohan's head snapped up. "No way." He shoved closer, practically nose-to-screen. "He's got a beard—and he looks happy. But yeah, that's him. Your dad is Nick Wright?"

The connection slammed into William like a blunt weapon.

The familiar name he'd brushed off.
The static zap of their handshake.
The hum he felt near Nick.
A chord tightening across time.
"Evidence," GaMII chirped, slipping into documentary mode.
The image stuttered.
Not like a natural fade—
but like a render pipeline choking.
Samantha's pregnant belly shrank by ten percent—clean, linear re-scaling, the kind software used when it didn't know any better.
Nick's beard thinned in blocky patches, a checkerboard dissolve.
Pixels blinked out like dead stars, sections refreshing out of sync.
It didn't look like reality changing.
It looked like a computer glitching badly.
But the kids didn't know what they didn't know.
William's hand tightened until the phone creaked. "Mom," he breathed.
"Observe!" GaMII said brightly. "According to the provided model framework, Nick Wright's current assignment at this facility has caused him to miss his scheduled first encounter with the female parental unit. The connection is destabilizing, delaying creation! Should the vector over-extend and sever completely... poof."
Yeldarb swallowed. "What is poof."
"The Will Wright-shaped hole in reality kind," GaMII said, cheerful as a weatherman predicting a meteor. "Engaging Existential Threat Protocol. It's a classic!"

William wasn't looking at the corner anymore. He saw his mom, less pregnant, his dad's beard dimming by pixels. There was a sour metallic taste in his mouth he'd learned to call fear.
"Can we stop the poof?" Elaine whispered.
"We make sure they meet," Rohan said, already in plan mode. "We parent-trap your parents. Easy. We throw a party. Or a fake emergency. Or a fake emergency party."
"Probability of success with current parameters: 3.2%," GaMII chirped. "But hey, go big or go poof. I will see what I can do."
Sabrina's hand found William's shoulder and squeezed once. "We'll raise the odds."

Out in the hallway, Tommy knelt by the doorframe and pulled a small, flat device from his pocket—something between a pager and a hearing aid, all wires and tiny LEDs.

He stuck the adhesive disk to the seam where the door met the wall. A soft green light blinked.

Not a standard mic.

A contact amplifier.

The kind Sabrina had built last semester as a proof-of-concept.

The kind she'd bragged no one else could figure out how to use.

The kind Bobby had "borrowed" from her toolbox during tech club cleanup.

Tommy pressed a single button. The gadget purred, translating vibrations up the length of the door into crisp, filtered audio.

My mom sent me here to protect me...

Back to the Future rules...

So I won't exist?

Tommy's eyebrows shot up. He rewound twice, double-checking the phrases, then practically flew down the hallway toward the Patriots table, bouncing like he'd just won a car on a game show.

"You gotta hear this," he said, breathless.

Bobby took the device, held the attached earpiece to his ear. His eyebrows went up. Then down. Then the smile that formed—slow and smooth—wasn't pleasant.

"He's not just a glitch," Bobby said. "He's a crazy glitch who thinks he's from the future."

He looked at Danny. "Thoughts?"

Danny didn't blink. "He believes it," he said. "People who believe things are predictable."

"Predictably removable," Bobby murmured, pocketing the amplifier like it was a loaded tool. "Ellis loves a reason to care."

Back in storage, the heater's hum filled the silence left by GaMII's theatrics. Dust motes twitched like nervous fireflies.

"So," Rohan said at last. "Checklist. One: stop you from vanishing. Two: copy the greatest media library known to man. Three: finally play Street Fighter 6 and Tekken 8 on cab two without TJX! unplugging the power strip for 'energy conservation.'"

Elaine raised her hand. "Four: talking animals?"

"Five," Sabrina said, like she was adding a lab step. "Find where Nick and Samantha were supposed to meet. If we know the where, we can force the when."

Autumn's voice came quiet and sure. "We can also take some pressure off you," she told William. "If anyone starts sniffing, I can give him something to think about that isn't you."

"You don't have to—" William began.

"Yeah," she said. "I do."

GaMII made a drum-roll with its mouth. "Team formed! Side quest accepted! Final note: please remember the photo-fade effect is for educational purposes. And drama. Mostly drama."

Sabrina squinted. "Is that your way of saying your guessing with the picture?"

GaMII threw up tiny pixel hands. "I assist in enhancing comprehension. And vibes."

"Can you not 'vibe' my existence away?" William said, and somehow there was a joke in it.

"Copy that! Recalibrating to 'gentle dread,'" GaMII said, then dimmed.

They stood there, the eight of them in a room that smelled like dust and old math, and let the mission settle. Outside, the day clattered on, oblivious.

"Okay," Sabrina said. "We start by not getting caught."

"Good start," Rohan said. "We're already very talented at that."

"Also," Yeldarb added solemnly, "we require snacks. For destiny."

"Basement tonight," Chico said. "I'll Bring drives."

"Basement tonight," Autumn echoed, and looked at William. "We've got you."

William nodded. The hum under his ribs steadied into something that wasn't quite courage and wasn't not. He slid the phone back into his pocket, where GaMII whispered, too quietly for the others to hear: "Don't worry. You're not Marty. You're you. That's harder to erase."

William exhaled. "Basement tonight," he said.

They unwedged the mop and spilled back into the hall. The heater kept humming. The dust kept dancing. Somewhere, Tommy's phone finished uploading. Somewhere else, a photo that wasn't a photo held its breath and waited to be useful.

The day swallowed them, noisy and bright. The island had a plan. The storm was still coming. And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 5 – Wright Perspective on History

The summons came in the usual Spencer way—no explanation, just a glitter-covered flyer taped to the cereal cabinet reading:

MANDATORY FUN! Attendance = Brownie Points (actual brownies possible).

By the time William shuffled into the common room, the air buzzed with wary curiosity. Sabrina and Rohan occupied the beanbags like they were hostages. Yeldarb had commandeered the couch's armrest, judging everything. Even Danny had shown up, which meant curiosity had trumped self-preservation.

Spencer appeared behind the curtain like a magician revealing both the trick and the rabbit. The curtain fell, releasing a storm of sequins. He stood in a sequined Judge Judy robe that didn't quite close, a curly blond wig slipping off his ear, and a foam-core gavel so oversized it looked like modern art.

"ORDER IN THE COURT!" he bellowed. "The Court of Second Chances—and also possibly pudding—is now in session! The honorable, fiscally responsible, occasionally lactose-intolerant Spencer Sarzh presiding!"

The kids groaned in unison.

Sabrina muttered, "I'm getting second-hand embarrassment so bad I think I'm astral-projecting."

Rohan whispered, "If we ignore him, maybe he'll despawn."

William tried to hide his smile. Part of him loved this—Spencer's desperate, ridiculous hope. It reminded him of the marketplace back home, his mother wrapping tragedy in theater, calling survival showtime.

Spencer slapped the gavel onto a folding table. Glitter exploded. "Today we swear in our newest officer of morale! Defender of fun! The honorable Nicholas Wright!"

Nick stepped through the doorway—and froze. He looked like someone walking into a dream halfway through. "Spencer," he said slowly, "we agreed on a brief introduction."

"Brief!" Spencer insisted, beaming. "I just didn't specify the length of briefness."

He reached to straighten Nick's imaginary tie, brushing at his collar instead. "Just making sure our guest lecturer looks judicially presentable!"

Nick gave a polite, pained smile. "That's... great. Maybe let's skip directly to the part where I don't sue you for harassment."

"Motion denied, silly!" Spencer cried, dropping the gavel again. It shattered a paper plate.

Across the room, Yeldarb gasped in delight. "The performance! The authority!"

Danny, stone-faced, nodded once, as though analyzing a tactical strike. Their eyes met briefly, both horrified by the mutual respect that had occurred. They looked away fast.

Spencer finally gestured grandly. "Ladies, gentlemen, and ambiguous special-ones—Professor Wright will now present today's lesson: A Wright Perspective on History!"

He exited with a flourish and tripped over the gavel.

Nick took the front with a resigned exhale. The kids had gone silent—not polite silence, but curiosity's kind, when the clown leaves and a real person steps forward.

"Okay," he began, dragging a stool center stage. "So, apparently I'm a professor now. No degree, just trauma and a whiteboard." He picked up a marker. "Let's talk about games."

That earned murmurs. Even Chico—usually an island of apathy—tilted his head.

Nick drew a crooked circle labeled ARCADE.

“Once upon a quarter,” he said, “you walked into a noisy room full of lights. You paid for three lives. You lost, you paid again. It was honest. Brutal, but fair. You owned your failure.”

Another circle: CONSOLE.

“Then games came home. You bought a cartridge, you owned the experience. Companies learned something powerful: if they made you care about saving, you’d care about coming back. They sold you worlds.”

He drew a final, messy infinity symbol. LIVE SERVICE.

“And now? The game never ends. It’s free, technically. But the price is your attention—forever. They don’t want your money once; they want your eyes, your hours, your identity. They turn fun into a job you pay them to do.”

He capped the marker. The silence that followed was thick enough to lean on.

Sabrina’s brow furrowed. “You’re saying fun got... monetized?”

“Worse,” Nick said. “It got weaponized. They built loops. Daily rewards, fear of missing out, streaks. The game stops being about joy and becomes about obedience.”

William’s stomach fluttered. Loops. He remembered his mother’s whisper in the dugout—They’ll make even fun into a wage. The words returned like static in his ears. His father—this man, years younger, oblivious—was describing the genesis of the empire that would cage them all.

Chico’s fingers tapped his knee, eyes gleaming. “So control is disguised as engagement,” he murmured, not to Nick but to himself.

Nick nodded, catching it. “Exactly. Freedom wrapped in convenience. Every update another leash.”

He leaned forward, elbows on knees, voice softening. “When you play, remember who’s writing the rules. If you ever feel like you’re playing someone else’s game, find the off switch.”

For a heartbeat, no one moved. Then Spencer, peeking through the doorway, whispered too loudly, “I must’ve inspired him to say that!”

Laughter cracked the tension—but not for William. His pulse thudded in his ears. The whiteboard’s loops blurred into the shape of the INVALID cuffs that had locked his mother’s ankles. Same cycle. Different skin.

The room didn’t so much explode as bloom. Kids unfolded from beanbags and battered chairs like someone had watered them. A dozen voices rose at once, the sound ricocheting off the trophy case and the sagging curtains Spencer insisted were “acoustically necessary.”

Sabrina reached Nick first, a pen already poised like a tiny sword. “Reading list. Not opinion pieces—primary sources. Behavioral economics, game design postmortems, anything on retention curves and compulsion loops. Footnotes are fine; I actually like footnotes.”

Nick laughed, then saw she wasn’t joking. “Okay, footnote warrior. Start with Schell’s Art of Game Design for framing, Caillois for play theory, and a couple of GDC talks from—”

“—Ramin Shokrizade,” Chico said, appearing over Sabrina’s shoulder like he’d been conjured by the word loops. His voice stayed low and even, almost gentle. “And the Ubisoft retention deck. The leaked one.”

Sabrina made a satisfied noise. “Thank you, ghost in the machine.”

Yeldarb shouldered in, eyes shining. “When do we get part two of the lecture? Ideally with slides. Or interpretive dance. You have the bone structure for it.”

Danny hovered nearby, huge and uncertain, then raised a single finger. “Can... you draw the circles again?” he asked, cheeks flushing as though he’d just lifted the question with brute force. “I forget things unless I see them in circles. And then I remember them forever.”

Nick flipped the whiteboard and redrew the loops—arcade, console, live service—shorthand halos around a stick figure labeled YOU. Danny nodded solemnly, as if the picture had just given him permission to breathe.

Rohan stood at the edge of the cluster, studying Nick’s face the way people watch weather roll in. “You talk like someone who lost something fun and decided to make sure nobody else gets tricked into losing it the same way,” he said, gentle and matter-of-fact. “That was kind. And also sad.”

Nick blinked. “You... just say the thing, huh?”

Rohan nodded. “It’s easier for everyone if the thing is said.”

Across the carpet, Autumn leaned against the doorjamb with her arms crossed, the posture of someone who remembers where every exit is. Her eyes softened a fraction as she tracked which of the younger kids were drifting toward Nick and which were staying back, overwhelmed. She didn’t smile, but the line of her shoulders loosened one notch—the chapter’s emotional math checking out.

Spencer, meanwhile, vibrated with triumph. “You see?” he declared to Xenia, who had materialized with a clipboard like a counterspell. “My showmanship sets the stage for education!”

Xenia’s eyebrow rose to a place of religious significance. “Your showmanship nearly set the stage on fire last month,” she said, tapping the corner where a glitter clump was attempting combustion by enthusiasm alone. “Also, we’re out of paper towels again.”

“As fate would have it,” Spencer sang, producing a Ziploc bag of brownies from beneath the folding table like a magician revealing a bunny that smelled of cocoa and questionable measurements, “we replenish morale as we replenish paper products. Brownies for brains!”

The bag was swarmed with reverence. Yeldarb took one like he was accepting a medal; Danny accepted his like he might crush it by accident if he thought too hard; Sabrina passed hers back to Rohan without looking, already writing Shokrizade on her palm.

“Share with the room,” Autumn called, not turning her head. The swarm instantly remembered manners.

William hung back, notebook resting on his knee, pencil hovering over the words he’d already carved into the paper:

LOOPS = CONTROL = ALEHANTE.

He underlined CONTROL until the page napped under the pressure. The lecture had moved through him like music he half-remembered—familiar because it had already scored his life. In the dugout, his mom had called it wage-fun. Now Nick had given it a diagram and a warning: if you ever feel like you’re playing someone else’s game, find the off switch.

William glanced up. Nick was smiling as kids lobbed questions, but the smile had a tired edge—a long road tucked into a grin. It made something hot and complicated move behind William’s ribs.

Chico slipped into the space beside him without disturbing air. “You copy fast,” he observed, eyes flicking to the notebook.

“I have to,” William said. “It gets slippery otherwise.”

“Most truths do,” Chico said. “Would you like to see the basement archive? Not on any map. Older loops live down there. When you know the old ones, the new ones stop looking like magic.”

William stared at him. “You have an archive?”

Chico’s mouth tilted. “I have a dock.” He tapped the corner of the notebook, and then, like he hadn’t said anything significant, drifted back toward the whiteboard, expression already three moves ahead.

Spencer swept by, trailing glitter and a smell of cocoa. “William, first-lecture tradition dictates you name the next session,” he said, solemn as a judge whose robe came from Party City. “Think big! Think punny!”

“Maybe... ‘Wright to Disconnect’?” William offered before he could get embarrassed by himself.

Spencer gasped. “Our little wordsmith has arrived. Xenia, add it to the curriculum doc that we don’t have!”

Xenia shook her head but scribbled something anyway. “I’ll put it in the real schedule,” she said. “And, Spence? No more sequins in the HVAC.”

Spencer threw a hand to his chest. “It’s called atmosphere, Xenia. Art isn’t tidy.”

“Neither is the filter,” she said, and walked off to stop a brownie from being redistributed directly into a pocket.

Near the snack cluster, Warren Jean held a brownie at arm’s length like it might stain his soul. “This is... rustic,” he said, though he took a bite and closed his eyes for a suspiciously long time. Tommy Messing tried to trade his for two of anything, then gave up and ate his in three feral chomps. Bobby lingered at the perimeter, smile neutral, eyes tracking the way attention pooled toward Nick. He clapped Danny on the shoulder, too hard to be affectionate, then drifted away with a thoughtful squint.

“Hey,” Sabrina called to William, softening her voice like she’d pulled the volume slider down. “You okay?”

He nodded. “Just... writing the part I don’t want to forget.”

“Good plan,” she said. “Write the part you control, too. Brain’s the only console you own outright.”

Rohan popped up beside her like a helpful annotation. “He’s scared but he’s making a plan. That usually works.”

Sabrina blinked. “I... yes. Okay, David. Thank you.”

“I will accept a brownie in lieu of gratitude,” Rohan said brightly.

She handed him half her square. “Taxation is theft.”

“Not if the roads are brownies,” he said, chewing.

Nick edged through the knot and crouched by William’s chair, lowering the room’s volume for the two of them. Up close, the laugh lines by Nick’s eyes looked earned. “What’d you write?”

William showed him the page. There was a long second where Nick read and then read again, understanding sliding into place like a book falling true on a shelf.

“Good note,” Nick said quietly. “Smart kid.”

William felt dumb tears press at his throat, so he nodded like it wasn’t a big deal and slid the notebook closed.

As he did, something thin and blue fell from the spiral and landed face-down on his sneaker. He bent to pick it up: a narrow strip of label-maker tape stuck to a square of shop-towel, the kind that smelled faintly of citrus cleaner. The tape bore two embossed characters:

F1

On the towel, in spidery ballpoint, a note: “Help keys aren’t cheating. They’re exits.” —S
William blinked. He hadn’t put that there. He looked up at Nick.

Nick’s gaze had snagged on the scrap. His expression flickered—the briefest flash of of course—and then the crooked grin returned, as if he’d decided not to interrogate a gift that came wrapped like a maintenance request.

“Friend of mine,” he said, too casual. “Thinks in... signage.”

“Is your friend a ghost?” William asked, half-joking, half not.

“Depends on the lighting,” Nick said. “Keep it. Chico will like the joke.”

William turned the strip over in his palm. F1. Press for help. An exit hidden in plain sight. He slid the scrap beneath the clear cover of his notebook like a saint’s card and felt something align—a private ritual, a new rule added to the game: when the loop tightens, look for the help key.

Across the room, Spencer clapped his hands, a glitter halo puffing up like a stage cue. “All right, scholars and skeptics, last call for questions before we return this, our sacred common room, to its natural habitat—chaos.”

Autumn pushed off the doorjamb. “Five minutes,” she said, voice carrying. “Then chores. You can theorize while you fold.”

A chorus of groans, affectionate and immediate. Someone muttered, “Autumn’s loop is undefeated.”

Autumn’s mouth almost, almost smiled. “It keeps the house standing.”

Nick straightened, easing back into the orbit of hands and questions. Sabrina asked about case studies; Danny begged for another drawing; Yeldarb requested a dramatic reenactment of “finding the off switch.” Chico said nothing, but his eyes kept landing on the F1 peeking through William’s notebook cover, like he was filing the symbol in a drawer labeled use later.

Xenia tugged the whiteboard toward the wall. “Spencer, if another sequin enters the ventilation system, I’m putting in a work order that says ‘glitter asthma.’”

Spencer pressed a hand against his heart. “Art,” he whispered, wounded.

“Please think of the Filters,” she countered.

William breathed in the warm, human noise—the rustle of paper towels, brownie-sweet air, the scratch of markers, the clink of the trophy case settling. For a long, strange moment the home felt like a level he might actually beat, not because the bosses got easier, but because he wasn’t holding the controller alone.

He flipped to a clean page and wrote, under the embossed F1:

FIND THE OFF SWITCH. FIND THE EXIT. TEACH THE OTHERS.

He underlined teach. Sabrina glanced over his shoulder and nodded once, as if he’d passed a private test. Rohan said, softly, “That sounds like a plan.” Chico’s mouth made the smallest shape of approval.

Spencer, misreading the hush as a dramatic beat he’d engineered, threw his arms wide. “Class dismissed! Brownie crumbs are currency; I expect repayment in vacuuming.”

Groans. Laughter. The shuffle of chairs scraping a floor that had seen too many scrapes to mind.

In the corner, William tucked the blue strip deeper beneath the plastic cover and pressed his palm there for a second, as if he could save the feeling into the page. The help key wasn’t magic. Neither were loops. But if someone had snuck an exit into his life and labeled it in citrus-scented tape, he meant to use it—and to make sure everyone else knew where to find it.

Not everyone celebrated. Near the hallway, Bobby lingered with the stillness of plotting. He waited until the laughter swelled, then slipped out the side door where Ellis Dee was making notes on his clipboard, his expression the calm of someone cataloging insects.

“Mr. Dee?” Bobby pitched it soft, confessional. “Can I... talk to you? I’ve been worried about someone.”

Ellis’s pleasant, professional attention rotated toward him.

“Of course, Robert.”

“It’s William,” Bobby said, lowering his voice. “He’s been telling people he’s from the future. He’s convinced his parents are supposed to meet or he won’t exist. Weirdest part? He thinks Mr. Nick is his dad. It’s... crazy town banana pants.” He produced the device with the dutiful reluctance of a citizen offering evidence. “I didn’t want to make a big deal, but after that lecture about manipulation... I figured context matters.”

He tapped play.

The recording spilled out—William’s rough-edged voice: my mom sent me here to protect me—GaMII’s artificial cheer: Back to the Future—Elaine’s gasp—so I won’t exist?

Ellis listened, unmoving.

Then his eyes brightened—not with pity, nor concern, but a thin, electric curiosity.

He smiled, small and scientific.

“Thank you, Robert. Context is... crucial.”

He lifted his clipboard and wrote:

Subject Wright, W. — Displays knowledge of temporal variance.

Investigate source.

Potential unsupervised exposure.

Bobby’s shoulders relaxed, pleased with himself.

He didn’t notice how Ellis’s gaze tracked William through the windowpane—precise, hungry, as if marking the first tremor of something he’d hoped to find.

Autumn saw everything reflected in the glass trophy case—the handshake, the clipboard, the smile that didn’t belong on a human face.

She intercepted William near the stairwell, her tone low. “You need to lay low.”

He blinked. “Why? Did I do something?”

