

Cipher: Breach in Time

Groom Lake, Nevada – June 14, 1955, 02:00 Hours

Stars blinked above the Nevada desert, timeless and unreadable. Moonlight washed over Hangar 18 at Area 51, its silhouette rising like a fortress chiseled from silence. Static hung thick in the air as Private Timothy Rustand sat alone in the guard shack on the facility's outer edge.

Rustand hunched in his chair and took a quick swig of lukewarm coffee from a tin military-issue cup. "Just once I'd like it to stay hot," he muttered. He wiped his lips on his sleeve, eyes forced wide for a moment.

Tim tapped the Morse key, logging his hourly check-in:

— . . . — — — — / ... - . - - .. — - - / . - . . . — - . - . - -
 / . - / - . - - . - . - - / .. / ... - - - — / . - —
 - . — — ... / . - / - . - - . - .

“Groom Station Alpha. All clear. I say again: all clear,” he sent, while repeating the words aloud, an old habit from tech school.

Each *dit* and *dah* drilled into the silence. More reflex than thought now. Each chirp reminded him of everything he wasn't cleared to know.

He paused, massaging his shoulder to ease his tension. Through the window, the black and diamond-studded sky implied eternity.

Dit-dah-dit, dah-ditty-dit, dah dit-dit.

Another series of taps echoed through the shack. This time, no reply came. The silence stretched. Too precise, too sterile. Not human.

“HQ? You CC?” Tim clattered back. “Did you RX that last MSG?”

The radio crackled, then flatlined into static, as if the silence had swallowed the reply.

Tim frowned and reached for the antenna tuner. The moment he twisted the dial, the radio spat out a sharp burst of static, followed by an odd pattern.

Dah. Dit-dit. Dah-dah.

He froze, recognizing the letters. But this wasn't standard

protocol. The signal repeated, deliberate, almost... patient.

A calibration error perhaps, or someone having fun. But unease prickled the back of his neck.

Curiosity got the better of him. He tapped out a response, mimicking the pattern he'd heard. The words didn't get verbalized this time. He couldn't bring himself to say them aloud.

Dit-dah-dah ditty-dit-dit dah-dah-dah, Dit-dit ditty-dit, Dah ditty-dit-dit dit-dit ditty-dit?

Another pause, longer this time. The radio snapped alive with a piercing tone, sharp enough to cut bone, followed by a string of rapid, high-speed Morse. The dots and dashes blurred into an incomprehensible rush, far too fast for any human hand to send.

The lights flickered.

The hum deepened. Low, resonant, and unnatural. It rolled through the floor like distant machinery waking up. Tim stiffened, hand hovering near the console, as the desk shook beneath his wrist.

It stopped.

Abrupt and absolute. One moment a scream of code. The next, only the soft hiss of static, like nothing had ever happened.

“HQ this is Alpha,” Tim keyed. “Confirm ur RX.”

“RX Alpha. All clear,” Control keyed back.

Tim rubbed the back of his neck, forcing a shaky laugh. “Must be these old lines.” he complained. He reached for the logbook. But the taps had sounded almost rhythmic. It was as if the interference knew exactly what he was listening for. An echo he couldn’t shake, familiar but impossible. He scribbled a note:

“Anomalous transmission. Interference?”

He didn’t think about it again.

But out there, somewhere across the cold vastness of space, the first ripple had been sent.

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He scanned the horizon. The hangar loomed behind him like an impenetrable monolith, its heavy doors closed tight in silent vigil.

Rustand stepped out of the shack and made his way toward his partner. He shifted his weight. The rifle rested loosely in his grip as he approached Sergeant Frank Carter.

Carter flicked ash from his dying cigarette without looking

up. “You check in, kid?”

“Yeah,” Tim muttered. “Got some weird chatter back. Didn’t sound normal to me.” His curiosity weighed on him like the rifle strap on his shoulder. “I’ve got to ask,” Rustand ventured in a low, thoughtful tone, glancing toward his partner who was leaning on a weathered crate. “You ever think about what they’ve got sealed up in there?” Carter, his sharp features softened only by the flicker of a match as he re-lit his stubborn cigarette, raised a skeptical eyebrow. He took another long drag. “Nope. And I plan to keep it that way.”

