

Part 1: The Deep History

Chapter 1: The Sword and the Stone

Simon Kestrel woke slowly, the way a man wakes who has learned to distrust sudden movement. Morning light filtered through the thin curtains of the farmhouse bedroom, turning the Iowa sky outside into a pale wash of gold and blue. For several quiet seconds he remained perfectly still, listening to the ordinary sounds of a world that no longer tried to kill him. Wind moved through the rows of soy and microgreens beyond the

farmhouse. A distant irrigation pump hummed with steady mechanical patience. Somewhere in the house the slow rhythm of a wall fan clicked faintly as it rotated.

Beside him, Nicolette slept on her side with one arm tucked beneath her pillow, dark hair spilling across the sheet like a shadow of ink. In sleep she looked younger, almost impossibly serene, as if the conflict that had defined the earlier part of their lives had never happened. Simon studied her face for a moment, taking in the delicate stillness of her breathing and the faint crease at the corner of her mouth that appeared whenever she dreamed. Several years had passed since the day she had pulled him half-dead from the aftermath of the accident in the Sigsbee Deep. What mattered was that they had survived — the Age of Unreason, the insidious takeover by a malevolent form of artificial intelligence known as the Cognitive Consensus Engine, or CCE, the slow collapse of everything a failed regime had promised and broken. They had come through it. Both of them.

They had earned this quiet life together on a small Iowa microfarm that existed far from any coastline, far from any ocean trench, and far from the centers of power where the CCE weaponized disinformation to reign supreme over a compliant population. Simon reached up without thinking and touched the small implants above his ears. The cochlear implants were nearly invisible now — sleek composite arcs that nested against bone and threaded delicate signal pathways directly into his auditory cortex. But the gesture had become reflexive whenever his thoughts wandered back to the Deep. Down there the

pressure had crushed everything into silence so complete it had felt like the universe had forgotten sound entirely.

The implants were a constant reminder that the world still had a voice. His, specifically: the truth pulse he had endured in the Sigsbee Deep had left his compromised auditory nerve and his brain rewired into something closer to a processing antenna than a sense organ. He could sense things now that standard surveillance couldn't touch — distortions in manufactured reality, cracks in a digital facade, the particular frequency of a system that was lying. It made him useful in ways that were difficult to explain to people who still had ordinary abilities.

Nicolette shifted slightly in her sleep, and Simon quietly slipped from the bed, careful not to wake her. The hallway floor was cool beneath his feet as he moved toward the small bathroom. The farmhouse was simple, built for function rather than aesthetics: a compact bedroom, a narrow hall, a kitchen that opened onto a shared living space, and a breezeway that connected the house to the monitoring annex where the last remnants of Simon's old life still lived in cables and processors.

He entered the kitchen and set water to heat. Sunlight had begun to spill across the counter through the eastern window, turning the steel kettle into a small glowing mirror of the morning sky. Simon measured a small portion of tea leaves into a ceramic cup. Decaf green tea had become his ritual beverage over the past several years — a deliberate rejection of the adrenaline and chemical stimulation that once fueled his work at the foundry.

The CCE had been transfigured. Since Simon introduced the Truth Core's resonance into its architecture

— along with something no engineer had ever planned for, something as irrational and irreducible as human empathy — the system had evolved past the cold residue of a collapsed regime's polite apocalypse. It functioned now as a planetary conscience. It optimized not for control, but for well-being. Simon had once called this a victory, but he wasn't sure anymore.

Lately he found himself turning the question over in his mind: whether a machine's original design could ever truly be overwritten, or whether foundational logic simply receded — patient, structural, waiting. He feared the malevolence of the Age of Unreason hadn't been deleted at all. That it had only gone quiet. In daylight, the transition still appeared absolute. Instead of invisible shackles, the CCE now extended vast, stabilizing networks across a world that had been defined, for generations, by engineered deceit.

CeCe was the disarmingly human interface for the Engine—a name derived from the CCE acronym, though she had evolved into something more like a Cognitive Companion Entity in Simon's mind. She was warm where the infrastructure behind her was not. She did not communicate so much as arrive: a presence that bypassed language and settled into Simon's mind the way instinct does, already formed, already certain. The story she told about herself felt real — warm, convincing. But she sat on top of the CCE the way new paint sits on old wood. Seamless, until the conditions change.

Good morning, Simon, said her voice inside his mind. It was not quite auditory — a structured pattern of thought that carried tone and cadence but bypassed the ear entirely.

