Radio Silence

*It was the silence that woke him.*

Liam Evergreen woke up with a jolt. He wasn’t sure what had caused it at first; all he knew was that something had startled him enough to wake him from an awesome dream involving skateboarding hamburgers. He rubbed his eyes and stretched, turning to look at his bedside clock, except the clock wasn’t working.

This, in itself, wasn’t that strange. Liam was used to his building experiencing power outages, which happened at least once a week; something to do with faulty wiring and a stingy building supervisor. Luckily, his window faced a clock store, and so he had an abundance of clocks to check.

Sighing, Liam hauled himself out of bed and padded over to his window. Pulling back his curtain he looked out.

Staring back at him was darkness. All of Main Street was hidden in shadows. No screens were lit, no TVs were playing. Even the cars in the surrounding streets were stationary. A chilling thought occurred to Liam. It wasn’t just the lights that were gone. Everything was silent. No voices or traffic noises. No hum of street lights or annoying music playing from upstairs. It was like the entire village was holding its breath.

Hearing a thud in the hall, Liam went over to his door and pulled it open, seeing his dad had run his wheelchair into the wall.

“Dad?” Liam asked, “What are you doing?”

“Nothing, nothing.” He assured, spinning the device around, “My night vision isn’t very good, and I didn’t see the wall in front of me.”

“Yeah, about that. What’s up with the blackout?”

“Ah yes, the blackout. It’s incredible, Liam! I’ve never seen anything like it before!”

“‘Incredible?’ Isn’t it like all the other ones? I mean, the blackout last summer took a week to be fixed, but there were no lasting problems…”

“Oh no, Liam. This time is different. Come to the dining room; you have to see this!” His dad rolled off down the hall, bumping over items hiding in the shadows.

Liam watched him go with an amused gaze. His dad was, well, strange. He fancied himself a bit of an inventor, and was always coming up with strange experiments to perform. Liam went down the hall, and opened the door to the dining room, only to be assaulted by the smell of melting candlewax.

The dining room was dimly lit, with half melted candles sputtering on every available surface. Covering the table in the centre of the room were hundreds of black and white photos.

“What’s all this?” Liam asked, picking up one of the photos.

“This”, his dad replied, “is all of the research I have been doing for the past year, ever since the black outs started happening so frequently.” He gestured to the photos with a smug grin on his face, glowing as if lit by an inner light. “Electromagnetic pulses, Liam!” he exclaimed, staring at Liam with a look of expectation on his face.

“Electro…..what?”

“Electromagnetic pulses. The sun has been giving them off for the past year, each one coinciding with a blackout. I believe that the most recent one is why we are now suffering from a worldwide blackout, and why cell phones are no longer working.”

“Wait, worldwide? How do you know? And why cell phones?”

“Well, I’m not entirely certain. It’s more of a hypothesis of mine. But I do know that all of Niagara-on-the-lake is dark. I went to the roof of our building when the power first went out on Main Street, and it’s completely dark as far as the eye can see. As far as the cell phones go, I’ve made the assumption that the pulse is not only interfering with all electronics, but also with all forms of communication, other than person to person.”

‘Oh man.’ Liam thought. ‘Even if it’s only the village that’s effected, there could still be a lot of problems arising.’

“How long is this going to last? Because if it takes too long riots might break out, just like every time a crisis occurs.”

“Could be hours, could be days, could be permanent. It’s hard to say at this point. It all depends on how long the pulse’s effects last.” His dad scratched the back of his head and sighed. “Since all forms of communication appear to be down, it could be awhile before help arrives.”

“But if the power might be gone for good, then we need help now. You said that you’ve been studying this since the blackouts became frequent, right? Surely you must know of something that might help?”

His father pinched the bridge of his nose and frowned, glaring at the ground like it had done something wrong.

“There is one thing you could try, although it’s untested, and therefore I don’t know how safe it is. I’d do it myself, but with my blasted leg it wouldn’t be possible. Do you think you can do it?”

