Tony thumbed the transmit button on his walkie. “Think we’re almost done here.”

Static crackled through the vast abandoned warehouse.

Somewhere beyond rows of rusting shelves and collapsed machinery, Martin’s voice answered. “Yeah. Almost done syncing the Surges at my end. One more to go.”

The transmission echoed back through the dark, distorted by rusted steel and empty concrete until it sounded like a stranger answering.

“Place looks ready to collapse any minute,” Martin added.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “You bring us to the nicest places, my friend.”

“Friday treat,” Martin said, nudging aside a pair of rats scuttling across the floor. “As I said earlier, this place definitely has a history. A lot of bad things went down in here. You can almost feel it. Fascinating…”

He tapped his wrist-mounted monitor. “High readings. We definitely stand a chance of seeing something in here. Entity exposure.”

Tony swept his torch across the yawning interior. It felt alive—not empty, but aware, as if the shadows themselves were watching. He aimed the beam toward an unusually dark corner; the black was so dense the light seemed to vanish inside it. A chill crept up his spine.

He stepped slowly toward it. “Hello?” he whispered into the dark.

Nothing. He shook his head, cleared his throat, and keyed his mic again. “Kieran, you there?”

A moment of white noise answered.

“…Yeah, man,” Kieran said. “Living the dream.”

Kneeling on the cold concrete a few aisles over, Kieran set down a round metallic device with a dull clunk. He stepped back and clicked a button on his remote.

The device hummed, vibrating faintly, and the shadows in the corners seemed to twitch.

It sparked—once, twice—then settled into a low, unnatural whine. A pale, sickly light pulsed outward, barely pushing back the surrounding void.

“That’s the last one on my end,” he said. “I’m heading out. Place gives me the creeps.”

He turned—then froze.

Above him, something creaked. His eyes snapped up as a tattered tarp stretched across a gap in the roof as it shifted in the wind.

Just the breeze.

“Way to spend a Friday night,” he muttered.

He backed away toward the broken doorway, not chancing turning his back until he hit the crisp night air outside.

To steady his nerves, he clicked the comms: “What comes once in a minute, twice in a moment… but never in a thousand years?”

A new voice—Latina and female—cut in. “The letter M. Same as the last time. And the time before this.”

Tony chuckled over the line. “Kate—how are you and Alex doing in the offices?”

“Yeah, just a few more, Gran Jefe,” Kate replied.

Inside the office area, dust lay like a second skin over the abandoned desks. Kate peeked through an interior doorway. Alex was kneeling in the corner placing another of the round metallic devices on the floor, his headphones blaring so loud the bass leaked across the room.

“Alex?” she said.

No response.

She rolled her eyes.

“Alex!”

Nothing.

“Son of a bitch,” Kate muttered. She snatched an old hardcover off a desk and lobbed it at his shoulder.

Alex jumped, yanking off the headset. “What the hell, Kate? You almost hit the Surge!” he hissed, pointing at the device. “Dangerous!”

“I was shouting for you from right next door!” she said. “¡Presta atención!”

He shook his head, confused.

She tapped her temple. “Pay attention, man!” she shouted. “I thought you were learning Spanish!”

Alex offered a grin, tapping his ear. “I am… chica bonita. Eh?”

“Not the same, man. You don’t even understand the songs you’re listening to.”

She walked back to her station as Alex went right back to humming under his breath: “No entiendo todo, pero suena bien…”

She smiled despite herself, pulling one of the Surge devices from her rucksack. “Why do you do this to yourself, Katia?” she whispered.

Martin’s voice crackled through the channel. “State visibility is high in here… highest I’ve ever recorded locally.” A pause, followed by the faint click of his wrist monitor. “Is this right? This would make the whole place a Void Three. Tom is going to lose his mind.”

“That’s great, Martin,” said Tony.

Kieran, now leaning against the crew’s white van outside, chuckled into his mic. “Martin, that’s fascinating, but I’m starting to understand why you can’t get laid, dude.”

Martin swept his torch across the vast darkness of the warehouse. “Give me something before I leave. After all these years. Entity visibility. Come on,” he muttered, not even realising he was still transmitting.

Kate spoke up. “But that’s dangerous, right?”

Martin nodded to himself. “That’s the theory… but that’s what makes it so exciting.”

He stared at the sensor on his wrist, muttering under his breath. “The city grid flagged this warehouse two hours ago, but this confirms it locally. Magnetometers, thermal drift, passive EM bleed… they’re all spiking.”

He slowly scanned the warehouse with his torch. “This place is saturated. Be interesting to see if the Surges make much of a difference.”