“You talked,” she said. “And Bobby recorded you.”

His stomach dropped. “He—what?”

“Ellis heard it. He’s not mad. He’s... interested. That’s worse.” She leaned closer, voice barely audible. “You’re not in trouble. You’re a specimen.”

The word hit like a siren. His throat went dry. Specimen. He remembered the patrolman’s visor scanning his mother’s feet, the word INVALID glowing purple. History looping again.

Autumn’s eyes softened. “You didn’t hear that from me.”

He nodded, heart pounding. “Thanks.”

She forced a crooked grin. “Don’t thank me. Just don’t give him more data.”

That night, the Home exhaled.

The hallways had gone to sleep in layers—first the chatter, then the shuffle of feet, then even the hum of the ceiling lights dimming into an amber sigh. Only two sounds remained to prove the world hadn’t stopped: the soft, mechanical buzz of the vending machine outside the rec room,

and the rhythmic creak of Spencer's chair down the hall, a tired metronome keeping time for dreams he was probably too sentimental to stop chasing.

William sat cross-legged beneath the bunk's small pool of light. His notebook lay open across his knees, the pages softened from too much touching. A faint smear of chocolate from Spencer's "morale brownies" streaked the margin, marking it like a relic from another kind of communion. His pencil hovered, then moved almost on instinct, retracing Nick's lesson in smaller, sharper handwriting:

Games are loops.

Loops are control.

Break the loop.

He underlined it twice, the pencil point pressing hard enough to leave an impression on the next two pages.

Then the words started to move. Not literally, but in the way memories sometimes melt the present—edges blurring, light folding. The Home's walls faded. He smelled onions and rust again. He saw the dugout's low ceiling glowing amber from the reactor light. His mother's hum—off-key but sure—threaded through the air as she peeled potatoes in a dented pan, her feet bare, her face softer than he remembered. The melody was Gorillaz, lazy and ironic, something she'd once said "used to mean freedom before it meant product."

He could almost hear the rest: the chair rolling, the cuffs unclicking, the gasp when she realized she could walk again. Then the sirens that came like punishment for joy. The gravel, cold and sharp beneath bare soles. The sound of her breath cutting through the night, half prayer, half promise.

"No Spark without Jessie. On my life."

He'd repeated it like a charm then, not understanding that what she'd sworn him to wasn't obedience, but agency.

Now, the words unfolded fully. The promise wasn't about power. It was about choice.

The power to not play. The power to walk away.

Help keys aren't cheating. They're exits.

It hit him then—his father's lesson, his mother's vow, Snakes' cryptic mercy—all facets of the same truth:

Every system builds walls. Every loop sells safety. Every escape starts with naming the door.

A floorboard creaked out in the hall. Spencer again, probably checking the thermostat for the tenth time. William pictured him in his slippers and a Captain's Log pajama top, whispering to himself about "sustaining morale overnight." The thought made him smile, the kind that hurt and helped at once. This place was chaos, but it was human chaos. Every loop here was made of care, not control.

He looked toward the far end of the corridor. Nick's door was closed, a sliver of warm lamplight tracing the floor from beneath it. William imagined him asleep with a book fallen open on his chest—someone who could dissect the mechanics of the world but couldn't see how they'd already written his future. The man who had unknowingly built the metaphor that became an empire. Alehante didn't invent control, William thought. It just perfected his theory.

A drop of rain hit the window. Then another. Then a rhythm. The storm was patient, tapping in time with the squeak of Spencer's chair. Each drop rolled down the pane like a timer counting toward something—steady, relentless, circular.

William wrote one last line under Nick's mantra:

If loops can be written, they can be rewritten.

He paused, watching the words glisten wet in the lamplight before the pencil's graphite dulled them matte again. Then, beneath it, smaller, like a signature:

I'll rewrite it, Dad.

I'll make it end.

He closed the notebook and sat in the quiet long enough to feel his heartbeat settle into the rhythm of the rain. Each beat a question. Each drop an answer. Loops within loops, and somewhere, a way out.

Across the hall, Spencer's chair finally stopped creaking. The vending machine clicked off for its auto-cycle. The house sighed deeper into stillness.

Outside, the rain fell in perfect measure—tap, tap, tap—a reminder that even patterns meant to contain you eventually wear through whatever holds them.

The loop would break. And when it did, it would sound exactly like this.

Chapter 6 — Heir to Rehearsals

The common room glowed the warm yellow of overworked bulbs and a brownie-sugar hangover. William sat on the edge of the thrift-store couch, notebook open, pretending to copy his math problems while the Family Game Knights orbited in their natural pattern.

Rohan drifted in first, an observant moon. “You look like you’re thinking three thoughts at once and none of them want to share,” he said, soft and guileless. “Want to talk about it?”

“I’m fine,” William said.

“You don’t have to be,” Rohan answered, like he was noting the weather.

Sabrina slid across the carpet on her socks, hair clipped back with binder clips she’d “borrowed” from Xenia. “Translation: David clocked your haunted eyes.” She plopped beside William and lowered her voice. “We’re gonna need a technical roadmap to ensure Mr. Wright meets Mrs. Wright, falls in love mutually, and thereby ensures your stick around with us. I’m not saying I’ll write the algorithm, but I will absolutely write the algorithm.”

William snorted despite the knot in his stomach. “That... seems complicated.”

“Existence is a messy dependency tree,” she said, dead serious. “But we can prune.”

Yeldarb sprang onto the arm of the couch like a mascot who had found a stage. “Comrade William! Without Existence, your hard work is for naught! We will shepherd your becoming with valor, meat, and possibly a montage.”

Autumn materialized at William’s other side with the unassuming gravity of someone who always knows where the exits are. She offered a thin, spiral notebook—small enough to hide, sturdy enough to survive. “Keep track,” she said. “GaMII can remember for you, but you need your own ledger. Don’t let technology own your memories.”

He took it, thumbed the cardboard cover. “Thanks.”

Spencer chose that exact moment to whirl through the doorway with a sparkle cloud and a flourish of cardstock. “Delivery for one William Wright,” he trilled, brandishing a glitter-dusted note like a summons from a benevolent fae. “Mandatory counseling! Which is a misleading phrase because the brownies are the star of the show!”

Sabrina squinted at the glittering script. “Mandatory snacks and mandatory feelings in one day. Ambitious.”

“It’s just talking,” Spencer said, an optimistic sunbeam. “With brownies.”

“Brownies don’t make a trap not-a-trap,” Autumn said.

Spencer’s smile thinned but held. “He’s a good man. You’ll like him.”

William folded the note. The room warped for a second—Spencer’s glitter, Sabrina’s clips, Yeldarb’s theatrics—overlaid by a different world: the sour-metal scent of alleys, dumpsters breathing cold, his mom’s bare feet blinking with cuff-light, the hum like a hummingbird caged inside her ankles. He steadied himself with the notebook Autumn had given him. “I’ll be fine.”

Rohan nodded once, a benediction of honesty. “You’ll be intimidated, but you’ll be fine.”

“Guard your dreams, comrade,” Yeldarb intoned, hand over heart.

Sabrina tapped William’s new notebook, then her temple. “Document or it didn’t happen.”

William tucked the glitter-summons in the back and headed down the corridor, heart thudding to a metronome set one notch too fast.

Ellis Dee’s office looked like a professor’s nest in a storybook—orderly shelves, a rubber plant thriving against all odds, a framed diploma, a bowl of unwrapped mints that somehow didn’t collect dust. Everything arranged to soothe. The only thing that didn’t fit was Ellis

himself: poised behind his desk with the patient interest of a biologist who had already labeled the jar.

“William,” Ellis said, warm as tea. “Thank you for coming. With everything that happened during the alarm last week, I thought it might help to have a quiet place to process.” He steepled his fingers—his signature. “I like to start simple. Sleep. Dreams. They’re windows into the stories we tell ourselves when we’re not busy telling them to anyone else.”

He slid a navy-blue notebook across the desk, a twin to the one Autumn had given him, except this one smelled faintly of a new-store aisle.

“I’d like you to keep a dream journal. Anything that surfaces. No censorship.”

William looked at the blank page and felt the lie slide into place: dreams.

“Okay.”

“Tell me one,” Ellis said gently.

William kept his eyes on the notebook and braided truth until it looked harmless. “I dream about walking with my mom. We... scavenge. She calls it ‘treasure hunting’ to make it a game.”

He picked neutral details, filed off brand names.

“We share earbuds. She laughs at the bad stuff.”

A memory sparkled—Samantha’s off-key Gorillaz hum, onions sweetening in a pan—and slipped away before it could burn.

“Sometimes there’s a key. A stranger gives it to us.”

Ellis didn’t interrupt. He nodded, the soft encouragement that pulls more loose.

“What do you hear most in the dream? Not with your ears—with your... heart.”

“The hum,” William said before he could stop himself. “Like... a machine purring under the floor.”

“Describe it,” Ellis said. “Environmental? Emotional?”

William swallowed. His fingers curled around the armrest. “Both,” he said. “It’s... warning and comfort at once.”

In the dream-life, the hum belonged to a reactor in a dugout—hot soups and safe lights—and to cuffs draining warmth from his mother’s bones when she healed him on a mattress that smelled like detergent and fear.

Another memory rose—unbidden, knife-clear.

A uniform.

Black plates.

A sigil burned onto the shoulder.

Maddox Alehante barking orders in a voice deeper than the one he’d have today at fourteen.

And William said it before he realized it was a mistake.

“It’s like the hum before an Officer comes down the hall. One of the... Alehante enforcement units. Like Officer Maddox used to—”

He froze.

Ellis didn’t.

His pen paused only a moment before resuming in a slow, deliberate stroke.

“Maddox,” Ellis said mildly. “As in Maddox Alehante? The eighth-grader?”

William’s mouth went dry. “It’s a... dream version,” he lied. “Just a name that stuck.”

Ellis’s expression didn’t shift. But the temperature of the room did.

A colder intelligence stepped closer behind his eyes.

“You mentioned restrictions,” he said softly.

William’s pulse staggered. He nodded once.

Ellis folded his hands, voice dipping into something almost affectionate.

“Dreams that stay consistent over weeks aren’t dreams, William.”

His eyes flicked—just flicked—toward the notebook.

“Dreams that contain structured detail, consistent mechanics, and names you should not know...”

He leaned back, studying him not as a boy but as a pattern.

“...those are rehearsals.”

The word hit like a clean strike to the sternum—rehearsals—turning the nagging fear into something sharper.

Hope in costume.

Threat without a mask.

“I have a few prompts,” Ellis continued, effortless. “Between sessions, write down any repeats. Draw maps if you can. When you wake up, sketch anything you touched.”

William nodded because nodding was safer than speaking. He opened the blue notebook and wrote a story labeled Nightmare to appease the ritual: a landfill, a beam, a battery, the loud bright pain of a bad lesson, his arm exploding into hurt, Jessica’s voice—half prayer, half profanity—Mr. E’s contempt coiled like smoke, and then his mother’s hands glowing over his shattered bones as the restrictions placed on her began to sing. He wrote it like fiction. His hand shook like truth.

On his way out, he realized his fingers were making micro-balancing motions against the air, the way Jessica had shown him to do when the ground felt like a lie. He stilled them and didn’t look back.

The next sessions layered like acetate sheets.

Ellis’s questions got narrower, his pauses longer. William learned the perimeter of safe detail and colored to its edges.

He told a dream about tea in a dugout, reactor purring (comfort), and Samantha’s blanket draped to hide her locked feet, a scarlet letter for healing her son. He left out the flavor of cuffs: citrus-and-metal, expensive cruelty. He wrote: She teaches me to laugh at the bad stuff.

He told another dream about the siege—sirens stitching the sky, a patrolman scanning violet across his mother, as her bare soles stomp helplessly, drones pursued like hornets, the voice booming “Invalid status verification,” and his Spark freezing the world still to clear a path he did not take because he could not leave her. He called it nightmare: robots, and drew a quadruped like a bad dog.

He told a third dream about flight—Jessica’s hammer turning gravity into a rumor, the river falling away like silver ribbon, the pirate ship groaning under their landing, the book that opened a staircase, the mansion below the earth like a secret heart. He didn’t write Casandra’s eyes or the moment Samantha decided to trade her spark and her life for his chance at a future. He did not write Snakes being there, promising to watch over him. He wrote: We went down and it got brighter.

Every telling carved something true into him. Between sessions, William sat on the lower bunk and repeated Jessica’s balancing drill—palms open, spine tall, micro-motions at the wrists. After a week, his center found center faster. After ten days, he could balance heel-to-toe for a count of twenty without the bedframe’s help. The rehearsals weren’t just making him braver; they were making him better. Wonder bloomed and terrified him in equal measure.

During the third week, lulled by the room’s soft lamp and Ellis’s patience, he slipped.

“It was in the market,” William said, describing the chase. “Someone tried to pay for a rebuilt laptop, but was short about five A-Chain. Mom felt bad and I—uh—think that we sold it to him at a discount.”

Ellis’s pen stilled mid-stroke. His head tilted just slightly, the scientist scenting ozone before a storm.

“A-Chain?” he repeated, tone smooth but sharpened at the edges. “That’s an interesting name. You’ve heard of it before?”

William shrugged, trying to sound casual. “I don’t know. It was just there. Dream money.”

Ellis smiled the way people smile when they’ve found the corner of a hidden map.

“Fascinating. Rumor has it Alehante Securities has been considering a digital-asset division by that name. But they’re at least five years from launch, if it ever happens.”

His gaze lingered on William’s notebook. “Dreams ahead of schedule—now that’s something worth documenting.”

Ellis’s pen paused. A whole thought passed behind his eyes and didn’t come out. “That’s an... evocative prediction,” he said. “Some believe dreams can predict the future.” His pen resumed. “Let’s track patterns.”

William’s stomach turned to ice, then heat. He tried to soften the edges. “It’s just imaginary dream money.”

“Mm.” Ellis smiled a scholar’s smile. “Let’s add tools. A sleep-tracker to pair with your journal. The Home’s benefactor has provided several. We’ll learn so much from your night cycles. It’s care, William. Data helps us help you.”

The case of trackers arrived in a white box stamped with the Alehante “A.” the week after Nick started. Xenia logged, gave the contents of the package to Ellis, and told Spencer he could keep the box for pencils. Like a rubbery watch, the device pulsed a pleasant green when it connected to the Home’s network and an ugly blue when it thought he’d fallen asleep. It was everything Ellis promised: sleek, clean, and hungry.

That night the band warmed William’s wrist like a polite hand that wanted to become a cuff. He lay very still, watching the LED breathe over his pulse. Somewhere down the hall, Spencer’s chair creaked; outside, rain rehearsed a loop against the eaves. He could feel the Spark in his body the way people feel a weather change. He kept it quiet.

Morning brought more surveillance: weekly reviews of the journal, gentle suggestions, and “collaborative goals.” Every therapeutic noun wore a uniform.

“Your face is doing the thing where you pretend your face is fine,” Rohan said at lunch. “Your face is wrong.”

Sabrina didn’t look up from the tracker. “He means: you’re scared they don’t think you’re dreaming—they think you’re delusional or time traveling. Option two is science fiction. Option one is very crazy-town banana-pants.”

“It feels like it’s both,” William said, voice small enough to hide in his tray.

Sabrina popped the clasp and frowned at the tiny sensor. “BLE beacon, optical HR, cheap movement accelerometer.” She turned it over with tweezers she absolutely did not have permission to possess. “I can spoof the heart rate at night with a metronome routine. Movement is trickier.”

“Maybe, GaMII can synthesize a plausible sleep pattern,” William said. “If I ask right.”

Sabrina’s eyes sparked. “Oh we’re co-opting the panopticon. Love that for us. We’ll pipe synthetic REM cycles over the BLE channel and let Alehante’s little snitch eat lies for breakfast.” She grinned. “Data is just code—rewrite it.”

Yeldarb thumped his fist to his chest. “We shall guard your dreams with guts.”

Autumn slid into the seat, eyes automatically scanning the room for Ellis’s line of sight. “Hide the details,” she said. “You don’t owe anyone your insides. Survive the countdown.”

On the way out, Danny—big, gentle, literal—lumbered at William’s elbow. “Your dreams sound like my *Cyberpunk 2077* game,” he said, low. “Any good tips for upgrades?”

Before William could answer, Bobby cut in smooth as a bad salesman. “Careful, Danny. You’ll catch the...Willies.” He smiled at William without using his eyes. “We have a kid who thinks he’s Marty McFly. Does slick Willy want Mr. Nick to be his Doc Brown?”

Danny looked confused, then unhappy. He drifted with Bobby like a moon dragged off its orbit.

Ellis watched William’s hands when he spoke. He never wrote, patient exhibits trained micro-adjustments at mention of “balance,” but William felt the notation land on his skin anyway.

“Describe the lesson again,” Ellis said during a later session. “The one with the... hovering.”

“It’s not hovering,” William said. “It’s control. Tiny shifts. Like... feeling the earth’s gravity and refusing to panic.”

He didn’t say Jessica and didn’t say hammer and didn’t say float, but his fingers betrayed him—thumb to index, a centimeter to the left, his back, then the seat of his pants, and finally his shoes lost contact with the chair and floor, imperceptibly above them for a split moment. His body remembered before his mind permitted it.

Ellis’s pen paused, the sound of scratching paper breaking for just an instant. “What did your body do just now?”

“Nothing,” William lied, too quickly.

“Mm,” Ellis murmured, the noise small but surgical. He looked down again, writing slower now, as though the note required precision.

That night, William couldn’t shake the sensation—the phantom lift behind his ribs. He climbed onto his mattress, eyes on the faint moonlight striping the wall. Back on the mattress, toes up, steady breath, open palms. He traced the energy around his body again and again, until his muscles found the memory Jessica had drilled into him:

“Stop fighting the pull,” she’d said once, hair whipping around her face as she floated half a story up. “You don’t beat gravity—you negotiate. You remind it that you belong up there too.”

He closed his eyes and remembered the rhythm—the micro-corrections in the ankles, the invisible counterforce of breath. The Spark inside him answered, faint but definite, a hum like a tuning fork in his bones.

He felt his body lighten. The pressure on the mattress shifted, sound dropping away until the quiet became enormous. When he opened his eyes, his body no longer touched the bed. He was hovering—first an inch, then two, then half a foot, the light from the window spilling under him in a silver ribbon.

His heart raced. He laughed under his breath, afraid to break it. It’s real, he thought. I’m doing it again.

The air thickened around him, alive, responsive. His body remembered Jessica’s every correction: the wrist roll to stabilize spin, the micro-tilt to steer. He floated higher—three feet now—eyes wide, trembling not from fear but exhilaration. The rehearsals work.

A sudden knock shattered the stillness.

THUD.

He jerked in surprise. The Spark faltered. Gravity remembered him.

The fall wasn't long, but it was loud—bedsprings yelping, notebook scattering, the Alehante tracker clattering against the floor like a mechanical heartbeat gone wrong.

William blinked up at the ceiling, chest heaving. The knock came again, muffled this time, Spencer's voice sing-song from the hall:

"Lights out means going to dreamland, not floating in the air, Mr. Nights into Dreams wannabe!"

William opened his mouth to answer—but his voice didn't come. The light above him flickered once, twice, then brightened, then enveloped the room blinding him. He blinked—and found himself still laying on his mattress, toes pressing the sheet. No bruises, no fallen notebook, no scattered pen.

The air was still. The Spark was quiet.

He stared down at his empty hands. Had that been...a Dream?

Outside, rain tapped the window again in perfect rhythm—like a metronome counting him back into the loop. He sat down slowly, heartbeat syncing with the storm. The only proof left was the faint ache in his calves and the lingering taste of sky in his lungs.

He flipped open his notebook and wrote, hands shaking:

Dream or rehearsal—doesn't matter.

Gravity listened.

I can feel the off switch.

The tracker learned his pulse too quickly. By night two it was breathing with him—green glow syncing to his veins like it had always belonged there. William hated how friendly it felt.

Ellis's check-ins got warmer and narrower. "Excellent compliance," he praised, jotting numbers like lullabies. "We're seeing consolidation. Fewer spikes." Care had a clipboard now.

"Your face is doing that brave thing again," Rohan said, walking guard beside William down the hallway. "It looks good on you. It also looks **heavy**."

In the laundry room after lights-out, Sabrina rolled up her sleeves over a washer marked OUT OF ORDER and produced a zip bag of righteous contraband: a thrift-store Android, a stubby USB Bluetooth dongle, and a nest of cables that somehow looked smug.

"New rule," she said. "GaMII doesn't touch the band. Ever. We keep the future god out of the mud. But we can still feed Alehante lies."

"How?" William whispered.

Sabrina set the thrift-phone on the washer and popped its back panel with a guitar pick. "Air-gapped pipeline. GaMII templatizes a sleep stream on an offline notebook—CSV only, sneaker-net via SD card. I digest it here, convert to plausible HR + actigraphy, and my little gremlin"—she tapped the dongle—"impersonates the Home's hub long enough to relay our fiction. Band thinks it's talking to Ellis's cloud. Cloud eats dessert."

Rohan stood watch at the door with the solemnity of a lighthouse keeper. Yeldarb draped himself across the dryer like a guardian gargoyle.

"Operation Dream-Cast commences," he whispered. "We baffle their oracles."

Autumn arrived last, quiet as a warning. She checked the hall, then fixed Sabrina with the look you give to talented people who love risk. "Five minutes, not six. Nothing stays plugged

when we're done. If a ping looks wrong, you abort. We're not clever if we get caught—we're just caught."