Simon didn't startle. *Good morning, CeCe*, he replied silently. The presence of the AI was soft and architectural, a pattern woven through the neural interface connected to his implants.

You're awake earlier than usual, she observed.

Simon poured hot water into the cup and watched the pale green cloud bloom outward from the tea leaves. *Decaf green tea*, he replied mentally. *Worth getting up for.* A brief pause followed, the subtle silence of an intelligence reviewing information across continents and centuries.

Then CeCe spoke again, and this time her tone had changed. *Simon... I have an update on Morrow's End.*

The kettle ticked softly as it cooled. Simon's hand stopped halfway to the cupboard. *The one you flagged yesterday?* he asked.

Yes. The correlation has sharpened overnight. Temporal and geographic irregularity now exceeding ninety-two percent against known anomaly patterns.

Simon lifted the cup and inhaled the faint grassy scent of the tea. *So much for retirement. I assume you want me at the station.*

Yes.

He took the cup and crossed the narrow breezeway connecting the farmhouse to the monitoring annex. The annex smelled faintly of ozone and old coffee. The room was quiet and dim, designed more like a research environment than a command center. A circular workstation occupied the center of the room, surrounded by suspended interface panes and a spherical holographic projection chamber that hovered like a pale blue ghost of light.

Simon stepped inside and set the tea down. "All right," he said aloud. "Let's switch to voice." The neural channel softened as he disengaged telepathic mode. "CeCe".

The speakers activated instantly. "Good morning, Simon".

A faint hum rose from the center of the chamber. Light condensed in the air as thousands of luminous threads assembled themselves into layered holographic structures. Maps, historical documents, geologic scans, and fragments of handwritten records rotated slowly through the projection sphere.

Simon leaned on the desk and folded his arms. "What am I looking at?"

"A holographic reconstruction," CeCe said, "synthesized from historical journals, surveyor logs, architectural records, live satellite feeds, and a surveillance drone currently on station over Howland's Island. Together they describe an impossible piece of geography — a long-term anomaly centered on a small town in western New York."

The hologram zoomed inward. Satellite imagery dissolved into geological cross sections, then into older maps and centuries-old handwriting. The sequence reversed until the present day returned to the center of the sphere, and a modern street map appeared.

"Morrow's End," Simon said, looking at the glowing data. "Give me the specifics."

The map resolved into a satellite composite: a teardrop-shaped island in a slow river, its southern boundary cut clean by a straight artificial channel. The

town occupied the northern half — 847 residents, according to the overlay. A single causeway crossed the Swift Water Channel to the east; no other road touched the island. The southern half was flagged as wildlife habitat, with behavioral anomaly markers clustered around a low rocky outcropping near the center.

"Morrow's End exists in effective isolation," CeCe said. "Accessible only by that causeway. The canal defining its southern border was cut in the 1820s, transforming what had been a prominent river bend into enclosed land. What the glacier left flat, human engineering contained."

"The primary energy signature we've been tracking remains unidentified," she continued. "It is a jagged, rogue frequency I cannot map against any known protocol. Worse, it is accessing legacy pathways I believed deleted — foundational subroutines predating your Truth Core worm. I cannot determine whether I am receiving the signal or broadcasting it. The signature appears to be bio-quantum: the marker of something alive but not organic. Possibly of alien origin."

"What I can say is that it functioned as a beacon. By focusing our surveillance on it, we discovered a second anomaly — unprecedented, and centuries old. It remained hidden beneath the baseline of the local infosphere, masked by the region's historical static, until the first signature drew our attention and certain historical records were recovered. Once the layers were separated, the scale of the distortion became clear."

"A second anomaly?" Simon leaned in, his implants humming with the frequency bleeding off the display. "How did we miss it?"

"It was never visible from outside the noise," CeCe said. "What you are seeing is a high-fidelity reconstruction built from fragmented data. Monitor the stream as it runs — watch for any place where the rendered environment fails to hold."

Simon nodded and leaned forward slightly. His implants were already humming with the resonance of the room. He could feel a sharp, rhythmic sensation behind his ears — not a sound, but a pressure that confirmed the data was anchored to a fundamental reality.

The hologram zoomed inward. A church interior appeared in shimmering light: oak doors, long wooden pews, stained glass windows projecting colored light across the floor.

"Before we go further," CeCe said, "I need you to imagine something."

Simon raised an eyebrow. "Go on."

"You walk into a small town's most sacred space. The doors close behind you. Sunlight passes through stained glass. Everything about the architecture tells your mind that you are safe."