He clicked the walkie again. “Hey, Kieran. You know something? I did go on a date recently.”

Kieran huffed a laugh. “Shut the front door. Who was the poor soul?”

Martin lifted his walkie to reply, but Kate chimed in: “Hey, Kieran,” she said. “Don’t be a prick, man. Martin, how did it go?”

Martin nodded to himself again. “Pretty well. Think she really got me. Told her one of my best chemistry jokes.”

Tony’s voice came over the speaker: “I bet she loved that.”

The walkie speaker rasped with interference.

Then Martin said: “Actually… there was no reaction. Get it?”

A heavy beat of radio silence followed.

Then Kieran burst out laughing. “No way that was supposed to be a joke, Martin.”

Kate laughed. “It was cute, Martin. I loved it, man.”

Martin smiled to himself. “I know, right?”

He headed toward the exit. “I’m all done. Heading out.”

The signal stuttered as Tony spoke: “Yeah… one… me too.”

Outside, Kieran shook his head with a smile as Martin approached him.

“It’s a good joke,” Martin insisted.

Tony joined them. “All done?”

Martin gave a thumbs up. “Let’s try it out.”

Tony raised his walkie. “Okay, we’re done with the packing and storage areas. Anyone inside those sections?”

“We’re good,” Kate replied. “We are still in the offices.”

“Great,” Martin said, climbing into the van. He rubbed his hands together. “Let’s see if this works.”

He dropped into a small seat and clacked away at a computer mounted inside the van. His fingers trembled with excitement.

“On three… two… one.”

A sharp hum surged through the ground—electric, deep enough to vibrate through bone.

Then… silence.

Heavy.

Expectant.

“Did it work?” Tony asked, stepping up to the back of the van alongside Kieran.

Martin stared at the screen, pale light flickering across his glasses. “All Surges detonated. State visibility dropped by… roughly fifty percent.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Lower than previous tests, but given the baseline saturation here, that makes sense.”

“So what’s the verdict?” Tony asked.

“We need to boost the Surge unit capacity.” Martin nodded, keying his walkie. “Kate, sync complete. Fifty percent reduction in packing and storage.”

“Felt it clear over here,” Kate replied through a patch of light static. “Like sitting in Alex’s car when he’s cranking the subwoofers.”

Tony grinned. “Yeah… guy’s gonna be deaf before his next birthday.”

“He’ll be deaf by the end of the night if he keeps it up,” Kate shot back.

Martin unbuckled from the console and grabbed his kit. “We’re going to do a quick sweep of the synced zones to verify the local readings, then we’ll meet you in the offices.”

“No hay problema,” Kate replied.

She lowered the walkie. Exhaling a tired breath, she wiped a streak of dust from her cheek and turned toward the adjoining room.

“Alex! You done?”

Silence. Only the distant, faint thump of his music leaked into the corridor.

She marched into the doorway. The corner where he’d been kneeling was empty. His rucksack sat open on the floor, straps sprawling like dead spider legs, but the room itself was deserted.

“What the hell?” she murmured, stepping inside. “Alex!” she shouted louder. “Where the hell are you, man?”

She stepped out into the corridor—a long, linear parade of identical glass-fronted offices stretching off into the dark.

“Alex?” she called again, her voice dropping an octave as the vast, heavy stillness of the floor pressed back against her.

She snatched the walkie off her belt. “Any of you seen Alex?”

Static hissed back at her.

“No. He’s with you, right?” Tony’s voice came through, slightly distorted.

Kate swept her torch down the hall. Peeling paint curled from the walls in long strips, and the dark inside the unlit offices looked thick, almost solid.

“He was.”

“No sign of him out here,” Martin chimed in.

Kieran’s laugh crackled over the speaker, words mixed with interference. “…What … do with him, Kate?”

“I didn’t do anything,” she snapped, her eyes tracking the floor for footprints in the dust. “He was in the next office… now he’s gone.”

She let out a sharp breath, trying to shake off the sudden, prickling sensation at the back of her neck.

“I’m going to check all the offices. He can’t hear for shit with those big headphones on.”

“Hokey dokey,” Martin replied cheerfully. “We need to try not to be too long. This building is abandoned but…”

The transmission went cold for a second before she heard Martin finish: “… technically trespassing.”

Kate clicked the walkie off and secured it to her harness. “Alex, quit messing me about, man,” she grumbled into the empty hallway.

Her boots crunched over shattered glass and grit as she moved cautiously down the corridor, the beam of her torch cutting a narrow cone through the gloom. Dust motes drifted lazily in the light like floating ash. Faded safety posters curled from the walls, their bold warning slogans degraded into peeling nonsense.

