

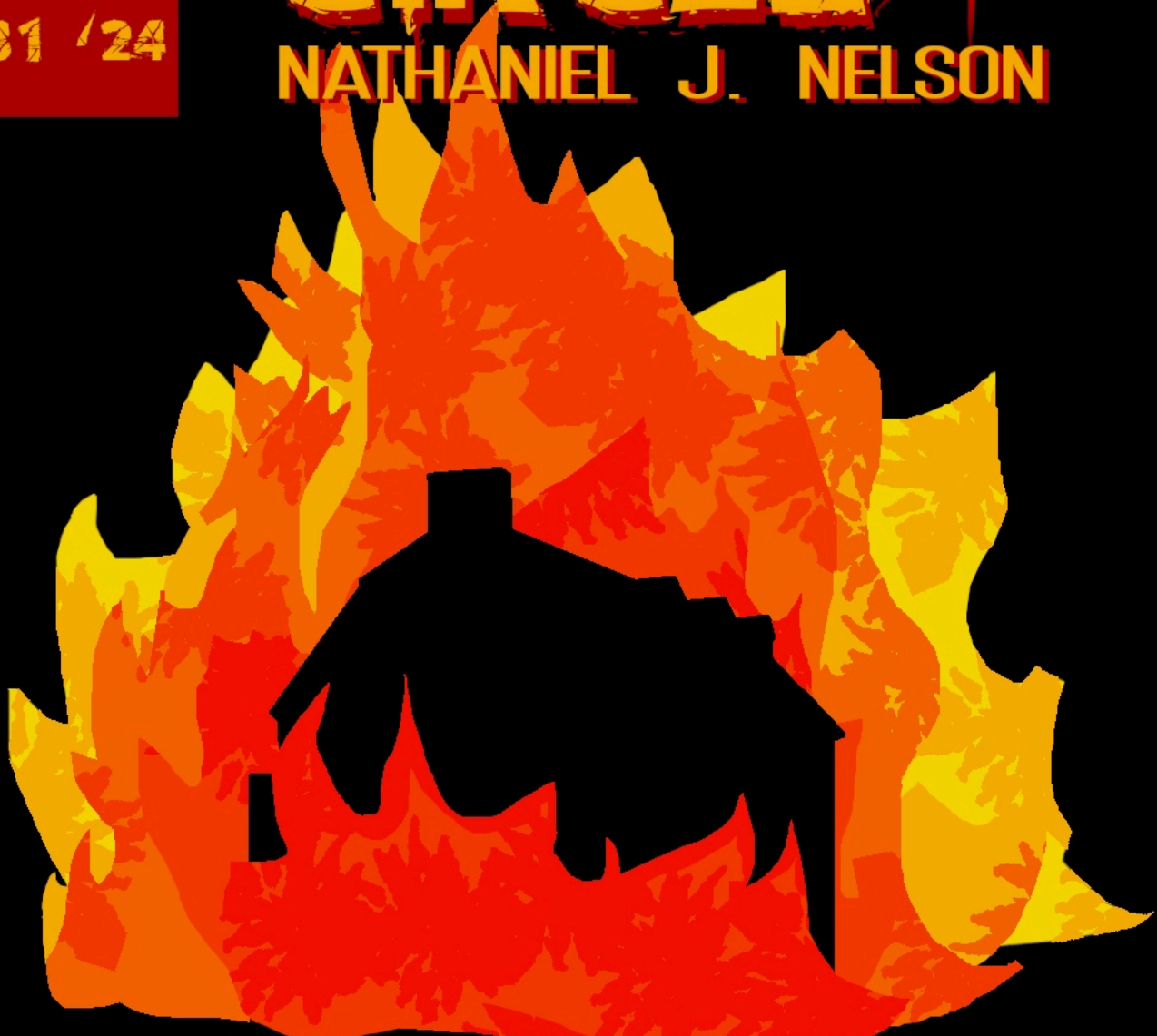
EP. 101



MAY 31 '24

# SEVENTH CIRCLE

NATHANIEL J. NELSON



IGNITION  
PART I OF V

# Seventh Circle ep101

## *Ignition: Part I*

*October 2015 – A freak fire in Boston destroys the headquarters of the Seventh Circle Institute for Paranormal Research – a nonprofit organization that never quite caught the public eye. As the company and its employees fade into nothingness, a lone conspiracy theorist in South Boston wonders if there may have been greater forces at play behind the demise of SEVENTH CIRCLE...*

JANUARY 20, 2017  
CAMBRIDGE, MA  
LATE MORNING

It was on that day – the day of the inauguration – that he realized something had to change.

He glanced between the faces of his peers, each in turn: some of them were speaking, some of them staring at their phones, some of them half-asleep. This was it, he thought. The flame had sputtered out.

“I mean we’re fucked,” Jack said. “He’s gonna call up the UN and try to file for bankruptcy for the whole country.”

What the hell was this? Vinny thought. Was this what they were doing now?

He didn’t exactly begrudge a group of college-aged Millennials the chance to discuss the most controversial and unprecedented presidential race in history – but they had the rest of the week for that, Tweeting during class and ranting on Snapchat Live about the country’s inevitable fall into fascism. This was a single hour of the week when they all came together to discuss a topic both nebulous and expansive that always seemed to escape the Venn diagram of their conversations.

Vinny suddenly needed a cigarette, bad, but knew he'd missed his chance. If he left the library now, he would return to the study room just in time to leave, and inevitably have another one on his walk to Harvard Square.

He found himself locking eyes with Jack across the circle of tables. Sasha and Jordan were caught in a cyclical discussion about Russian voter fraud; the others had gone silent, apparently losing interest in even this juicy a topic.

Jack was a good-looking guy, trim, athletic, the kind of guy who was strongarmed into playing linebacker in middle school and grew up to live the Baby Boomer's vision of the American dream. He had always struck Vinny as too traditionally "cool" to hang out in a group like this; further evidence, Vinny supposed, that while they may live in a computer simulation, they did not live in a sitcom.