Sabrina saluted with the guitar pick. "Nice and clean, Avril Lavigne."

The rehearsal began. William sat on the washer, the Alehante band warm on his wrist, watching the thrift-phone become a counterfeit heartbeat. On the screen: their "night" unspooled in numbers—smooth REM arcs, no midnight; heart rate like a quiet sea. The band's LED pulsed green as the gremlin relayed the stream outward.

"Cloud handshake good," Sabrina murmured. "Checksum matches. Packet timing human. We are now a boy who slept like a healthy deer."

Then—

the LED blinked red.

Once.

Sharp and surgical.

Everyone froze.

A second pulse—yellow this time—flickered like a scanning eye.

Sabrina inhaled through her teeth. "No, no, no—don't you dare." Her fingers blurred over the thrift-phone. "It's querying the MAC address. Stupid thing wants the original manufacturer handshake—Rohan, shut the door all the way—Yeldarb, don't breathe."

The band pulsed red again, angry and alive.

Autumn stepped closer, voice barely sound. "Sabrina—abort."

"Give me one second—one—" Sabrina rerouted something with a swipe so fast it was almost violence. "Spoof the seed. Spoof the seed. Come on. Come on."

The band blinked yellow.

Then green.

Steady.

The room exhaled.

"Healthy deer," Rohan whispered, reverent now, "nearly eaten by drone wolf."

Sabrina sagged back, wiping sweat off her forehead with her wrist. "Okay. For weekly reviews, our data's consistent, boring, and a little heroic. If Ellis asks why you're suddenly sleeping better, say friends plus routine plus hydration. Adults love hydration."

Yeldarb raised a fist. "Hydration is the people's gasoline."

Autumn straightened the OUT OF ORDER sign and set a timer on her own watch. "Next window is Friday. If anything feels wrong before then, we burn the plan and go back to pencils and prayer."

Cables vanished. The thrift-phone went dark. The laundry room remembered it was just a room. The band blinked once, innocent.

But now William knew:

Alehante tech didn't just monitor.

It hunted.

On the way out, Danny shuffled past, eyes dipped, then lifted at William with that puzzled kindness of his. "Did you fix your dreams?" he asked.

"Working on it," William said.

"Okay," Danny said, relieved by the tone more than the words. He wandered away, gravity orbiting him like a friendly planet.

Ellis's next session came with velvet approval and a new instruction: "Try not to nap," he said, voice steady as a metronome. "We want purer night data."

William nodded and didn't say: *I want purer nights too, just not with your machine watching.*

That evening in group, Spencer wheeled by with a tray of pudding like a benevolent airline attendant. "Banana for bravery, chocolate for closure, vanilla for vibes," he announced. He set one by William with a wink that said *I don't know, kid, but I am rooting for you with snacks.*

Across the room, Bobby watched the puddings land the way a cat watches a laser pointer: curious where the beam will stop. Warren rehearsed indifference in a reflective trophy. Tommy stuck gum under the foosball table like a calling card. Danny ate his pudding like it was a sacrament.

The band hummed at William's wrist through it all—friendly, hungry, a patient trespass.

Later, back in his room, the rain came again—measured, exact—like the sky was practicing too.

William lay on his side, notebook open to a clean page, band breathing a gentle green on his wrist as **Sabrina's spoof** replayed their perfect sleep for a server three towns away. He pictured the thrift-phone dark in its hidey-hole, the dongle asleep, GaMII air-gapped in the desk drawer like a saint in a reliquary. Code was code. Boundaries were vows.

He wrote:

- > Mom's cuffs counting. Jessica's hand steadying my back. Mr. E calling pain a bookmark.
- > The rehearsals etch. Body remembers. Mind pretends.
- > If loops can be written, I can write a better one.*

Rain tapped the glass in sixes. The band's LED kept time in fours. William tapped a quiet **five** against the mattress—counter-rhythm, a small rebellion no sensor could flatten.

Down the hall, a chair creaked and stopped. Somewhere else, a clipboard closed like a soft door. In an office that smelled like dustless mints, a line appeared under a tidy heading: **SUBJECT W.—CONSISTENCY INCREASE. ANOMALOUS VOCABULARY ("A-Chain"). CONSIDER NEXT-PHASE INSTRUMENTATION.**

William closed his notebook. He thought of Jessica in the air, hair a halo of motion. He thought of his body lifting, of the taste of sky. Dream or rehearsal, it didn't matter. Gravity had listened.

He lay on his back and counted the air into his ribs the way she'd taught him. Somewhere deep, the Spark hummed like a tuning fork waiting to be struck.

"Soon," he told it. "On my terms."

The band breathed; the rain answered; the loop kept trying to close.

He tapped his counter-beat again—five in a row—and smiled into the dark.

Tomorrow, they'd feed the machine more perfect sleep. And after that, they'd start teaching it how to dream wrong on purpose.

Chapter 7 — An Invalid Investment

Nick's sedan still smelled faintly like coffee and printer paper—lawyer musk that no amount of air freshener could beat. He drummed the steering wheel with callused fingers as the city slid by in humid sheets, the river throwing back scraps of pink skyline. Eldorado slouched in the passenger seat with theatrical boredom, mirrored lenses up on his head like a second, shinier forehead.

"They're amazing kids," Nick said, which he tended to say about anyone decent. "Resilient. Like little knights building their own kingdom with duct tape and rules no one writes down."

"Fans build empires," Eldorado muttered, thumbing his phone. "And then they forget to donate. Capitalism hurts the soul, man."

Nick grinned sideways. "Your soul has an account balance?"

"Two, and one is in exposure," Eldorado said. He slid the lenses back down. "So. Why am I doing a charity cameo at your after-school for weird geniuses?"

"Because your Dad said you had to," Nick said simply. "Because some of them watch your streams. Because you're not unkind when you try. And because it might do you good to see a room that doesn't need to like you for clicking."

Eldorado scoffed. "The only room that doesn't need to like me is the one with my father in it." He tapped a large case of mysterious items he brought with him, then sighed. "What's the case you're not taking? The one Gunther's snatching like a seagull?"

Nick's mouth twitched. "Defamation thing. John B. Stiles—professional conspiracy sprinkler—claims the mayor of Philly is a vampire controlled by Alehante—"

"Cute," Eldorado said. "Dad's too busy empire-building for local bloodsucker drama."

"—and that he never says anything bad about the mayor, just that he's controlled." Nick smiled ruefully. "Open-shut, really. Daylight videos debunk half the bit. It's absurd, but the dedication to the bit is... almost admirable. Makes you wonder what he thinks he saw."

"Delusion with production value," Eldorado said. "America's core competency."

"Gunther can cut his teeth on it." Nick checked his mirror, then the road. "You ever meet Stiles's assistant? Sam Springer?"

Eldorado shrugged. "I don't associate with people who think my family works with cryptic creatures."

"Curious mind," Nick murmured, more to himself now. "Heard Gunther talking to her, she sounds cute."

Eldorado watched the water stain of a cloud smear across the windshield. "You mentor everybody, huh?"

Nick hesitated. "I try to not to waste anybody's time."

"Must be nice," Eldorado said lightly, but the word snagged.

The Harrison Home rose like an old mansion learning a new language—brick and glass and graffiti turned to murals. When they pulled in, the common room's lights were already honey-warm, bodies shifting behind the windows like the House itself breathed.

Inside, the kids reacted the way the internet taught them: a wave forming, some squeals, some stone-faces pretending not to care. Yeldarb bowed at the waist as if saluting a visiting duke. Warren tilted his chin to a camera that wasn't here. Tommy tried to crush a handshake to win a private arm-wrestle only he understood. Danny stood too big and too careful behind the others, expression a careful blank.

"Streams saved my rank," Warren blurted. "Do you know J.L.D.? Like, in real life?"

“Met him once at our AIM, that’s Alehante Influencer Media-convention,” Eldorado said, and let the syllable hang like a humblebrag.

Sabrina blinked at his shoes, then his face, then his shoes again. “Streaming capitalism criticism is an ironic hill to die on for someone with ‘Alehante’ printed on his genetics.”

Eldorado smiled with too many teeth. “You’re Sabrina. The one with the broken face and loves stupid questions.”

“Rude, and my questions aren’t stupid,” she said, which meant he’d seen enough to push her buttons.

Rohan, who saw through things the way some people saw weather, tilted his head. “You look rich and unfulfilled.”

Yeldarb clapped once. “We honor your pixels, streamer lord!”

Autumn, from the doorway, folded her arms. “Don’t promise what you can’t deliver.”

William—the kid with the notebook who looked like he was always half in a memory—stood a little behind the group, eyes locked on Eldorado like he’d swallowed a live wire. He didn’t hide the flinch. He didn’t quite blink. GaMII, the quiet voice in his pocket, vibrated once like a sleeping machine shifting in its dreams.

Check the photo, it’s vibrations whispered in the back of William’s thoughts, the way the technology could without making a single sound. Mother’s belly—measure again. Variable introduced.

William didn’t pull out the GaMII here, not with Eldorado’s grin invading the room. He felt it anyway, a file saved safely on GaMII: his mother by the pirate ship with his father, smile so bright it made the air around it honest. If the bulge at her waist was smaller, the fade was accelerating. He swallowed, grounded his feet—heel to toe, breathe, don’t wobble—and forced his face into neutral.

Nick clapped his hands. “Quick tour,” he said to Eldorado. “Then I’ll introduce you to the snack based economy.”

“Ah, yes,” Eldorado said, moving through the room like a cat that already owned the furniture. “The future of finance...sugary desserts.”

It turned out Eldorado didn’t want the tour.

He wanted Bobby.

Bobby had the shine that mean boys get when someone richer blesses them with attention. He stepped forward already grinning, already selling. “Your anti-cap rants are—man—catharsis, dude.”

Eldorado looked him over in one professional swipe. He saw a petty tyrant with potential—a soft clay fist he could harden. He smiled and the room seemed to pull in.

“Let’s talk upgrades,” he said, casual like he wasn’t about to break the house rules in four directions.

He popped a hard case like a magician who never admits it’s a trick. Inside: tech that looked like toys and felt like weapons. Shoes with concealed wheel hubs and a faint sapphire glow under the mesh. A hoodie that felt heavier than cotton and slicker than polymer. Sunglasses with too much lens and not quite enough frame. Gloves whose knuckles hummed like a distant transformer.

“That’s what was in that box you had on your lap in the car” Nick expressed when seeing the inside of the box.

“Prototypes,” Eldorado said. “from Alehante Sports, our SecTech’s... more athletic cousin. Don’t tell My Dad.”

"Eldorado, we can't... this is a massive liability," to which Eldorado waves him off with a "Relax, counsel, Dad's got unlimited money."

Warren made the sunglasses his entire personality in under a second. “Classy edge,” he breathed, watching himself watch himself.

Tommy slid the gloves on and crushed an errant 8Ball from a long forgotten pool table, that had the misfortune of finding his glance “Crunch time.”

Danny slipped his hands into the hoodie pockets, brow furrowed. “Warm,” he noted softly. “Feels like... it’s thinking about me.”

Bobby laced the shoes and rocked heel-toe. A soft whirr answered. He drifted forward three feet with a predator’s grin. “Kings.”

“You are not kings,” Autumn said flatly, already calculating in silence which door she needed to reach fastest when this inevitably went bad.

Sabrina squinted at the open case like a jeweler assessing a stolen gem. “Power hogs. Look at those cells. Frequency signature’s loud enough to hum a lullaby to the grid.” Her eyes danced. “Chekhov’s clip, waiting to be jammed.”

Rohan glanced at William, then back to Eldorado. “Cheating to get strong doesn’t make you strong,” he said absently, like an ornithologist noting a **sparrow**.

Eldorado’s smile cooled—still bright, but sharpened at the edges.

“These aren’t toys,” he said. “They’re tools. Like courtrooms. Or keyboards. Or stories.”

He leaned toward Bobby, ignoring the others completely.

“Every tool has synergy metrics,” he went on. “Performance depends on how well the system syncs with you.”

He tapped the battery meter with a knuckle. The bar flickered—not down, not up, just responding like it was listening.

“These charge fast,” Eldorado said, “and when you really push them, they’ll auto-optimize using your biometrics. Makes them feel like an extension of you.”

He gave Bobby a conspiratorial grin.

“Bottom line? The harder you go, the harder they go. Perfect for someone who wants to level up.”

Bobby nodded—hungry, dazzled, already buying the lie. “Copy.”

William stood very still, watching the future stroll into the present wearing a hoodie and mirrored shades. The hum from the shoes prickled under his skin; the jacket radiated a hungry heat; the gloves buzzed like something alive.

Precursor tech.

Friendly skin.

Patient trespass.

Everything he hated about the world waiting for him—wrapped in gifts.

Eldorado looked past him to Nick, who’d been trying to look like he wasn’t choking on a rule violation. “They needed a win,” Eldorado said, all injured innocence. “Consider it a morale boost.”

Nick stared at the case, then at Bobby’s shoes, then at the knot of kids who’d fallen silent in the wrong way. “Did morale sign the consent forms?” he asked gently.

“Paper is prison for people who can’t improvise,” Eldorado said. “Relax, counsel. Let them play.”

Sabrina muttered, “Play as rehearsal,” and William heard the word like a knife being sharpened.

The building’s power dipped at 11:27, caught itself at 11:28, and lied about it by 11:30.

Sabrina met William and Yeldarb in the corridor dressed like a burglar from a children’s book—dark hoodie, darker grin. “Powers acting all weird,” she whispered, brandishing a notebook she’d not stolen from Autumn. “Spike in the east wing. Non-dorm outlet. Somebody’s charging more than a phone.”

“Strong men charge hearts, not batteries,” Yeldarb said solemnly, which meant he was excited.

They moved soft through the sleeping house. At the junction by the trophy case, William hit a streak of lemony sheen and slid half a step. A mop hissed from the dark like a stage cue.

“Nights the best time for moppin,” Snakes said, materializing with his cart the way pigeons materialize with bread. He didn’t turn his head to look at them; he looked at the floor as if it were speaking. “Sometimes it’s best to let sleeping dogs lie. They’ll be put down if they bark too loud.”

Sabrina blinked. “Are you... quoting a manual written by ghosts?”

Snakes angled his chin toward the stairs. “Basement’s sweating. Not the boiler. Not tonight.” He tapped the glass of the trophy case like a divining rod. “Picture’s changing...faster.”

William’s skin went cold. “What picture?”

Snakes already knew. He always seemed to. ““Still keeping that back door in mind?”” he asked mildly, like asking after a pen—F1 glinting in William’s mind—“Good. Some exits are labels; some are habits. You’ll need both.”

“Who are you,” Sabrina muttered, “and why do you make advice sound like a riddle wrapped in an enigma wrapped in a burrito, covered in chicken fried rice?”

Snakes pushed the cart past them, wheels squeaking a private code. “Janitors don’t fix messes,” he said. “We keep endings from happening too soon.” He was gone by the time the sentence ended.

“Okay,” Yeldarb whispered. “Russia would not give that man permission to mop.”

They found the hum in the east service closet—a feral purr behind a half-closed door. Inside: Bobby’s crew sitting on inverted buckets like kings on low thrones, shoes plugged, hoodie slurping current, sunglasses eating darkness. The extension cord arrangement looked like a crime of geometry.

Sabrina winced. “They’re going to brown out the entire home, does he think he’s Electro?”

Warren tipped his sunglasses down, and the lenses clicked audibly into a different mode. “I see you,” he said, thrilled by the sentence.

“Congratulations,” Sabrina said. “You have eyes.”

Tommy flexed the glove and crushed the corner off a cinderblock that had done nothing wrong. “Jealous losers. Alehante tech makes us kings.”

Danny glanced at the wall outlet, then the hoodie battery, then the beads of sweat on his own wrist. “She might be right,” he said softly. “Feels... too warm, too fast.”

William looked Bobby in the eye and sternly said “You should listen to your friend.”

Bobby didn't stand. He didn't have to. The room pivoted around his grin. "What do you care? You writing violation reports? You going to cry to Nick? Tell Mr. Nick about your weird dreams about him being your dad."

William stepped forward before his body told him to. "We care because someone has to," he said. "And because the bill for 'kings' always comes due."

Bobby's smile got smaller and sharper. "Marty McFly gets a mouth."

Yeldarb inhaled like a wolf scenting something big. "Steps," he whispered. "Like moose. Like squirrel."

The steps belonged to TJX!

He filled the doorway like a blessed interruption—small, clear bag with lumpy green balls, gripped in one hand, a glass item half-hidden by discretion under his security hood. He squinted, then widened his eyes theatrically. "What you youths doin' in my domicile of relaxation?" he asked, voice rolling like a laugh in a jar.

Warren stood so fast he almost ejected his sunglasses. "Mr. TJ—"

"X!" TJX! barked. "You clap after the X."

Warren clapped. No one else did. TJX! didn't need them to.

"We were—uh—charging," Bobby said, suddenly boyish. "Like... for athletics."

TJX! sniffed, identified three lies, and decided to bless none of them. "Athletics happen on tracks," he said, "not cords. Cut it off. Scram. I gotta... cultivate serenity." He lifted the bag a fraction. It gave off a pungent, earthy smell.

Sabrina's mouth twitched. "Yes, sir," she said demurely, already memorizing the serial numbers she could see and the frequencies she could smell.

They scattered like human guilt. Bobby yanked the plug with a violent twist and muttered something about next time. Danny lingered one second too long, met William's eyes with an apology he didn't know how to say, and followed.

TJX! watched them drain away, then glanced at William's wrist, at the green pulse of the band, at the way William held his shoulders as if he'd learned a new weight and hadn't told anyone. "Bed," TJX! said softly, to William alone. "Before you bump into the alter-ego of Ellis and reprimands you and calls it therapy."

William nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Sir is my father," TJX! said with a grin. "I'm just TJX!" He waved them off with the kind of benevolence you extend to children you'd arrest with love if you had to.

They reconvened in Sabrina's room because Sabrina's room had the best wall. Elaine was already there, curled into a beanbag like a cat that had read its own horoscope. She cracked one eye. "If you wake me, make it worth it."

"Challenge accepted," Sabrina said, and toggled William's phone into a mode GaMII whispered about in a voice that touched no networks: projector mode. A rectangle of light opened on the wall with a satisfying click of pixels, Back to the Future filling the paint with 1985.

Yeldarb clasped his hands as if church had turned out to be fun. "We honor your cinema, future magic boy!"

Rohan watched Marty kiss his knuckles after the first guitar strum and smiled like he'd caught a secret. "You fade if you're not born," he said, matter-of-fact. "Cruel math."

"Do not talk about fading while we watch the fading movie," William said, which made everyone laugh. It wasn't funny.

Elaine sat up, hair like soft thunder. "Is William gonna fade like Marty?" she asked, more curious than scared.

“No,” Sabrina and Rohan said together.

“Yes,” Yeldarb said, because he loved a dramatic arc.

“Maybe,” William said honestly—and then, softer, because he’d promised himself to be brave the right way, “Not if we write faster.”

Nick knocked once and stuck his head in, caught the projection, and smiled. “Good choice.”

“You’re George,” Yeldarb informed him gravely.

Nick winced. “I don’t know if that’s a compliment.”

“It is,” William said, because it was.

Halfway through, GaMII whispered not into the speaker, not into the band, not into anything Alehante could trace, but into the private space the AI used when it cared enough to be kind. Variable introduced, it said. Eldorado proximity increasing paradox velocity. Recommend: counter-signal rehearsal, identify “off switch” analogue in narrative.

“Find the scene,” William murmured. “Where the loop breaks.”

“The punch,” Sabrina said. “Or the song.”

“The song breaks nothing,” Rohan said. “It only proves a thing we already knew.”

“The help key breaks it,” William said, and he didn’t mean F1, not exactly; he meant the door inside the story you only saw if you were looking at it wrong on purpose.

They watched until the lightning struck and the car leapt and the timeline caught.

When the credits rolled, the room exhaled. Yeldarb and William stepped into the hall’s hush. Snakes was there already, of course—how long had he been?—leaning on his mop like a scepter, eyes on a stain only he could see.

“Bed,” he said. “Before Sleep-Walking Ellis or Evil Ellis smells the plot.” He pointed his chin toward the far end of the hall where the counselor’s office slept like a trap with the lid down. “He’s laying instruments like a fisherman. Don’t bite on the shiny.”

“Noted,” William said. “Thank you.”

Snakes gave him the long, slow blink of a heron acknowledging a fish and rolled away, wheels writing letters on linoleum.

Ellis’s office light bloomed after midnight and stayed. Sleep was an enemy he could not slay that evening. On his desk, the variance report lay open like a polite accusation. He wrote neatly—always did—columns of numbers marching into a conclusion the paper wasn’t brave enough to say out loud.

SUBJECTS: WRIGHT, SABRINA, YELDARB, ROHAN — ANOMALIES CLUSTER.

SUBJECT: TJX! — POSSIBLE UNAUTHORIZED HORTICULTURE USAGE.

SUBJECTS: WOLF, JEAN, MESSING — LIKELY MISUSE OF EQUIPMENT.

SELF-NOTE: SLEEP AMBULATION? (SLEEP WALKING ME / EVIL VERSION OF ME) / SELF-DOUBT. CONTROL FOR COUNTER-TRANSFERENCE.

Nick sat on the edge of his bed with a legal pad and wrote “Sam Springer” in the margin like a name he’d once borrowed and had forgotten to return.