Tim Rustand’s lips twitched, but he couldn’t keep his gaze from drifting toward the hangar. “Come on, Sarge. The security, the way they act so cagey... it’s not just aircraft in there, is it?” His tone carried the echoes legends and half-heard stories passed down among privates in hushed voices.

Carter’s expression hardened, and he exhaled a stream of smoke, his tone clipped and matter-of-fact. “You keep asking questions like that, and you’re going to find yourself guarding the back end of a supply depot. They’d assign you to watch paint dry if they thought you were too curious.” His voice, though light with humor, carried an undercurrent of caution. A warning born of years of following orders without question.

Rustand hesitated, shifting on his feet weighing the gravity of the conversation. “I don’t know. My dad swore there were stories. You know, about things we pulled out of the sky.

Machines that don't belong here." His words were soft, laced with an almost childlike wonder. A wonder that recalled evenings spent around a crackling radio, listening to tall tales of strange happenings.

Carter chuckled, his expression softening as he crushed his cigarette under his boot. "Stories are for people with time on their hands. Out here, you've got a job. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. The only thing flying around tonight is your imagination." His laugh was low and knowing, as if he'd heard a thousand such questions and learned to dismiss them with practiced ease.

Before Rustand could reply, a faint metallic sound, sharp and deliberate, interrupted them. It was a click that split the night's silence with uncanny precision.

Both men froze. Tim's knuckles went white on the rifle. "Did you hear that?" Carter scanned the dark. "Could be a coyote... but that didn't sound like teeth on wire." Rustand's heart hammered, and a wave of nausea mixed with disbelief overtook him as he staggered backward, unable to process the surreal split-second vision.

Carter straightened, his focus intensifying as his eyes scanned the dark horizon. "Stay alert. Could be nothing. Could be trouble." His words were clipped. Like a mantra recited on the edge of an unknown danger.

The wind whispered softly through the sand, carrying with it secrets of distant times and places. And then, time stuttered.

Rustand rested his hand against his side to catch his breath. He felt... vulnerable. For an instant, something painfully uncomfortable prickled at his senses. It was as if the world had skipped a frame, like a film reel that jumped, distorting reality. The distant buzz of the generators, a constant presence in the night, skipped a beat. A sudden, jarring break in the familiar background noise that made both men's skin prickle.

Rustand turned toward Carter, and what he saw defied logic. Carter was there, but he was not alone. In that split second, Rustand saw two Carters: one standing as he had been moments before, his fingers brushing the holster of his sidearm; the other, a ghostly, fractionally ahead version of Carter, who had already drawn his weapon, his mouth open as if to issue a silent, urgent warning.

Then: snap. In the blink of an eye, only one Carter remained.

But the moment lingered, like a scene replaying itself out of sync.

Rustand blinked rapidly, the sensation different from déjà vu - more like an intentional reset, as though reality had deliberately skipped. As if something wanted the moment to repeat, until someone noticed. He swallowed, uncertain whether the signal was watching him, or simply waiting.

It felt like reality skipped. Like something a professor once called 'spooky action,' only this wasn't theory. In that instant, Carter's inexplicable duplication and sudden erasure

felt like a ripple in one stretched fabric of reality. Distance and time no longer followed the rules.

Rustand froze. The hum of the generators faltered. Not only in sound, but in pressure. The air felt impossibly thick. It pressed around him as if he were moving underwater. Carter looked directly at him. His eyes were sharp, full of concern, as if he too had experienced something indescribable.

“Rustand, you all right?” Carter called out. The words reached him a second too late, like an echo from a half-remembered dream.

A low hum, deep and resonant, vibrated through the ground beneath him. Tim’s breath caught in his throat. The hum intensified, and the metal desk shuddered beside him. He noted with a mix of fear and incredulity that Carter’s posture had shifted, his fingers now brushing the grip of his sidearm. But Rustand swore he had already seen that exact moment unfold before his eyes. A cold, static-like sensation electrified his spine, feeling as though his body had skipped forward while he struggled to catch up. It was as if time itself had faltered, leaving him stranded between two seconds.