Jack raised his eyebrows, and Vinny indicated the room at large with a tilt of his head. Jack would understand, he figured, because they'd had this discussion before: every Friday, it seemed, at least since the group had visibly shifted away from staying on topic.

"So!" Jack clapped his hands together, slipping in between Sasha and Jordan's dialogue. "Let's focus up. Who's got anything?"

In an ideal world, the group would look to Vinny as their *de facto* leader – he was the most dedicated, and easily the most knowledgeable – but today, their disinterest was wreaking havoc on his own motivation.

"Emma?" Jack proposed.

Emma looked up from *Pokémon Go*, surprised at hearing her name. She didn't talk often, he knew, but had occasionally shown a depth of knowledge that surprised him. "What?"

"Did you bring anything?" Jack asked. Presumptuous, Vinny thought: the days had come and gone when their members would show up fully prepared for that day's discussion.

Emma took a second to puzzle through the question, then replied in the negative.

"Well let's talk about *something*," Jack said, his first-prize smile faltering. "This is a discussion group, isn't it? Let's discuss."

"Go right ahead," Jordan replied. "What do you want to talk about?"

Jack shot him a withering look, and its meaning was clear: *he* still cared enough to participate, but he wanted to determine if the same went for everyone else.

Vinny scratched at his disconnected goatee. What were they even doing here? he wondered. A year ago, this group had been alive with excitement and fervor about every conceivable talking point, to the extent that he had felt like they were making progress towards some great, unknowable goal even when their interactions consisted entirely of sitting and talking. But now, for whatever reason – be it loss of interest, simple boredom, or the concern over massive world changes etched across every one of their faces – the same group of nearly all the same people was unable to even bother trying.

This wasn't some planning committee, or even a school study group. The handful of twenty-somethings in this conference room weren't here to better themselves or make a positive change like the Alcoholics Anonymous chapter that met in this room right after them; they weren't a grassroots campaign championing a lesser-known political figure. They were a discussion group for conspiracy theorists and paranormal enthusiasts: if the other members were no longer interested, nothing was forcing them to stay.

The meeting dwindled to a close with little to no ceremony, and the other members silently filtered out of the conference room, Vinny trying not to think about the days when they would end their hour with a tongue-in-cheek, semi-official sign-off. "We're just in a rut," Jack said, clapping Vinny on the shoulder on his way out the door. "We just need to remember why we're here in the first place."

Now alone in the conference room, Vinny slowly began tying his scarf around his neck. *Why we're here in the first place*, Jack had said. And why was that, exactly? To discuss paranormal activity and conspiracy theories, presumably. But was that really it? Just to sit and chat? If Seventh Circle was still around...

But Seventh Circle wasn't still around. And was that really such a bad thing? Vinny had narrowly avoided being yanked into a world of office work and little pay, all in the name of discovering the truths behind the supernatural. He would have come to hate the job, he knew, and the fire that claimed their building was sent by providence – and

possibly an arsonist – to keep him firmly rooted to his high-paying gig and his normal adult life. Without Seventh Circle – hell, without this group – Vinny was an average twenty-three-year-old bartender who made decent money and lived in an impossibly decent apartment. He drank a little too much, sure, and he still hadn't managed to kick his smoking habit – but he had money in the bank, a college degree, a loose collection of peers he sometimes referred to as *friends*... everything he could have hoped for in his adult life.

So why was he suddenly struck with the uneasy notion that he wasn't getting any younger?

A couple of guys from AA entered the room, shot Vinny a quick nod, then began pushing the tables out towards the edges. Possibly a dark look at his future, he thought: if he didn't make a serious change in his life, enough to shock him into some kind of action – if he didn't identify that out-of-reach *something* that he felt just beyond the horizon of his wants – there could come a day when he stuck around the conference room to give his name and condition to a circle of fellow addicts.

Vinny loosened his scarf, pulled on his tan duster, and left the building.

The world outside the library was frozen, in time and temperature, manmade paths of slush and sleet barely visible between fields of gray snow. Vinny trudged away from the library building, knowing the moisture would eventually make its way to his socks, and finally arrived on the sidewalk.

One other member of their group was still on the premises: Sasha Belanger, leaning on the phone pole at the edge of the sidewalk, scrolling through her phone. Her silky Chinese hair was worn loose, as usual, and she was wrapped in a puffy jacket with a faux fur hood. From the back, she looked like a cross between a Viking and the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man.

“Sasha,” Vinny said, coming to a stop beside her.

Sasha jerked away and swore, almost dropping her phone. “Don't do that!” she cried, yanking out her earbuds.

“Sorry,” Vinny said. He pulled out his pack of Cherry Bomb Merlots and lit one up. “You waiting for someone?”

Sasha removed her comically large glasses and wiped them on her jacket, futilely attempting to de-fog the lenses. “My stupid boyfriend was supposed to be here early,” she said. “I’m missing valuable homework time.”

“You live in East Boston, don’t you?” Vinny supplied. “He’s got traffic.”

“If you’re gonna drive in Boston,” she said, “You gotta learn to compensate.” She pulled out her phone and squinted at it through blurry lenses. “God dammit,” she said, immediately putting it back in her pocket. “It’s official.”

Vinny almost asked what she meant, but remembered the national event that had overshadowed today’s meeting of the formerly-engaged conspiracy theorists.

“How the hell did this happen?” Sasha wondered aloud, holding out two fingers. Vinny passed her the cigarette, and she took a deep drag. Across the street, a homeless man was peering in the window of a ratty old pizza place: the sole business in a line of residential.

“Shadow government,” Vinny said, before he could stop himself.

“What?” She handed him back his cigarette.

He took a second to reply, trying not to look like he was backpedaling. “I know certain factions have made this line of thinking, let’s say, unfashionable,” he began, “But the concept of a secret society running America isn’t new.”