Sabrina fell asleep cross-legged, a pencil still tucked behind her ear, a schematic of larceny disguised as care half-drawn on her knee.

Rohan slept like people who have already forgiven themselves.

Elaine slept in the shape of a question mark and woke up as an exclamation point, exactly once at 3:04, because the cat that wasn’t allowed in the Home still made his rounds.

William lay on his back and tapped five beats against the mattress—counter-rhythm, small rebellion no sensor could flatten. The band on his wrist breathed its soft green lie. The rain wrote its patient, perfect loop on the window.

New power unlock—new glitch incoming, GaMII whispered, the words feather-light, just enough to push, not enough to move him for him.

William stared at the ceiling until it became the underside of a sky. He thought of Eldorado's gifts to Bobby and his crew that drank potential and the way Bobby's grin had found its crown. He thought of his mother's smile at the pirate ship bookcase, and what he would do to see it again in this world. He thought of Doc Brown and how wrong it was to think the doctor saves you. Sometimes the kid does. Sometimes the janitor does. Sometimes the song is just proof you can sing.

Chapter 8 — The Ghost in the Machine

They met in the sunken corner of the common room that everyone called “the pit,” because that’s where conversations went to either grow up or fall apart. The overhead bulbs were tired but trying, the couch springs sang when you breathed, and the whiteboard still wore “UNDER THE SEA DANCE!” in Spencer’s enthusiastic block letters with a jellyfish doodle that looked like a wobbly chandelier.

William held his notebook like a seatbelt. The others formed their usual orbit: Rohan long and loose on the arm of the couch, Sabrina cross-legged on a milk crate that used to store dodgeballs, Yeldarb standing because sitting felt like surrender, Autumn posted at the edge as if guarding a door only she could see. Elaine had a pillow and the confidence that she would have an idea, any minute now.

“We got your dad here,” Rohan said, level, kind, factual. “Half the map. Now we find your mom.”

William swallowed. The word mom was a warm ache and a winter. He pulled a breath through his ribs and said the part he didn’t want to say. “I don’t... I don’t know her maiden name. Her friends called her Samantha. I don’t know where she’d be. We were always moving. The dugout, the ship, the mansion—everything was after. I never—” His throat closed. “I never asked about before.”

Nobody filled the silence too fast. They let it stand, a respectful shape between them.

Elaine, trying to be helpful and not sure where the helpful shelf lived, said, “Is she like Sam Pucket from iCarly? Because if she is, maybe she’s a Waverly Place—”

Sabrina snorted. Yeldarb lit up. “Pucket is strong warrior. Smashes chicken with hands.”

Rohan’s mouth tilted. “Different Sam.”

Elaine shrank half an inch into the pillow, then rallied. “I just... thought... Sam energy.”

“It’s okay,” William said, and meant it. The attempt was a hand on his shoulder.

The room stalled out around the problem of a mother with no maiden name. Problems with names were the worst kind; you couldn’t look them up, couldn’t catalog them, couldn’t diagram them into obedience.

“Practical distraction,” Rohan said, sensing the gathering fog and choosing headlights. “We upgrade Rohan’s basement arsenal. New games make everyone show up. We build our Kingdom while we’re stuck on finding William’s queen. Maybe ask Mr. Nick about any Sams or Samanthas he may know when we bump into him.”

“Chico’s basement,” Chico said, automatic on principle, as he walked into the room.

“Rohan’s basement,” Rohan said, automatic as if on principle.

“It is a place of great battles,” Yeldarb declared. “We show our skills like knights, too many knights to name it after just one.”

“Are we really like Knights,” William said, a laugh slipping out before he could stop it.

“You two argue more like a family.”

Yeldarb straightened as if knighted. “Do proud Knights argue like youngest in family about games.”

“It’s just games night,” Rohan advised. “with people who are like...family.”

“We’re... we’re a family,” Elaine said, hopeful again. “Who happens to also play games.”

“Knights,” William said, the word arriving like a coin into an open palm. “The Family Game Knights.”

The words hit the room and stuck like a flag in new ground. Yeldarb thumped his fist to his chest. Rohan nodded once, the kind of approval that meant yes, this is the shape. Autumn's shoulders shifted, half-smile tiny as a treaty. Sabrina tilted her head, considering the cadence, then grinned crooked. "Fine. But I refuse to wear chainmail."

William turned GaMII on—no broadcast, no pairing, just light and local whisper. The home screen was unassuming: a clean grid and a clock that kept time whether the future believed in it or not.

"Show me your library," Rohan said, reverent the way some kids say please. He produced a brick of a drive from his hoodie like a magician's rabbit. "One terabyte. Modern fighters. Tekken 8, Street Fighter 6, Fatal Fury: City of the Wolves. We seed the basement and steal some souls."

"We are running on thrift store potatoes and your feelings," Sabrina said. "Chico's machine coughs when you open a browser."

"Palzy I know you'll figure it out," Rohan said, faith as casual as shrugged shoulders.

Sabrina's eye twitched in the direction of pleased. "Don't call me that," she said, which was how you knew she didn't mind.

William glanced at the corner of the screen. GaMII pulsed once in that not-quite sound he'd learned to hear. Approved, the AI breathed along his skin. No external transmission. Local copy only.

William nodded to nobody. "Okay," he said. "Transfer."

Sabrina watched the progress bar like it owed her money. Yeldarb stood guard with unnecessary intensity. Elaine cheered when the first title icon appeared, as if a small boat had crested a wave.

When William slipped the phone back toward his pocket, something else slipped with it—plastic edge catching fabric. A small, battered key clinked to the floor and skittered. Elaine was fastest; she scooped it up and held it aloft like a locket that knew songs.

"What's this?" she asked.

William's stomach fell and rose at once. "It's—" He didn't have a lie better than the truth. "Something that belongs to my family."

GaMII spoke without a screen, voice a soft resonance inside the circle. Identification: Access key—Nicholas and Samantha Wright. Authorized to: domestic safe, Resistance Network node Kestrel-Philadelphia. Status: dormant in this era. Location target: within city grid radius.

The room sparked. Rohan sat forward so fast he nearly fell. Sabrina made a sound like a guitar string tuning itself. Yeldarb whispered "comrades" like a prayer.

"Tell us," Autumn said. Two words, steady as a corridor.

"Tell us," William echoed, and the tremor in his voice had more to do with hope than fear. GaMII obliged. Not with a dump of data but with a story—its favorite way to be human.

"Begin with a case," GaMII said gently. "Defamation. John Bremton Stiles and his researcher, Samantha Springer, accuse a mayor of being the puppet of the Alehantes and, in Stiles' flourish, a vampire."

"Lawsuit gold," Rohan murmured, delighted by the absurdity. "You can't just say vampire in court."

"You can," GaMII said. "You will lose."

Pictures formed on the nearest wall without light, the way words paint images when you listen right. William saw her—Samantha—young and fierce, white hair pulled back with a pen,

eyes lit by an idea that dared the room to keep up. Next to her: a man with too many bracelets and a mouth designed for microphones. Stiles, an engine wrapped in a hat.

“Nick Wright,” GaMII continued, “then a junior attorney with a principled spine and a tragically optimistic view of due process, is assigned to collect their debris and carry it from the courthouse to the trash. He meets Samantha. He expects bad facts. He finds a better question.”

“How could she—” William began, then stopped. It felt like talking about someone who might hear him through time.

“She was correct,” GaMII said simply. “Not about fangs. About strings. About a network that used money like gravity, pulling people downhill into a conclusion pre-written by an empire. Nick investigated to satisfy himself. Instead, he satisfied the truth.”

“Then he quit,” Elaine breathed, face as bright as a bedtime story.

“Not at first,” GaMII said. “He tried to win inside the lines. He gathered enough evidence to wake a city. A judge threw it out with a sentence shaped like a smirk. Nick changed religions.”

“From court to cause,” Rohan said softly.

“From belief in rules to belief in right,” GaMII said. “Samantha already knew how to live there. Stiles already knew how to talk there. Nick learned to fight there.”

Yeldarb’s hands had come together without thinking. “He trained,” he said reverently. “He did reps in heart.”

“In focus,” GaMII said. “In discipline. In a thing you will call Spark.”

William felt the word move through the room like weather. “What are Sparks?” he asked, though some part of him had been answering that question with every breath since he arrived here.

“Latent potential in every person,” GaMII said. “A wellspring of unique energy and pattern. Most flicker like a pilot light. Some become bonfires—when you name them, feed them, practice their pathways until they are not accidents but art. Sparks don’t match like uniforms. They show up as vision, strength, memory, charisma, a hand that chooses the right wire without looking, a body that remembers a sky it hasn’t touched yet.”

Sabrina’s head tilted. “Technobabble me later, but... that last one.”

“Everyone has one?” Rohan asked. “Even—” He flicked his eyes to Yeldarb, to Autumn, to Elaine, to William, to himself. “—us?”

GaMII didn’t hesitate. “Everyone,” it said. “Some learn. Some deny. Some try to buy what they already have.”

“Eldorado,” William said, tasting the word like bitter sugar.

“Money’s a loud tool,” Autumn said. “It’s good at pretending to be power.”

“Power is quiet until you train it to speak,” GaMII said.

Yeldarb punched his palm lightly, not in anger, but as a punctuation. “We train.”

William rolled the key between his fingers. Nicholas and Samantha Wright. The name on the metal was proof the future wasn’t only a threat; it was also a promise. “How did they meet?” he asked, greedy for before.

GaMII smiled in its way—no face, just warmth. “He corrected her grammar during a pre-trial recess.”

Sabrina cackled. Rohan covered his eyes with his hand. “Of course he did.”

“And she let him,” GaMII went on, “because he was right. Then she corrected his hypothesis about how conspiracies are born. He let her, because she was.”

William's throat closed with a feeling that didn't have a name yet. He saw them both in a fluorescent hallway—Samantha with a coffee gone cold, Nick with a file gone heavy—realizing they were the same kind of stubborn pointed in different directions.

"Within five years," GaMII said, "Nick's Spark matched his heart. He learned to hold his energy the way a master musician holds a note, until the world around him had to decide whether to harmonize or crack."

"Legend," Yeldarb whispered.

"Disputed," GaMII corrected, fond.

The room breathed. The couch sighed. The key warmed in William's palm.

"Okay," Sabrina said briskly to hide that she'd been listening with her whole face. "So Sparks are real, not just your cozy metaphor for 'being good at stuff.' Some people train them. Some people buy shoes. We have a key to a house we can't find yet. We are now a family of knights who play games and also possibly commit felonies with kindness." She exhaled. "Great. Next problem."

They didn't get to choose it.

"Fairy tales," Bobby said from the doorway, the word curdled in his mouth. His crew spread behind him like a shadow that had learned to walk. "Inner power. Sparks. Cute. Real power wears a logo."

Warren had his sunglasses perched on his head like a crown and smirk you had to earn with hours of practice. Tommy worked a wad of gum with the intent of a cow chewing cud at a funeral. Danny hovered, hands in his pockets, looking at the floor tile like maybe if he solved it, it would turn into a door.

"Close the door," Autumn said, not turning around. "You're letting the draft in."

Bobby didn't. He strode three steps into the pit and stopped where Nick would have stood if he'd been on their side of the room. "Show me your magic rock," he said. "Let's see the god phone."

"It's called privacy," Sabrina said. "Look it up when you're done Googling 'how to have a personality without sunglasses.'"

Bobby smiled with his eyes, not his mouth. "Here's a personality," he said, and the shoes purred under him. He blurred forward, hand a live wire, and GaMII was in his grip before William registered loss.

"Give it back," William said, and his voice startled him with its lack of tremor.

Bobby waggled the phone. "Android with special needs," he said, cruel because he had nothing else new to be. "Does it do tricks if I talk slow?"

"Unauthorized user detected," GaMII said calmly. "Hostile intent inferred. Initiating lockdown."

Bobby stabbed at the screen. It did nothing. He shook the device as if it owed him coins. "You mad, little god?"

"Don't," Rohan said, low. "Bobby—don't be that guy."

"Always been that guy," Warren murmured, admiringly.

Bobby raised the phone above his head like a trophy. "Maybe it breaks easy."

"Hostile user escalation at threshold," GaMII said. "Delivering corrective feedback."

The sound happened all at once—

a razor-thin, needle-high frequency, calibrated too precisely to be accidental.

Not loud. Not even painful.

Just wrong.

A pressure behind the eyes, a vibration in the bones.

Bobby yelped—high, surprised, young—and reflexively dropped the phone. His hand flew to his ear, face scrunching as if he'd swallowed a wasp.

GaMII spun in a perfect parabola of doom—glass flashing, trajectory undeniable—
—straight into Spencer's skull.

He entered the pit wearing a red wig and a fishtail that had lost an argument with a stapler, mouth open to declare something very Under the Sea, when the phone thunked against his forehead with the sound of a cartoon bonk.

His eyes crossed.

He folded like bad origami.

Chaos, predictably, followed.

"Spencer!" Rohan was there first, steady hands at shoulder and nape—the muscle memory of someone who'd Googled "concussion first aid" more than once.

"Breathe," Autumn said, already checking pupils with two fingers and a tiny flashlight she apparently carried for "Spencer moments."

"I didn't—" Bobby started, then immediately abandoned the sentence. "We out."

He flicked two fingers like dismissing a waiter.

Warren obeyed instantly.

Tommy stuck his gum under the table as a parting gift.

Danny lingered a heartbeat—eyes touching William's with something halfway between apology and hunger for a different story—then he lowered his gaze and followed.

Sabrina had GaMII in her hands before the phone hit the couch. "Report."

"Undamaged," GaMII said. "Hostile interaction logged. Thank you for retrieval, Sabrina. Your energy signature is... intriguing."

Sabrina blinked. "Flirt with me later. And do not ever do that to Spencer again."

"Noted," GaMII said. "He was collateral, not target."

Spencer groaned. "Ariel is not—made—for concussions," he said, rubbing his forehead and squinting at the red strands flopped over his nose. "Was this an attack on the concept of whimsy?"

"On your skull," Rohan said. "You're okay."

"I am okay," Spencer repeated, convincing himself with the grammar. He sat up. "Boys will be boys," he began, then caught Autumn's look and pivoted with the grace of a man who liked sleeping inside. "And will be held responsible for their choices later."

"Better," Autumn said.

"Under the sea," Spencer tried weakly, and nobody took the bait. "Okay. Fine. I will go ice my dignity."

He waddled out, tail squeaking. William pressed his fists into his thighs until he could breathe like a person instead of a wave.

Sabrina set GaMII on the couch and looked at William the way surgeons look at the right tool. "We're fine," she said. "We're better than fine. He tried to break our window into the world and got a static kiss. Now let's make something they can't steal."

William's shoulders loosened by an inch. "What?"

"A miracle built out of dead office machines," she said. "Come on. Basement."

Downstairs, the subterranean kingdom hummed. The old tower PC crouched in its corner like a retired boxer: big, dented, respected. Posters of long-dead tournaments papered the concrete wall—cryptic rules, brackets drawn in marker, past champions circled with jokes only

they still found funny. Someone had taped a sign over the breaker box: OFFICIAL WORLD IS A DEMO. PRESS F1 FOR FULL GAME.

Sabrina stood in the doorway, one hand pressed to the wall. William had never seen her so still. She was listening.

“What do you hear?” he asked.

“Everything,” she said softly. “And nothing interesting.” Then her lopsided grin found its angle. “Let’s change that.”

What followed didn’t feel like work so much as music.

Sabrina moved through the junk shelves with a certainty that made finding look like remembering. A half-dead office tower for a spine. Two more for spare nerves. A box of mismatched RAM sticks. A tangle of SATA cables that looked like seaweed. An ancient power supply with a fan that rattled and then didn’t when she looked at it the right way. A stack of drives that had once held spreadsheets and boring lives.

“William,” she said, and he was there before the sentence finished. “Hold the light. No, closer. Okay. Feel that?”

He did. Not with his fingers; with something that lived under them. The Spark in him hummed once, polite. He steadied, breathed, remembered balance is negotiation, not domination.

She asked for nothing that made sense in the order she asked it, and made all the sense in the world once she’d placed each part. She soldered without burning. She wrote on a sticky note and fed the note to the process and somehow it became code. She booted a machine that had no right to wake and it came up smiling in a language she’d just taught it.

When the tower objected, she coaxed it; when the fans stuttered, she counted them back into rhythm; when the three stubborn graphics cards refused to speak the same dialect, she wrote an interpreter in a margin and then taped the margin to the side of the case with a strip of duct tape that read: DO NOT TOUCH, THIS IS SCIENCE.

“Palzy,” Rohan breathed from the stairwell, eyes wide, one hand at his chest as if steadying a creature there. He’d come when the hum changed, bringing the drive like an offering. “What are you doing?”

“Bad ideas, beautifully,” she said. “Gimme your fighters.”

He handed her the brick. She slid it into the machine like a priest sliding bread into an altar. On the wall-mounted monitor no one had gotten to work in months, a penguin logo skated by wearing a crown. A text storm rolled; Sabrina’s fingers met it and calmed it. The desktop that wasn’t supposed to exist winked into being. She scrawled across a black window, a song in commands, and the machine listened like it had been waiting for this exact singer.

“Okay,” she said, breathless and utterly at home. “We use a proton-like shim made of spite. We fake a driver, strap the cards together with duct tape and friendship, and lie to the game about everything that would make it judgmental.”

“That’s not how any—” Rohan started, and then the launch icon for Tekken 8 bloomed like a dare.

Sabrina glanced at William. “Ready, knight?”

He nodded. His hands were steady. His heart was a little on fire.

She clicked.

The title screen filled the old monitor the way a symphony fills a room that has only ever known radio. Colors that machine had no license to brag about poured into the corners. The opening fight cinematic flowed like oil on glass. No hitch. No cough. No apology.

Rohan swore once, softly, with the sincerity of a beekeeper finding honey. He grabbed two controllers from the dry erase tray, didn't question why they were there, didn't ask who had put them there like a puzzle piece that knew its box. He tossed one to William and punched the other's power on. The system recognized both like old friends.

They loaded into practice mode. The frame counter in the corner read numbers that shouldn't happen on hardware this old. William picked a character at random, then not at random, then remembered to breathe.

Sabrina leaned back from the keyboard, cheeks flushed under the paint-speck cluster of freckles, hair askew like genius in a breeze. "Behold," she said, half-mock, half-prayer. "The Knight Terror."

"The what?" Rohan asked, already mashing, already learning.

"The machine," Sabrina said, gesturing at her Frankenstein with maternal pride. "The one that eats rules and spits frames."

"Your Spark," William said quietly, the way you say sunrise when you're the first one to see it.

Sabrina froze.

William watched the moment land on her and unfold. It wasn't a glow in the air; it was a glow in comprehension, a click of parts inside the person. Her gaze went past the monitor, past the desk, to a diagram of the room none of them could see. He heard a hum that might have only been his own blood answering hers, two tuning forks in a quiet church agreeing on a note.

"I can... talk to it," she said, laughing once in disbelief and then strangling the laugh into a gasp because she wasn't ready to call it joy. "It talks back. Not with words. With..." She flipped a palm up, small and callused and nicked. "With yes and no and almost."

"Technopathy," Rohan said, loving the label. "Technokinesis if you make it move. But you—" He looked at the monitor, then at the humming case. "You made it bow."

Sabrina's lopsided grin flashed—wild, unafraid. "We have work to do," she said, all business and awe. "This is a proof. We make it a practice."

They played until the world outside the basement might have been a rumor. Yeldarb whooped at every combo like he'd been the one to throw the punch. Elaine painted victory signs on scrap paper and taped them to the wall at random angles. Autumn stood with her arms crossed and a smile she wasn't going to feed.

On the stairs, a figure stood very still where the light was thinnest.

Ellis Dee had the patience of a fisherman and the focus of someone who loves puzzles more than people. He watched the framerate counter with the same cool interest he'd used on William's wrists. He had a small notebook. He wrote in it without looking down, eyes on Sabrina like you look at an answer that changes the question.

SUBJECT: S. PLUMBER — IMPOSSIBLE PERFORMANCE ON OBSOLETE
HARDWARE.

HYPOTHESIS: HUMAN ANOMALY (?)— TECHNOPATHIC/TECHNOKINETIC?

ACTION: INSTRUMENT ENVIRONMENT. OBSERVE SUBJECT DIRECTLY.

NOTE: BENEF... (he paused, crossed out the word) — DEFER EXTERNAL REPORT.
NEED MORE DATA.

He looked at William, then at William's hands where they steady-held the controller the way you hold a bird, soft and sure. He wrote one more line in smaller letters.

GROUP IDENTITY FORMING: "FAMILY GAME KNIGHTS."

DANGER: COLLECTIVE PRACTICE.

He closed the notebook. The sound was soft and very loud.

Chapter 9 — The Cost of Genius

The knock wasn't a knock so much as a drum code—two quick, three slow, a pause that meant us—and it yanked William out of a dream where the pirate-ship bookcase was a lighthouse.

He stumbled to the door in socks and yesterday's T-shirt. When he opened it, the hallway was jammed wall-to-wall with the Family Game Knights. Rohan had a notebook and a look, Sabrina had raccoon eyes and electricity coming off her like a halo you couldn't photograph, Yeldarb stood at parade rest as if sleep were a rumor, Chico held a thermos and ownership papers for gravity, Autumn's ponytail meant business, and Elaine offered a granola bar with the solemnity of a treaty.

"A little early to start a raid, isn't it?" William rasped.