With every step she took, the quiet seemed to compound. The sound of her own footfalls felt unnaturally loud, swallowed almost immediately by the dense air.

Scratch.

Kate froze. The sound had come from somewhere ahead—a faint, rhythmic scraping against concrete. “Alex? That you?”

She eased up to the doorway of the fifth and final office. The air here felt subtly different—colder, thicker.

She reached for the door, pushing it open inch by inch. The dry hinges shrieked in protest.

Crunch.

Her boot came down on a fragment of glass.

In a flash of motion, a high-pitched shriek tore through the room. A shadowy shape exploded from beneath an overturned desk, shooting past her ankles and vanishing down the dark hallway.

“Fuck!” Kate screamed, jumping back and slamming her shoulders against the wall.

Her heart hammered against her ribs before the reality set in. She let out a ragged, breathless laugh. “A cat. A fucking cat!”

Shaking her head, she shone her torch into the office. Overturned chairs, a shattered CRT monitor, scattered papers—nothing else.

“What the hell went down in here?” she whispered to the empty room.

She turned and slowly retraced her steps toward the office where Alex had set his last Surge. The joke felt stale now. The dark seemed to be pressing closer, the beam of her torch struggling to slice through it with the same clarity as before.

She unclipped her walkie again. “Still can’t find Alex. I need to get out. This place is giving me the shivers.”

Static.

Blank, hollow static.

“Hello? Has he turned up? Any of you seen him?”

Nothing. Just the low, rushing hum of dead air.

She reached the office threshold. “What the hell?” she breathed.

The doorway opened into blackness so absolute the beam of her torch flattened against it, failing to illuminate the far wall she’d been looking at a few minutes ago. She smacked the side of the torch against her palm, but the light was fine—it was the room itself that had gone wrong. The air inside looked almost curdled.

Footsteps echoed behind her.

Kate whirled around. Alex walked out from the corridor haze, his headphones slung around his neck, blaring a tinny, unintelligible bassline.

Kate let out a massive breath of relief, her irritation surging back to mask the fear. “Where the hell did you go, man? I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

He didn't answer. He didn't even turn his head. He just walked right past her, stepping directly into the darkened room.

“Hey!” she shouted, turning to follow him.

Alex reached down, pulled his headphones off completely, and looked around the empty space with a subtle frown. “Ah… come on, man,” he muttered to himself. “Where did you go?”

Kate stopped in her tracks. The air in her lungs turned to ice.

Alex turned around. He walked back toward the corridor—toward her.

“Are you serious?” Kate yelled, stepping directly into his path. “Alex!”

He stopped two feet in front of her. Slowly, his gaze drifted up.

His eyes passed straight through her face, staring blankly at the empty hallway behind her.

Kate froze. Every instinct in her body screamed that something had fundamentally torn.

“Hey!” she whispered, her voice trembling as she snapped her fingers an inch from his nose.

Nothing. Not even a blink.

Alex lifted his walkie-talkie to his mouth. “Any of you seen Kate? Swept all of the offices. No sign of her.”

Kate’s jaw dropped. The blood drained entirely from her face.

“A-Alex…”

Panic hit her like a wave of freezing water.

“Alex… can you see me?”

The world around her began to dull. The ambient noise of his headphones faded into a muffled, underwater thrum. Alex stepped around her, his outline softening, his edges bleeding into the shadow as he walked further down the hall.

Hands shaking violently, Kate raised her walkie. “I think something’s wrong,” she stammered, her breath coming in ragged gasps. “Alex can’t see me. It’s like…”

She couldn't bring herself to say it out loud.

“Let’s meet outside,” she whispered.

Static crackled softly, indifferent and far away.

“I’ll go outside,” she told herself.

She turned around, but the hallway was gone. The light from her torch didn't bounce off walls any longer; it simply died three inches past the lens. The darkness was total, physical, and suffocating.

She reached out blindly, taking a slow step forward. “Guys… I—I think I need help. There is something not right in this place.”

Static.

Then, faint and echoing as if from the bottom of a deep well, she heard them. Voices. Tony. Martin. Nearby, yet impossible to reach.

“Hello? Tony? Martin? Anybody?”

She opened her mouth to call out again, but no sound came. Her vocal cords moved, her throat constricted, but the air produced nothing.

Help, she tried to say.

Silence.

“HELP ME!” she screamed with everything left in her lungs, but the sound died in her throat. The darkness didn't echo. It drank the sound instantly, pressing against her eardrums with a sickening, crushing weight. The only thing left in the world was the frantic, violent thudding of her own heart against her ribs.