“And that’s why fascism is on the rise,” Sasha shot back. “Cause these asshole conspiracy theorists use baseless concepts like the *shadow government* to justify xenophobia.”

“I mean...” Vinny performed a dramatic turn-glance back at the library, and was again surprised to see that the brick building had a turret. “Aren’t we conspiracy theorists?”

“Not when it comes to scientific racism and bullshit about the Jews running the world,” she replied. “If my parents ran all the banks I wouldn’t have to work at CVS.”

Vinny said nothing. She wasn’t wrong, he knew: with the rise of white supremacy in the United States, calling oneself a conspiracy theorist wasn’t as innocuous as it once had been. *Kurt Bachman wasn’t a conspiracy theorist*, he thought absently. Seventh Circle had been little

more than a clump of cubicles where bored slackers were paid to browse paranormal-related subreddits by generous donors looking for a tax writeoff – at least, that was the impression he had gathered from the late nonprofit’s website and social media outreach – but man, at least they had an office. And a cool name, and an even cooler logo. They didn’t have to waste their time in a library conference room with unpaid twenty-somethings who refused to admit they just weren’t interested anymore.

“Did I ever tell you about...Seventh Circle?” Vinny asked, not looking at her. He was getting colder – he was getting older – but he still had a long time to kill.

“That place you’re like, always talking about in the group?” she replied.

Vinny killed his cigarette and tossed it into a snowbank. “Yeah I know I’ve talked about it, just wasn’t sure if that was before you showed up.”

“You talk about it all the time,” she reiterated. “You just bring it up, tell us it sucked, then drop it.”

“Right, yeah,” Vinny said, “It did suck, as far as I could tell. Not really much to it. But I was just thinking how cool it would be if we had an actual organization, instead of just a discussion group. Y’know – instead of just talking about paranormal activity, we get out there and see it for ourselves.”

“Sounds like a great idea,” Sasha replied, “For when we all suddenly become rich and don’t have to work forty hours a week on top of school.”

*Yeah, well...* Vinny thought. *You wouldn’t be my first choice in partners anyway.*

“I’m probably gonna stop coming soon,” she admitted. “We barely ever talk anymore anyways, and it’s a pain in the ass getting here. Plus, like...with everything going on in the world...”

Vinny nodded, implying that he understood. With everything going on in the world, he thought, time was running out to figure out what was really going on. Who was really behind the election of Donald Trump and the rise of white supremacy...and, on a more personal note, who really burned down the headquarters of Seventh Circle?

“This group is on its last legs,” he agreed. “But maybe we can rejuvenate it somehow. Y’know...a phoenix type thing. Rise from the ashes.”

Sasha clocked the white pickup truck trundling down the road in front of them, then looked at Vinny. “Sounds like a lot of work,” she said.

*Yeah*, he thought, *But I know at least one guy who’d be willing.*

The pickup truck pulled to a stop in front of them and Sasha opened the passenger door. “See ya,” she said.

Vinny nodded at her back. The driver, a buff Hispanic guy with a neat beard, held up a hand in greeting. Vinny mimicked the gesture and watched as they pulled away down Broadway. He was left alone on a frozen sidewalk, a lengthy train ride from home, that feeling of disappointment returning to his gut. What was he looking for? he wondered. What had to change?

JANUARY 20, 2017

SOUTH BOSTON, BOSTON, MA

AFTERNOON

Vinny’s day began at five p.m: the hour his higher-ups had deemed the perfect changing of the guard for their little watering hole. The day drinkers would be stumbling out to their evening shifts on the construction site, and the day laborers would be just leaving their offices or Internet startups, depending on which generational cohort and tax bracket they belonged to. This left Vinny with the whole afternoon to himself: time to be productive, he would always think, before remembering that he wasn’t working on anything in particular.

*Just killing time*, he thought, pouring himself a whiskey on the rocks: enough to kill a horse – enough to kill time – but not enough to impede his bartending abilities. He leaned against the counter and took a sip. He could read, he thought: he was halfway through Joe Hill’s *NOS4A2*, but was quickly losing interest in the nonsensical lore and paper-thin characters. He was halfway through a replay of *Ocarina of Time* on the vintage N64 he’d found on eBay – but the thought of working his way through the current dungeon full of brain teasers just



made him feel tired. He could masturbate, that was always a winner. But he definitely wasn't feeling it. Shit. Maybe he would just sit here and drink.

Without thinking, Vinny sat at the small table dominating what he laughably called his *dining room*: really just the back half of his kitchen. His apartment wasn't huge, but he spent more than half his monthly income on rent and utilities, which at least netted him a place with separate kitchen and bedroom. He opened his aging MacBook, adorned with a hammer and sickle drawn in Sharpie and a piece of masking tape over the webcam, and opened his Seventh Circle folder.

Over a year ago, Vinny had heard about the little research organization from somewhere or another, and been surprised to discover that its headquarters was a short walk from his apartment. He had cruised by a couple times, but never gone in: before he strode into their building, looking suitably badass in his long coat and neat goatee, he had to do his due diligence and look into his soon-to-be employers. He had spent days scouring their website, the public records of all their investigations into the world of the paranormal. It was all there online – a haunted high school in New Haven, a haunted restaurant in Burlington, a series of coincidental killings in Portland, even one particularly disturbing incident out in Nebraska, their only real geographic outlier – and Vinny had been impressed by their repertoire. At least, until he had realized that their so-called *field agents* never really followed up. Reading through the detailed reports of their field missions, he had come to the conclusion that Seventh Circle's MO involved finding an alleged paranormal case, checking in with its human center, poking around for a day or two, then leaving without conclusion. They were the real-life equivalent of a cryptid-hunter reality show whose crew never bothered sticking around one area.