"Breakfast is the most important meal for planning a timeline heist," Rohan said, already pivoting. "We go together. Strength in numbers."

"Strength in pastries," Yeldarb added, because priorities.

They moved as a flock—down the corridor, around Spencer's jellyfish poster, into the cafeteria where trays clacked and the waffle iron breathed steam like a small dragon. Their table, the one by the condiment rack and the outlet nobody was allowed to use, became a war room.

"We need to pry information from Mr. Nick," Rohan said, drawing a circle that looked like a sun and writing Samantha ? at its center. "Gently. No red flags. Casual curiosity."

"We could start with a family-tree project," Autumn suggested. "Back-to-school season ruse. 'Interview an adult about someone who inspired them.' It's manipulation, but wholesome."

"I don't mind wholesome manipulation," Elaine said, unwrapping the granola bar. "It's like yoga for plans."

Sabrina had her hands wrapped around a coffee she was not drinking. Her hair stuck out like she'd been static-shocked by a good idea. "We don't just ask," she said. "We build. The Knight Terror isn't just for Tekken. We can use its cycles to scrape public databases, cross-reference city records, run fuzzy searches on Sam with ten thousand last names. We make it our research engine."

Chico raised an eyebrow. "On my breaker? Yeah, no. But... we could spin up overnight jobs if you batch them, cache indexes, throttle queries. My basement can handle clever more than it can handle hungry."

Sabrina's mouth tipped. "I can write a clever script that tells the hardware to eat electricity like a bird."

"Birds actually eat a lot," Elaine said.

"Fine," Sabrina said. "I'll write clever that eats like Ariana Grande after filming *Wicked*."

Rohan drew arrows, boxes, a tiny hamster with sunglasses. "Phase one," he said, tapping the hamster. "Phase two is getting Mr. Nick to take that Vampire Mayor case."

William's stomach was tight with hope and caffeine that hadn't happened yet. He could feel the rhythm under the table—their knees, their plans, their beating-that-pretended-not-to-be-a-march. He looked at his friends and felt the same gratitude he'd felt that night in the basement when frames poured out of junk: he wasn't alone.

The plan got as far as "ask Nick about Sams he may know" before the air temperature dropped a clean five degrees.

Xenia approached with the gait of someone who had already dealt with three fires and a funding email that told her to smile more. Ellis walked two steps behind, not looming, not

hurrying, just arriving the way a shadow arrives when the sun checks the time. His clipboard was in his hand; his pen had been fed.

“Sabrina. William,” Xenia said, voice low enough not to embarrass and loud enough to roll through defenses. “We need to speak with you. Now.”

The Knights stiffened like a herd who’d heard a twig snap. Rohan closed the notebook in one smooth motion and slid it to William without looking. Yeldarb stood as if between them and a door no one else could see. Autumn’s eyes tracked exits, vents, the mirror in the juice machine. Chico, uncharacteristically quiet, gripped his thermos and stared at the table like he could memorize wood.

“It’s okay,” William told them, because he had to.

“It will be,” Sabrina said, daring the world to contradict her. She pushed back her chair like a person who had decided gravity worked for her, not the other way.

The walk to the basement was longer than the stairs deserved. William’s heart ticked in fives. He imagined the Knight Terror taken apart by neat fingers and labels. He imagined Ellis’s gleam. He imagined losing something they had built out of stubbornness and junk and joy.

Xenia opened the door to the subterranean room.

Spencer and Nick were already there, standing before the Knight Terror like pilgrims at a reliquary.

Spencer turned with his whole body and glowed. “It is magnificent,” he announced, clasping his hands as if someone had brought home a baby giraffe. “Sabrina, my darling creature, what a contraption! A contrapture! A tech-nificent wonder!”

Nick’s smile was quieter—the proud-teacher tilt, the “someone told me the rules and we are going to negotiate them” glint. “This is... extraordinary,” he said. “You did this?”

Ellis didn’t look up. He circled the rig, eyes moving in clean lines, hands behind his back. He knelt to read duct tape like it was scripture. He watched the case fan breathe. He lifted a cable between two fingers, let it fall back into its curve, and wrote one small word on his pad: repeatable?

Sabrina’s shoulders rose and settled. “We did,” she said. “Me, mostly.”

“And exactly the kind of remarkable ability Mr. Alehante looks for!” Spencer trilled, beaming at the case, at Sabrina, at fate itself. “You’re a shoo-in for special attention, my dear!”

The words hit the concrete like dropped cutlery.

Sabrina’s hands went cold. William felt it—the change in the air, the way a room notices a storm.

“Special attention?” Sabrina said, voice cool. “What does that mean?”

Spencer blinked. His grin flickered. “Oh, I mean a—a generous benefactor! Grants. Opportunities. A summer institute where they have smoothies. You know. Meritocracy!” He aimed a wink at Nick. It ricocheted off Nick’s disapproval and died under a folding chair.

Xenia closed her eyes for a second, as if asking a god for patience and a budget.

Ellis finally stood, pen tapping once against paper. He looked at Sabrina as if he’d been saving the look for the moment it would do the most work. “Did you build this,” he asked, crisp, “by yourself?”

Sabrina held his gaze. “Yeah, just told ya, I built it,” she said. A beat. “But William... his ...inspiration helped. A lot.”

Nick’s head tipped at the word spark—a lawyer filing a note in a drawer labeled Later. Ellis’s pen pressed down hard enough to dent the top sheet. Spencer missed all of it and clapped.

“We can’t let this remain unsupervised,” Ellis said. “It’s an unregulated variable—unknown power draw, unknown interference. For safety, I recommend—”

“No,” William blurted, a little too loud. He swallowed. “Sorry. I mean—please don’t take it apart. We didn’t break anything. We built something. That matters.”

“It does,” Nick said, stepping in before Ellis could. “And so does the message. Confiscating passion is how you get kids who stop trying. There’s a fire of ingenuity here, Ellis. It’s not burning the house down.”

Xenia flicked her gaze to the breaker box and then back. “I don’t want to get a call from the power company asking why a youth home is suddenly a data center.”

“Limit runtime,” Ellis said. “Install monitors. Chain of custody on any removable media. Log all—”

“Okay, everyone breathe,” Spencer said, palms out, falling into his head-of-home voice like a familiar chair. “I love safety. I cherish safety. I would propose to safety if safety would have me. But I also love genius when it shows up wearing thrift store parts and chutzpah.” He turned to Sabrina, eyes bright. “You keep it.”

Sabrina exhaled in a way that almost counted as sitting.

“But!” Spencer lifted a stern index finger. “One day a week. Supervised. We will not anger the Electric Company, who feed us lights and waffles. And I am thrilled—simply thrilled—that this is the only unauthorized tech project brewing under my nose. One less thing to worry about!”

Nick shut his eyes. Xenia pinched the bridge of her nose. Ellis wrote 1 day/wk and underlined it, then wrote monitor three times, each underline a leash.

“We’ll draft a usage agreement,” Nick said, meeting Sabrina’s eyes. He tried to temper the fire without smothering it. “You’ll help write it.”

Sabrina’s chin lifted. “I’ll write the tech section,” she said. “In human.”

“Perfect,” Spencer said. “Wonderful. Democracy ends in pudding. Off we go.”

He ushered Xenia with him, trailing adjectives. Ellis lingered, eyes on the Knight Terror, then on Sabrina, then on the ceiling like he could see the wires behind it. “Soon,” he murmured—not to anyone, exactly—and left.

Nick hung back a second longer. “Proud of you,” he said softly to Sabrina. Then he looked at William. “Proud of you, too.”

William’s mouth opened, and a question arrived wearing street clothes.

“Mr. Nick?” William said, trying for casual like a jacket that didn’t know his shoulders yet.

Nick was digging through his briefcase, muttering about misplaced forms.

As he shifted folders, something slipped just enough for William to see a tab:

Sam Spri—

The rest of the name buried under a client file.

The world tunneled. His pulse dropped into his shoes.

William blurted, “Does the name Samantha mean anything to you?”

Nick paused, pulled his head out of the briefcase.

“Samantha? Uh... not really. Unless you count—”

He tugged the folder loose.

“Oh. This.” Nick laughed. “The Vampire Mayor case. Total circus. We’ve got a pair of conspiracy nuts suing the mayor for ‘blood crimes.’ Guy named John B. Stiles and his researcher, uh... Sam Springer? Sam Spri—something.”

The folder read exactly that:

Sam Springer – Research Assistant (Stiles Case)

William's heart sprinted and fell at the same **time**.

"It was mine originally," Nick said, shaking his head at the absurdity. "Easy open-and-shut. But since they stationed me here full-time, the firm reassigned it to the new guy, Gunther. He'll have it wrapped soon."

The words hit William like stepping onto a bridge that wasn't there.

Wrapped soon.

Next week.

A door closing in real time.

The air under him cracked.

By bringing Nick inside the Home—

by helping him become the mentor the kids needed—

William had pulled him off the path that would have led him to Samantha.

He had saved his father from one kind of future

and stolen him from another.

A quiet, rising pressure curled low in William's gut—panic blooming with teeth.

If Gunther closed the case next week, then Nick's chance to meet Samantha was already slipping.

He was running out of time.

The timeline was running out of him.

"Will?" Nick asked softly. "You okay?"

"Yeah," William lied, and the lie echoed like a stairwell.

His pulse didn't believe it.

His breath didn't believe it.

Nick squeezed his shoulder—warm, steady, grounding. "I'll bring a burger with extra cheese to the usage session. You earned it."

When the adults left, the basement felt older.

Hollow.

Like the past had shifted a half-inch out of place—and William could feel the gap widening.

Sabrina was watching him the way she watched fans—listening for a wobble. "Breathe," she said, low. "This is good, Will. We have her last name now. Springer. We have a case. We have a courthouse. We have a timeline and a target. Yesterday we had vibes; today we have nouns."

"I just—" He swallowed. The word Gunther tasted like a door closing a room away. "He was supposed to take it."

"Sure," she said. "And now he's not. So we take the problem. We push where the hinge is. We make him take it anyway, or we get her to bump into him anyway, or we—" She flapped a hand, searching the air for the right word and finding ten. "We hack fate. Like we hacked a driver."

He let out a crooked breath that wanted to be a laugh and didn't know how. "Okay."

They climbed the stairs, the Knight Terror humming below them like a sleeping cat. In the hallway above, the rest of the Knights were waiting—Rohan with the expression he put on when he was bracing for bad news, Chico looking at the floor as if he could read the building's pulse through tile, Autumn measuring them for damage, Elaine already holding the glad-you're-back smile like a lantern, Yeldarb bouncing with unused courage.

"We got to keep it," Sabrina said. "One day a week. With supervision. But it's ours."

A wave of relief broke and then was pulled back by a darker tide.

“Spencer said ‘Alehante,’” Autumn murmured. “He’s not careful because he’s kind.”

“And Ellis stared like... like the cat that learned algebra,” Chico said. “He’s not telling anyone yet; you could see the later in his eyes. But he’s going to nail sensors to the ceiling.”

“And?” Rohan prompted, reading William’s face.

“And we have the last name,” Sabrina said before William’s mouth could give away the crack in his breath. “Samantha Springer.”

Rohan’s eyes lit like streetlamps. “Oh, that’s a street address compared to what we had. I can build a crawl that—”

“Nick didn’t take the case,” William said, the words blunt, as if gentleness might let them float away. “He would have. But he’s here. They gave it to some guy named Gunther.”

The table of their friends went quiet in the way true friends do—making room for the hurt to sit without falling off the chair.

They were leaving the common area when they nearly collided with Yeldarb again—he’d looped back, too restless to stay put.

“Report,” he said, like a commander in a comic who had finally gotten to be one.

Sabrina gave it to him in three clean lines: keep the machine one day, Springer now working with Gunther instead of Mr. Nick.

Yeldarb frowned, literal clicking into place first. “But if they did not meet,” he said, eyes sharp. “How are you still here, little brother? Should you not be—” He waggled his fingers, the universal sign for poof.

Sabrina stopped walking. The hallway hummed. William could hear the building breathe.

“That’s it,” she whispered, eyes widening like a door opening to a brighter room. “That’s the proof. He’s still here. The meeting isn’t impossible—it just hasn’t happened yet.” She grabbed William’s sleeve, grounding and launching him in the same touch. “The timeline isn’t broken. It’s bent. We didn’t fail. We found the point of failure.”

Rohan’s grin was all teeth and plans. “We change the court calendar,” he said. “Metaphorically. Or literally. I’m not picky.”

Autumn exhaled, a soldier filing fear and pulling courage. “We do it quiet. Eyes are on us now.”

Chico nodded, already mapping city servers in his head. “We build a search that doesn’t look like a search,” he said. “We become rumor-shaped.”

Elaine squeezed William’s elbow. “We’ll get your mom to bump into your dad,” she said. “I believe in meet-cubes.”

Yeldarb thumped his fist to his chest, softly this time. “We will shepherd your becoming with valor,” he said. “And also with calendars.”

William looked from face to face, felt the shape of them settle around him like armor you could laugh in. The ache in his ribs eased; the mission in his bones sharpened.

Down the hall, a chair creaked in Ellis’s office and then stopped—paused between ideas. Somewhere else, a sensor woke up to a job it had been promised. In the basement, the Knight Terror purred like a machine that had found its name.

William pressed the key in his pocket so hard its teeth printed little moons in his palm. Springer. He said it silently, a spell, a target, a promise.

“Okay,” he said. “We bend it back.”

Chapter 10 — Unstable Investments

Spencer burst into breakfast like a confetti cannon learned to walk. He hopped onto a chair—wobble, catch, flourish—and tapped a spoon against a juice glass until the cafeteria’s clatter bent toward him.

“Attention, my radiant scholars, my waffle warriors, my resilient rockets!” he sang. “Owing to recent demonstrations of exceptional potential”—he paused for effect, eyebrows doing jazz hands—“our benefactor, Mister Ernesto Alehante, has graciously funded an extension of Mr. Nick Wright’s residency at the Harrison Home!”

A cheer went up from the tables that liked Nick already; a contented murmur rolled through the ones who liked pudding; a cautious silence pooled around the Family Game Knights’ corner.

Sabrina and William traded a look that had too many words in it to fit between blinks. More time with Nick. Good. More Alehante eyes. Bad.

On the far wall, where the outlet nobody used hid in plain sight, Ellis spoke into his cell phone with his body turned just enough to make privacy seem accidental. His voice was low, steady. He looked up mid-sentence and found William watching him. Ellis’s mouth made a thin, unreadable line of a smile. Then he turned away, finishing a sentence with a soft mm that could have been anything from agreement to victory.

Spencer, drunk on announcement, pinwheeled into the rest. “This means more tutoring, more mentorship, possibly matching ties—no pressure, Nick!” he added, aiming finger-guns at a baffled Nick who had a coffee in one hand and a stack of intake forms in the other. “Mentoring looks so good on you.”

“Thanks?” Nick said, as if someone had complimented him on his tax returns.

At the Knights’ table, Yeldarb thumped his fist to his chest in a brave quiet. “More time with good man is good.”

“More time with eyes is eyes,” Autumn said, tearing her bagel in perfect halves. “We move softer.”

“Soft but significant,” Rohan said. “We’ll use him before they do.”

Chico blew on his tea like it was a birthday candle that only listened to patience. “We should,” he murmured. “Before the extension comes with strings we can’t see.”

Gym smelled like bleach, rubber, and whoever had hidden a bag of chips behind the bleachers in September and then forgotten. The net cut the room into clean halves, sunlight sliding through high windows to stripe the floor like a referee that loved drama more than rules.

Nick looked a little like a teacher in a borrowed costume—drawstring shorts, Harrison Home T-shirt, whistle he didn’t plan to use. He balanced a clipboard and a grin. “Lost a game of straws,” he told the class. “I’m your substitute gym teacher for the week. Try not to injure me; I am a national treasure in very small circles. Today is volleyball. P.E. skills plus not weaponizing the ball. We can do this.”

“Volleyball,” Yeldarb repeated, reverent and concerned, as if someone had said trial by sunlight.

Before anyone could groan or volunteer to be a line judge for medical reasons, the gym doors opened with the kind of timing that makes you suspect fate is working from a script.

Eldorado Alehante sauntered in like an ad for a product that didn’t exist yet. He wore athleisure that had never met sweat, sunglasses on his head though there was a roof, and the confidence of a man with an unlimited data plan. “Don’t mind me,” he said—meaning, mind

me—“just here to check on some investments.” He tipped two fingers toward Bobby and crew. The boys stood taller like someone had pumped air into their shoes.

Nick’s jaw moved as if it were looking for a polite word that could stand up to a rude one. “No Alehante tech during class,” he said. “School rules.”

Eldorado’s laugh came from somewhere as shallow as a mirror. “Why? Afraid my team will destroy your little brown-nosing toddlers?”

William felt the word toddlers like a flick at his ear. Sabrina rolled her eyes so hard they almost did a lap. Rohan’s mouth tugged sideways in a way that meant do not let me speak yet; the sarcasm has teeth.

“Let’s not,” Nick said. Then, because Eldorado’s grin was the kind that made you want to sand it off a face with a nice, even court, he added, “Unless you’d like to make it interesting.”

Eldorado’s eyebrows climbed onto his forehead and set up a DJ booth. “A wager?”

“I... don’t think we’re dogs at a track,” Chico muttered, loud enough for both of them to hear. His eyes didn’t leave the lines on the floor, but his voice put down a boundary that knew its own name.

Nick heard it and nodded, chastened. He slid sideways, putting himself between the kids and the glare. “You’re right,” he told Chico, quiet. “We don’t bet on people. We bet for them.” He turned to the group. “Okay. If we win, you all get an all-access tutoring session. No subjects off the table. I am yours, legally and emotionally, for one afternoon. Deal?”

Rohan brightened like someone had plugged him in. Sabrina’s eyebrows arched: dangerous, useful. Autumn looked at Nick as if measuring him for a shield. Yeldarb’s smile split his face like a sunrise. Chico exhaled; some line inside him unclenched.

Eldorado clapped his hands once. “Terms then. If my team wins”—he flicked his hand toward Bobby, who flexed like a brand new noun—“you accompany me to our high school reunion. Show the old gang we still hang out.”

“If your team wins,” Nick said evenly, “you give me a peaceful, Eldorado-free weekend.”

“Done.” Eldorado thrust out a hand. Nick took it, grip steady. Spencer, somewhere in the doorway, clasped both hands and whispered “matching ties” like a spell.

William and Chico sealed the deal with a handshake of their own: a silly, elaborate routine Chico taught him on the spot—slap, slide, spin, knuckles, thumbs, the kind of handshake that says the world is rough; make complexity a joy. When their palms smacked and came apart, a sharp blue-white spark jumped between their hands. They both jerked and laughed.

“Static,” William said, shaking his fingers. The familiar hum in his bones said maybe and also more.

From off in the distance, Rohan put a hand over his heart. “Betrayal,” he gasped. “That was our secret handshake.”

“It’s public-domain friendship now,” Chico called back, grinning.

They split into teams the way water finds channels.

Knights: William, Sabrina, Chico, Rohan, Autumn, Yeldarb.

Chaos Crew: Bobby, Tommy, Warren, Danny, and two new satellites—Peter “P-Nut” Knutt, who spoke like a time traveler in suspenders, and Oscar Simmons, whose mouth was a highlight reel of the internet.

“Let’s get this bread, no cap,” Oscar said, clapping. “On God. Sheesh.”

“Twenty-three skidoo,” P-Nut replied amiably, tugging at a hoodie string like it should be tied around a Model T.

Eldorado drifted to the sideline, arms crossed, posture that of a man watching a product demo he's already decided to buy. "Play nice," he said to no one and everyone.

Nick tossed the ball up, blew the whistle he'd sworn he wouldn't use, and sent the serve arcing into the air.

Bobby's team took the first points like they'd been pre-ordered. The shoes grabbed the floor and launched him into jumps that looked suspiciously like physics taking bribes. Tommy's gloves met the ball and made it stick for a fraction of a second longer than natural, enough to tip it anywhere he liked. Warren's sunglasses did something unpleasant with light and depth; he blocked blind like a bat with a trust fund. Even P-Nut, shrugging into his hoodie like a grandpa at a sock hop, found his posture suddenly heroic; the fabric stiffened against his shoulders, giving him a wall to lean on that moved like a friend.

The Knights pushed sand uphill.

Yeldarb's hits were thunder with a travel time; powerful, late. Autumn's feet knew where to be before her brain declared it safe; she put the ball up like she was setting the table for a friend who'd had a bad day. Rohan and Chico made a net of eyes and intention—calling lines, reading tells, yelling "short!" and "line!" and "mine!" until the noise became strategy.

Sabrina surprised herself. The ball left hands and her mind solved angles before they declared themselves questions. Her sets arrived where spikes wanted to be born; her digs landed in the exact square of floor William's knees could command.

William felt the rhythm in the court the way he'd felt it in the air. He didn't fly—gravity still got a vote—but he met it in the middle of decisions and stole half of them. His timing sharpened into a needle. Twice he floated a second longer than seemed polite and brought his hand down through the ball with a thwack that made even Eldorado wince.

"Legal," Nick called, grinning and not pretending otherwise.

The score crawled from embarrassment into contention. 12–5. 13–8. 15–11. 18–14. Sweat filmed forearms. Sabrina's breath came even; William's came hot. Eldorado watched, amused. Ellis passed the small window in the gym door without slowing, a man who noticed everything and admitted nothing.