“Sure, if you think it’ll help, then why not? What’ve you got?”

“This, Liam, is an electrostatic generator.” His dad held out a small device, about the size of a shoe box. It was made of metal and had what looked like an alligator clip sticking out the front. “Or, at least it was. I modified it. Since the pulse prevents electronics from working, I’ve fixed this up to run on static. When activated, it will send up a wave that will strengthen the ozone slightly to repel the pulse.”

“Great, but how am I supposed to activate it?”

“The substation near our apartment building is full of electrical towers, right? And those towers, although compromised by the pulse, will be covered in static electricity. The amount on just one of them should be more than enough to power this box up. When it starts to spark, you’ll know it’s working.”

“Perfect! I’m going to go and put it to the test!” Liam grabbed the box and ran out of the dining room, grabbing his jacket as he reached the front door.

“Liam!” his dad called out as Liam opened the front door.

“Yeah dad?”

“The generator has to be plugged directly into the electrical tower, right near the top where the wires are. Be very careful. One wrong move and you could have thousands of watts of electricity running through you.”

“I’ll be fine dad, quit worrying. I’ll be back soon.”

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Liam grabbed his skateboard and took off down the street. As he rolled down the road, he was appalled by what he saw. Store fronts were smashed in, cars were tipped on their sides and debris was everywhere.

‘Man, if this was all done in less than an hour, then things are worse than I thought. Let’s hope this device really will work, otherwise we’re all screwed.’

As Liam neared the substation, he looked around to make sure that no one was going to jump out at him, and didn’t notice a big lump in the middle of the road. He hit the lump and went flying, falling a few feet away.

“What the heck was that?” Liam sat up and rubbed the back of his head, looking to see what it was that he had run over. At first it looked like a large pile of debris. But upon closer inspection, he realized that what he had run over was in fact a person.

‘That’s not good.’ Liam ran to the body, and rolled the person over onto their back. It was a boy, who looked like he was only a few years older than Liam himself.

“Dude, are you okay?!” Liam shouted, shaking the boy’s shoulder. He groaned, and slowly opened his eyes.

“W-what happened? Who are you?” He looked suspiciously at Liam, before glancing at his surroundings. “Where am I?”

“You’re lying in the middle of the road outside of the substation. Why were you there?”

“I don’t know…all the lights went out so I was heading home, but on my way a couple of guys came out of the shadows and tried to steal my bike from under me. They had bats and then, well, here we are. I’m going to assume they succeeded.” The boy rubbed his shoulder, rolling it a few times to get rid of some kinks. “Doesn’t feel like anything is broken, though. They must’ve hit my head hard enough to knock me out and then just left me alone. That’s something to be thankful for, I guess. Although my bike was really expensive…”

“At least you’re okay. What’s your name?”

“James. You?”

“Liam. Well, James, it was nice meeting you, but you should probably head home, just in case something goes wrong.”

“‘In case something goes wrong?’ What do you mean?”

“This box is supposedly going to help turn the electricity back on. But if it does, then there might be a lot of electricity released, and that would not end well for anyone in the vicinity.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but it sounds like whatever you’re going to do with this box could be dangerous. Why not get the police or firefighters to deal with it?”

“No electricity means no form of quick communication. The time it would take to get the police is time that we don’t have. What happened to you is happening all over the city. This needs to be stopped now, before it gets worse. And other than my dad, I’m the only one with any sort of idea about how this machine works.”

“That sounds serious, and like you’re trying to do something really noble. Good luck and all that, but I’m not sticking around to see your charred corpse hit the ground if it works. My first concern is for my safety, not the village.”

“Didn’t expect you to.” Liam bent down and grabbed his board, before turning to the chain-link fence surrounding the substation. ‘How do I get in?’ Liam wondered, looking around to see if he could see any gaps in the fence.