After Seventh Circle had burned down – infuriatingly, the very day he had planned on touching base – Vinny had downloaded nearly all the content from their site, knowing Google would be reclaiming their domain name if Bachman and the gang couldn't keep paying their dues. He had saved gigabytes of plaintext, image files, external links, and screenshots, first to his MacBook, then to his external hard drive, then to the Cloud, then off the Cloud when he remembered he didn't

trust the Cloud. It was all pretty interesting, he thought – not because Seventh Circle had proven a paranormal research organization was more than a pipe dream, they had barely done that, but because if all these piddling investigations had really occurred, that meant there really were innocent people out there in the country who were seeing dead people or feeling unknown presences or getting bit by vampires and looking for someone to prove they weren't crazy – and if the paranormal entities in question were real, to figure out how they worked.

A thrill of excitement ran through Vinny as he couldn't help but picture himself – plus Jack, maybe Sasha, whoever else wanted in – as a genuine paranormal investigator, not just sitting in a library or an office, but out in the world, meeting people who experienced paranormal activity and helping deduce what was really going on in this invisible world beyond human understanding. If Seventh Circle's handful of employees had been a little more enthusiastic – and a little younger – they could have played up the cartoonishness of their profession and gotten real results by rolling up to haunted houses and refusing to leave until they had answers. Not that there was a lot of money in that, he thought, or, any money at all. Was Seventh Circle really a nonprofit? Who the hell had been keeping their lights on?

"The cases are there," Vinny said aloud, draining his name-brand whiskey. He poured himself another one, and when he sat back at his computer he immediately opened paraGhost: less trustworthy than Seventh Circle's records, he believed, based on absolutely nothing, but a hell of a lot more interesting.

A colorless post-stacking site with no user interface to speak of, paraGhost was closer to a 4chan clone than social media: its users were lighter on the memes and the casual racism, but its brutalist design (or lack thereof) showed that paraGhost wasn't a site you log onto just to fuck around: it was the last port in the storm for those who were being plagued by paranormal activity they couldn't even describe let alone explain, or, at the very least, people who heard something go bump in the night. They weren't likely to network with any genuine ghost hunters – those being in short supply in these agnostic modern days – but at the very least, everyone who posted on paraGhost would be

heard and believed by at least a handful of other users.

Vinny scrolled through paraGhost's home page for a while, stopping only briefly on a post titled **MULTIPLE ALLEGRO THEORY (???)**. Allegro was a common topic of discussion on paraGhost: the mysterious, unnamed founder of the site, he (or she, or they) would moderate from the shadows and occasionally stop by to ask for more information on a particular post. No one knew Allegro's real name, age, location, anything...but due to the nature of paraGhost's users, they weren't about to let him get away with it.

*Fuck it*, Vinny thought, taking another sip from his whiskey. He must have forgotten to eat anything recently, he thought, because he could feel the alcohol taking effect as he piloted over to paraGhost's /meetup/board: ostensibly a place to discuss IRL meetups and possible collaborations, but in practice a forgotten corner of the site that usually devolved into *Twin Peaks* circlejerks and cosplay photos despite Allegro's authoritarian modding. Vinny created a new thread and began to type, not thinking too hard about it, just letting his emotions flow through his fingers and onto his keyboard: his disappointment at never getting to work for Seventh Circle, his irritation at his group losing interest, his feelings of helplessness when he thought about the direction the country was headed and how even in a true democracy, the power of the people would be null and void when the real decision-making was done in the shadows.

THOUGHTS ON SEVENTH CIRCLE??

user WarwickWizard1994

jan. 20 2017

13.43

any of you ever heard of seventh circle? it was a small reesarch organization in boston that burned down last year. it was founded by a guy named kurt bachman in 1977 and despite being around for 50 something years no one really noticed it, probably cause they didnt put a whole lot of effort into their investigations.

## *7C101 – IGNITION: PART I*

ive been thinking about 7c a lot lately (partially cause i live like two blocks away but mainly cause i'm wondering why it's so unheard of for a paranormal reasarch group to actually be successful. like 6/7 billion people are religious which means they believe in the supeirnatural so why does no one try actually starting a group that actually goes out into the world and actually tries to iigure out if paranormal entities and places have some kind of logic to them? like supernatural isnt really SUPER natural right? if these things exist they must have SOME kind of rules to thme, so why isnt anyone trying to figure it out? or is it that people ARE trying to figure it out and you just never hear about them cause theyre never successful? ig there's probably no money in paranormal investigation. 7c was a nonprofit which honestly sounds great, not like they were gonna get rich off it but they got paid to do what had to be done.

i feel like thats what we need: not some kids in a van going around solving mysteries but like a real honest to goodness company that specializes in this shit. like ghostbusters. just, more serious. kurt bachman was a bbay boomer so maybe he knew something about business none of us do, but he definitely had something going with his cool team name and logo. again 7c didnt really bust any ghosts or prove the existence of aliens or anything but at least they kept it going for like 50 years. id

NATHANIEL J. NELSON

rather have a boring job working towards my goals than a fun job i dont care about.

ive posted about 7c before and usually you guys turn it into a whole conspiracy about how they were "silenced" and the shadow govt probably burned down their building and maybe thats true but its not what's important. what's important is that kurt bachman had the right idea and right execution, he just didn't have the overhead and i'm guessing his employees didn't have the motivation. imagine seventh circle but run by young people who actually care about exposing the supernatural and the shadow govt. we could honestly change the world.

idk im just rambling. but i'm part of a paranormal discussion group irl and over the last year all the other members have stopped caring and now they just sit there yapping about politics and unimportant stuff. i cant help thinking that if we had a cool name and logo and maybe some spending money they wouldnt have lost interest.

thoughts?

Vinny didn't glance over what he'd written before he posted it: he didn't want to edit his rant into anything more poetic, which he wouldn't be able to resist. He needed the anonymous users of paraGhost from around the country – around the *world* – to hear what he was saying, and hopefully feel what he was feeling.