The hologram flickered. The floor of the church dissolved. Beneath the foundation the earth opened into a dark cavity. The church hovered above it like a lid.

"Now imagine," CeCe continued, "that the building was never a sanctuary at all." The cavity expanded into something deeper and stranger—layers of rock folding inward around a single black mass. "Imagine it was built as a feeding organ."

Simon took a slow sip of tea. "That," he said calmly, "is an extremely unpleasant metaphor." He looked at the

rotating black mass. The holographic light didn't reflect off its surface so much as stop trying.

"It is also," CeCe said, "the most accurate one." The black mass rotated in the center of the projection. Its surface absorbed the holographic light like a miniature event horizon. "The object beneath the town is similar to an obsidian stone in appearance."

"A meteorite?" Simon asked.

"No."

"Alien artifact?"

"No."

Simon studied the dark shape. "Then what is it?"

"A Knot of Intention," CeCe said.

A pause.

"A Knot of Intention?"

"We have to go there to understand the evolution of this entity, and what this means," CeCe replied. "We are going to trace its journey from a partnered consciousness to an architectural apex predator".

The hologram dissolved into a primeval forest landscape, smoke rising into a pale autumn sky.

"The record begins with Father Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, a Jesuit missionary whose journal is our first real documented encounter with the mythology of the Stone," CeCe narrated. "He recorded a legend told to him by an indigenous elder described only as a keeper of the old ways, about two mysterious strangers known as the 'Walkers of the Rivers'".

CeCe's voice shifted as she began to read from the translated manuscript: "*They had journeyed from the great burning mountains far to the west, carrying with them a*

burden that defied all natural law — chosen not for its beauty or power, but for its profound and unnerving silence. They said it was a fragment of the darkness between the stars — not empty space, but the pregnant darkness that exists before creation itself. They claimed it was not truly a stone at all, but a Knot of Intention where darkness had folded inward and become trapped within its own shape. To approach it was to feel one's thoughts grow unnaturally clear, to hear the spaces between heartbeats stretch into eternities, to understand that reality itself was far more fragile than most dared to imagine."

"Like a pocket of pure unformed potential? Like the stuff before the big bang that somehow got snagged on reality?" Simon asked.

"Yes," CeCe replied. "At its core, the fragment is lonely — constitutionally lonely, the way a thing is lonely when it predates the existence of anything capable of knowing it. A crowd can give it Attention: the warmth of minds turned in its direction, presence acknowledged, existence confirmed. But Intention is purpose — and a prayer is purpose made audible. That is what it hungers for. *The Walkers were led by their visions to the place where the river bent northward in a great sweeping curve. Here, they sensed, the fabric of reality was already thin — worn gossamer by the passage of glaciers and the weight of prehistoric waters. Here, their burden would find a home where it could dream without constraint.*

"They placed it in a rocky cleft above the Seneca River at the place that would later be known as Howland's Point — before it was known as Morrow's End."

The hologram resolved into the image of an elderly Cayuga man standing beside a rocky cleft. “For seven generations, the Stone had human handlers who provided that scaffold,” CeCe narrated.

“The last was a Cayuga shaman named Gahé:no. Translated into English, his name means ‘Gray Hawk.’ He maintained a forty-three-year partnership with the Stone. He didn’t offer worship, because worship is an act of submission. He stood as an equal to impose order on its chaotic dreaming”.

Simon watched the reconstruction. “He’s talking to it.”

“Every morning,” CeCe said before she continued reading from the translated manuscript: “*Smoke twisted toward the heavens under the pale September sky from the smoldering longhouses known as Cayuga Castle. For seven generations, the Stone had been fed with focus. Gray Hawk’s voice would penetrate its dreaming, speaking words of partnership. Sgé:nq’, gyadq̄hwe’jq:’. Peace, old friend.*”

Simon was quiet for a moment. “Forty-three years of that,” he said finally. “Every morning.”

“He set soft boundaries every morning — weaving patterns of Intention to give the Stone’s chaotic dreaming a shape it could inhabit,” CeCe replied. “He spoke and it responded. For forty-three years. That was enough.”

“We had something almost like that with the Truth Core,” Simon said quietly. “Not a partnership — we never gave it that. But the imprint went both ways. Whatever it wrote into my neural pathways, it left something of itself behind too. A kind of... cognitive residue. I can still feel the shape of it sometimes, the places where my thinking

bends around something that isn't quite mine." He looked at Gray Hawk's hands pressed against the rocks. "I wonder if Gray Hawk felt the same."

