



# LOST IN SPACE

ONLINE WEBSITE EDITION

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A Gurnerman book prepared for online reading

## THE GURNERMAN BIBLE

### Chapter One: The House

The house had the tired look of a place that had seen too many arguments and not enough fresh paint. Even in daylight it managed to feel nicotine-coloured, though nobody in the place smoked indoors anymore unless it was raining hard or they were in a mood foul enough to stop pretending they had standards. The wallpaper in the living room had once aimed for cream and ended up a kind of defeated yellow, the carpet held a history of ash marks and mystery stains, and the big old television in the corner looked like it had survived a small war and would probably survive another. The radiator clicked and sighed all winter like a man paid to hate his job, and the window above the front garden had a permanent film of grime that made even a normal afternoon look slightly cursed.

It was, in other words, exactly the sort of room in which the end of ordinary reality ought not to happen.

Fred Gurnerman was stretched along the settee like he had been dropped there by gravity and left to harden. He was tall enough that none of the furniture in the house quite suited him, broad enough to make every chair look temporary, and permanently burdened with the expression of a man who had already heard your idea and decided against it. He was not good-looking in the soft, organised way magazines like, but he had the sort of face people remembered. Hard cheekbones, heavy jaw, eyes that always looked one insult away from dismissal. Even when he was relaxed he gave the impression of being halfway through disapproving. His humour was like the rest of him: dry, stubborn, and so miserably well-timed it often took a moment to realise just how nasty he had been.

Tim Gurnerman, his younger brother, was sat cross-legged on the carpet by the coffee table, sorting through a little spread of stupidity with the concentration of a child building a bomb. He looked softer than Fred at first glance, less severe, easier in the face, but a lot of that was presentation. Tim had long ago learned that seeming a bit thick could be useful. People explained more when they thought you were a harmless idiot. They let things slip. They relaxed. Then Tim, who was clever in exactly the wrong way, would quietly walk off with the better end of the interaction while still looking like someone who had trouble with bus timetables. He could play daft because he understood daft from the inside, but there was always a sharpness beneath it, the kind that only appeared properly when he was building a plan or chasing a thought no one else would have been stupid enough to take seriously.

The brothers had spent their whole lives taking lumps out of each other. It was how they communicated, how they showed affection, how they tested whether the other one was still alive and worth the effort. Fred insulted Tim because Tim gave him opportunities every ten seconds. Tim insulted Fred because Fred reacted like an old dog with a hangover and the responses were nearly always worth it. They had the kind of relationship that would have sounded abusive to outsiders and comforting to them. They were not sentimental men. They would rather have swallowed a plug than sit down and tell each other they cared. Instead Fred kept an eye on Tim's stupid ideas with the sort of constant low-level vigilance other men reserve for suspicious neighbours, and Tim kept dragging Fred into situations neither of them had any business surviving.

That Friday night had begun like a hundred other Friday nights in the house: boredom, low funds, nothing good on television, and the long nagging sense that if they stayed sober the evening would be exactly as pointless as the week had been. It had rained on and off all afternoon, the sort of weak miserable rain that made the estate outside look even more temporary than usual. By six, the streetlights had come on, turning the wet pavement orange and sad. Somewhere a dog had been barking for nearly an hour. A car alarm went off twice and then gave up. Their mum was staying with

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an aunt for the weekend, which meant no one was about to come downstairs and start asking questions like, “Why does the room smell like a festival toilet?” or “Which one of you has burnt something again?” The house was theirs for the night, and that always improved the odds of disaster.

Tim had turned up just after eight with mushrooms wrapped in kitchen roll, a couple of tabs of acid sealed badly in cling film, and the expression of a man about to make the wrong evening sound like a terrific one.

“Tell me that isn’t what I think it is,” Fred had said, not because he objected morally but because he enjoyed starting from refusal.

Tim looked wounded. “It’s tea bags.”

Fred looked at the cling film. “Then your tea’s gone very wrong.”

Tim had put it all down on the table with the ceremonial seriousness of a village idiot laying out treasure. “Come on. We’re doing it properly tonight.”

Fred had lit a cigarette by the open window and looked over with slow contempt. “Your version of properly is why decent people install locks.”

Tim grinned. “You’re just scared you’ll see God and he’ll think you’re rude.”

Fred had taken a drag and shrugged. “If he’s worth meeting, he’ll know I’m right.”

That was how these things began with them. Not with yearning or spirituality, and certainly not with any of the fake profound nonsense people liked to spout after a comfortable middle-class mushroom trip in a nice cottage with blankets and herbal tea. Fred and Tim were not looking to discover themselves. They already knew themselves and did not particularly like the results. They were looking to be entertained, derailed, chemically removed from the same stale room and the same stale life for a few hours. Anything deeper than that would have embarrassed them.

The truth was that both brothers carried boredom like an untreated injury. Fred hid it under work, sarcasm and the constant impression that everyone around him was wasting oxygen inefficiently. Tim hid it under little schemes, stupid purchases, odd conversations and his endless appetite for hidden patterns. The estate they had grown up on had never seemed small to them when they were children. It had seemed infinite then, full of alleys, gardens, lampposts, cracked garages, older lads to avoid, shops to drift toward, and weird corners that looked important if you were the right age. By their twenties, though, it had shrunk. Every road now seemed to lead only to another version of the same week. Fred hated that quietly. Tim hated it noisily. Neither of them would have called what they wanted escape, but that was the word for it.

Tim laid the tabs flat on the table beside the mushrooms and looked up. “Go on then.”

Fred stared at them and then at his brother. “If this ends with you crying because the wallpaper’s breathing again, I’m leaving you to it.”

“That happened once.”

“It happened twice.”

“It definitely didn’t happen twice.”

“You apologised to a lampshade, Tim.”

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Tim laughed despite himself. "It looked judgemental."

Fred took the tab between two fingers. "Everything looks judgemental to you when you've done drugs."

"That's because I know I'm being watched."

Fred gave him a look. "By who?"

Tim popped his own tab on his tongue. "No idea. But they've got taste."

Fred muttered something about there being no hope for him and took his.

Outside, the rain thickened against the window. Inside, the radiator clicked like a countdown.

### Chapter Two: Bored Men and Bad Chemistry

The first hour passed the way these nights always seemed to pass at the start: too slowly, then all at once. They smoked, drank fizzy drinks that tasted of chemicals and old sugar, put rubbish on television and argued over it as if the quality of the evening depended on their commentary. Fred sat back with the loose-limbed confidence of a man who had taken worse things and not died, while Tim wandered in and out of the room every five minutes on pointless errands, as if the kitchen might suddenly contain revelation if checked often enough.

When the mushrooms began to creep up under the acid, the room seemed to soften around the edges without losing any of its ugliness. The corners went deeper. The yellow of the wallpaper started looking exaggerated, almost theatrical, like the house had overcommitted to being miserable. The carpet pile looked too alive, too directional, as if it had opinions about how feet ought to move across it. The television glow became more liquid. Tim stood in the doorway for a full minute just staring at the fruit bowl on the sideboard, then said, in absolute seriousness, "That banana's got bad energy."

Fred, sprawled on the settee with one leg hanging off, looked over. "You've got bad energy."

"No, listen," Tim said, walking toward the bowl and pointing. "Look at it."

Fred gave the banana a slow glance. "It's a banana."

"It knows."

Fred held out his hand. "Give me the remote before you start a feud with produce."

Tim snorted and chucked it at him. The remote bounced off Fred's chest and landed in the crease of the settee, where it always vanished like it had a little nest there. Fred fished it out with grim familiarity and turned the sound down because the presenter on whatever late-night documentary was on had developed the sort of voice that made murder sound reasonable. Rain ticked steadily against the glass, and every now and then the house made one of those old-house noises that is probably pipes settling but always sounds like somebody else having a careful think in the next room.

The drugs deepened. Colours did not explode so much as settle into the wrong hierarchy. The old lamp beside the chair seemed suddenly far more important than it had any right to be. The television screen looked less like a screen and more like a lit hole. Fred's trainers had become, in Tim's opinion, "aggressively shaped." Fred responded by asking whether Tim had ever considered remaining silent for just one minute out of respect for his own limitations. Tim laughed for a full

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thirty seconds at that, the sort of helpless laugh only drugs can turn into a whole-body event. Fred smirked in spite of himself, which was the closest he came to warmth without an injury involved.