Not that he knew what he was feeling. Generally, Vinny found it a lot easier to drink away his feelings than try to puzzle them out – but something told him he may have started figuring himself out. The group sucked, that was clear. But the people in the group – especially

Jack, and maybe Jordan – they had joined for a reason. With the right circumstances, they could become a bona fide team: and he would be their leader.

JANUARY 23, 2017  
SOUTH BOSTON, BOSTON, MA  
AFTERNOON

Just picture it,” Vinny said, gesturing up into the shadows. “Three stories. A library. Cubicles. Even a couple corner offices for you and me. And in every one of those cubicles is a field agent who’s just about to take off on a field mission to somewhere new and exciting.”

Jack crossed his arms and leaned against the brick wall. “What are we doing here again?”

Vinny turned around, the hem of his duster twirling in a way he always found immensely satisfying. He was standing in the center of the lot, the three-story buildings on both sides towering above: one, a second-hand clothing store, the other a laundromat, both with two stories of apartments above. The Seventh Circle headquarters had seemed much bigger a year ago, when he had stood outside and debated entering with bluster and good humor; now, he couldn’t believe Kurt Bachman had fit his little nonprofit on this postage stamp of an asphalt square.

“This was Seventh Circle,” he said. “Their headquarters was right here, before it burned down.”

“Yeah but...what are we doing here?” Jack asked again. “Are you suggesting we build an office building here?”

“No – hang on.” Vinny ran a hand through his hair, trying to collect his thoughts. He realized he needed a cigarette – bad – then realized there was no law about smoking in a building that no longer existed, so he lit up. That first cloud of almondy smoke carried with it a burst of inspiration for continued eloquence. “Seventh Circle is old news,” he said. “They didn’t even have the capital to spring back after the fire.”

“What happened to them?” Jack asked.

“No idea,” Vinny admitted. “I asked online, but no one had ever heard of them. I figured the owner is flipping burgers somewhere, trying to pay off the insurance company. But that doesn’t matter. The point is, we can form our own group. Not just for talking – but for *doing*. I’m talking field missions. There are thousands of people on paraGhost begging for help with ghost infestations or saying their baby is actually a changeling.”

“You wanna take advantage of people,” Jack said.

“No,” Vinny replied. “I want to help people. And every time we do, we get that little bit closer to exposing the supernatural and maybe even the Illuminati.”

Jack took a deep breath. He was still leaning against the brick wall of the Helping Hands. “It sounds amazing,” he admitted.

“Doesn’t it?” Vinny gestured with his cigarette. “And I know we’re young, but Kurt Bachman must’ve been about our age when he founded Seventh Circle.”

Jack frowned, and Vinny realized he may have misspoken. But how? Even starting as lame a company as Seventh Circle felt like a major achievement at their age, especially in this increasingly confusing world. Vinny barely knew how to do his own taxes, let alone understanding the financial hierarchy of a nonprofit organization – if he managed to found a company that lasted forty-eight years, he would consider it a major success.

“I have a job,” Jack said finally. “And I actually like it a lot, I’m thinking about making a career out of it.”

“That’s great,” Vinny replied, deciding not to remind Jack that his beloved TV station was just another thread in the great tapestry of neoliberal propaganda and imperialist dogma that made up what the American public laughingly referred to as *the news*.

“I work forty hours a week,” Jack continued, “I really don’t have time for much else. I barely have time to commute to the group.”

“Forty hours is standard,” Vinny reminded him. Well, usually thirty-nine. Sometimes thirty-nine and a half. “Hey I’m sure you’ve got a lot on your plate, but the vast majority of your time is still *not* at work.” Standing in the middle of an empty lot, he was forced to gesture as he spoke or risk conveying nothing with his body language.

“I usually work *more* than forty. I don’t know about you, but I spend a lot of time just scrolling on my phone or going to the bar: time that could be spent on my real goals.”

“What makes you think we have the same goals?” Jack asked.

“Cause you’re the only one who still cares,” Vinny replied. “Come on – Jordan just likes feeling superior to everyone, and Tobey thinks he can spin the group into extra credit for sociology. I think Sasha’s just trying to spend some time away from her boyfriend. And Emma – ”

“Tony,” Jack said.

“What?”

“It’s Tony. Not Tobey.”

Vinny frowned. “Really?”

“Yeah. Never been Tobey.”

“Huh.” He thought for a second. “I’ve always called him Tobey.”

“Nope,” Jack said.

“Weird.” Vinny recovered quickly. “But seriously. You’re the only one who’s really dedicated. You’re the only one who talks anymore.”

Jack let out a deep breath. “I mean it sounds fun,” he said, “But do you really have the money to start a whole company?”

“No,” Vinny admitted. “That’s why we start small. With social media and public outreach. We investigate some cases – haunted houses and stuff – and we build up a fanbase, then we file for an LLC and go from there. We keep full-timing for a while, we just spend more of our downtime focusing on our goals.”

“And where are we supposed to find these cases?”

“ParaGhost,” Vinny replied. He had introduced the site to their group, which led to a sudden spike in conversation levels which eventually died off. “Maybe if we get big enough, Allegro will notice us and we can collab. But until then, we find the most panicky OPs and ask if they’d like a hand.”

“But we don’t *know* anything,” Jack said. “Not really. If we investigated a paranormal event, we would just be grasping at straws.”

“Yes,” Vinny agreed, “But no more than anyone else.”

Jack made a pained expression. “I’ll think about it,” he said. Then, seeming to realize how difficult he was making this: “You know I’m super dedicated to paranormal research. I just – never really pictured



myself making a career out of it. Cause, like, no one does. That's not a real career you can have."

"Yet," Vinny added.

"Sure," Jack said. A pause, then: "Y'know I really liked the group. Back when everyone was interested."

"I did too," Vinny agreed, though he was starting to wonder. Had he ever really enjoyed sitting in a circle with a handful of bored college students who already agreed on everything and rived Socrates in their acknowledgement of their own ignorance? or had the group always been a subconscious means to an end?