Rustand’s boots crunched once on the gravel, then stilled. He hadn’t taken another step, but the world around him had shifted, like a room that had been rearranged in the dark. The air didn’t shift. It bent. Ever so slightly. Like something had leaned in too close and pulled the world with it. He froze. The wind had been steady. Now it pushed back in tiny bursts, like it couldn’t make up its mind. There was a shimmer, like

the blinking of stars. And yet, not light. Not heat. Something else. Like space forgot what shape it was supposed to be. He looked at Carter, but Carter was still scanning forward, unaware. How was he not feeling this? Rustand's fingers curled tighter on the rifle grip.

"Something's... not right," he intoned. He wasn't sure who he was talking to.

The earpiece in his helmet buzzed, coughed, then died. Cold silence filled its place.

His left foot twitched. Not because he moved it. It had shifted forward, like someone had spliced out a frame of time and dropped him into the next.

He held his breath. Waited.

Then the shimmer passed again. This time, he felt it in his teeth.

His balance swayed. Not from motion, but from the weight of what he couldn't see.

Whatever this was, it hadn't merely touched him. It had folded reality around him. And it wasn't done yet.

The wind that had been a constant, gentle breeze, became a carrier of a strange echo of sounds that had not yet happened, the future and present intertwined. Then, in that eerie silence, Rustand heard Carter's voice again. Not once, but

twice. “Stay alert. Could be nothing. Could be trouble.”

Carter’s voice was first heard during the real-time conversation, but a second, nearly identical version of the message was received immediately after the first one, as if it had been sent as a ghost echo, as if someone had recorded it onto an audio tape and put it out of sync, poorly, yet in a rather chilling manner. Rustand stopped breathing, the panic was intense. He looked, expecting Carter to react with visible alarm, but the sergeant remained unfazed. He flicked his cigarette away and rubbed his temple as if nothing unusual had happened. “You hear that?” Rustand whispered, his voice trembling with a mixture of disbelief and fear.

“Hear what?” Carter replied with a scowl, his tone clipped and full of uncertainty.

Rustand’s boots betrayed him. The ground beneath his feet felt unsteady, not as if the earth was shifting or moving, but as if he was standing on a memory of the present and not the present itself. He blinked in rapid fire, confused, and found himself 10 feet in front of where he was moments before.

The sensation was surreal. The rifle strap dug into his shoulder. Rustand blinked, but the moment held still, as if reality hadn’t reloaded. His brain hit a wall. It wasn’t confusion, it was more like the whole world had been tilted and no one warned him.

His foot was forward. He hadn’t stepped.

“I... what?” he whispered.

His voice came out strained, like it belonged to someone else. He turned toward Carter, but Carter stood frozen in a way that didn’t look natural. Not stillness, but suspension. Like time had hiccuped.

Rustand reached for the ground to steady himself. His palm scraped the gravel as he caught himself, the pain snapping him back into the moment.

Then he was back. The same position. Same breath. Rifle clenched. A sharp pulse drummed behind his eyes. Something had snapped him into place, but it wasn’t gravity.

“Carter,” he croaked. “I was...”

The words broke apart as another ripple passed through the air.

Carter’s head lifted. He straightened fast, boots shifting back. His eyes locked on Rustand.

“You...” Carter forced out words. “You moved.”

“I didn’t,” Rustand muttered. “But I wasn’t here either.”

He heard it. It sounded absurd, even to him. But Carter didn’t question it. He had already drawn his sidearm.

Rustand didn’t move. He couldn’t trust the ground beneath

him.

Carter's face tightened. "You blinked. One second you were five feet ahead."

Rustand gave a small nod. "Felt like both. Like I stepped out of sync."

Then came a sound. A clean, deliberate click.

Not boots. Not gravel. Something cleaner. Intentional.

Carter turned sharply. His voice lowered. "That wasn't us."

Rustand stayed still. His mouth was dry.

A second click followed. Closer this time.

Their eyes met. No one spoke.

Then the shadows shifted.

Carter's voice was low, almost hushed. "Tell me you saw that."

Rustand didn't answer right away. "I saw it... I just don't know what I saw."

Carter shook his head, eyes scanning the horizon. "No time to process it. Not now."

Rustand exhaled shakily. “That was plain wrong.”

“Keep it together,” Carter said, though his voice betrayed a crack of unease. “We’ll deal with this nightmare later.”

Rustand nodded, trying to push the moment down, deep. “If there’s a later.”

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