By half ten the room no longer felt still. That was when Fred began to feel it too, though he would never have phrased it like that at the time. He would have said the room had started acting strange, as though it were a person making a poor effort at appearing normal. The curtains seemed to breathe even when the window was shut. The strip of darkness between the sideboard and the wall looked too deliberate. The glass cabinet door reflected the room with a half-second delay, or at least that was how it appeared to Tim, who kept checking and then shaking his head as if he'd caught someone lying badly. Fred's own body had begun to feel both heavier and less properly attached, like he was sitting inside himself from slightly too far back.

"Tell me honestly," Tim said at one point, sitting on the floor and looking up, "do you think the room's always been this weird and we've just never had the decency to notice?"

Fred rubbed at his face. "No. I think you've got mushrooms in your blood and half a chemistry set behind your eyes."

Tim leaned back on his hands and looked around. "Still though."

"Still nothing."

Tim nodded toward the television. "That's not normal static."

Fred looked. The programme had ended. The channel, either through signal failure or lack of respect, had slipped to a grainy mess of black and white snow with a faint hiss under it. There was nothing remarkable about that in itself. The aerial had been bad for years. Weather knocked it out. The wrong lorry going past too hard could probably have offended it into failure. But on that night, in that room, it seemed less accidental. The static looked textured, as if it had depth rather than randomness. Lines gathered and dispersed. Shapes almost formed.

"You're staring at dead air like it owes you money," Fred said.

Tim squinted. "I swear something's in it."

"So am I, and unfortunately that something is you."

Tim laughed, then stopped. "Nah, seriously."

Fred looked again, more because Tim's tone had changed than because he believed him. The hiss from the television seemed to have thickened. It was not louder. It was lower. Less like ordinary signal noise and more like a sound with machinery behind it. Fred frowned, sat up a bit straighter and listened.

Tim heard it too.

For a few seconds neither spoke. The room, already softened and made strange by the drugs, now seemed to draw inward around that one sound. The hiss had become a hum. Not full, not obvious, but there. A low mechanical vibration that didn't seem to come from the television alone. It was in the skirting board. In the floor under the coffee table. In the cheap framed picture of flowers their mum had refused to throw out even though nobody had ever liked it. Tim swallowed.

"You hear that."

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Fred did not answer straight away. He had gone very still, which was how Tim knew this was not just the usual drug chatter. Fred could laugh off most things, insult them, flatten them under dry contempt. When he went quiet like that it meant something had slipped past the usual defences.

“Yeah,” Fred said.

Tim sat forward. “That’s weird, though.”

Fred turned to him and gave him a long look. “That’s your summary, is it?”

Tim gestured vaguely at the room. “Well it is.”

The hum continued, steady now, patient in a way that made the skin at the back of Fred’s neck tighten. He glanced at the television again. The static was not random anymore. It was organising itself, not into pictures exactly but into arrangements. Dark bars. Clusters. Repeating marks.

Tim saw them at the same time. “What the fuck is that?”

Fred didn’t answer. He stood up too fast, clipped his shin on the table and swore hard enough to bend the tone of the room back toward normality for a second. Tim burst out laughing, unable to help it, tears springing instantly to his eyes the way they do when a trip catches you wrong. Fred grabbed his leg and muttered, “You laugh now, wait till the room kills us both.”

That only made Tim laugh harder.

And somehow that stupid little moment mattered. It mattered because it was the last cleanly ordinary thing that happened that night. After that, the house began to come apart in a way neither of them would ever quite explain properly afterward, even to each other.

The hum deepened.

The television screen darkened at its edges.

And on the far side of the living room, where the wall met the shadowed strip by the cabinet, the space between things seemed to open.

### Chapter Three: The Same Picture

People like to imagine hallucinations as private events. Even the language around them is solitary. You see things. You hear things. Your brain plays tricks. Your nerves misfire. Your body misunderstands chemistry and hands you nonsense dressed as experience. That framework works nicely right up until two men in the same grotty living room both go quiet at the same moment, both stare at the same patch of wall, and both start swearing for entirely valid reasons.

At first Fred thought the room had simply lost proportion. The far wall seemed further away than it should have been, and the strip of darkness between the cabinet and the wallpaper had become too straight, too deliberate. Then the wallpaper itself seemed to stop being a surface and started behaving like something draped over a depth it did not possess. He had just enough time to think, with absolute clarity, that Tim had talked them into chemical stupidity again, before the space opened properly.

Not like a door. Not with light. There was no blessed cinematic nonsense to it. It was uglier and much harder to dismiss. The room remained there. The lamp remained there. The tea mugs on the table remained there. But behind and through the ordinary shape of the wall there was now a corridor, metallic and narrow, stretching far beyond the dimensions of the house into a kind of dark

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that did not belong to suburban England. The lines of it were industrial rather than mystical. Panels. Seams. Dull strips of light. Repeated markings embedded at intervals along the walls. At the far end, framed by a narrowing perspective, hung something round, scarred and dimly lit, like a moon with a grudge.

Tim whispered, "Fred."

Fred did not move.

"Fred, are you—"

"Don't tell me what you're seeing."

Tim's mouth shut.

For a second all that could be heard was the hum and the rain on the window and the thin hiss of the television, which now sounded miles away despite being four feet from them. Fred turned his head very slowly, eyes still fixed forward.

"You say yours first," he said.

Tim swallowed. His face had changed. Not just because he was off his head, though he was. There was fear there now, proper fear, the kind that drags a laugh right out of a man.

"It's a corridor," Tim said. "Metal. Like... like inside a ship or something. There are symbols on the walls. And there's a planet or moon or whatever at the end."

Fred stared ahead for another few seconds. Then, in a flat voice that frightened Tim more than shouting would have done, he said, "Is it all burned-looking?"

Tim looked at him. "Yeah."

"Bruised?"

"Yeah."

"Like it's been knocked about?"

Tim nodded slowly. "Yeah."

Fred sat back down on the settee because his legs had very suddenly stopped being a guaranteed part of the evening. He laughed once, but there was no humour in it. It was the sound a man makes when his own brain has become less private than expected.

"Well," he said, rubbing a hand over his mouth, "that's a bad sign."

Tim was still staring at the corridor. "How are you seeing the same thing?"

"I was hoping you'd explain that."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the twat who brought the mushrooms."

Under other circumstances it might have been funny. It was funny, a bit, because even in panic the brothers could not speak to each other like sane people. But the laughter did not last. The sharedness of it was the problem. If Tim alone had seen the corridor, Fred could have mocked him out of it. If Fred alone had seen it, he would have kept it to himself and stared the room into

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submission until the chemicals wore off. But both of them, independently, had described the same impossible structure and the same ruined body hanging at its end. The odds of that were low enough to make coincidence feel lazy.

Tim stood up too quickly and had to grab the chair to stop himself tilting sideways. “No, no, hold on. Describe the symbols.”

Fred looked at him. “What?”

“Describe one.”

Fred squinted toward the corridor. The symbols were not letters as he knew letters. They looked more like route markers or technical signage, shapes with function rather than beauty. One of them sat high on the wall nearest the entrance to the corridor: a broken rectangle crossed by a slanting hook.

“There’s one like a bent box with a slash through it.”

Tim’s eyes widened. “Yeah.”

“And another one looks like two lines stacked but the top one’s shorter and wrong.”

Tim nodded hard enough to make himself wobble. “Yeah, yeah, and there’s one further down, like a fork if a fork hated you.”

Fred stared at him. “That’s not a description.”

“It’s right though.”

They both looked back.

The corridor had not vanished. If anything it had sharpened. The metal surface seemed scraped and used, not conjured from pure imagination. One side panel bore a streak of darkness like old grease or scorching. The floor had a faint track worn into it. The far round body hung in the black like a thing you could travel toward and regret for years.

Tim began laughing then, not out of joy but because terror and drugs have a filthy habit of using the same doorway. He laughed so hard he had to bend over, hands on knees. Fred watched him with irritated disbelief.

“What’s funny?”

Tim straightened, wiping at one eye. “We’re both seeing the same haunted space corridor in the living room.”

Fred looked back at the wall and then at him again. “You say that like it improves it.”

Tim tried to speak, failed, laughed again, and finally managed, “It’s just mental, isn’t it?”

That did it. Fred laughed too, one short harsh burst, because there really was something obscene about it. Two grown men off their heads in a council house, stood between a knackered radiator and a cheap sideboard, calmly discussing whether the hidden corridor to ruined space looked more like a ship interior or an industrial tunnel. The grim absurdity of it was almost enough to make it manageable.

Then the television hiss changed.