"I don't know if I wanna spend all my time doing supernatural stuff," Jack admitted. "Like – if it becomes a job, then maybe it won't be fun anymore."

*What are you not understanding here?* Vinny thought. This wasn't supposed to be fun – and it wasn't supposed to be a hobby. The disparate topics they had discussed in their group were all important, and most of them were objectively real on at least some level. Ghosts. Monsters. Aliens. The shadow government. Secret cabals. Order 322. Illuminati. Roswell. Quantum Airlines' 888. Walt Disney. JFK. MKUltra. John Titor. Bigfoot and Mothman. Spontaneous time travel. The Georgia Guidestones. Taos Hum. Reincarnation. Heinrich Himmler and the Holy Grail. Annabelle and the Warr –

"What," Jack said.

"What?" Vinny replied.

"You were grinning like a crazy person," Jack replied.

"Oh." Vinny forced his face into a neutral pose and took a calming drag off his cigarette. "It's nothing."

Jack checked his watch, and Vinny realized Jack was wearing a watch. "Look man I gotta get home. Work tomorrow."

Vinny nodded. "Understood. I gotta be at the bar in a couple hours."

"I'll think about this," Jack said. "I'm very interested, trust me – I just don't know if I'm ready to make the jump from paranormal discussor to paranormal investigator, y'know?"

"I know," Vinny agreed, smiling to conceal the pit of dread that was opening inside him. What if Jack decided against it? he thought.

What if he was forced to go back to that group without a plan, or even a hope? Or, worse, if he ended up quitting the group entirely and slowly lost interest in paranormal investigation? Was there a hypothetical world line in which Vinny Howell neglected his clear destiny as a ghost hunter and Illuminati buster and possibly part-time wizard for the simple, unremarkable life of an aging Boston bartender? Oh, God, please, say it isn't so, he thought, that life was perfectly fine for someone else, someone who wasn't bothered by the thought, but not for him, not ever. *Strike me down now*, he thought, unable to resist a preemptive glance at the sky above, *If all You have planned for me is a mediocre life.*

"I'll think about it," Jack said again, stepping over to Vinny and holding out a hand. They performed the traditional half-shake-half-hug that most white men were pretty sure they were doing wrong, then Jack disappeared from the shadow of the two three-story buildings.

Vinny stood there for a while in the center of the asphalt square, surrounded by plants and grit and a few blocks of concrete left over from the remains of Kurt Bachman's life's work. A few yards away, cars were cruising back and forth across West Broadway. Where was Bachman now? Vinny wondered. He was pretty old, Vinny knew from the website, so he didn't have much chance for a new start – he may have died in the fire, honestly, but Vinny had scoured the South Boston obits and found nothing about a seventy-something German guy that particular week.

Seventh Circle had hosted a handful of employees at any given time, Vinny knew, but the website didn't paint them a flattering image. Fat old white guys, mainly, who were clearly looking for an easy paycheck, or else had been with Bachman since the Seventies and used to actually care. *Not us*, Vinny thought, performing a dramatic twirl to take in the darkened contours of the invisible building. *We'll find out the truth – or we'll die trying.*



JANUARY 27, 2017  
CAMBRIDGE, MA  
LATE MORNING

Vinny was the first to arrive at the library, and not because he was eager to get started. Jack had implied via text that he would have his answer at the next meeting, and, based on the tone of their conversations over the last week, Vinny liked his chances.

He had daydreamed through multiple shifts at the Inferno Club, running on autopilot and clamming up when lonely barflies tried starting a conversation. He loved his job, if for no other reason than that it paid almost triple federal minimum wage (which was still only two-thirds of its own worth adjusted for inflation against the last time the minimum wage was raised) but something had changed over the last week: he had started to realize – and, he hated that he was coming to this conclusion at the tender age of twenty-three – that this may not be the home stretch of his life.

He had followed up his paraGhost thread with several more, all increasingly legible and desperate. He wasn't so much looking for team members to hire as he was looking for confirmation that his hypothetical team would be accepted: that one of the biggest paranormal discussion forums on the Internet would recognize his authority, as a lifelong theorist and a frequent user of said website, and not perform one of the Internet's unexpected and surprisingly harmful coups d'état against a fellow anon who hadn't done anything to warrant their scorn.

The general responses had been negative. An increasing number of comments on each post, some of them fully abusive, a few using some choice words that didn't technically apply to Vinny but weren't fun to see anyway. Some paraGhost users were ragging on him for his continuing series of posts about a now-dead and forever-insignificant nonprofit, others were telling him to stop taking up space in a board that was usually dominated by photos of slutty cosplay. But until Allegro himself intervened, Vinny had decided, he would keep sending his little signal into the ether, hoping for some support and maybe

even a new partner.

Maybe Allegro was Kurt Bachman, Vinny thought, as Emma Hayward trundled into the conference room and flopped down at one of the tables. Maybe paraGhost had been his contingency plan in case Seventh Circle was silenced by the Illuminati. If Allegro was in his seventies, that would at least explain his lack of user-friendly UI and general reluctance to ban users for encouraging hate crimes. But no, Vinny thought – that would be too perfect. There were theories out there about the paranormal relying on some kind of semi-physical residue that drew into itself – Midi-chlorians for real-world magic – but Vinny couldn't honestly guess that the two paranormal experts he'd been thinking about recently were the same person. He knew he could come off as lacking in cognitive continuity, and, honestly, if he was going to be the leader of a team, he needed to tone it down. Leave the wacky wild card antics to someone else, preferably the third member (second male member) who was never once considered a possible match for the sole female member. Oh and, if he was going to lead a team, he needed to stop thinking about real life in TV stereotypes.

Lizzie came in and sat in her usual spot, foot up on her chair, poking at her phone. Jordan came in next, outdated headphones plugged into his phone, and sat in silence, watching a video that Vinny couldn't see but definitely sounded educational based on the monotonous hum crawling out from Jordan's ears. When Sasha entered, she shed her puffy coat to reveal her usual sweatpants and tight T-shirt: the uniform of a college kid who had well and truly given up, barely a semester into sophomore year.