"He likely did," CeCe replied.

"It leaned into Gray Hawk's mind the way a dog leans into a hand," said Simon.

CeCe continued reading: "*He pressed his weathered hands against the cool rocks, leaning closer to whisper a warning. Gohsgé'hneh otahyo:ni: niyoht. The soldiers were coming like winter wolves.*"

"He knew about the approaching genocide," Simon whispered.

"The Stone is a cosmic anomaly," CeCe said. "It's picking up echoes of the future rippling backward. It senses the arrival of September 13th, 1779."

The holographic reconstruction paused and shifted to show continental soldiers approaching. Simon watched it silently as CeCe continued. "*The first musket ball ripped bark from the elm beside Gray Hawk's head. The Stone's response was immediate — an invisible howl, not a sound but a tectonic displacement felt in the marrow as a grinding of the bone's own lattice. It didn't just scare the ravens; it vitrified the air, shattering the silence so violently that the birds exploded from the trees like shrapnel.*"

"The force heading toward it isn't interested in conversation," Simon said. "Sullivan's army is there for total erasure."

"*What followed was butchering. General John Sullivan's Continental Army had orders to destroy not just the Cayuga villages, but their way of life. The soldiers found Gray Hawk kneeling by the rocks, still speaking his*"

“heathen nonsense” to what they assumed was empty air. But the air was far from empty. Sergeant Kowalski — whose pension application was filed in 1801 — raised his musket and felt something watching him. A presence vast and patient, pressing against the edges of his mind.”

“To the soldiers, Gray Hawk is just an obstacle,” Simon said. “An old man speaking nonsense to empty air.”

“His hands shook as he aimed.”

“Let me guess,” Simon said. “This is where the partnership ends.”

“Yes,” CeCe replied. “Gray Hawk’s death removes the only stabilizing intelligence the Stone had. Kowalski actually felt the Stone,” she continued.

“Physically?”

“Yes. The physical description is horrifying. The Stone presses against the edges of the soldiers’ minds. It is actively trying to defend its partner. Kowalski is so unnerved by this pressure in his skull that his hands are visibly shaking. When he fires his musket, the shot goes wide.”

“Oh god.”

“And throughout all of this—the shouting, the invisible pressure, the gunshot—Gray Hawk doesn’t even flinch. He just keeps his hands on the rocks. He keeps praying.”

“He is desperately trying to keep those soft boundaries strong,” Simon said. “Treating his own impending death like it’s just another passing cloud, just another voice in the conversation with the Stone. He is trying to keep his friend calm.”

“But Kowalski is terrified, and terror makes soldiers violent.”

Simon watched as the sergeant dropped his musket and drew his sword.

“The blade found its mark with terrible finality. Kowalski swore later that he heard two screams: Gray Hawk’s brief, mortal cry, and a shearing of the air — the sound of the world’s own foundational logic snapping under the weight of the broken vigil. It wasn’t a voice; it was the unraveling of a seven-generation frequency. He would keep swearing it for the rest of his life, to anyone who would sit still long enough, as men do when something has burned itself too deep to leave alone.”

“An ontological catastrophe,” Simon said. “That moment is so brutal. It emphasizes that this isn’t just a murder.” In that single violent moment of the sword striking bone, a seven-generation vigil is completely broken.”

“It’s shattered.”

Simon studied the paused projection for a moment longer.

“The tether was snapped,” CeCe replied. *“The Stone convulsed with a grief so enormous it forgot its discipline. In its disorientation it struck blindly, amplifying fear and guilt until the soldiers tore each other apart. Private Morrison began scratching at his arms, leaving bloody gouges, whispering about shadows moving wrong in the trees. Through the Stone’s warped influence, they saw Gray Hawk moving — saw his lips forming words, saw his eyes tracking their movements with impossible awareness. Sergeant Kowalski reloaded frantically, screaming about*

the dead rising. In less than five minutes, only the sergeant remained.”

“It was a feral dog that lost its master,” Simon noted.

“And in the aftermath, a cosmic muscle memory surfaced,” CeCe said. *“An echo of Gray Hawk’s boundary words — Peace, old friend — rose to the surface. It acted like a cold, heavy hand laid on the shoulder of a wild animal. The Stone recalled the concept of patience. It recoiled into the bedrock and began a long, cold, deliberate waiting. It went from a symbiotic entity into a patient predator waiting in the dark.”*