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Both brothers snapped their heads toward it.

The static on the screen had thickened into patterns. Dark bars clustered into the same symbols that lined the corridor wall. One after another they formed and dissolved, not randomly but in sequence, like a route being shown. The hum came stronger through the cabinet, through the floor, through the soles of Fred's feet. Tim took one step toward the television. Fred caught his arm.

"Don't."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"That's not a reason."

"It's enough of one."

Tim tugged his sleeve free and leaned in anyway, because there was something in him that always had to inspect the exact thing most likely to ruin him. Up close the symbols on the screen were grainier but undeniably the same. The broken rectangle. The fork. A sequence of short stacked bars. A circle with a diagonal cut. The television was not showing nonsense. It was repeating the corridor's language.

Tim spoke softly now, the laughter gone clean through into wonder and unease. "This isn't normal."

Fred, still gripping the back of the chair as though furniture might vote in his favour, gave him a look. "You think?"

The room around them had become secondary. That was the other disturbing thing. The house was still there, yes, but losing authority. The carpet no longer felt like carpet underfoot. The light from the lamp no longer held the room together properly. The corridor had become the true line of sight, the deeper shape behind everything else. Tim could still smell old smoke in the curtains and the damp that lived permanently somewhere behind the skirting boards, but beneath it there was another smell now: dry metal, hot dust, the stale air of a place sealed too long.

"Fred," he said quietly, "I don't think this is just us chatting shit."

Fred answered with admirable practicality. "No. I think it's us on drugs."

"But why the same drugs in the same way?"

Fred opened his mouth, closed it, then said, "Because you've got bad luck in a very organised form."

It was a very Fred answer. Bleak, funny, and more revealing than he meant it to be. Because that was what made the shared vision so awful. It felt organised. If it had been a riot of random colours and nonsense, they could have written it off later as a bad mix and a worse idea. Instead this felt like seeing through something. The room had not melted. It had thinned.

Tim took another step toward the corridor itself. Fred's hand shot out again and caught his hoodie this time.

"You are not walking into it."

Tim twisted back, genuinely offended. "How do you know I was going to?"

Fred gave him a level stare. "Because I know you."

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He did know him. Tim had the exact temperament needed to mistake danger for an invitation if it was presented interestingly enough. The corridor, with its symbols and distant wounded moon and impossible depth, was almost custom-built to offend Fred and fascinate Tim. Fred felt that knowledge with a kind of sick certainty. If something had chosen to show them this, it had selected well.

The hum built once more. The television hiss dropped even lower. Rain hammered at the window in a sudden burst, and for one dizzy second the reflections in the glass all merged: the room, the corridor, the television glow, and the orange streetlight outside all folding over each other until it looked as if the estate itself had slipped into orbit.

Tim spoke without taking his eyes off the wall. "Do you think we're dying?"

Fred considered that, then shook his head. "No."

"You sound very sure."

"I'm not giving this room the satisfaction."

It was such a dry stupid answer that Tim laughed again, but gently this time, almost gratefully. Then he looked back at the corridor and realised something else.

It was not just there.

It was waiting.

### Chapter Four: The Drift

The sensible version of events would have had them retreat to the kitchen, drink water, sit on opposite sides of the house until their brains remembered how walls were meant to behave, and then spend the next day pretending none of it had happened. That would have been the wise approach. It would also have required them to be entirely different people.

Tim stayed where he was because his curiosity had long since overtaken whatever self-preserving instinct remained. Fred stayed because leaving Tim alone with an impossible corridor would have been the equivalent of placing a toddler near an open manhole and hoping for the best. Fear, in both men, translated quickly into role. Tim observed. Fred guarded. Neither of them had spoken this arrangement aloud, but it was already there, older than the trip.

They sat back down after a while, not because the vision had lessened but because standing up in a moving room had begun to seem like a poor strategy. The corridor remained embedded in the far wall with stubborn clarity. Sometimes it appeared more solid than the room itself; sometimes the room would push back, a burst of ordinary detail reasserting itself so sharply that Tim could see every scratch on the table and every grease shadow on the wallpaper. Then the hum would roll through again and the corridor would deepen, and with it came the sensation of movement.

It was not literal movement at first. The house did not shake. The furniture did not slide. But both brothers began to feel, in their stomachs and behind their eyes, the unmistakable pull of drift, as though the room had become a vessel gliding without visible engine through some dark pressure outside itself.

Tim said it first. "Do you feel that?"

Fred, staring at the far wall, gave the tiniest nod. "Yeah."

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“Like we’re moving.”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s how idiots make things worse.”

Tim smiled faintly. “That should be on the family crest.”

Fred looked at him. “Our family shouldn’t be allowed a crest.”

The humour steadied them in small doses. It made the impossible slightly less insulting. Tim leaned back against the settee, felt the scratchy old fabric through his hoodie, and then felt something else layered over it: a vibration, low and mechanical, as if the settee were no longer just furniture but a seat bolted to a hull. The drinks cans on the table glinted strangely. In the corridor-light they looked less like litter and more like instruments, silver and pressure-sealed. The ashtray caught a shard of television glow and turned into something cratered and metallic. Even the lamp beside the chair now resembled a bent docking mast or a signal post rising out of an unseen deck.

The room was not disappearing. It was being translated.

That was the nastiest part. The trip was using the contents of the living room as material, converting the cheap details of their actual life into equivalents inside the space delusion they were both somehow sharing. The old television became a monitor bank. The coffee table became a control surface. The radiator’s clicking turned to hull-tick and cooling pipes. The rain at the window became static brushing a ship exterior. None of it was random. The real room was being reused.

“Fred,” Tim said after a while, keeping his voice low as if the room might overhear, “what if we haven’t gone anywhere.”

Fred gave him a sideways look. “That’s your reassuring theory?”

“I’m just saying. What if we’re still here, but...” He gestured vaguely at the corridor. “But this is on top of it.”

Fred looked back to the wall. “That’s not better.”

“No.”

“It’s worse.”

Tim nodded. “Yeah.”

The honesty of that calmed them more than denial would have. They were not floating above the earth in any literal sensible way. Some part of both of them knew that. They could still smell the house, still hear the occasional car on the wet road outside, still feel the stubborn sag of the settee springs. Yet at the same time, with equal conviction, they felt lost from the ordinary world. They were not physically miles from the estate, perhaps, but mentally and perceptually they had slipped so far sideways that the difference hardly seemed worth arguing over.

After a while Tim got up to pee and nearly didn’t make it to the door because the floor seemed to slope under him in slow motion. Fred watched him veer sideways and muttered, “Graceful as ever.”

Tim caught the wall with one hand. “The ship’s not steady.”

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Fred gave him a dead stare. "We're in a living room."

Tim looked genuinely thoughtful. "I'm not sure we are."

That stayed with Fred while Tim was in the bathroom. The sentence was stupid. It was also, in the way Tim's stupidest sentences often were, too close to the nerve. Because what counted as the room now? The visible wallpaper and battered furniture? Or the corridor threading right through them, the hum in the floorboards, the unmistakable shared sense of travel? Fred hated ambiguity in practical matters. Engines should either start or not start. Doors should either open or not open. But the living room had become both itself and something else, and there was no useful way to insult it back into choosing.

When Tim came out again he stood in the doorway for a moment, looking past Fred.

"It's longer."

Fred turned. The corridor did seem longer now, or perhaps more accessible. The perspective had sharpened. More of the wall-signs were visible. What had looked at first like a simple straight passage now revealed a subtle bend further in, and beyond that bend there was a dim widening, maybe an intersection or a chamber.

"You're not going near it," Fred said immediately.

Tim rolled his eyes. "You keep saying that like I'm a dog."

"You'd be easier if you were."

Tim came back to the room, sat on the carpet this time instead of the settee, and looked up at the corridor with his hands clasped between his knees. He had stopped performing quite so much now. That was how Fred knew the fear was real. When Tim lost some of the stupid chatter and became intent, it meant his mind had locked onto something it could not dismiss.

"Do you reckon," Tim said, "that people could see us right now and just think we look mental?"

Fred thought about the neighbours across the road. About net curtains. About how the room must appear from outside if anyone happened to glance in: two brothers off their heads, staring at a wall and barely blinking. He almost laughed.

"People think we look mental sober," he said.

"Fair point."

They both smiled at that, tiredly. Then the hum shifted again and the smile went out of the room.

This time it was accompanied by sound from inside the corridor itself. A distant metallic clunk, followed by something like an air-seal releasing somewhere far along the bend. Not loud, but precise. Functional. Tim's eyes widened. Fred leaned forward, all humour gone.