Vinny made a show of playing on his phone, scrolling through Reddit without really looking – he wanted to check his most recent paraGhost thread, but he knew the poorly-constructed website didn't translate well to mobile – keeping one eye on the conference room door and reminding himself to play it casual when Jack walked in. He didn't bear the group any ill will, he told himself, but he wouldn't say no to a satisfying moment of telling them off for their waning interest and strutting out of the library with his new second-in-command in tow.

“Sasha,” Vinny said.

She looked back at him.

“What happened to you?” He almost allowed his question to dangle, then decided that life is short enough already and gestured vaguely towards his eye.

“Oh.” Sasha pulled her glasses halfway off and gingerly touched the darkened skin around one eye. “I walked into a door.”

“Really?” Vinny frowned. He was leaning back in his chair, and he thought he might like to stay that way for the rest of the meeting. “Your glasses aren’t broken.”

“I wasn’t wearing them,” she shot back, and he thought he detected an edge in her voice. “I’d just gotten out of the shower.”

“Alright,” Vinny replied, looking away. He didn’t really care about Sasha’s issues, if Sasha didn’t really care to discuss them. Honestly, he thought, he could take or leave anyone in this group – not that he wouldn’t totally die for them if the chance arose, but, if he was handpicking his paranormal investigation team, he needed to choose wisely.

Jack didn’t show up before eleven, but this wasn’t really a concern seeing as no one bothered to start the meeting. Vinny remained where he was, leaning back in his rough plastic chair, the little pads at the end of the stainless steel legs resting in the carpet as the two front legs hovered in the air.

Vinny subtly turned to look at each member of the group in turn. None of them knew, he thought. And they wouldn’t know, not for a while – not until his new team, with its dedicated cast of personalities and badass logo had enraptured the zeitgeist to the point where the shadow government wouldn’t dare to make them disappear. Burn down *our* building, will you? Ha! Vinny’s team would never end up as an insignificant little collection of middle-to-older-aged professor types – not when they needed strength of body and mind to figure out what was really going on.

Eleven-ten. Jack still hadn’t shown up. Was he trying to keep Vinny in suspense?

“Okay guys,” Jordan said, finally taking his headphones off. “Let’s get started.”

“Get started with what?” Emma asked.

“The meeting,” he replied, as if that should have been perfectly obvious. Nah, Vinny thought – not obvious. How could anyone be blamed for thinking the purpose of this group was to sit around in silence and denial? “I found a new case on paraGhost,” Jordan said, pulling out a notebook. “It’s a haunted restaurant. Poltergeist stuff. I thought that could be fun.”

“Sure,” Emma said, not sounding particularly enthused. Her cheek was resting in her hand.

“It’s in Burlington,” Jordan began. “Near UVM. OP said he matched with one of the waitresses on Tinder and she told him all about it.” Too little too late, Vinny thought, wondering if he should feel bad about what he was about to do.

“I know this one,” he said, allowing the front legs of his chair to hit the floor. “Seventh Circle investigated them back in ’08.”

“Yeah uh.” Jordan glanced down at his notes. “OP said the owner said there was an investigation a while back, but – ”

“But ‘there is no way to further prove what we already suspect,’ ” Vinny quoted. It wasn’t even close to what the Seventh Circle scribe had posted on their website all those years ago, but no one in this group would know that. “They gave up, essentially.”

“Yeah,” Jordan said. “They gave up.”

“What kind of stuff happens in the restaurant?” Sasha asked.

Vinny’s phone buzzed and he checked the screen, ignoring Jordan’s response. A new text from Jack, he saw: *sorry dude i don’t think I’m coming today.*

He stared at his phone for a minute, trying to work through the variety of implications in that single line of text. Had Jack just decided not to make the commute to Cambridge on this freezing Friday morning? Had he decided he was *never* coming back? Did that mean... was he giving up on the group...*and* Vinny’s proposal?

A new text. *probably not ever going back tbh.*

*Oh fuck this,* Vinny thought. He didn’t need Jack to spell it out for him. In fact – he didn’t need Jack at all.

He sat up straight and interrupted whoever was talking. “Jordan,” he said.

“What.”

“What’s the most likely paranormal event or entity we’ve covered here.”

“What do you mean ‘likely’?”

“I mean of everything we’ve talked about in the last couple years, what do you think is the most likely to be genuinely supernatural instead of a hoax?”

Jordan looked down at his notebook. “Uh...this restaurant – ”

“No,” Vinny snapped. “You’re just saying that cause it’s right in front of you. Give me something with a little more evidence.”

“There *is* no evidence,” Sasha reminded him. “If there was, there wouldn’t be any mystery.”

“Evidence doesn’t equal proof,” Vinny said. “A lot of these cases have plenty of evidence, so name one of them.” A silence. “Emma?”

“I don’t do well on the spot,” Emma confessed.

*Unbelievable*, Vinny thought. Were any of them even pretending anymore? “Have any of you absorbed anything in the months and *years* you’ve been coming here? Or does it all just go in one ear and out the other?”

“Why are you having a meltdown?” Emma said.

“We’re not here to be *tested*,” Tobey told him. “This isn’t school.”

“No, this is more important,” Vinny shot back. “We’re talking about the kind of stuff that could save the world someday. If we actually understood the supernatural we could prepare ourselves for whatever’s coming.”

“Nothing’s *coming*,” Jordan told him. “Dude. I don’t know what world you’re living in but this is...kinda just a hobby.”

Vinny stared at him, then looked at Tony, Emma, Sasha in turn. They really didn’t care, he thought. They really didn’t draw the connection between what they were doing here and the state of the world. Thousands of people suffered through paranormal experiences every day – and this group that had dedicated its time to researching such cases preferred to sit here in silence rather than putting in any effort.