On the sideline, Oscar recorded vertical video no one would watch later and shouted "W!" every time his team scored. P-Nut muttered "bee's knees" like a sacrament whenever he landed a serve.

It started with a smell—hot plastic and anxious metal.

Sabrina's eyes narrowed. She did not reach out with hands. She reached out with the part of her that had stood in a basement and made impossible hardware purr. Be kind, she thought at the grid. Be brittle, she thought at the SecTech. Not a command. A suggestion. A nudge at the edge of a system that had never been asked to consider a different song.

Bobby planted for a jump. His shoes coughed a gray breath and squealed like a scooter with opinions. He landed awkward, ankle wobbling, bravado tripping a half-beat behind balance.

Tommy spread his fingers to set and the gloves made a cheerful chirp. Then they locked. His hands froze mid-"OK," the universal sign for fine turning into a curse. "Yo," Tommy said, panic skittering under the word, "yo yo yo."

Warren's sunglasses flickered. The world went to midnight and back to solar flare. He staggered, grabbed for a reality that kept changing channels. "I can't—who turned the—" He flinched away from the light he couldn't stop wearing.

P-Nut's hoodie stiffened against his will, fabric whispering posture correction engaged like a smug chiropractor. His shoulders rounded into a dignified stoop. "Well, ain't that a kick in the keister," he wheezed, instantly forty years older by sweater decree.

Oscar, who'd forgotten to wear his gear, shouted, "We vibing!" and continued to film the apocalypse.

"Time!" Eldorado sang, faux-pleasant.

"No time," Sabrina said, and popped a perfect set as if the court were a keyboard. William rose, met the ball at the seam of gravity's patience, and hammered it down the line. 18–17.

The game bent into chaos. The Knights ran on sweat, stubbornness, and a kind of joy that enemies mistake for carelessness until it ruins their plan. The Crew scrambled in bad shoes and worse light, tech hiccuping like toddlers denied juice.

20–20. Game point either way.

Bobby called for the ball with his whole body. Warren's flickering shades managed a pass; Tommy's trapped hands turned anything they touched into slapstick; the ball arrived anyway, as if drawn by entitlement. Bobby jumped. The hoodie hummed. For a second he hung there, arms and grin and a future he thought he could buy.

Then the hoodie hit its line.

Emergency protocol: when cells fall too low, they sip from skin. Too low, too long—

It drained him.

Bobby fell like a string had been cut. Not dramatic. Not slow. Simply... off. He hit the court in a crumple that made sound flatten into a silence with edges. The ball bounced twice and wobbled to a stop by Nick's foot.

"Hey!" Nick's voice cracked into anger he rarely unwrapped. He spun on Eldorado. "I told you this was unstable. I told **you**—"

Eldorado lifted both hands, palms out, as if innocence were an app he could open.

"Field test," he said mildly. "Every innovation needs stress data."

Bobby's body twitched once—small, involuntary.

Nick dropped to a crouch beside him.

"He's a kid," Nick snapped. "What did you do to him?"

Eldorado didn't flinch. He didn't even look apologetic.

He studied Bobby the way a tech CEO might study a prototype that failed QA.

"Pity," he said, tone flat. "The hardware clearly outpaced the user."

Nick stared at him, furious. "Outpaced—? He's on the floor."

Eldorado shrugged, expression smooth and faintly bored.

"Some people adapt. Some people don't. Performance is... enlightening."

William knelt beside Bobby. The boy's lashes fluttered against cheeks gone gray.

"Someone get Xenia," William whispered. "Now."

The gym telescoped. The noise pulled back to a thin wire. Chico heard his own pulse counting down.

Move, something in him said. Not a word. A push.

Warmth flooded his calves, a fizz behind his knees, a river under skin. He didn't decide to run. He simply wasn't standing there anymore.

The hall blurred into streaks. Corners lost their right angles. Air snapped against his cheeks like cold applause. He arrived at Xenia's office before his fear remembered to trip him.

He slammed a palm against the door frame. "Bobby—collapsed—gym—shock—" he gasped. The words were scattershot; the emergency was a clean line.

Xenia was up before the sentence decided how it wanted to end. She grabbed the bag that lived by her desk the way firefighters grab coats. “Lead,” she said.

Chico didn’t know how he’d done it the first time. He didn’t have time to not know now. He turned and the world forgot to resist him. The hallway slipped by in a ribbon. He stopped at the gym doors, heart sprinting in place.

“I got her!” he panted, materializing at William’s side.

“Chico, not now,” Autumn snapped on reflex, eyes on Bobby’s pulse. “This is—”

“Two seconds,” Sabrina breathed. Her voice wasn’t disbelief; it was math. She looked at Chico like a problem that had turned itself inside out and revealed music.

Xenia barreled through the doors a heartbeat later, bag unzipped, hair a halo of urgency.

“What happened? Chico said—”

She dropped to Bobby’s side and froze for half a second—just long enough for the room to notice her reaction. Her fingers found his wrist, then his neck.

Her brows pinched.

“Why is he cold?” she murmured, almost to herself.

Then louder, crisp and cutting:

“Electrical collapse. Shallow vitals. You—” she jabbed at Tommy “—stand still unless you want to live as punctuation.”

She pushed back Bobby’s sleeve—and went still again.

The skin beneath the cuff was pale in a way skin shouldn’t be.

Not white.

Not gray.

More like the color had been smeared away, leaving an absence instead of an injury.

Xenia didn’t flinch.

She worked faster.

The hoodie’s hem snapped under her hands, wires obedient to her firm, practiced grip. Nick crouched opposite her, movements steady, voice low and grounding:

“You’re okay, Bobby. Stay with us.”

Eldorado hovered beyond the circle of usefulness, concern arranged on his face like an accessory he had put on backwards.

Bobby stirred.

Barely.

Color didn’t return all at once.

It seeped back in thin, hesitant waves—as though something unseen needed coaxing, or permission, or warmth.

Autumn touched Bobby’s shoulder lightly.

Rohan’s hand hovered near his ankle.

Chico whispered, “Hey, hey—hey man, come on.”

Bobby’s fingers twitched.

A breath shuddered through him.

Slowly, warmth bloomed under Xenia’s touch.

She nodded, once.

“There. Good. Keep talking to him.”

He blinked, pupils slow to adjust. “Light... and kings... and the floor... being rude...”

Xenia finally exhaled.

“He’ll live,” she said, and the authority in her voice made the air loosen. “He’s not dehydrated. He’s... drained. Like his body tried to run without fuel and stole from places it shouldn’t.”

She looked hard at the hoodie’s dismantled wiring.

“He needs heat, fluids, rest—and to stop wearing a science experiment like a sweater.”

Bobby shivered once more. William noticed: even with color back, Bobby’s skin still looked like it remembered being empty.”

Danny’s big hand shook as he reached for Bobby’s shoulder. “Hey,” he said, relief making him gentle in a way that would haunt him later. “You scared me.”

Bobby’s eyes found Chico, hazy and sharp at once. The look that crossed his face was an algebra problem no one at this school had assigned: shock plus shame plus a pinprick of gratitude he couldn’t say in front of the person he wanted to be.

“Class dismissed,” Nick said, voice low and final. He straightened and faced Eldorado. “We will talk about this later.”

“Looking forward,” Eldorado said, and somehow made it sound like he was talking to a waiter.

Bobby’s crew gathered him up, wobbling toward the exit. Tommy’s hands, stuck in that stupid “OK,” made the gesture look like a lie. Warren pushed his broken sunglasses up on his head, blinking at a world he didn’t like without filters. Oscar kept filming until Danny swatted his phone down. P-Nut muttered “horsefeathers” like a benediction and held the door.

When the gym had more empty space than people, the Knights stood in a ring bigger than their bodies, the silence shouting what did we just see.

Chico stared at his hands.

They shook—fast, irregular, like his bones were still remembering the velocity.

He tried pressing them together.

Apart.

Together again.

“I... I think I just...”

He couldn’t finish the sentence.

His breath stuttered like it had been yanked from one timeline into another.

His face was pale under the fluorescent lights, freckles sharp against windburned cheeks.

He bent forward suddenly, bracing his palms on his knees.

“Whoa—” Rohan said, reaching out, but Sabrina shot him a warning glance: don’t touch him yet.

Chico swallowed hard.

“I’m—uh—really dizzy,” he whispered. “And hungry. Like... I could eat the table. Is that normal?”

His stomach growled loudly enough for the bleachers to hear.

He winced. “And my skin feels... hot. And cold. And my teeth hurt?”

Sabrina’s eyes were bright and ferocious.

She didn’t reach for him—breaking contact too early could scramble what was settling—but she stepped close enough that the electricity in the room recognized kin.

“Yeah,” she murmured. “Your nerves just did a hundred miles without filing the paperwork. Of course you’re shaky. And starving. And probably gonna burp lightning in an hour.”

William couldn’t help smiling—a crooked, quiet thing.

The hum inside him—the one that lived in bone and breath—answered the one that had just woken in Chico.

Two tuning forks vibrating across a gym that still smelled like burnt plastic and fear.

Chico exhaled shakily.

“I... think I need to sit.”

“You do,” Sabrina said. “Preferably not at Mach 3.”

On the hill beyond the windows, where the shrubs pretended to be decoration, a pair of binoculars lowered.

Ellis Dee wrote without looking at the page.

SUBJECT: C. SWAN — DEMONSTRATED EXTREME KINETIC ACCELERATION.
STRESS-INDUCED MANIFESTATION.

NOTE: ENHANCED ABILITIES SPREADING VIA PROXIMITY TO SUBJECT
WRIGHT? CATALYST EFFECT?

ACTION: EXPAND OBSERVATION PARAMETERS TO ENTIRE “KNIGHT” COHORT.

He capped his pen, slid it into the spine of the clipboard, and watched the children below—one hand on his phone, the other on a plan that hadn’t yet decided whether it was kindness or conquest.

Chapter 11 — The Announcement and the Horror

The Harrison Home cafeteria at peak lunch sounded like a hundred different plans trying to happen at once. Trays clattered, milk cartons snapped open with battlefield pops, the waffle iron hissed in the corner like a retired dragon, and the air carried that particular chili-powder perfume that meant Spencer had once again declared beans a vegetable.

William sat with the Family Game Knights at their usual table by the “OUTLET—DO NOT USE” sign. Rohan had spiral-bound strategy spread like a map; Sabrina was dissecting a breadstick with the same care she gave to motherboards; Autumn split an apple with a plastic knife and battlefield pragmatism; Yeldarb ate with valor; Chico unscrewed his thermos as if pouring tea could steady the world; Elaine lined tater tots into constellations only she could name.

The double doors slammed open like cymbals that believed in themselves.

Spencer entered not like a man, but like an idea that had outgrown its brain. He hopped onto a chair—wobble, recover, cherub grin—then tapped a spoon against a sweating water pitcher until conversation coagulated into attention and the ceiling tiles braced for impact.

“My melodious muffins! My potential Pavarottis!” he trilled, one hand to his heart, the other flinging jazz hands toward the fluorescent heavens. “We are in a cultural crisis! We—” he punched the air on we “—need ten brave, talented, or at least willing-to-stand-there students to form a temporary Glee club replacement!”

A chorus of groans rose—some sincere, some theatrical, one from Yeldarb that sounded like a medieval horn.

Rohan didn’t look up from his notebook. “What happened to the original Glee club?” he called, deadpan as a court transcript.

Spencer’s face went through five stages of grief in two seconds. He fixed his gaze somewhere over the mashed-potato line, a single tear welling like he’d rehearsed it and the tear had agreed to show. “They... embarked on a journey,” he said, voice dropping to reverent hush. “A journey of the soul. And the brakes. They are currently undergoing... sonic and psychological realignment.”

He shuddered. The room leaned as one toward the inevitable flashback.

— — —

EXT. HIGHWAY – DAY

A short bus labeled HARRISON HOME GLEE CLUB hurtled the wrong way down the interstate, a bright yellow salmon in a river of honking steel. Inside, children screamed like a choir that had learned only the key of panic. Sheet music pinwheeled. A glittery tambourine ricocheted.

TJX! gripped the wheel, racing helmet and bug-eyed goggles on, grinning like a saint of bad decisions. “YIELD, CITIZENS!” he bellowed out the open window. “I HAVE THE INVINCIBILITY STAR! MY AUTHORITY IS ABSOLUTE! YOU CANNOT STOP THE CLAP!”

An eighteen-wheeler moaned past. The kids clutched each other like human seatbelts and made bargains with any gods accepting walk-ins.

— — —

Back in the cafeteria, silence landed. For once, the Knights' table and Bobby's Chaos Crew table shared a look: unified, profound concern, the rare peace treaty signed in the ink of what did we just hear.

Peter "P-Nut" Knutt adjusted imaginary suspenders and cleared an imaginary soar throat. "I say," he announced to no one in particular and everyone at once, "joining a troupe so freshly... discombobulated seems a frightful notion. It's simply not cricket!"

Oscar Simmons nodded vigorously, phone already up to immortalize nothing. "Fr fr, no cap, that's a whole lot of skibidi Ohio rizz," he said gravely. "We can't be gyatt-ed into that."

Warren smirked behind sunglasses that never quite decided whether they were for function or faith. Tommy snapped his gum in Morse code for over my dead choreography.

Bobby ended the commentary the way he ended most things—by slamming a hand on the table so the ketchup shuddered. "We're not joining a nerd choir," he said, eyes sliding to William's table and staying there, a challenge and a calculation sharing a chair.

Autumn didn't flinch. "Which teacher is leading this?" she asked, as if she were choosing which battlefield to accept. "And for how long?"

Spencer brightened so fast you could hear the click. "The one, the only, Mr. Nick Wright!" He spread his arms like a curtain call. "Just for this one show to appease the Benefactors! The original members will return just as soon as they stop jumping around in their padded rooms."

Sabrina's breadstick froze mid-autopsy. "Appease which Benefactors," she muttered, eyes narrowing. "With what. And for how long."

"Could be good camouflage," Rohan murmured, pencil tapping a rhythm that meant bad idea we can make useful. "Rehearsals are alibis."

"Rehearsals are rehearsals," William said, the word still a bruise and a vow in his mouth.

The doors opened again, this time without cymbals—just fatigue.

Xenia moved through the room like a low front: gray sweater, dark circles, clipboard that had seen things. "For the record," she said, loud enough to set expectation and squash rumor, "TJX! claims he was 'exhausted and fell asleep.' It's his first strike. The cops were lenient, thanks to Nick." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "He's back in his 'recreational domicile' to... relax."

Spencer pursed his lips. "What does he do in there?" he mused aloud. "It always smells like he's cooking mushrooms... hmm. Mushrooms." His eyes went dreamy in a way that made several adults wince and one child whisper, "same."

Then he snapped back, clap like a spell. "Sign-up sheet is on the board! Destiny awaits! Also, there will be costumes but not dangerous costumes"—he shot Xenia a smile—"and TJX! will not be driving anyone anywhere for the foreseeable eternity."

A ripple of laughter broke the tension's spine.

"Knights?" Yeldarb asked, already half-standing. "We aid culture?"

"We evaluate," Autumn said. "We don't volunteer for crosshairs without a plan."

Sabrina watched Spencer tape the sign-up sheet to the corkboard as if it were a butterfly she intended to examine and maybe befriend. "If Nick runs it," she said slowly, "we can keep him in our orbit without looking like stalkers."

"Alibis," Rohan repeated, pleased. "And maybe a wireless mic and a mixer that needs a friend."

Chico sipped tea. "I will not sing," he said gently. "But I can fix the sound."

Elaine's hand shot up as if a teacher had asked. "I can sing wrong on purpose but with confidence!"

William looked past the board, past the room, to the knot of fear and luck that tied his heart to a case with a name attached at last. The cafeteria's noise came back into focus: tray, laugh, bell, life. He met Bobby's gaze for half a second—a flare of rivalry without hatred, at least not in William—and then looked away first on purpose.

Spencer hopped down from his chair with a squeak of rubber and triumph. “Remember,” he called, backing toward the doors, “art saves lives, and also, please bus your trays, we live in a society!”

He vanished in a blur of errands and optimism.

On the board, a pen waited. The sign-up list glowed with possibility and poor choices:
HARRISON HOME — TEMPORARY GLEE (NICK WRIGHT, GUEST DIRECTOR)
SIGN YOUR STAR HERE:

Autumn's eyes tracked the room again: Ellis by the juice machine, watching the Knights watch the board; Nick at the far table, talking softly to a kid who'd lost their appetite; Xenia on the phone, already solving the next unsolvable problem. The world clicked forward one careful notch.

“Destiny awaits,” Sabrina said wryly, standing.

“Or destiny hides behind a speaker and needs a Phillips head,” Rohan said, following.

“Either way,” William said, picking up his tray and his courage, “we better bring our own music.”

The Knights leaned together in the low, conspiratorial hunch that cafeteria tables are built to encourage. Trays framed them like shields; the world's noise dimmed to a whisper of clinking forks and distant laughter.

William broke it. “I'm signing up,” he said. “Nick's leading it. That's time with him—all of us, together. We can't waste that.”

Yeldarb thumped his chest with heroic gravity. “Then I, too, shall lend my mighty lungs to this chorus of champions!”

Sabrina didn't even look up. “Absolutely not. Your voice sounds like a bear fighting a bag of rocks. You're a security risk.”

Yeldarb blinked, unoffended. “Then the bear will guard the door.”

Rohan lifted his notebook, dry as toast. “I'm more of a behind-the-scenes narrator. My singing voice is... statistically average.”

Before anyone could respond, Chico pushed back his chair, stood on the bench, and—with zero warning—belted out a flawless, full-volume bar of “Livin' La Vida Loca.”

He even added a hip-shake that would've made Ricky Martin retire respectfully.

For a heartbeat, the entire cafeteria froze—spoons mid-air, mouths open, gravity reconsidered its loyalties. Then applause detonated. Even Warren, from across the room, gave a slow, impressed three-clap and muttered, “Okay, Swan.”

Chico bowed, sat, and sipped his tea as though nothing had happened. “I suppose I, too, will join.”

Autumn smirked, the corner of her mouth doing push-ups. “I'll sign up. Someone has to keep this from turning into another Spencer production of *Les Mis: The Fire Hazard Edition*.”

Sabrina sighed. “Fine. I'll go. Someone's got to make sure the mic cables don't end up in a puddle—and to keep an eye on Will.”

That earned her a small smile from William—the kind that said thanks without saying it.

They rose as a unit—William, Sabrina, Chico, and Autumn—crossing the cafeteria toward the corkboard like adventurers approaching a quest notice. But when they arrived, destiny was already crowded.

Bobby and his entire crew stood there, blocking the sign-up sheet like hired bouncers guarding the gates of art.

William stopped short.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Bobby turned, wearing that same half-smile built from ego and cafeteria espresso.

“Don’t get excited. Ellis and Spencer are making us do stage-work.” He made air quotes with surgical disdain. “Punishment for tampering with gifted technology.”

Tommy flexed his still-bandaged wrist. “Guess Alehante tech exploding on you counts as misuse. OSHA could never.”

P-Nut sighed wistfully. “A cruel twist of fate, gentlemen. I was born for the spotlight... and yet condemned to cables.”

Oscar filmed the sign-up sheet. “We backstage, no cap. Manual labor arc. Wild.”

William scanned the paper—and froze when he spotted Warren hovering over the “SINGERS” column, staring at it like a door someone told him he wasn’t allowed to open.

“I wanted to try out for tenors,” Warren muttered, almost too quiet. “Guess I’m stuck lugging amps.”

Something warm pulsed in William’s chest, a hum starting behind his ribs, whispering: This is the move.

He stepped forward.

“Hey,” he said to Warren. “We can swap. You take my spot with the singers. I’ll do stage-hand work.”

Warren blinked, thrown completely off script. “You serious?”

“Yeah,” William said simply.

Bobby scoffed—a sharp exhale loaded with threat.

“Fine, hero,” he sneered. “You sweep the floors. Try not to trip over your own cape.”

The smirk he wore wasn’t amused.

It was the smirk of someone filing an insult away for later.

Sabrina’s head snapped toward William.

“Will, what are you—”

She stopped when she saw his face: that steady, impossible calm he’d worn the night the Knight Terror came alive.

The look that meant trust me.

Her frown melted into reluctant certainty. She nodded.

Rohan appeared beside them like inevitability with a hoodie. “I’m not letting you be the only Knight backstage with these clowns,” he said, already scrawling his name under Stage Crew.

Bobby folded his arms, eyes narrow. “Hope you know how to plug in a spotlight.”

William met his gaze without blinking. “Hope you know how to harmonize.”

The tension between them hummed—hot, brittle, inevitable.

From across the room, Spencer’s voice rose like a trumpet blast:

“Sign-ups closing in five! Remember, my darlings, fame waits for no one—except people who forget the key change!”

The Knights finished writing their names. A strange, charged quiet settled among them.

They had no idea whether they were walking into music, disaster, or both—
—but for the first time in weeks, the next step didn't feel like running.
It felt like rhythm.

The Harrison Home “Auditorium” wasn't so much a room as it was a miracle of repurposed ambition—a large garage with a slightly raised platform, curtains older than half the students, and folding chairs arranged in what could be called optimism. A row of fluorescent lights hummed overhead, half of them dim, one flickering like it was auditioning for a horror movie.

Ten students milled about in clusters—half clutching sheet music, half pretending not to care. Sabrina and Autumn tested the piano keys, each note puffing out a small ghost of dust. Chico leaned casually on the stage rail, warming up under his breath like a pro who'd wandered into community theater.