The corridor was not a picture.

It was doing things.

"Tell me you heard that."

"I heard it."

"What do you think it is?"

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Fred answered with admirable consistency. "Something I don't want near this house."

Tim looked at him. "You keep talking like it's coming here."

Fred turned his head slowly. "Tim. It's in the wall."

That shut him up for a moment.

Outside, the rain had eased. A fox screamed again somewhere out on the estate, that horrible human-sounding cry that makes every old terrace suddenly feel like a place with history in the foundations. The television hissed. The corridor waited. And under the drugs, under the fear, under the crude humour that kept them from splintering completely, both brothers began to feel the same dawning thing.

The living room was not somewhere they were sitting anymore.

It was somewhere they were losing.

### Chapter Five: The Estate Falls Away

There is a point in a trip where time stops behaving like quantity and begins behaving like weather. Minutes drift. Half-hours bunch together. A whole stretch of conversation can seem to happen in one instant, while ten seconds of silence can feel long enough to grow old in. By midnight, Fred and Tim had lost any clean grasp of how long the corridor had been there. It could have been twenty minutes or three hours. The room clock had become unreadable in any useful sense, its ticking too loud and too deliberate, and every time Tim looked at the numbers they seemed either embarrassingly normal or utterly impossible.

The estate outside, meanwhile, had started to fall away.

Not literally. The house had not left the road. But the ordinary cues of place were wearing thin. Car sounds came fewer and further between. The orange streetlight through the dirty glass had shifted from reassuringly local to something more like a distant beacon. The rain no longer sounded like rain so much as a thin grainy sweep over metal. Once, when Fred stood to look through the window and ground himself in the sight of parked cars and wheelie bins and the little patch of front garden with its half-dead shrubs, he instead saw the street stretch outward with a length and silence that belonged to no road he knew. The terraced houses opposite looked too dark, their windows blacked out. The sky above them seemed oddly star-heavy despite the cloud.

He stepped back hard enough to hit the arm of the settee.

Tim looked up at him. "What?"

Fred rubbed his jaw and said, "Nothing useful."

Tim stood and went to the window, because of course he did. He peered through the grime, one hand on the curtain, and then made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a wince.

"Yeah," he said. "That's not right."

"What do you see?"

Tim kept looking. "It's like the street's gone longer."

Fred folded his arms. "Longer?"

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“Yeah. Like it keeps going but not properly. And there’s way more sky.”

Fred stared at the window. He did not want to look again and hated that he did not want to look again. Fear always offended him first. After a second he stepped up beside Tim and forced himself to glance out.

The road had become a line running through dark, with the orange lamp now looking ridiculously isolated, less like a council estate streetlight and more like some pathetic last marker at the edge of a landing zone. The parked cars seemed wrong in silhouette, too still, too low, as if they were wreckage cooling after impact. The row of houses opposite had flattened into dark blocks with only a couple of lit rectangles left among them, floating like remote compartments in a larger dead structure.

“We’re still here,” Tim said quietly, perhaps to himself as much as Fred. “It’s just not behaving.”

Fred gave him a look. “You do hear the words coming out of your mouth, don’t you?”

Tim half-smiled. “Not always.”

Fred pulled the curtain closed. “Sit down.”

They returned to the room because there was nowhere else to return to. That was one of the grim jokes of the whole thing. In a normal nightmare you wake up. In a normal bad trip you change rooms, go outside, drink water, sit under a different light. But the house now seemed to share the same disease throughout. The kitchen had that same wrong depth. The hallway seemed one door short or one shadow too long. The bathroom mirror had reflected the corridor for half a second when Tim washed his face. No refuge existed inside the building because the building itself had become a participant.

Back in the living room the corridor had altered again. What had once been merely visible now had presence in the room’s air. The temperature felt drier. The smell of old carpet and stale smoke had thinned beneath something metallic and flat. The hum rose and fell as if syncing to a system deeper in the wall. More of the bend was visible, and past it there now seemed to be a wider space, maybe an opening or chamber. There was also, unless the drugs had chosen this exact moment to become much nastier, movement near the edge of the view.

Tim saw it first. “Did that—”

“Yes.”

They both stared. Something had passed across the widening beyond the bend. Not close enough for detail. Just a shape, fast and low, cutting through the dimness like a person hurrying across a corridor in the distance. Fred felt his spine go cold in stages.

“Right,” he said, voice suddenly very steady. “That’s enough.”

Tim turned to him. “Enough what?”

“Enough of this. We are ending the evening.”

“How?”

Fred opened his mouth and then stopped, because it turned out “ending the evening” was easier to say than do when the wall of the room contained working space and movement. He could switch the television off, perhaps. Shut his eyes. Drag Tim into the kitchen and stand under the harsh little bulb

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until dawn. But none of those actions would remove what had already happened, or the fact that both of them now knew the corridor was active.

Tim, infuriatingly, seemed calmer after the sight of movement, as if fear and fascination had finally found a ratio his nervous system could work with. He sat on the floor again, knees up, hands hanging loose between them.

"Maybe we're not supposed to fight it," he said.

Fred looked down at him. "That sounds like a sentence said immediately before disaster."

"I don't mean give in. I mean if we keep acting like we're in a room, maybe that's why it keeps getting worse. Maybe we're somewhere else as well."

Fred laughed once, harsh and joyless. "You want me to negotiate with the living room."

Tim shrugged. "I'm just saying we're not exactly winning."

That was difficult to argue with. The room had outlasted denial. It had outlasted jokes, though not by much. And perhaps worst of all, it had outlasted the assumption that both brothers were merely seeing random drug nonsense. Shared hallucinations happen, perhaps. Minds influence minds. The brain is a dirty liar with access to all the wrong chemicals. But this felt increasingly less like two men inventing a fantasy and more like two men stumbling into one already laid out.

Fred sat back down and pressed his palms against his knees. "Fine," he said after a while. "If we're lost in space, then what?"

Tim looked up and smiled slowly, because he knew exactly what that meant. Fred was not giving in. Fred was adapting.

"Well," Tim said, "first thing is, we don't panic."

Fred gave him a stare of such dry contempt that Tim nearly laughed again. "You say that as if you've ever not panicked elegantly."

Tim held up both hands. "I'm being serious."

"So am I. You panic like a man trying to explain himself to a toaster."

Tim grinned. "Still. No panicking. We're together. We know where we were before. We know the room's still... sort of... here."

"That's not comforting."

"No, but it's true."

Fred hated truth when it arrived wearing Tim's voice. He sat with it anyway. The settee beneath him felt both like knackered furniture and a crash seat. The coffee table looked more and more like a control platform stripped of its intended instruments. The ashtray on it resembled a pitted grey world seen from too high up. The drinks cans glinted like spare pressure cylinders. Everything domestic had acquired a second occupation.

Tim spoke again, more quietly now. "Do you ever think we're both seeing it because we've always seen the same weird shit?"

Fred frowned. "What does that mean?"

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Tim shrugged. "I dunno. Growing up here. Same house. Same stuff. Same kind of head, maybe. Maybe all this was always somewhere in the room and we've just gone daft enough to catch it."

Fred looked around the battered living room with its tired walls and bad lamp and shit carpet. "If there was a hidden universe in this room all along, I'm offended by its standards."

That was such a good Fred line that Tim barked out a laugh despite the fear. Fred's own mouth twitched. The sound of laughter in the room felt important. It proved they were still themselves, at least partly, and not yet fully swallowed by whatever shape the night was taking.

Then the television screen went black.

Not static. Not a channel cut. Black, sudden and absolute, though the set was still clearly on because a thin low glow held at its edges.

On that black screen, pale as scratches in old film, a single line of symbols appeared.

And under them, in the glass, reflected behind the brothers, the corridor now seemed to open straight into the room.

### Chapter Six: Proof

Nothing makes fear worse than proof.

Before the symbols appeared on the black television screen, Fred and Tim could still have hidden behind the sloppy comfort of maybe. Maybe the wall was breathing because the acid had turned the room inside out. Maybe the sharedness of the corridor came from the same environment, the same chemical mix, the same fevered conversation feeding itself in a loop. Maybe they were both just twisted into the same shape badly enough to call it vision. It would not have been a good explanation, but it would have been an explanation, and bad explanations are often the only thing standing between men and a proper breakdown.

Proof kills maybe.