“Whatever,” Vinny said, standing up. He couldn’t do it alone, he knew: not without Jack, and not without the rest. Maybe joining this

group had been a bad idea in the first place: maybe he needed to take a step back, reevaluate his life...then clock in for his evening shift.

“Where are you going,” Sasha said.

“Home,” Vinny replied, pulling on his scarf. “I’m not gonna waste my time coming out to Harvard every Friday if no one’s willing to have a real conversation or even believe in what they’re saying. I get the feeling that goes for the rest of you too, you just refuse to admit it to yourselves.” He yanked on his duster and headed for the conference room door. “Enjoy your discussion.”

He stood on the sidewalk, his boots an inch or two deep in slush, and lit a cigarette. He didn’t look back at the library, on principle, though he was once again tempted to check if there really was a turret. He was never coming back here, he thought: Jack wasn’t, and neither was he, and, if the others had taken his words to heart, they probably weren’t either. He may have just destroyed their little group with a couple sentences: he felt suitably guilty about that, but there was nothing for it. Someone had to put them out of their misery. It was like Sasha had said. They were wasting valuable homework time.

Vinny let out a cloud of smoke, riding on a deep sigh. There was no group, he thought. No organization. No nonprofit or even for-profit startup based on paranormal investigation. It was a ridiculous thought. When Kurt Bachman had moved here from Berlin, he had found himself in a very different United States: still in shock over the death of John F. Kennedy, blessedly pre-Reagan, moving into a period of agnosticism but still more generally accepting of Bachman’s field of interest. Plus, the simple difference of economies was enough to prove that Vinny wouldn’t be starting a company in the 2010s, not without massive capital. And even if he started small, like he’d suggested to Jack...no one else was interested. And he wasn’t going to be a one-man team. He was aiming for *Scooby-Doo*, not *Doctor Who*.

“Hey! Vinny!”

He turned to see a lumpy figure jogging through the slush away from the library. When she reached him and came to a panting stop, her glasses were fogged up and her coppery skin was flushed. She



unzipped her marshmallowy jacket and jerked at the front of her shirt.

“What the hell was that?” she demanded.

“What was what?”

“You’re just leaving?” she continued. “After all this time?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I’d rather waste my time doing something fun than sitting around doing nothing. Especially with a two-hour round trip.”

“So, what, you’re just gonna leave *me* to suffer?” she shot back. She looked away, towards the slushy sidewalk. The bruising around her eye was just barely visible behind her foggy lenses.

“Suffer how?” Vinny murmured.

“With those dumbasses,” she said, throwing a hand back towards the library. “You’re like the only one I like in there. If you’re out, I’m out.”

Vinny considered this, surprised. He had never thought they were particularly close, any more so than he and any other member. He appreciated her knowledge of the supernatural, but her cynicism and inability to let herself believe made her difficult to work with.

“Are you trying to start a new group?” she asked. “Cause if so, I might be into it. If it’s closer. And less boring.”

“Not exactly a group,” he said, before he could reconsider. “More like...a team.”

“What,” Sasha returned, “Like Seventh Circle?”

“Seventh Circle,” he said, wondering if he should stop talking and take a second to consider if he even wanted Sasha involved. “But good.”

“But we’re, like...kids,” Sasha returned. “We don’t have any money. Or time. How are we supposed to – ” She stopped when Vinny held out his cigarette. Hesitantly, she accepted, and took a drag off the pink filter. Sasha? he thought. Really? She was known as the cynic of the group, unable to grant any leeway to any theories. The others had called her *Agent Scully* on more than a couple occasions, and it really pissed her off, he knew. She wasn’t his first pick, actually, she may have come in dead last: he needed partners who would keep an open mind and be willing to believe what they were seeing.

Then again...of everyone in the group...only she had followed

him out.

“Take a walk with me,” Vinny said, nodding down the street.

“Where are we going?” she asked, handing him back his cigarette.

“Harvard Square,” Vinny replied, starting to walk.

Sasha hurried to catch up. “What’s in Harvard Square?”

“Three different Dunkin' Donuts within a hundred yards of each other,” he replied. “Let’s grab a coffee. And then we can talk.”

OCTOBER, 2015

UNKNOWN LOCATION

UNKNOWN TIME

The metal rings were chafing at his hands, rubbing his thin skin raw. The cuffs were attached to the middle of the table, which allowed him to sit upright with his hands resting on the flat surface – but even this neutral position had grown uncomfortable after the first few hours.

When the man in the sunglasses finally returned, he was alone. The door slid open to allow him inside, although with the near-pitch darkness of the room and the hallway beyond, he may as well have simply appeared through the wall. He was dressed in a suit and tie, his hair seeming messier than possible given its length. As ever, a pair of reflective sunglasses completely obscured his eyes: in this room, they reflected nothing but blackness and a single white light directly above the table.

“How long do you plan on keeping me here?” he demanded, trying not to think about the pain in his wrists. He focused on the aching in his rear end, cramps and stiffness after sitting for so long: not much better than his hands. “Or do you even have any idea? Are you just making this up on the spot?”

“Oh we know exactly how long you will be here,” the man in the sunglasses replied, sitting down across the table. He steepled his fingers in front of his face, his pale hands becoming ghostly smears in his lenses. “Down to the minute, I assure you.”

“Not down to the second?” He gritted his teeth against the pain, which now seemed to come from everywhere all at once. “And here I was, about to be impressed.”

The man in the sunglasses smiled without any trace of humor or positivity in general. The tightening of his lips drew thick lines in parallel on either side of his face. “You have quite the nerve, Herr Bachman,” he said. “And I regret that I may have to break it. But it’s time we determine what you know.”

*Will Vinny succeed in forming a paranormal investigation team with no money and no time? How will Sasha and Jack fit into his new lease on life? Will they ever catch the attention of the enigmatic Allegro? And who or what really caused the fire in Kurt Bachman’s office building? Find out next time on SEVENTH CIRCLE...*