As he was trying to figure out if he would be able to throw the box over without breaking it, Liam was tapped on the shoulder. Turning around, he saw James standing behind him with a ladder.

“Saw this resting against the wall over there.” He said, pointing to a factory building behind them. “Figured it might help you get in.”

“Thanks, man. Not to come across as rude or anything, but I thought you weren’t going to stick around.”

“Yeah, well. You look pretty young, and I felt kind of like a wuss, letting a kid attempt to fix this mess while I ran off home. So here I am, ready to help.”

“I’m not a kid, I’m 17!” Liam looked at James indignantly. He grabbed the ladder from James and propped it against the fence, making sure it was steady before climbing up.

“Sorry, man. It’s just that you’re sort of short, y’know? I didn’t mean to offend you.” James climbed up after Liam and jumped down on the other side.

“Whatever.” Liam sighed, walking towards the nearest electrical tower. Holding the box under one arm, he used the other to pull himself up the ladder on the side of the tower. James hurried after him, glancing around as he did so.

“Where exactly are you supposed to put that thing?”

“On the top of the tower. That’s where the static electricity will be most powerful.” Liam reached the pinnacle of the tower and started fiddling with the clip on the side of the box.

“Wait, the top of the tower? If this works, you’ll get electrocuted!”

“Look. This pulse is not something that people have had to deal with before. At least, not one this powerful. There’ll be conflicting ideas from different scientific organizations. And while they debate, the crimes will only escalate. If this box can do anything, then it needs to be done now. Besides, maintenance people come up here all the time, right? I’ll be fine. If you really want to help me out, go down and stand guard. I’m pretty sure we’re not supposed to be up here.”

“If you’re sure, man.” James took one last glance at Liam, before turning around and descending back down the ladder. Liam followed him with his eyes, until he was sure James wasn’t in contact with the tower.

‘Here it goes.’ He took a deep breath before connecting the box to the top of the tower. ‘I sure hope dad knew what he was doing.’

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Liam wasn’t sure what to look for, but it didn’t seem like anything was happening.

“Did it work?!” James called up to Liam from the ground.

“It doesn’t seem like it!” Liam replied. “I’m going to leave it and come down. We can go and ask my dad if something is missing.”

Liam stood up and grabbed onto the frame of the tower, making his way towards the ladder. As he was about to turn around to start his descent, he heard a humming noise starting overhead. Looking up, he saw the box begin to spark.

“Yes! It’s working!” Liam cried. As he turned his head to shout down to James, he caught sight of the sparks coming off of the box. They were leaping onto the tower, and heading right for his hand.

Without time to let go, the power surged through his body, sending him convulsing backwards and off the tower. He watched as the light of the box shrunk, until it was a tiny speck. As his body hit the ground, the spark disappeared from view, as well as everything else.

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James ran towards Liam. He wasn’t moving, and that scared James.

“Liam? Oh crap. Liam?!” He checked him over without touching him, unsure of what to do. As he was checking to make sure that Liam’s neck wasn’t broken, Liam’s eyes fluttered.

James’ eyes filled with tears, as he looked down on the face of the boy who had sacrificed so much to help the village.

Liam shakily raised his hand in the air, reaching for something only he could see. James grabbed his hand, and held it close to his chest.

“Liam, hold on, alright? You did it. You’ve turned the power back on. I’ll call an ambulance, so just sit tight. Look at me, okay? You’re going to be fine.”

“Apologize to my dad for me,” Liam mumbled, “I lied to him. I told him I’d be back soon. He always hates it when I lied.”

“You didn’t lie, Liam. You’re going to see your dad soon, alright? Just hold on a little longer.” James clutched Liam’s hand tighter as tears flew from his eyes.

“Why’re you crying, mate? It…was all…worth it, right?” As Liam finished his sentence, his eyes slowly fluttered shut. He heaved one last breath, and his arm went slack.

“Liam?! Oh god, Liam! Open your eyes, damn it! LIAM!!”

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