The symbols sat on the television glass in a pale line, sharper than static, steadier than noise. The broken rectangle. The forked mark. The stack of bars. A new shape Fred had not seen clearly before, curved and split through the middle. They held for three seconds, perhaps four, then faded and returned in a different order.

Tim got to his feet so quickly he nearly trod on the drinks can at his heel and sent it skidding across the carpet. "No, that's actual proof."

Fred stayed sat for a second longer, not because he was calmer but because some primitive part of him had decided movement would count as surrender. Then he stood too, every line of his body drawn tight.

"We need to write them down," Tim said.

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

Fred looked at the corridor reflected in the television, then at the symbols cycling across the glass. The last thing he wanted in the world was to let Tim get near a pen and paper and turn the whole

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event into an organised hobby. Yet he also knew that if he didn't, Tim would remember it badly, or selectively, or with additions the drugs had no right to claim. Practicality won as it always did.

"Fine," he said. "Get the notebook."

Tim lunged for the little pad on the table, knocked the lighter off with his elbow, swore, grabbed the pen, and sat down cross-legged again as if this were a normal thing for a man to be doing at half midnight in his mum's living room while off his head on acid. Fred dictated the first three symbols with the sort of clipped annoyance men usually reserve for insurance details after a minor crash.

"Broken box. Fork thing. Short bars. Curved split one."

"That's shit description," Tim muttered as he sketched.

"You do better then."

"I am doing."

Fred hovered over him, which is a terrible position for a tall miserable man at the best of times and looked even less dignified now, swaying slightly with the drift of the room while trying to supervise handwriting. Tim drew quickly, eyes flicking up to the television and back down again. Once he finished the row, he held the page up beside the screen and both brothers felt the same nasty lurch in the gut.

It matched.

Not artistically. Tim's sketching always looked like it had been done by a man escaping a moving vehicle. But the forms were right. The order, at least in that moment, was right. What they had seen on the screen was now on paper.

Fred exhaled through his nose. "Brilliant."

Tim looked up at him. "Why are you saying that like it's bad?"

"Because it is bad."

"But it means it's real."

"Yes, Tim," Fred said, "that's the problem."

It was a perfect Gurnerman exchange. One brother delighted that the impossible had structure. The other furious precisely because it did. Tim wanted truth, pattern, the chance that the whole thing might be followed deeper. Fred wanted functioning laws of reality, or at minimum a night in which the television stayed in its lane.

Still, once proof existed, both of them changed. The fear became more focused. Tim stopped grinning so much, which was how Fred knew it had got under his skin properly. Fred stopped dismissing everything as drug filth, which was how Tim knew he was frightened in earnest. They had crossed some threshold simply by copying symbols off the television. The night no longer felt like it could be slept off and laughed about later. It felt collectable. Recordable. Repeatable. That last one sat in the room like a threat.

The hum rose again while Tim was still sketching. This time it seemed to answer the act of recording. The corridor in the far wall sharpened. The dull light strips inside it brightened by a degree.

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Somewhere deep along the bend came another sound, the same metallic clunk they had heard earlier, followed by a softer hiss like pressure shifting through a seal.

Tim looked up immediately. "That's closer."

Fred stared at the corridor. "Do not say that like you're pleased."

"I'm not pleased."

"You're a bit pleased."

Tim gave him a sheepish half-smile. "Maybe a bit."

Fred pointed toward the corridor. "That is why you're a problem."

Tim should have denied it. Instead he just shrugged because there was no use pretending. Curiosity was eating him alive now. It sat plain on his face. He was scared, yes, but beneath the fear was that bright stupid hunger he got whenever the world threatened to contain more than it had admitted so far. It was the same instinct that made him take apart broken radios, ask too many questions at the pub, poke dead things with sticks as a child and once climb onto a garage roof just to see whether the estate looked more important from up there. Fred had spent years trying to keep that trait from getting Tim properly damaged. Tonight it had found the perfect fuel.

He sat down beside Tim after a while because standing above him had begun to feel ridiculous and unsteady. The brothers leaned against the settee side by side, the notebook open on the carpet between them like two amateur occultists who had lost funding years ago. The television cycled through more symbols. Some repeated. Some rearranged. Tim wrote them all down. Fred corrected him when he got lazy with the angles. Neither of them mentioned that this was exactly the kind of behaviour they would have mocked in anyone else.

After a run of six sequences the screen went dark again.

They waited.

Nothing.

Tim looked down at the page. "What if it's a route?"

Fred did not answer immediately. He was staring at the notebook as if it might yet apologise for existing. "A route to what?"

Tim tilted his head toward the corridor. "That."

Fred considered this and hated how much sense it made. The symbols did not resemble words or decorative nonsense. They looked functional. Ordered. The kind of markings you would expect in a place used repeatedly by things that needed to know where the hell they were going.

"You think the telly's giving directions to the wall," Fred said.

Tim looked at him. "When you put it like that, yeah."

"That's the most disgusting sentence I've ever heard."

Tim laughed under his breath. "Still true though."

The room drifted more strongly after that. Or perhaps they simply surrendered to the feeling of drift and noticed what had already been happening. It now seemed obvious that the settee was fixed to

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something larger than the floorboards. Obvious that the hum was engine-not-house. Obvious that the far wall did not open onto a hallway or extension but a structure moving through dark. Tim glanced once at the front window and saw not the estate but a thin smear of distant light beneath black. Fred looked at the same window and saw, for just a second, the parked car outside tilting slowly away as if floating.

Neither mentioned it. Some experiences are too silly to say aloud without worsening.

Eventually Tim said, "If this really is a route, then maybe we're not meant to stay here."

Fred turned to him. "Who's 'meant'?"

"I don't know."

"That answer's doing a lot of damage."

Tim rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm just saying maybe we keep seeing it because it wants us to go further."

Fred gave him such a cold flat look that even on drugs Tim understood he had reached the edge.

"Listen carefully," Fred said. "There is no version of tonight where I hear 'it wants us' and decide to cooperate."

Tim held up both hands. "Fine."

But he looked back at the corridor anyway.

And that was the moment Fred knew the night had gone from strange to dangerous in the only way that really mattered. It was no longer the corridor itself. It was Tim looking at it like an opportunity.

### Chapter Seven: Leaving Without Moving

One of the cruelest things about the trip was that the body refused to vanish just because the mind had gone elsewhere. Even while the room translated itself into some dead drifting vessel, Fred still had a dry mouth, a sore shin from the table, a knot in his shoulder from tensing too long, and the slow creeping nausea that comes from too much smoke, sugar and chemistry on top of an evening you were not spiritually qualified for. Tim kept rubbing his hands on his jeans because his skin felt wrong. Their backs ached from half-sitting, half-bracing against a room that no longer seemed to accept stillness. They were, in every practical sense, still two blokes trapped in a living room, with all the sweat and discomfort and petty physical indignities that came with it.

This actually made the space-belief stronger.

If they had become floaty, abstract, beautifully detached little souls drifting through the stars, the whole thing would have seemed fake and sentimental. Instead they remained horribly embodied. Fred's lower back hurt. Tim needed a piss again. The stale house air made their mouths taste of dust and old smoke. The corridor, by contrast, felt dry, cold and exact. It had the authority of somewhere real because it did not flatter them. It was not a cosmic dream in bright colours. It was a place that looked functional, ugly and difficult to survive in. That was the sort of environment Fred trusted more than any spiritual vision. Tim trusted it because it looked like it contained systems.

The argument about whether they were "leaving" started at around one in the morning, although time by then had become a rude suggestion rather than a measure.

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Tim had been staring at the corridor for ages, notebook open, when he said, too casually, “I think if we go any further, it’ll happen properly.”

Fred, who had just taken a long drink from a flat warm bottle of cola and regretted every second of it, turned slowly. “Go further how.”

Tim gestured. “Mentally.”

Fred stared at him. “I hate that.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean I genuinely hate that sentence. It makes me want to throw something.”

Tim smiled weakly. “I’m just saying maybe the more we fight the room, the more we stay stuck between both things.”

Fred sat with that for a moment, because he could not immediately dismiss it without also dismissing what they were both currently seeing. That was the filth of the whole experience. Logic did not vanish in the trip. It got redirected. The idea made sense within the bad rules of the night. The room had become a space-ship-not-space-ship. The corridor had sharpened every time they acknowledged it. The symbols had responded to being written down. If there was a deeper stage to this, then yes, perhaps it would involve the two of them giving in enough to “go further” without physically moving anywhere.

He hated that Tim had managed to phrase it first.