The distant voices of the team drifted further away, dissolving into the abyss.

Kate stumbled forward, her hands clawing at empty space, desperate to touch a brick, a doorframe, a person—anything real.

Nothing.

Her breathing broke into sharp, silent gasps.

Stay calm, Katia.

Her mother’s voice leaked out from some distant corner of her mind.

No need to be afraid of the dark.

Then another memory slammed into her—the smell of old varnish, the heavy click of a latch, tiny fists hammering frantically against a dark cupboard door while music and laughter carried on downstairs.

Nobody hearing her.

Mummy, please! I can’t get out!

She remembered the exact moment she had stopped screaming, realizing that nobody was coming. The screams had become nothing more than noise inside her own head.

Kate’s knees gave out. She hit the floor, though she couldn’t even feel the concrete beneath her. Hot tears spilled over her cheeks, cutting clean lines through the dust on her face—the first tears she had shed in years.

The dark pulled everything away. Sight, sound, touch, direction.

She was completely, utterly alone.

“Help…” she whispered inside her own mind.

And then, the blackness swallowed her whole.

Alex stepped back out into the main office corridor, shoving his walkie to his mouth.

“Still can’t find Kate. She turned up with any of you guys?”

Static.

“No, she’s not out here,” Tony’s voice replied. “Alex, you playing around?”

Alex frowned, his chest tightening with genuine frustration. “No, man. I’m not playing around. I’m going to check central assembly. Perhaps she got lost or something.”

Kieran chimed in, annoyed: “Why the hell would she have gone there? Will you just find each other already and get out here?”

Alex was about to reply, but Kieran continued: “Martin has kindly decided that now is the time to confess that we are, in fact, actually committing a crime. So… get out here already.”

Finally Alex snapped back: “That’s what I’m trying to do, man!”

A few seconds of harsh white noise filled the line before Martin’s authoritative tone cut through. “Do not go to central assembly. I gave explicit instructions to avoid it. Too hazardous. The structure is unstable—old machinery, abandoned chemicals, exposed high-voltage bleed. It’s dangerous.”

“I won’t spend long in there. Just a quick check.”

“Alex,” Tony said, his voice dropping into his command tone. “You know the drill. Meet us back out here. That is an order.”

Alex lowered the walkie, looking back down the pitch-black hallway. “You’re not the boss of me, man,” he muttered bitterly. “Told you that too many times.”

He clicked the volume dial on the walkie all the way down, muting the chatter, and turned back toward the end of the corridor.

He raised his torch. The beam cut weakly through the settling dust.

“Kate?” he called softly.

He moved past the final office, reaching the end of the line. A massive, industrial steel door stood before him, streaked with decades of rust and grime. Stencilled across the centre in faded yellow paint were the words: **CENTRAL ASSEMBLY FLOOR**.

Alex pushed against the heavy iron crash-bar, just enough to squeeze through. The door gave way with a groan of tortured metal.

Beyond it lay a void.

“Kate?”

He stepped over the threshold onto the assembly floor.

The cavernous scale of the room swallowed him instantly. His torch beam felt useless here, pushing a fragile needle of light into an endless, subterranean cavern. Overhead, massive rusted gantries hung like forgotten skeletons. Ancient conveyor belts stretched across the floor like dead black rivers.

“Kate?” he called again, keeping his voice low, instinctively afraid to wake whatever slept in a place this big.

Only the rhythmic crunch of his own boots against the grit answered him.

He wove his way through rows of silent, dead machinery, sweeping the light left and right.

Nothing.

No movement. No heat. Just cold, dead space.

He took three more steps—each bootfall heavy against the concrete.

Thump.

“Hello?”

Clang.

Alex froze, his torch snapping toward the sound. “The fuck was that?” he whispered to himself, stepping closer into the gloom.

Clang…

“Who’s there?” Alex shouted, his voice cracking. He stepped deeper into the centre of the floor, right into the pool of old, volatile chemicals and leaked motor oil that had settled beneath the presses over decades.

His torch beam jittered as his hands began to shake. His eyes widened, fixing on the dark space ahead.

“What the hell?” he whispered.

Meanwhile, back outside, Tony, Martin, and Kieran gathered around the open doors of the van.

Tony pressed the transmit button on his walkie once again. “Alex, where are you? Alex?”

He lowered the radio, jaw tight. “What the hell is going on?”

Kieran sighed, rolling his shoulders. “If Alex is messing about again, I’m going to stick my boot up his arse, I swear.”

He shook his head, staring toward the darkened building.

“He takes this whole thing as a joke. You know that, right?”