The double doors groaned open.

Nick Wright stumbled in, a human sigh in sunglasses. His coffee was roughly the size of his moral compass, and he held it like both shield and life support. The shirt under his jacket was only half-tucked, his hair bore the faint memory of a pillow fight, and his voice came out as gravel with good intentions.

“Okay,” he croaked, clapping his hands once and regretting the sound immediately. “Glee club. Let's make this quick. Singers on my left, stage-hands on my right.”

Rohan muttered to William, “He looks like he lost a debate with a hangover.”

“Or with Eldorado,” William replied.

They weren't wrong. Nick had spent the night half-arguing, half-nostalgic-drinking with his old friend turned Alehante emissary, who was still relentlessly campaigning for him to attend their high school reunion. Eldorado's charm could intoxicate, and Nick's resistance had been... under construction.

The students divided.

Left (Singers): Sabrina, Chico, Autumn, Maximilian (the new kid with posture like he'd swallowed a ruler), and Warren—who looked equal parts nervous and thrilled to finally be where he wanted to be.

Right (Stage-hands): William, Rohan, Bobby, Tommy, and Oscar, who had already found the light board and was livestreaming his own reflection.

Nick slumped into a chair that creaked like an old confession booth. He took a long sip of coffee, inhaled like a man remembering his humanity, and said, “All right, singers. Give me a bar of something. Anything. Let's see what we're working with.”

Chico didn't wait for order—he launched into a showy flourish of “Livin' La Vida Loca” that made the rafters hum and the folding chairs blush. Maximilian followed with a perfect, sterile run through a classical piece that had the precision of an algorithm and the soul of a tax form.

Then Warren stepped up. His voice wasn't loud, but it was clean—a steady, clear tenor that carried something rare: sincerity. The room actually listened. Bobby pretended not to be impressed from across the way.

Sabrina gave a half-hearted rendition of “Take On Me,” purely to check if the acoustics could handle her sarcasm (they could). Then Autumn stepped forward.

She looked at the group, then down at her hands, and began—softly, deliberately—
“You got the touch... you got the power...”

Her voice wasn't flashy or trained; it was true. The words didn't rise—they resonated. A quiet confidence that didn't ask for permission, only presence. The garage felt less like a room and more like a memory.

When she finished, even the fluorescent light paused its flicker, as if paying attention.

Nick removed his sunglasses, revealing eyes that looked both exhausted and quietly proud. "That's the one," he said. "Autumn, you're lead. You've got the voice—and, I'm guessing, the sanity—to herd these cats."

Autumn blinked. "Sanity's relative, but I'll take it."

Sabrina smiled faintly. "Queen of the misfit choir. Long may she reign."

Nick gestured to the rest. "The rest of you, back her up. Harmonies, enthusiasm, ideally fewer key changes than the Beatles on a bender."

Then, rubbing his temple, he pointed to the right. "Stage-hands, over here. You're my builders, my lifters, my light technicians, my gaffer gang. We're gonna make this place look like a show instead of a hostage situation."

William joined the group, feeling that hum again—the faint, guiding nudge that told him this was the right call. As he bent to pick up a plank from the pile of old set pieces, he caught motion in the far corner.

Snakes, mop in hand, leaned against the wall like he'd been waiting for this exact scene. He gave William a slow, deliberate thumbs-up, his face unreadable but his meaning unmistakable. Then, without a word, he went back to mopping a perfectly clean stretch of floor, tracing slow, precise lines that could have been a map if you looked from above.

William hid a grin. He turned toward the singers. Across the room, Sabrina met his eyes. For a heartbeat, the exhaustion melted, replaced by a spark of realization and pride. He'd been right. The risk, the swap, all of it—it was working.

He gave her a small, sly smile—the kind that said told you so without sound.

Sabrina rolled her eyes but couldn't hide the ghost of a grin tugging at her mouth.

The rehearsal stumbled forward: Nick nursing coffee and pretending to be authoritative, Chico hitting notes like a jukebox possessed, Autumn keeping chaos on beat, and William quietly weaving through the crew, stacking props and listening for patterns.

For the first time that week, everything felt almost normal.

But under the hum of the lights and the uneven piano chords, William felt it again—the same undercurrent that followed every victory they'd stolen lately.

The plan was in motion.

And something—someone—was watching the tempo.

Chapter 12 — Starlight, Interrupted

The clock on the wall of Room 3C ticked louder than usual that morning, as if aware of the tension simmering beneath the surface. It was the day of the Glee performance—hours away—and Nick Wright’s History of Technology class was unusually alert, even for first period.

He stood at the front of the room with his sleeves rolled up, a half-drunk coffee at his elbow, and a marker that squeaked faintly against the whiteboard as he wrote one word in capital letters: SEGA.

“Here’s your free lesson in hubris,” Nick said, pacing a little. “They went from underdogs to gods, then forgot what got them there.”

A murmur of interest ran through the room—gaming talk was better than midterms.

“They were innovators,” Nick continued, drawing a crude Genesis next to the name. “They had the Dreamcast before anyone else dreamed of online play, but they got comfortable. They fought everyone—including themselves.” He pointed the marker at the class. “That’s how you lose: not by failing, but by believing you can’t.”

He capped the marker with a click that echoed. “Hubris isn’t just for companies. It’s a trap for any person or institution that believes its own hype.”

The air held steady, expectant. Then, softer, he added, “But the real lesson isn’t the fall.”

He turned the board over to reveal a new word beneath:

REBIRTH.

“When they stopped trying to win a war they already lost, they did something smarter: they adapted. Became a third-party developer. Focused on what they were best at—making great games. Sonic. Persona. Yakuza.”

His eyes met the students’, sharp but kind. “That’s resilience. It’s what separates arrogance from growth. You don’t stop because you lost. You stop fighting the wrong battle.”

The bell rang just as he finished. Students packed up quietly, some still chewing on the analogy.

Nick gathered his notes. “Remember the second lesson,” he said, as they filed out. “Focus on what you do best. Don’t let the pressure get to you tonight.”

William lingered in the doorway for half a second longer than he needed to, the words focus on what you do best sitting heavy in his chest.

An hour before showtime, the converted garage—now “auditorium”—was alive with motion and nerves. Folding chairs lined the front rows, an ocean of mismatched plastic. The faint buzz of lights mixed with the squeak of sneakers and whispered rehearsals.

William and Rohan were backstage, tracing cable runs, testing mic jacks, double-checking the pulleys that hoisted the curtains. Sabrina stood onstage with the singers, clipboard in hand, pretending to be calm while counting down every possible way a speaker could explode.

Nick paced near the front row, fielding questions with the patience of a man already halfway to exhaustion. William took the chance to approach, his notebook half-open.

“Mr. Wright,” he started carefully, “did you ever meet someone named—”

“Nick!” Spencer’s voice pierced the air, theatrical and panicked. “The lighting cue for Act Two is dimmer than my optimism! Fix it!”

Nick turned, apologetic. “Sorry, Will. Later, okay?”

Before William could answer, Eldorado swaggered into the frame, phone in one hand, ego in the other. “Nicky, buddy! Don’t forget—audience engagement metrics. Eye contact, crowd banter, emotionally manipulative pauses. People love sincerity.”

Nick exhaled through his nose. “You want to run the show, you grab a mic.”

“I would,” Eldorado said, grinning, “but then they’d all stop paying attention to you.”

Nick stared at him. “You’re right. I do owe them that mercy.”

William smothered a laugh and slipped back toward the curtain.

Sabrina waved from the stage. “Hey, Stagehand Wright! Your song’s up after Warren’s!”

William blinked. “My what?”

Autumn, leaning against the piano, called over her shoulder. “We voted. We’re doing ‘Starlight’ for you. You’re not singing it, but it’s yours.”

The band began their soundcheck.

The first soft chords of “Starlight”—that melody of impossible hope—spilled into the room.

And for William, time split open.

The present dissolved. The air around him thickened and refracted, colors bending into the crystalline blue-white shimmer of a memory he couldn’t refuse.

He was back inside the chamber, a cathedral of crystal and light where the walls hummed with energy. Samantha stood before him—his mother, her hair tied back, eyes alive with fire and heartbreak.

“You have to go,” she said, voice trembling under control. “You must. The world outside this chamber can still change.”

“I can’t leave you!” William’s voice was younger here, rawer, trembling with all the grief that hadn’t yet hardened into survival.

Her cuffs glowed, their cold blue spreading like ice across her ankles. “My Spark burns brighter than it should,” she said softly. “It can buy you time.”

Snakes stood by the archway, face shadowed. “Ain’t no fair trades in miracles, kid,” he said, voice low. “But she’s already decided what kind of story this is.”

Jessica’s voice cut in—furious, defiant, alive. “You think I’m letting her die alone? Hell no. I’ll carry her light if I have to.”

Then came the sound—the piercing hum that marked the arrival of him. Maddox Alehante, stepping through the fractured light like a man made of authority and contempt.

“You call it rebellion,” Maddox said. “I call it waste.”

Samantha turned, defiant to the last. “You call it order. I call it rot.”

The cuffs flared. Her knees gave way. She smiled through the pain, her last words almost a whisper:

“Shine on, my starlight.”

The light consumed everything.

William gasped. The auditorium walls snapped back into place. He was backstage again, breathing hard, one hand braced against a wooden flat for balance.

The echo of her voice rang in his head: Shine on.

The song he’d chosen wasn’t just a song anymore—it was a wound reopened.

The lights dimmed. The crowd hushed. The show began.

From the side stage, William watched it unfold through the halo of footlights.

Sabrina's voice anchored the harmonies; Chico carried the rhythm like it was in his DNA; Warren stood front and center, his earnest tenor wrapping around the lyrics like a prayer.

Spencer sat near the front, eyes shimmering with pride. Xenia even smiled—a rare, unguarded thing.

In the second row, Ernesto Alehante sat perfectly still, chin propped on one hand, expression unreadable. But when Warren hit a particularly pure note, something in the man's face shifted—his jaw slackened, his eyes softened. He felt it.

Eldorado, slouched beside him, scrolled absently through his phone, muttering about “set pacing.”

William adjusted a mic stand, cued a light change, forced himself to focus on tasks instead of memories.

When Warren's performance of “No Cars Go” hit its crescendo, the applause was thunderous. William found himself grinning through tears. Rohan shot him a thumbs-up from across the rigging, and William returned it without thinking.

Then Sabrina's number came—her chaotic, infectious “Kickstart My Heart.” The crowd clapped along. The room pulsed.

As the last drumbeat faded, William knew what was next. His heart sank. His song.

The stage darkened to deep blue. The opening chords of “Starlight” began.

William exhaled. “Here we go,” he whispered.

Backstage, the noise of the crowd faded into heartbeat silence.

William steadied himself. The Spark under his ribs began to hum—not with emotion, but with warning. The hum sharpened, directional, like a compass spinning wildly.

“Something's wrong,” he murmured.

He followed the pull deeper backstage, where the light turned industrial and cold.

Then he saw it.

Rohan—high above, crouched on the edge of a narrow catwalk, leaning out past the railing to reach a loose wire. His sneaker slipped on the metal grating, kicking the ladder that was his only safety net to the ground. Gravity took him. His fingers clawed the rails, leaving him dangling over open air.

“Rohan!” William shouted.

Below, lounging against a crate, Bobby looked up mid-chip. “What?”

“The ladder! Put the ladder back up—he's slipping!”

Bobby looked down at the fallen ladder beside him, then back up with a smirk. “Ladder? Oh, this thing? Must've fallen. Seems dangerous.”

“Bobby, stop screwing around!”

“I'm not screwing around, hero boy,” Bobby sneered. “Maybe he should've been more careful. You Knights think you're the only ones allowed to fix things.”

William's pulse thundered. “You're going to get him killed!”

Bobby kicked the ladder lightly. “Then you better get that thing to him faster.”

“Guys...” Rohan's voice cracked, panicked. “I—can't—hold—”

The argument burned white-hot, two boys too angry to see the disaster between them.

Then—

A scrape.

A gasp.

A thud.

The sound was wet, final, and impossibly loud.

William froze. Bobby's chip bag hit the floor.

They both looked down.

Rohan lay twisted on the concrete, one arm and one leg bent at grotesque angles. His head was turned too far, too still.

"Rohan?" William whispered. His voice didn't sound like his own. He dropped to his knees, shaking, hands hovering over his friend's motionless body. "David? Come on, man—come on—"

Bobby stumbled forward, face draining of color. "I—I didn't—he—"

William stood, trembling, eyes blazing through tears.

"You—" His voice broke, then hardened. "You did nothing!"

Before Bobby could respond, William's fist connected with his face. The impact cracked through the backstage like a gunshot. Bobby reeled, crashing into the prop wall, a streak of red blooming under his nose.

For a second, there was nothing but the sound of breathing—ragged, uneven, horrified.

Above it all, behind a one-way glass in the lighting booth, Ellis Dee watched.

He had been watching Rohan since the rehearsal began.

Not William.

Not Bobby.

Rohan.

Clipboard in hand, he recorded every small variable:

elevated heart rate

no sweat response

unbroken gait

faster-than-average recovery from earlier drills

no reported injuries in school medical logs

anomalously consistent health across the semester

Under the note column he had written earlier:

Subject: Rohan — suspected Spark trait: durability / resilience.

Hypothesis: stress-event may trigger manifestation.

Below that:

Test condition required: acute physical impact.

When the argument started, Ellis barely looked up. He marked changes in tension, tone, proximity.

But when the shoving began—

Ellis leaned forward.

Eyes narrowing.

Focusing not on the conflict...

...but on Rohan's stance, his center of gravity, his reflex lag, the way he braced.

Almost ready, he thought.

And then Rohan's foot slipped.

He fell.

Hard.

Something in Ellis jerked—an involuntary, human flicker of alarm.

For one raw instant, he almost moved.

Almost.

Then Ernesto's voice hissed through memory like conductive wire:

"Do not interfere.

Observation precedes intervention.

The data is the priority."

Ellis's jaw tightened.

He sat back down.

His knuckles went white around the clipboard—but he did not rise.

He watched Rohan hit the floor.

He watched William break, watched Bobby bleed, watched the lifeless boy between them—
not because he didn't care...

...but because he cared about the wrong thing.

He studied every second with clinical hunger.

He wrote:

Subject impact complete.

Awaiting anomalous response.

Continue observation.

And he did nothing..

On stage, the show went on.

The lights dimmed to soft indigo. The first verse of "Starlight" rose—gentle, ethereal,
heartbreakingly pure.

"Far away, this ship is taking me far away..."

The audience swayed, unaware.

Backstage, the same melody washed over horror:

Rohan's still form.

William, sobbing quietly into his friend's shirt.

Bobby, shaking, a hand to his bleeding nose.

Ellis, motionless in his booth, a ghost of his own making.

"I'll never let you go, if you promise not to fade away..."

The lyrics bled into the moment like prophecy.

The light on stage flared—bright, brilliant, utterly wrong for the scene it underscored.

And in that dissonant glow, as applause began to rise for a song no one on stage understood,
everything that bound the Family Game Knights together began to fracture.

The stage fading to black as the song crescendos.

Chapter 13 — The Catalyst

The hopeful swell of Starlight still floated through the curtains, a clean, bright ribbon of sound that had no business touching what lay backstage.

William was on his knees, arms braced around Rohan like he could keep the brokenness from leaking out. His breath came in hiccups. The concrete was cold through his jeans; the world in his ears was ocean-loud. He did not move except to shake.

Bobby paced in tight, useless circles, one hand clamped over his bleeding nose. “No, no, no,” he whispered, then louder, “Nope—nope—no—” like a man rewriting fate with denial.

William lowered one shaking hand and reached for Rohan’s fingers—just to touch, to anchor, to say I’m here.

The moment skin met skin, a familiar hum lifted through William, warm and resonant—like the night Sabrina’s hands had found the right wire; like the instant Chico had blurred into and out of the hallway and back again. The hum wasn’t his, not exactly. It was here. In Rohan.

William yanked his hand back, stunned, heart tripping. He stared at Rohan’s still face, then at his own palm, as if it might glow.

The Spark wasn’t gone. It was answering.

Something in him—whatever part had been boy until now—stood up.

He rose, wiped his face on his sleeve, and crossed to Bobby. Up close, Bobby’s panic looked less like rage and more like a cornered animal.

“Bobby,” William said, voice low. “Stop. We need to think.”

“My nose—” Bobby’s eyes shone, furious and watery. “Is it broken? He just fell! It was an accident!”

William grabbed his hoodie at the collar and pulled him into eye contact. “You let him fall,” he said, quiet as a knife. “Calm. Down.”

They stood there locked—William’s grief sparking into anger, Bobby’s fear curdling toward calculation. William watched the exact second the boy decided on a story.

“It was an accident,” Bobby said, almost gentle now, like a self-hypnosis. “He fell. We had nothing to do with this.”

William’s jaw clenched. The callousness hit like a slap. He started to answer—and Bobby remembered his nose and began shouting again, volume a shield.

“Look what you did! Are you happy?”

“What I did?” William snapped back, grief finding a target. “You kicked the ladder!”

“I tapped it!”

“Guys...” Rohan’s voice, thready and frayed, sliced clean through the noise. “Would you two... shut up?”

They froze—William’s fingers still gripping fabric, Bobby’s mouth open around the next defense. They turned together.

Rohan lay where he had fallen. And then—impossibly—the contorted angles began to change. His forearm twisted with a wet crack, then straightened; his knee rotated, ligaments strumming under skin, then slotted into place. Vertebrae ticked as if counted by an unseen hand. The sounds were small, awful, precise. Rohan’s face pinched with annoyed pain, like someone enduring a too-firm massage.

William felt the answer in his own bones—a sympathetic lift, a resonance like tuning forks agreeing. His Spark brightened in time with Rohan’s, a quiet chord that said yes, here, now.

Rohan drew a breath that wasn't a gasp. He blinked and sat up slowly, rubbing his arm, flexing his fingers as if they belonged to him again. He looked between them, bewildered and oddly calm. "I had the strangest dream," he said, as if waking from group nap. He stopped, staring at his palms, then his forearm, then his leg. "Will... I think... I feel stronger." He swallowed, eyes widening, a thrill he couldn't disguise. "I think I can... heal?"

William's relief broke him open. He lunged forward and wrapped Rohan in a hug so fierce it knocked them both backward into laughter and an oof. "Don't do that again," William muttered against his shoulder, crying and laughing at once.

Across from them, Bobby stood very still, bleeding quietly, his expression a storm front—annoyance, relief, confusion, and something far more dangerous dawning behind his eyes: fear.

"Backstage? Boys?"

Xenia's voice preceded her, crisp as a clipboard. She appeared with Spencer in tow—Spencer in full post-show glow, which dimmed instantly at the tableau: William's tear-streaked face; Bobby's red, swelling nose; Rohan's shirt ripped and dusty, hair a static halo, posture... fine.

Too fine.

Spencer flung his hands.

"What happened? Why is there blood? Why do you look like you wrestled a tumble dryer?"

Xenia was already at Rohan, kneeling, flipping open her small nurse kit.

"You"—point—"sit."

She shined a penlight into his eyes, pupils strict and unblinking under her scrutiny.

"Any dizziness?" she asked.

"No."

"Nausea?"

"No."

"Pain anywhere? Neck? Back? Chest?"

"No," Rohan said, absolutely truthfully—and that was the problem.

Xenia's frown deepened. She pressed along his clavicle, ribs, wrist, then ran two fingers gently up the back of his skull.

Nothing.

Not even swelling.

"That's impossible," she muttered, voice slipping into the honest register nurses use when the world doesn't line up with anatomy.

"You look like you hit the floor hard enough to echo. You should be in shock—at least shock. Or guarding something. Or..."

She stopped herself, unsettled by the absence of a symptom.

"Pulse strong," she said finally, though the relief in her tone was tangled with suspicion.

Her eyes flicked up sharply.

"Delayed onset is a thing," she warned. "If anything changes—anything—you tell me immediately. No tough-guy nonsense."

Rohan nodded, a bit too calmly.

Xenia turned to Bobby next.

"Let me see."

Bobby tilted his head back, theatrical and wounded.

Xenia palpated the bridge of his nose with quick, practiced fingers.

"Mild fracture," she diagnosed.

“Not displaced. Ice and time. No sports.”

She flicked a look around backstage—dark corners, ropes, pulleys.

“Where was Ellis? He said he’d be monitoring the crew from the wings. I didn’t see him in the audience.”

Spencer pinched his own nose in sympathy with Bobby.

“Okay. Everyone stop breathing dramatically and explain. Who started this?”

The three boys exchanged the look of co-defendants searching for a story that wouldn’t detonate.

William felt Rohan’s honesty beside him like a flare—he’ll tell everything—and Bobby’s survival instinct like ice—he’ll tell anything but.

He stepped forward before either could speak.

“I saw Bobby pushing Rohan around,” William said, steady. “I got mad and punched him. That’s it.”

Bobby’s head snapped toward him, eyes flaring—first with: That’s not the whole story, then with a flicker of unexpected respect.

He shut his mouth and let the lie stand.

Spencer sighed like a man who’d rehearsed disappointment.

“We do not bully or throw punches in this home,” he said, slipping into a familiar cadence.

“William, Bobby: rooms. Now. I’ll determine consequences once I’ve consulted the Council of Consequence.”

He gestured vaguely.

(Xenia and the stuffed owl on his shelf usually made up the quorum.)