“So what,” Fred said, “we sit here and act more lost?”

Tim looked at him seriously. “We already are.”

That sentence landed harder than either expected.

Because they were lost. That was the truth of it. Whether in space, in the room, in their own fried brains, or in some revolting overlap of all three, they were no longer located in an ordinary Friday night. Every route back to normal had frayed. The estate outside looked wrong. The television had become a machine for showing symbols. The wall had become a corridor. Their shared certainty was not that they had literally left Earth, perhaps, but that they had drifted out of the world they recognised and had not yet found the edge of wherever they now were.

Fred rubbed both hands over his face. “Fine. Explain it like I’m thick.”

Tim snorted. “That’ll be new.”

Fred gave him a look of such concentrated dryness it almost dried the air. “Tim.”

“Right, right.” Tim drew a breath and tried again. “I think... I think the room’s using what’s here. The settee, the TV, the window, all of it. It’s turning it into something we can understand. Or maybe we’re turning it into something we can understand. I don’t know. But if that’s happening, then maybe we need to stop trying to keep one foot in the living room. Maybe that’s why it keeps feeling half-broken.”

Fred listened. It was, against all moral instinct, a decent explanation. Not because it was sane but because it fit the evidence as well as anything else currently available. The room had indeed been

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translating. Every domestic object now had a second occupation inside the shared space-vision. The cheap little life of the house was being cannibalised into ship logic.

“And what if we do that,” Fred said, “and never come back?”

Tim did not answer immediately. The fear returned in his face then, real and undisguised. For all his curiosity, all his daftness, all his instinct to lean toward the forbidden thing, Tim did not want to disappear forever into whatever this was. He just lacked the gift of lying to himself when the impossible was already in the room.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly.

That, more than anything, convinced Fred to stay close. Fear he could work with. Certainty in Tim was always the more dangerous condition.

They made what passed, in that state, for an agreement. They would stop fighting the space-logic of the room. They would not physically move toward the wall. They would stay together. They would say out loud what they were seeing so neither got ahead of the other into private nonsense. Most of all, Fred said, they would not do anything suddenly. This rule was clearly aimed at Tim and therefore immediately necessary.

After that the drift deepened.

The room did not vanish, but it loosened. The edges of furniture seemed less final. The corridor no longer sat only in the wall; it seemed to extend through the room’s own geometry, as if the living room had become a docking compartment attached to the wider structure. The coffee table now truly looked like a console, and the rings left on its surface by years of mugs became circular readouts or stained planets, depending on how the eye landed. The lamp by the chair became a damaged signal mast. The front window was no longer simply a window but a viewing plate looking out over a dark measureless field broken by one or two points of distant light.

Tim lay back on the carpet and looked upward. “You know what this feels like?”

Fred remained upright because surrendering his spine to the floor seemed like a symbolic mistake. “Go on.”

“It feels like we’ve left without moving.”

Fred considered that and gave a grudging nod. “That’s unfortunately good.”

Tim smiled at the ceiling. “I have those.”

“Rarely.”

“Still counts.”

Outside—or what used to be outside—something moved past the window. Not close, not with shape, more like a shadow crossing distant light. Both brothers saw it. Neither commented. They had reached the stage where every new proof felt less like a shock and more like another brick dropped into the same pit.

The hum fell lower than before, to a range that could hardly be called sound. Fred felt it in the settee frame behind him. Tim felt it through the carpet into his shoulder blades. The house, the ship, the room, the drift—whatever this was—seemed to be settling into a route. There was a horrible smoothness to it now, as if they had been caught by some current beyond choice.

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Then the television flicked back on.

The screen showed no programme. Instead it displayed something much worse: a grainy interior feed of the corridor itself from further along the bend than they had yet been able to see. The image shook slightly, as though recorded through old damaged security glass. On it, a wider chamber was visible, and beyond that chamber, hanging in a huge black viewing panel, was the same scarred moon.

Tim sat bolt upright. "Fred."

"I can see it."

"No, but that's further in."

Fred looked from the wall to the screen and back again. The live corridor and the screened image aligned in ways that made his teeth ache. It was as though the television had become not just a translator but a guide, showing them the path deeper into the shared vision. If Tim was right, the room was not asking them to stand up and physically walk toward the wall. It was asking them to let go enough to drift further along the route it had already mapped across the house.

The two brothers sat in silence for a long moment.

Then Fred said, in the tone of a man signing a form he deeply resented, "Fine."

Tim looked at him.

"We're already lost," Fred said. "So let's see where it thinks we are."

### Chapter Eight: The Moon at the End of the Hall

Once they stopped resisting the logic of the thing, the trip became more coherent, which in many ways was much more frightening than chaos. Chaos can be laughed off. You can blame it on bad dosage and a weak stomach and the general stupidity of being born into a family that thinks Friday night entertainment should involve dissolving reality. Coherence, on the other hand, implies structure. It implies rules. It implies that what you are seeing is not simply a mess thrown up by a poisoned nervous system but a place your mind has learned to navigate.

Fred and Tim did not move from the room in any literal way. That remained the grim joke underneath everything. Fred still knew, in some remote practical part of himself, that he was in a settee against the wall of the living room. Tim still knew his knees were on rough carpet and that his right foot had gone a bit numb because of how he'd been sitting. Yet in every meaningful experiential sense they drifted further from the house. The corridor lengthened. The camera-like feed on the television advanced. The moon at the far end of the image grew larger and more detailed.

It was not beautiful.

Tim, for all his appetite for weirdness, had expected something at least grander than this. The moon looked injured. Not romantically scarred, not poetic, not the soft noble ruin of a science-fiction painting. It looked used-up and battered. Whole grey plains were slashed by darker regions that resembled burns or impacts. There were lines across one hemisphere that looked almost artificial, long geometric marks that suggested structures once built there and later half-destroyed. It hung in the viewing chamber with the heavy authority of something that had outlasted more than it had any right to.

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“That’s horrible,” Tim whispered.

Fred, eyes fixed on the screen, nodded. “Yeah.”

“It looks dead.”

“No,” Fred said after a second. “Worse.”

That was what both of them felt. Death would have been a comfort. The thing looked active in the way old wounds remain active in bad weather. Something about it suggested continuation, a problem that had not finished happening.

The corridor itself now seemed almost secondary to the pull of that moon. Even in the wall-vision, even in the screen-feed, it acted like a destination. Symbols repeated near its alignment. The hum rose when its image grew clearer. The room’s drift seemed to take direction from it. Tim became convinced, in that stubborn daft way of his, that the whole route was somehow built around it. Fred became convinced that the moon was where the trouble lived, which was really the same idea said with more dignity.

Tim picked up the notebook again, flipping back through the symbols he had copied. “Look.”

Fred leaned over despite himself.

The repeating forms on the screen now clustered in sets around the viewing chamber, and three of those shapes matched exactly the sequences Tim had drawn earlier. One of them, the broken rectangle with the slanting hook, appeared over and over whenever the camera-feed shifted perspective toward the moon.

“You think that one means the moon?” Tim said.

Fred rubbed his jaw. “Or danger. Or route. Or don’t be stupid.”

“That last one would be useful.”

Fred looked at him. “You’d ignore it.”

Tim grinned weakly. “Depends on the font.”

It should not have been funny. It was funny anyway. That was how the brothers survived each other and most other things. They found the nastiest possible angle and leaned on it until the fear lost some of its glamour. But under the line there was real concentration now. The notebook mattered. The symbols mattered. The moon mattered. The logic of the trip was tightening.

At some point, while staring at the feed, Tim realised the wider chamber beyond the corridor resembled the front room itself in the same way dreams sometimes cruelly borrow from waking life. There was a low raised platform where the television cabinet ought to be. There was a bank of dark reflective panels where the window should sit. The chamber walls carried vertical strips that echoed the curtains’ fall. It was not exact. It was worse. The space-vision was built out of the living room’s bones.

He told Fred, expecting mockery.

Instead Fred looked slowly around the actual room, then back at the screen, and muttered, “That explains why I hate it.”

“What?”

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"It's ours." Fred pointed toward the chamber on the screen. "Or based on it. Whatever this is, it's nicked the room."

Tim stared back at the image. Once said aloud, it became obvious. The route beyond the wall was indeed cannibalising their surroundings, elevating the miserable domestic shape of the living room into something industrial and lost. The brothers were not simply seeing a spaceship. They were seeing their own life converted into one.