Tony flicked his gaze toward Martin. “We’d better check it out.”

Martin nodded.

“Great… just great,” Kieran muttered, glaring at Martin. “The things I do for you and Tom and your little obsession.”

He unhooked his torch and clicked it on.

They approached the building again, stepping through the loading bay entrance as their beams sliced through the vast darkness.

Tony led the way. “Alex?” he called into the gloom.

Only silence answered.

The three men crossed the packing area and entered the corridor leading toward the offices. Their torch beams swept across rows of abandoned desks, shattered

glass, and peeling paint. Office doors hung open like empty mouths, each room beyond swallowed by shadow.

Kieran shook his head. “I’m telling you now, if he’s hiding just to wind us up again…”

“Keep moving,” Tony cut in.

They checked each office as they passed.

Empty.

The next.

Nothing.

Another.

Still nothing—only dust, overturned furniture, and suffocating quiet.

By the time they reached the end of the corridor, the rusted steel door stood before them, resting partially open.

CENTRAL ASSEMBLY FLOOR.

The faded yellow lettering was barely visible beneath decades of grime.

Tony frowned. “Why would he have gone this far?”

“We’re going to have to check,” Martin said softly.

Then—

Clang.

The sharp metallic strike echoed from somewhere deep beyond the door. The three men froze instantly.

“The fuck was that?” Kieran breathed.

Clang…

Then silence.

Kieran looked at Tony. “Someone’s in there.”

“Alex?” Tony called, stepping closer to the gap.

No reply.

A slow, grinding noise drifted through the metal doorway—like something immensely heavy being dragged across raw concrete.

Then—

WHOOMPH!

A brilliant, violent bloom of orange light burst to life deep inside the assembly floor.

The rusted doorway flashed with dancing firelight, shadows stretching and warping across the corridor. A sudden wave of intense heat rolled out to meet them.

“What the hell!” Kieran yelled, throwing a hand up to shield his eyes.

Tony shoved the heavy steel door fully open.

The cavernous assembly hall stretched endlessly before them. Ancient conveyor belts crisscrossed the factory floor like dead rivers, suddenly illuminated by roaring fire. Flames crawled greedily across spilled oil and dry debris, climbing rusted machinery and throwing huge, distorted shadows against the walls. Thick, oily smoke coiled upward into a void so deep the ceiling remained completely hidden.

“Alex!” Tony roared.

His voice was instantly swallowed by the roar of the blaze.

The three men pushed forward into the room, navigating the labyrinth of silent, burning machines. Within seconds, smoke choked the air around them, wrapping them in heat and blinding orange glare.

They searched frantically, screaming for Alex and Kate over the crackle of the fire.

Then, through a wall of shifting flames near the base of an enormous hydraulic press, Martin caught sight of a silhouette. Someone was on their knees.

“Over there!” Martin yelled, pointing through the smoke.

They surged forward. As they drew close, the kneeling figure slowly lifted its head.

It wasn’t Alex.

It was a stranger, his face slick with dark blood. The man’s lips moved, his voice somehow cutting through the roar of the fire.

“He’s gone.”

“Where is he?” Tony yelled, stepping toward him, but a fresh gust of oxygen fed the blaze between them, sending a sheet of fire surging upward to block their path.

The stranger stared right through the wall of fire, his expression hollow. “Help me,” he said.

“Alex! Kate!” Tony shouted past him into the gloom.

The stranger shook his head, his voice eerie and detached. “Do you not see me?”

Martin froze.

For a moment, he simply stared at the man.

He could see him.

He could see the blood.

The fear.

But the heat was becoming unbearable. The fire was spreading. Tony, Kieran—they were already struggling to breathe.

Martin took a step back.

The stranger’s eyes remained fixed on him. “Please.”

Kieran jolted Martin from the moment. “This place is falling apart!”

With that, Martin looked away from the figure.

He grabbed the back of Tony’s jacket, pulling him hard away from the heat. “We’ve got to get out of here!” he yelled.

Kieran backed him up, waving his arm frantically toward the exit. “Let’s go!”

“We’re not leaving until we find them!” Tony protested, fighting against Martin's grip.

“We’re going to die in here, Tony!” Kieran screamed.

As the heat became unbearable, the flames surging higher around their escape route, Tony had no choice. They began scrambling back toward the corridor.

As they retreated, Martin instinctively glanced over his shoulder.

Through the roaring orange glare, he saw the bloodied figure dissolve back into the shrouded darkness beyond the fire.

And right behind him, deep in the unlit abyss where the firelight couldn't reach, Martin was certain he saw something incomprehensible looking back at him…