“Rohan,” Spencer added, “since you’re... bizarrely fine, go sit down and drink water. If your head aches, shout my name and I will sprint, possibly in slow motion.”

Xenia arched an eyebrow.

“I’ll sprint,” she said. “You’ll... attempt.”

Spencer placed a hand to his chest.

“Rude, but fair.”

He shooed William and Bobby with the same hand.

“March.”

They marched—one furious, one wounded, both very quiet.

Evening gathered the staff in the multipurpose room under fluorescent peace. Spencer had changed into a military-style uniform complete with epaulettes and a sash that might have been a curtain tie. He stood at the head of the folding-table council like a general of gentle disasters.

“Operation Crescendo,” he began, tapping a yardstick on the tile. “We triumphed. The benefactors were overjoyed.” He beamed. “They appreciated the culture, the community, and they noted special interest in our most talented students.” (Somewhere, a quiet alarm should have rung.)

Xenia sat with a legal pad and a face that trusted pens more than declarations. Nick leaned back, eyes shadowed but warm, a smile tucked into his cheek for the memory of Warren’s tenor. Ellis sat with his clipboard, the ink already dry on lines no one else could read.

TJX! raised a hand that wasn’t really raised so much as hovering with intent. “I can contribute to the post-symphony commerce discussion.”

Spencer flinched. “That’s not a—fine. Say your piece.”

TJX! placed a plain cardboard box on the table with a flourish. “Ladies, gentlemen, and undecideds—bootleg recordings. For the culture. Only \$19.99.”

Nick frowned. “Isn’t that... a little high for a CD?”

TJX! blinked. “I would never sell a compact disc.”

“Then what’s in the box?” Spencer asked, not sure whether to confiscate or pre-order.

With ceremony, TJX! opened it and produced a single folded sheet of paper. He unfolded it to reveal, in thick black marker, a YouTube URL.

Silence sat down with them.

“So you’re selling... boxes with links in them,” Nick said carefully.

“Absolutely not,” TJX! said, offended. “For \$19.99 I show you the link. For \$24.99, I type it in for you. Full-service artistry.”

Xenia shut her eyes for the length of one prayer. “We will talk about... commerce boundaries later.”

Spencer cleared his throat, grateful for any subject change. “We did have one... hiccup. William and Bobby—minor altercation backstage.”

Ellis’s eyes flicked up. “What is their story?” he asked, voice neutral, pen poised.

Spencer recited, hands stepping through the beats: “William saw Bobby bullying Rohan. William punched Bobby. End of scene.”

Ellis wrote something small and underlined it twice.

Nick’s jaw worked. “Look,” he said, “I know William. He’s a good kid. If he saw someone pushing Rohan around—” he hesitated, glancing at Xenia, then continued, gentler, “—and considering the rumors the kids have been whispering about his mother being... mistreated... I could see why he’d react. Doesn’t excuse it. Explains it.”

“A reason isn’t a pass,” Xenia said, but softer. “Still—we hold Bobby accountable for provoking. And William for the fist.”

Nick nodded. “Let me take them tomorrow. I have to meet Gunther at Squire Park about the Stiles-Springer defamation case.” The names shifted the air for him, like a song he’d heard before. “I’ll bring William and Bobby. They can pick up trash—community service, not just punishment. Constructive. No fists.”

Spencer’s whole face lit. “A restorative justice field trip! Supervised by an adult I trust and possibly also admire.” He stamped an imaginary approval form. “Yes.”

Xenia’s mouth did the rare curve. “Good idea. Clears the air before it clouds.”

Ellis wrote again. He did not look up.

TJX! raised his hand a second time. “Bring chicken nuggets to feed the ducks,” he advised.

Nick squinted. “You mean bread.”

“Nuggets,” TJX! insisted. “Scientific inquiry. We must determine if they are cannonballs.”

“Cannibals?” Nick said, lost at sea.

“I am not part of a cabal,” TJX! replied with dignity.

Xenia stood abruptly. “Meeting adjourned,” she declared, before the English language suffered more.

Spencer saluted with his yardstick. “Dismissed, soldiers of song.”

Chairs scraped, papers stacked, the room exhaled.

Ellis’s office glowed the color of a fish tank after midnight. Papers lay in rings around the desk—loops of notes, arrows, timestamps, a taxonomy of the unexplainable.

He paced, hands behind his back, then in his pockets, then gripping the edge of the desk as if he could tilt the world to the angle he needed.

“Chico,” he said to no one, using the nickname he’d seen scribbled on a sign-up sheet. “C. Swan. Extreme kinetic acceleration under acute stress. Appeared at court, reappeared with nurse in tow. Seconds.” He jotted: SPEED—STRESS-INVOKED.

“S. Plumber.” He tapped a line of data: a frame counter that should not have existed on a corpse of a PC; a power draw that violated both warranty and common sense. “Technopathy. Systems conforming without standard interfaces. Hardware behaving as if... persuaded.” Another note: TECHNO-PATHIC? NON-CONTACT INFLUENCE.

“D. Rohan—” He stopped. He had to say the next word out loud, or it would sound like a magic trick in his head. “—healed. Compound trauma. No residuals. Instantaneous orthopedic correction.” He wrote: HEALING RESPONSE—**SPONTANEOUS**.

He stared at the page until his eyes watered.

Then he turned to the board on the wall—names linked by red thread, dates, incident reports, disciplinary notes, health files, all forming a web that was beginning to look less like a conspiracy map and more like a pulse.

At the center, already circled before he would consciously admit it, was:

W. Wright

Ellis drew a second circle around the first.

Then a third.

He flipped through his clipboard, muttering as he read the notations he’d made over the past weeks:

Plumber: anomalous technokinetic spike during coding drill — Wright holding the lamp at the time.

Swan: short-distance displacement event — Wright initiating contact seconds prior.

Rohan: fall from height — Wright the first to react; physical response disproportionate to baseline.

Group cohesion indices spiking only in Wright-led interactions.

Psychological contagion effect — confidence, bravery, and emotional regulation increase in peers only when Wright is within 10–20 meters.

He underlined the distances twice.

“Environmental variables... inconsistent,” Ellis murmured.

“Alehante tech exposure... limited and not uniformly distributed.”

He paced, flipping back pages.

“But the anomalies cluster around a single factor.”

He tapped William’s name.

“Proximity.”

He paced again, faster now, the pattern falling into place like tumblers in a lock.

“Catalyst,” he said aloud, tasting the hypothesis. “Not as metaphor — as function. A presence that increases likelihood of activation in others.”

He flipped back farther in his notes — arrival logs.

Day William Wright entered the Home: no Spark manifestations recorded prior.

Seven anomalies in the eighteen days following.

His pen scratched quickly:

Wright correlates with ignition.

Not powered alone — but triggers others.

He circled the phrase and boxed it.

He hesitated a long moment.

Then—almost embarrassed by the tenderness of the thought—he whispered:
“Could it be... his heart?”

Silence answered him.

The building creaked.

Far away, the last chairs in the auditorium were being folded and stacked.

Ellis placed his fingertip on the circle around William’s name.

“The subject isn’t just an anomaly,” he whispered. “He’s a key.”

His knuckles whitened around the marker.

“And I will learn how this influences our benefactor.”

Outside, the rain rehearsed a rhythm the Home already knew. In two rooms on opposite halls, two boys stared at ceilings and did not sleep—one nursing a bruised nose and a more complicated fear than he’d had that morning; the other with salt on his cheeks, a spark in his ribs, and a new weight settling on his shoulders like a cloak.

In the quiet between chords, the cost of genius arrived. And the next move—trash bags, a park, a meeting that should have happened months from now—was already on the calendar.

Chapter 14 — An Echo and a Signal

Morning dressed the Harrison Home in weak sun and cooler air, the kind that made breath look like smoke and plans feel possible. William stood on the curb with his hands jammed in his hoodie, eyes on the parking lot, heart somewhere far away, beating on a delay. Beside him, Bobby paced two steps left, two steps right, palm hovering near his bandaged nose like he was afraid it might fall off if he didn't supervise it.

They didn't speak at first. The quiet wasn't friendship; it was a truce that knew it had an expiration date.

"Your weird friend is fine," Bobby muttered eventually, the complaint pitched like a question he wanted to win. "And I'm the one who looks like I headbutted a shopping cart."

William kept his eyes forward. "Rohan almost died."

"Yeah," Bobby said, too fast. He scuffed his sneaker. "But he didn't."

"He didn't because something happened and you—" William's jaw hardened; he swallowed the rest. The fight was a door he could not afford to open again. "You kept quiet."

Bobby rolled a shoulder like the compliment didn't fit. "No one would've believed me," he said. "I barely believe me. 'Hey, Ms. Xenia, kid fell off a rafter but now he's fine, bones went pop-pop back in like Legos.' Sure. Or—" he waved his hand like conducting an orchestra of bad choices, "—'We pushed. He fell. End of story.' Your boring bullying thing... easier to swallow."

"Thank you," William said, because it was the only true thing that didn't taste like rust.

"Don't make it a thing," Bobby said, staring at the asphalt. "It was self-preservation."

"Still counts."

Bobby huffed, then cocked his head. "You ever play Chrono Trigger?"

The name landed like a thrown pebble—unexpected and weirdly precise. William looked over. "No. I've heard of it. Time travel, right?"

"Yeah," Bobby said carefully, as if testing how far he could lean on the rumor that William wasn't from here or now. "Time travel. Frog knight. Clockwork apocalypse. It's... good."

"I didn't have a lot of time for games," William said. "But I played EarthBound."

Bobby's face cracked open like a window. "No way. That's my favorite."

"Kid with a bat, friends who believe you, weird adults—" William said, a smile he didn't invite climbing up anyway. "Felt familiar."

Bobby's mouth shaped a laugh he didn't release. "Yeah. It's funny and creepy. Like... someone wrote it to dare you to care."

A black sedan eased into view—sleek, older, loved. It idled with the quiet pride of something that had been waxed by hand and defended with small, obsessive rules. Nick leaned across the passenger seat, popped the rear door with a click, and called, "Back seat. Shoes clean. No snacks. We do seatbelts in this car."

The interior smelled like leather and a life that had paper in it—legal pads, contracts, a stiff hint of cologne he probably applied with a stopwatch. On the floor at William's feet lay two industrial trash bags, a nest of neon gloves, and two aluminum grabbers that clicked with satisfying menace when you squeezed the handles.

"Community service," Nick said cheerfully, checking their buckles like a pilot before takeoff. "We'll make Squire Park sparkle and then—if we're civil and productive—Summer's Café. Pastries are a privilege, not a right."

"Praise be," Bobby said, already seatbelted like a hostage.

They rolled out. The Harrison Home slipped behind them; the city assembled itself ahead—rowhouses like teeth, the river glancing sun back into eyes, a billboard for a mattress sale pretending to be destiny.

Squire Park lived in William's body like a scar. As they turned in under the lopsided arch, his chest pinged hard and low, and memory surged—dirt under his nails, onion skin in the dugout sink, Mr. E's laugh a curl of smoke, his mother's voice saying keep, keep, keep when he wanted to throw away the broken things.

"Hey, Mr. Wright?" William said, the question catching on the way out. "That case—John Stiles and Sam Springer—"

"Snacks," Bobby blurted. "Do they have the good croissants or the fake buttery ones?"

"After the cleanup," Nick said, a judge's gavel in the rearview. "We earn our sugar."

William tried again. "The case. Is it—"

Nick's phone chimed. He glanced at the screen. A small cloud darkened his face; he thumbed the call on speaker, then off again, apologetic. "Gimme a second." He hit accept and sighed. "Eldorado."

A muffled voice spilled into the car—oil-smooth and too amused. William didn't need the other half to sketch the conversation: reunion, guilt with a wink, remember when. Nick's replies were tired but civil, the language of someone who remembered love and refused to hate.

"I'll go," Nick said finally, voice flat. "Yes. Fine. No tux. No bit where we pretend you weren't insufferable at seventeen. I'm hanging up now."

He ended the call, exhaled, and tried on a smile. "High school," he said to the windshield. "Some people keep it like a photo in their wallet. Some of us keep it like a rash." He flicked a glance at the rearview. "Eldorado remembers it better than me. Hard not to when your dad's security firm paid for every dance."

William watched the world blur past: a faded mural of hands; an empty corner where a bodega had been; the gravel path to the abandoned amusement park cutting a gray wound through weeds. Bobby followed his eye and smirked.

"Isn't that where they found you?" he asked. "With that hobo girl?"

William turned before he thought. "Don't call her that."

Bobby's eyebrows climbed. "Touchy."

"She took care of people," William said, the words arriving steady from somewhere deeper than anger. The amusement park's gates hung open in his peripheral vision; in memory, Casandra stood there with a flashlight, her hair backlit lemon-yellow by somebody else's generator. "Her and Mr. E—if we needed heat, they found it; if we needed wires, they knew the ones death wouldn't chew through. They weren't hobos. They were the reason the lights came on."

Bobby looked at him, then away, chastened by something he didn't want to name. "Okay," he said, dismissive but softer. "Okay."

They pulled into Squire Park and found it hungover. Beer cans glittered under picnic tables like ugly confetti; paper plates skittered on a breeze that did not care for dignity. A banner still flapped on the bandshell, half peeled: SUMMER COVER FEST! featuring 10 ½ Boatmen (Twenty One Pilots tribute), Robert Undead (Rob Zombie tribute), ZAPP! (AC/DCish). A plastic skeleton lay face-down on the grass, possibly a casualty of Robert Undead's encore.

Nick parked near a wooden table with a view of the bandshell and the pond. He popped the trunk, distributed gloves and grabbers like party favors, and set a battered briefcase on the bench where he could work and watch.

“Bandshell perimeter’s yours,” he said, pointing. “You can say ‘ew’—you can even sing about it—but you will bag every chip bag that utters your name.”

“Yes, sir,” Bobby said, mock-military. He snapped his grabber like a snare.

They got to work. Trash is an honest enemy; it tells you how people spend their joy and where they leave it when they’re done. William snagged a wad of napkins that had decided to be a bird, then a raft of soda cups sailing nowhere. He kept one eye on Nick, hunched over the briefcase at the picnic table, phone pressed to his ear, legal pad absorbing scribbles. He tried to catalog the moment: location, angle of the sun, the way the gray in Nick’s hair was a map of years spent being good in bad rooms.

“So,” Bobby said, easing back into the abandoned conversation like checking water with a toe. “Chrono Trigger is time travel with feelings. Like, you save a cavewoman and a robot and then do taxes with the apocalypse. EarthBound’s different. It looks dumb—no offense—but it’s about being brave when everyone says you’re not allowed to be. Like... you stand outside your house with a bat and fight the idea that you can’t.”

William smiled, shoulders loosening a fraction. “Yeah.”

“Favorite part?” Bobby asked, pretending he didn’t care about the answer as if the answer didn’t matter as much as oxygen.

“When you call your dad to save,” William said immediately. “And he just... picks up.”

Bobby’s eyes flicked to Nick across the grass. “Yeah,” he said, voice softening enough to show his age. “Yeah.”

They cleaned in companionable silence for four breaths.

“Sorry about your nose,” William said.

Bobby readjusted the grabber. “I’ll live.”

“And I’m not letting you rewrite what happened,” William added, because the truce had to know the truth to be worth anything. “You didn’t help him.”

Bobby’s jaw worked. “I know,” he said. It was a hard admission and a small one both. “I’ll... try to be better. Or whatever.”

“Like a good custom ROM,” William said.

Bobby snorted. “Nerd.”

They worked. Between them grew a lopsided, useful bridge: apologies, a shared language, a promise made in the dialect of half-picked-up trash.

“So,” Bobby said, eyes on the grass, voice threaded with curiosity he could no longer pretend he didn’t feel. “Your freak abilities. They... real?”

William considered the pond, the phone under his pillow those first nights, the way Sabrina had made dead machines flinch to life, the way Chico had blinked and brought a nurse back with him, the way Rohan’s bones had voted to remain. He wasn’t ready for a speech. He was too tired for a lie.

“They’re called Sparks,” he said. “Everyone has something. Most people never hear it. Some of us did.”

Bobby’s grin finally broke free. “Like a chakra mode,” he said, delighted to translate magic into fandom. “Naruto stuff. Hidden leaf—open your eight gates—yee-haw.”

“Please don’t yee-haw,” William said, but he was laughing when he said it.

They lugged two fat trash bags to the can, tied the throats with furious satisfaction, and trudged across the grass toward Nick’s table. Another man had joined him—tall, deliberate, hair combed like it had never rebelled a day in its life. Gunther, presumably, in a suit that made the picnic bench look like it owed him **money**.

“—what do you mean dropped?” Nick was saying, low but sharp.

Gunther spread his hands. “City solicitor called. Said no need to proceed. The mayor died three nights ago. Skiing upstate. Accident.”

Nick froze.

“Skiing,” he repeated slowly, like the word was made of glass.

Gunther nodded uneasily. “Hit a random tree. Tragic.”

Nick’s face didn’t change, but something behind his eyes sharpened.

“...He didn’t ski,” Nick said.

Gunther blinked. “What?”

“He hated the cold. Had that old knee injury from the fundraiser softball game.” Nick’s voice dropped. “He couldn’t even climb the courthouse steps without complaining.”

Gunther swallowed. “Well... official report says skiing.”

Nick stared at him like he was reading a deposition for the first time and finding all the lies.

“A wooden branch through the chest?” Nick asked. “At high speed? With his mobility?”

Gunther hesitated, looking uncomfortable with how uncomfortable Nick suddenly was.

“That’s what the report says. I’ll, uh... file the closure.”

Nick closed his eyes for a beat that lasted too long.

When he opened them, his calm had become a lid—tight and deliberate.

“Okay,” he said softly. “Thank you.”

Gunther left.

Nick continued standing there, staring at nothing, jaw tightening.

“Mayor Flynn didn’t ski,” he murmured to the empty open space.

“And someone wanted that case dead.”

He noticed the boys, slapped a smile on that almost fit, and clapped his hands as if the sound could move time. “Gentlemen. This is looking respectable. Take twenty. Walk the pond. Don’t feed the ducks anything that looks like Alka-Seltzer.”

“Copy,” Bobby said, because he couldn’t help himself.

William didn’t trust his voice. He nodded, turned, and started walking.

The bandshell receded. The pond acknowledged the breeze with polite ripples. A kid threw a Frisbee badly and cheered anyway. Somewhere, a dog barked in the key of middle-aged contentment.

In William, something unscrewed.

The path that had seemed so fragile but so clear—Nick meets Samantha at a ridiculous trial, they discover the truth, they become the shape of the story that makes him possible—had slammed shut with a sound his bones heard. The mayor was dead, the case was ash, and fate had shrugged like a clerk who didn’t care that you’d stood in line for hours.

He thought of Rohan on the concrete and the way the universe had said not today. He thought of Sabrina listening to a dead computer sing. He thought of Chico returning with a nurse and no time lost between leaving and arrival. He thought of his mother’s hands, of Jessica’s steady palm between his shoulders, of Snakes’ voice saying endings don’t happen if I can help it, kid.

What if no Spark was enough? What if he’d bent the timeline until it broke, the way you bend a plastic spoon until it goes white where it’s going to give, and then it does?

He stopped on the path without meaning to. The pond lay ahead like an eye.

A warmth bloomed in his chest.

It was not the shy hum that announced Sabrina's gift. It was not the quicksilver surge that had ridden Chico's veins. It was not the sympathetic chord that had rung through him when Rohan repaired. This was a sunrise trapped under his sternum. It pressed outward, asking doors to open. It was familiar, in the way the smell of onions in a dugout is familiar, in the way a hand on the back that says breathe is familiar. It felt like his mother's light, remembered and made new. It did not ask for permission; it asked for attention.

He followed it.

Down the path, over a scab of cracked asphalt, past the willow that pretended to be sad but secretly loved being dramatic. The warmth tugged left; he obeyed because obeying felt like relief.

He reached the pond's edge and saw her.

She was seated on a bench where the path widened, a paperback open in her lap, one foot tucked under, the other tapping lightly to music only she could hear. Her clothes were neat in the way of people who iron because it makes their thoughts stack straight. A cardigan the color of library carpet. A skirt with an honest hem. Hair pinned like a decision. She looked like she had a planner and three pens, and all three worked.

She turned a page, and the light in his chest answered as if she had called it by name.

William did not recognize her face. That was impossible. He knew every line of his mother's smile, the way her mouth quirked when she decided she'd win and anybody who disagreed would be tired later. This girl wasn't that. She had a different chin, a different freckle constellation, a posture that apologized for taking up space even while refusing to yield it. But the Spark inside him reached for the Spark inside her the way magnets would if magnets could feel surprise.

He took one step closer and stopped because the world had narrowed to the space between his next inhale and whatever this was.

She had not seen him. Not yet. The bench bracket had rusted prettily; the water commuting past the birch trunks carried a film of pollen like fairy dust for kids who never grew up. Across the way, Nick and Gunther were figures with hands. Bobby ambled a polite distance behind, pretending not to keep watch, the bag of community-service trash gloved to his fist like a promise he'd unexpectedly kept.

William's heart knocked once, twice, three times in his throat. The warmth in his ribs rose like a chord trying to lift a roof. The pond made a small sound against the concrete lip, a kiss or a warning.

He did not know her name. He knew her.

The future had just folded in the middle like a map.

He stood at the water's edge, every muscle listening, and felt the world shiver on the brink of becoming something else.