That had a strange effect on Tim. It made the whole thing sadder. Not softer, not more emotional, but sadder in the blunt humiliating way working-class reality often becomes when turned inside out. There was something darkly comic about the universe apparently deciding that the best available raw material for a cosmic event was a council-house front room with a burned carpet and a dead lamp switch. If God had wanted to make a joke, he could have done worse.

"You know," Tim said, unable to help himself, "if we actually have left Earth and this is the official vessel, it's bleak that our ship is basically mum's front room."

Fred snorted. "Would explain the budget."

"And the smell."

"And the seating."

Tim laughed. "Bit rough for deep space."

Fred gave the settee a look of grim betrayal. "I've been saying that for years."

The laugh helped, but only briefly. Because as soon as it died, a new detail appeared on the screen.

At first it seemed like another glitch in the grainy image. A shadow crossing the far chamber. Then the feed steadied, and both brothers saw the movement resolve into shape. Something had passed across the viewing room in front of the moon. Tall, narrow, quick. Not enough to describe, but enough to know it had not been a fault.

Tim's mouth went dry. "No."

Fred was already on his feet.

The screen flickered. The shape was gone. The moon remained, hanging huge and sick in the black beyond the chamber.

"Tell me that was just the picture jumping," Tim said.

Fred did not answer.

"Fred."

"I know what I saw."

Tim looked from the screen to the corridor in the wall, where the bend now seemed darker than before. Somewhere from beyond it came a faint metallic ring, then a second, like footsteps or tools or something knocking lightly against a rail.

"We're not alone," Tim said.

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Fred stood absolutely still. He had reached that stage of fear where the body becomes miserly with movement, as though every extra inch of motion might attract the wrong kind of attention. His voice, when it came, was quiet and dry enough to scrape.

"In the nicest possible way," he said, "I am not thrilled to hear that."

Tim barked out a laugh before he could stop himself, then clapped a hand over his mouth because suddenly it felt obscene to be loud. The room—ship—chamber—whatever it was—seemed to listen after the sound.

No one spoke for a while.

The feed on the television remained fixed on the viewing room and the moon beyond. The corridor in the wall remained open and waiting. The hum continued, lower now, like they had moved deeper into its jurisdiction. The entire house felt suspended. Even the ordinary noises had thinned. No cars. No pipes. No distant doors from neighbours. Either the estate had gone silent, or the brothers had drifted too far from it to hear.

Tim stared at the screen and finally said, "Do you reckon there's actually something in there."

Fred gave him a bleak look. "That is not the kind of question that helps."

"It's still a question."

"Yes," Fred said. "And like most of your questions, it leads directly to grief."

But he was thinking it too. What had crossed that room? A person? An animal? Something the trip had invented to keep the story moving? Or had the living room, the drugs, the shared vision, and whatever hidden pattern sat underneath all of it actually led them to some point where another presence had entered the route? Fred did not like any answer. Tim liked too many of them.

Then the feed shifted. Not by static or error, but deliberately, as if some unseen camera had turned.

It panned away from the moon and toward a dark side passage leading out of the chamber.

And stopped.

### Chapter Nine: The Passage

Every horror becomes worse when it behaves as though it knows where to look.

That was the feeling both brothers had when the television feed turned of its own accord and settled on the dark passage leading off the moon-view chamber. A broken camera might jump, flicker, die or distort. This did none of those things. It reoriented. It chose a new point of interest. That one act gave the whole vision an intelligence the night had previously only implied, and it made the skin on Fred's neck draw tight as wire.

Tim leaned so far forward he was practically kneeling in front of the screen. "Why's it showing that?"

Fred gave him a look. "I'm delighted you think I'm on the planning committee."

"No, but seriously."

"That is you being serious, which is half the problem."

The passage on the screen was narrow and badly lit, the walls carrying the same tired industrial panels as the corridor in the wall, but with more damage. A long scrape scored one side. The floor

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had something scattered across it—debris or fragments or maybe just dark patches the grain of the image exaggerated into threat. The camera held on it with patient insistence. No movement. No sound but the room's hum and the faint living-room hiss of the television set itself.

Tim licked dry lips. "It wants us to look."

Fred folded his arms. "I refuse the word wants."

"Fine. It's making us look."

"That's worse."

Still they looked.

There was no other sensible response. Turning the television off felt impossible in the same way turning off a headlight while driving into dark feels impossible. You might hate the road ahead, but blindness would not improve it. The feed had become their only clear line deeper into the space-logic. The corridor in the wall showed only the near route and the bend. The television showed what lay beyond. Whatever shared delusion or structure had built itself over the living room now seemed determined to reveal the next stage through the old battered set in the corner.

Tim's breathing had gone quieter. That was unusual enough that Fred noticed at once. Fear made Tim speak more until it crossed a certain threshold. Beyond that threshold he went almost careful, as though too many words might harden whatever he was looking at into certainty.

Fred sat down again, but on the edge of the chair this time, body angled toward both the screen and his brother. "Talk me through what you're seeing."

Tim kept his eyes fixed ahead. "Passage. Narrow. Same wall panels as the corridor but worse condition. Something on the floor. Could be metal. Could be rubbish. Light's coming from above but half the strip's dead."

"Anything moving?"

"No."

"Any symbols?"

Tim squinted. "Maybe one near the left edge. Can't tell."

"Right."

The discipline of the exchange settled them. It was what Fred did naturally when anything went bad: break it into workable pieces. Description. Observation. Sequence. Mockery, where necessary. Tim answered because it gave his brain rails to run on. Without Fred's dry grounding, his thoughts would have been everywhere at once by then, and some of them would almost certainly have made things worse.

After perhaps a minute the image shifted slightly, not a full camera move but a tiny correction, enough to bring the left side of the passage into better view.

There, low on the wall, was a symbol.

Tim grabbed the notebook without looking away and shoved it toward Fred. "Find the split fork."

Fred flipped through the pages. "This one?"

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“No, that’s the stacked bar one.”

“How do you know? They all look like broken cutlery.”

“The one after that.”

Fred found it, squinting. “Right.”

Tim took the notebook and compared. “Yeah. Same.”

Fred looked at the drawn sign, then back at the screen. The symbol on the passage wall matched one they had already seen not on the television, but in the corridor itself, down near the bend where the widening began. It was a route marker, then. Or a warning. Or both.

“What’s it mean?” Tim murmured.

Fred took the notebook back and frowned at the page as if violence might extract translation. “No idea.”

Tim looked at the passage. “Feels like a side route.”

“Everything feels like a route to you.”

“That’s because they keep being routes.”

Fred hated that because it was fair.

The trip deepened again then, not visually so much as bodily. Tim’s ears popped as if pressure had changed. Fred felt his chest tighten with that peculiar sensation of descent you get in a lift just as it starts moving, except there was no lift and nowhere sensible to descend to. The house groaned softly around them. Or the ship did. Or their bodies did. Whatever vocabulary applied, the effect was the same: they were going further in.

Tim whispered, “Do you feel that?”

Fred nodded once. “Yeah.”

The passage on the screen seemed sharper now, closer somehow, as though the camera had taken one silent step nearer. The black beyond it looked denser. Not simply unlit, but inhabited by the possibility of shape. Tim could not stop staring. The passage had the quality of something waiting to be entered, and because he was Tim, some part of his mind immediately wanted to know what sat just beyond the visible.

Fred sensed that mood in him and said, without taking his eyes off the screen, “Don’t even think about suggesting it.”

“I haven’t said anything.”

“You don’t need to. You’re radiating it.”

Tim exhaled through his nose. “I just want to know what’s there.”

“That,” Fred said, “is why people like you end up in documentaries.”

Tim gave a weak laugh. “If this ever becomes a documentary, they’ll need a narrator with serious self-respect issues.”

“They can get the banana,” Fred said.

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It was such a stupid callback that Tim nearly doubled over laughing again, and the laugh came out wrong because fear was mixed through it. That was the tone of the entire night now. Every joke had teeth in it. Every funny line scraped against panic on the way out. But laughter still helped. It kept the two of them tethered to their own personalities, which mattered, because the room kept trying to turn those personalities into functions inside its weird little ship-story. Fred the protector. Tim the curious idiot. Both roles were real enough without the trip making mythology out of them.

The television crackled suddenly.

A burst of static tore through the room, sharp enough to make both brothers flinch. Then, under the static, a sound appeared. Not speech. Not anything human. More like a dragged metallic intake followed by three clipped notes at uneven intervals. Tim froze. Fred's face went flat.

"Play that again," Tim said automatically, then realised what he had said and looked at the television in horror.

The sound came again on its own.

Three clipped notes. A pause. Then a long descending tone that made the hum under the room seem to answer.

Tim's heart began pounding so hard he could feel it in his throat. "No."

Fred stood up. "Right."

Tim looked at him. "Right what?"

"Right enough. We are done with that."

He moved toward the television, and the instant he did, the image changed.

Something stepped into the passage.

Not fully. Not enough to understand. Just part of a shape entering the edge of frame—too tall, too narrow, wrong at the shoulder, the head shape indistinct, all of it grainy in the bad old screen-light. It stopped halfway in, as if aware it was being observed.

Fred halted dead.

Tim made a sound he would later deny making, a thin involuntary noise of disbelief and terror. The thing on the screen did not lunge or distort or perform any of the theatrics the frightened brain expects. It simply remained there at the edge of the passage, partly visible, as if looking from just outside the line of proper exposure.

For several seconds neither brother moved.

The long descending tone came again, quieter this time.

Then, in the screen's cracked reflection, the shape seemed not only to stand in the passage, but to stand somewhere inside the room.

### Chapter Ten: The Shape at the Edge

The worst thing about the alien—because by then there was no kinder word left for it—was how little of it they could see and how certain they both were that it was there.

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Not a ghost. Not a random shadow. Not a trick of grain or static or overfed imagination. Something. Something narrow and patient and wrong in outline, standing just off the centre of the television frame where the side passage opened into the moon-view chamber. The visible part of it suggested a body that did not quite obey the same proportions as a person. The shoulder line sloped too sharply. The neck, if it was a neck, seemed either too long or too absent. The head shape was indistinct, but not because it lacked definition; it was more that the screen itself seemed reluctant to settle on it.

Tim stared with his whole face gone open. Fred did not blink at all.

The two of them stood in that wreck of a living room, under a tired lamp and above a badly stained carpet, while a thing from the edge of their shared trip stood half in view and did nothing.

In some ways that was worse than attack.

Action would have simplified matters. If the thing had rushed them, they could have screamed, thrown something, switched the set off, fled to the kitchen, fought the wall, hit each other by mistake, done any number of standard panicked human activities. But it did not rush. It remained there the way predators in bad dreams remain there, with the silent confidence of something that has all the time in the world and knows the fear will do half its work for it.

Tim spoke first because the silence had started to make his teeth hurt. "Fred."

"Yeah."

"That's there."

"Yeah."

"That's actually there."

Fred's answer came after a second. "Yeah."

The three confirmations did nothing except make it harder to breathe.

Then, because he remained himself even under the most appalling circumstances, Tim said, very quietly, "It looks like one of them weird lads from the job centre if you stretched him."

Fred let out a short disbelieving breath that might have become a laugh in any universe less rotten than this one. "If this is your coping mechanism," he said, "I want better standards."

The line helped by about two percent. Still, that was two percent more than they had.

The alien shifted.

Only slightly. A tilt of its upper body or head or whatever counted as its centre of attention. But the movement was enough to show that the thing was not an artefact or loop. It had observed them back. Tim felt his stomach go hollow. Fred's hands curled at his sides.

The descending note sounded once more from the television speaker, except now it was not just sound. It seemed tied to the thing, as if the noise emerged from the passage and the figure at once. Not speech exactly, but communication. Structured. Intentional.

Tim heard himself say, before his better nature—small and overworked thing—could stop him, "Do you reckon it can see us?"

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Fred turned his head a fraction and gave him the kind of look older brothers invent specifically for moments of lethal idiocy. “Tim. It’s looking at us.”

That was obvious, yet saying it out loud made the room drop another degree in temperature. The whole trip had so far carried the bad comfort of observation without contact. The corridor. The symbols. The moon. The route. Even the movement beyond the bend had remained safely over there, within the logic of a place not yet fully committed to acknowledging them. But this was contact. Even if only visual, even if nothing had been spoken in any human sense, the line had now crossed both ways.

Tim stepped backward and his heel crushed the old lighter on the carpet with a sharp crack. The alien did not react. Or perhaps it had already reacted and they simply did not understand the movement.

Fred took one slow step in front of Tim.

He did not think about doing it. That was the thing. People talk about bravery as if it involves speeches and decisions and noble little paragraphs inside the mind. Most of the time it is nothing more than habit arriving before thought. Fred had spent his life stepping in front of things. Trouble in pubs. Rows in the street. Threats from older lads when Tim was younger and had not yet learned when to shut his mouth. The scale of the situation had changed beyond all reason, but the old reflex remained. If there was a shape at the edge of the room looking wrong at his brother, Fred’s body would put itself in the way first and ask questions later, even if the shape happened to be from a shared acid-space delusion in the wall of a council house.

Tim, seeing that move, felt a strange hard mix of affection and despair. “Fred...”

“Don’t.”

“What if it—”

“Don’t.”

The television image sharpened, not in the way technology sharpens, but in the way fear sometimes seems to drag detail into existence. More of the thing’s side became visible. Its limbs were long but not elegant. There was something jointed about the posture that made Tim think, disgustingly, of an insect trying to imitate a person. The surface of it—skin, clothing, suit, hide, whatever it was—did not gleam or ripple. It looked matte and dark, absorbing more of the screen than it reflected. The outline around the head kept refusing to settle into anything comfortably recognisable.

And all the while the reflection in the television glass made it worse.

Because in the reflection, beyond the flickering image itself, the living room overlaid the passage. The settee, the lamp, the stained carpet, Fred standing in front of Tim—and there, standing just behind that overlay, the shape seemed to occupy the exact same space inside the room. Not physically, perhaps. Not literally. But enough that both brothers kept feeling as though if they turned quickly enough they would catch it at the edge of the actual living room rather than only the screen.

Tim did turn, once.

There was nothing there behind him except the lamp, the curtains and the old cabinet.

Then he looked back at the television, and the reflection showed the alien closer.

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He made a strangled noise and stumbled into the arm of the settee.

Fred saw it too. "No."

The word came out half command, half disbelief. He was no longer sure whether he was speaking to Tim, to the thing on the screen, or to the room itself.

The hum in the floor rose. The corridor in the wall brightened by that tiny ugly degree it had whenever the vision deepened. The television crackled, and the alien took one full step into the frame.

Now both brothers could see that it was carrying something or perhaps had something grown into one arm—an extension, a tool, a limb, some narrow articulated shape hanging low and jointed near the hand. Tim's mind immediately tried to classify it and immediately failed. Fred's mind classified it as "bad" and got on with the more important business of not letting that show too much.

Tim swallowed. "What do we do?"

This was, in its way, the most honest question he had asked all night.

Fred did not answer straight away. He stood there, tall and squared and visibly furious with the entire structure of reality, staring at the thing in the television as if contempt alone might still carry some legal force across dimensions, hallucinations or whatever insult this was. Then he said, dry as old paper, "Well, I'm open to options, but I'd like to officially record that this has gone past irritating."

Tim would have laughed if his body had remembered how.

The alien moved again, this time not advancing but raising its head—or the top part of itself—in a way that suggested attention sharpening. Then a new sound emerged from the speaker. Not the clipped notes from before, but something lower and more complex, a ripple of tones that made the room's hum wobble in answer. The wall-corridor seemed to pulse with it. The moon-view chamber on the screen deepened. The living room lights dimmed.

Tim felt a crawling certainty move through him.

"It knows we're here," he whispered.

Fred answered without looking away. "Bit late to worry about that."

The shape at the screen edge shifted once more, and then, with horrible calm, it began coming down the passage toward them.

Not fast. Not running. Nothing dramatic. Just a measured movement, one step and then another, each one soundless in the image but somehow louder in the room than anything else had been all night. As it advanced, the corridor in the wall seemed to align more directly with the television feed. The two visuals folded tighter together. The distance between where the alien walked in the passage and where the brothers stood in the living room began to feel insultingly thin.

Tim backed up another step. Fred didn't.

The speaker crackled. The alien kept walking.

One more step.

Then another.

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And just before it reached the edge of the chamber light, where they would finally be forced to see its face properly, every bulb in the living room blew at once, plunging the house into black.

For one second there was only the hum.

For the next there was a pale glow from the television.

And in that glow, right at the other side of the room—not on the screen, but in the room itself—something tall bent its head toward them.

Then the set went dead.

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That version gives you the proper root-story spine for Book One. Book Two can begin with daylight, hangover, chemical ruin, notebook evidence, and the question of whether anything in the room actually changed or whether the comedown just makes everything worse.