

Phoenix, Arizona (Orion's Headquarters)

Swanson and Ross sat in the surveillance van wearing VR helmets that projected what the squad leader saw through his goggles. Swanson would have preferred to be going in with the raiding party but had been told in no uncertain terms that he was to sit it out. Ross, on the other hand, was glad to be out of the line of fire.

The squad leader had done a recon earlier and was reviewing the tapes with his team. They saw a small concrete and brick warehouse with two entrances – one at the street and another at the back opening onto a loading dock – and only a few windows high up on the wall facing the street. Thermals scans showed about ten people inside the building. Most were near the back but two were near the front.

“We believe that the factory floor where the jacking devices are set up is near the back. These two ...” The leader pointed to the two figures near the front of the building. “... we think are in offices separate from the main area. One might be the leader. We are going to hit both doors simultaneously. Team One will hit the back and take out the large group. Your primary concern will be to protect the devices. Assume they will try to destroy them and act accordingly. We want those machines.”

Team One's leader nodded.

“Team Two, you go in the front. Capture these two.” He tapped the screen again. “Capture if you can. If not, take them out. Use the gas canisters. They should work in the smaller rooms.”

The Team Two leader asked: “Do we know the layout of the place?”

“Nope. The only schematics we could find are over fifty years old and about three owners behind. We are going in blind.”

“Seems like we always get the shit jobs.”

“That's why they pay us the big bucks, Moreno. We go in two minutes.”

They touched knuckles and headed for their start positions. Weapons were checked and comm links tested. Video cameras on the helmets of the team leaders were turned on. They were ready when the squad leader started the countdown at ten seconds. At eight seconds, guns were cocked and safeties thumbed off. At four, the teams advanced so that at one, they stood just outside the doors, battering rams at the ready.

“Zero. Go! Go!”

Rams hit both doors and the raiders flooded into the building from two directions. All stopped puzzled. The interior of the building was wide open and vacant. The only people visible were the two incursion teams.

“What the hell?”

The raiders instinctively went into defensive stances and scanned walls and ceilings, ready to fight but there was no one to fight with. The leader of Team One reported but he needn't have bothered. The squad leader, with Swanson and Ross in tow, burst into the room to see for himself.

“Search every inch. I want to know why our thermal scanners showed people where there obviously aren't any.”

The squad leader was pissed. The only thing worse than losing a fight in his mind was being ready to fight and not having an opponent. He was all pumped up with adrenaline with no release. He spun to face Swanson.

“Your intel sucks, Swanson. Where’d you get the info?”

“A very reliable source, Major.”

“For sure. I hope you didn’t pay your source anything ‘cause that’s what his info was worth.”

Swanson snapped back.

“My intel was solid. I think the plan for the raid was leaked, maybe by one of your team.”

The Major just smiled.

“Nice try, Swanson. My boys were told about the raid and its location on the way here. They thought we were going on a training mission until then. If there was a leak, it was on your side. Not mine.”

The leader of Team Two called over from near the back door.

“Sir, you need to see this.”

“What is it, Romero?”

“This is what messed with the thermal scanners.” He pointed to a tiny grey box the size of a deck of cards hanging on the wall beside the back door. “It’s a laser generator, sends out laser beams and wherever they hit something like the floor, they create hot spots.”

“Take it with us. We’ll give the lab geeks a go at it. In the meantime, stand down. We’re done here.”

He looked at Swanson and shook his head.

“I’d take another look at your people. The Others were warned. They made sure we’d waste time. You have a leak.”

Swanson wanted to punch the Major but had to admit the possibility he was right about the leak so he resisted the urge. He turned and left the building, gesturing to Ross to follow him.

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Los Angeles (Swanson’s Place)

The flight from Phoenix back to Los Angeles was a tense one. Swanson and Ross had chalked up another failure but were reluctant to talk about it as if talking made it real. Both were desperately seeking a solution to their predicaments. Neither wanted to face the consequences for repeated failure and knew that they had to succeed or else.

Back at Swanson’s house, he broke the silence.

“We need to take out Orion and his crew at all costs. Otherwise ...”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Ross snapped. “You had a snitch give you the exact location of the base and we get there ... and nothing. Your snitch played you.”

“I don’t think so. His intel was good but somehow between the time we got the information and the time we were ready to act on it, Orion moved. Somehow he knew we were coming. He left that laser gizmo especially for us. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Ross was tired and did not want to get into another argument. “What do we do now?”

Swanson smiled.

“We still have that computer freak in the basement. We can force it to search for Orion.”

“We can try but we have no leverage.” There was no enthusiasm in her voice.

“Nonsense. We’ll find something that’ll motivate her. Let’s go!”

Swanson rushed to the basement and Ross followed more slowly. By the time she reached the Faraday Cage, Swanson had the laptop open and was holding the power cord.

“What the hell is this? The laptop’s battery is dead.”

“I have no idea,” Ross responded.

“Bullshit, Ross. You were the only one who ever came down here.”

He plugged the computer in and booted it up. As the operating system went through its opening steps, Swanson watched Ross’s reflection in the screen. He saw fear. He turned towards her.

“What happened here? Tell me the truth.”

“Nothing. I already told you. Nothing.”

He grabbed her wrist and twisted it until she screamed. He leaned towards her.

“Tell me or it’ll hurt a lot more.”

“Let go of me, you shit.” Ross yelled.

Swanson twisted harder and they heard a sharp crack as her arm bones snapped. She fainted.

When she woke up, she was strapped into a chair, helpless. She tried to struggle but each time she moved, the broken arm exploded in pain.

“Untie me, Swanson. You can’t do this.”

“I can and I am doing it. I need to know what happened. Sarah does not seem to be in the computer. Either you let her escape or you never had her. Which is it?”

“You are out of your mind,” She blustered, stalling while her arm repaired itself. A few minutes more and she’d be back at full strength. Swanson picked up a hammer and broke her other arm.

“It’s not often I get to work on one of us. Our healing power is quite remarkable. Break a bone or two, wait a half hour and you get to break it all over again.” He used the hammer on her just healed arm. Ross screamed and passed out. Swanson repeated the process twice more, waiting for each bone to heal before breaking it again. He had to admit he enjoyed hearing Ross scream. Before he could break her right arm for the fifth time, she’d had enough.

“Okay. Sarah was in the computer. I got drunk and unplugged the thing. Sarah is dead. I killed her.”

Swanson looked into her eyes and saw truth. She believed she actually murdered Sarah.

“You are such an idiot, Ross. You can’t kill a computer program. You just made it harder for us to keep track of it.”

“No! I killed her! I did!”

“You were supposed to contain it. Keep it away from Adams for a while but no, you had to take it that one step further. Because of you, it’s gone. We’ve lost control.”

“But ...”

“Don’t you get it? Sarah is a computer program – nothing more, nothing less. You can’t kill a computer program. It isn’t dead. She isn’t dead but you are.”

He placed his revolver against her forehead and fired. The silver coated bullet penetrated her brain and stopped. Ross slumped in the chair, dead.

Swanson left the cage and pulled out what looked like a satellite phone. He dialed and reported to his superiors, blaming Ross for everything. They accepted his explanation but ordered him to travel to New Mexico to meet his immediate supervisor who was inbound to take over. Swanson swore under his breath and then out loud said: “Yes sir.”

* * * *

Unspecified Location

“It’s hard to get used to you guys switching bodies. I just get used to one and you show up in a completely different one.”

“I’m afraid it’s necessary for security reasons. The Authority uses facial recognition software and can track an individual too easily. We use the avatars for only a short period each to get around that. We have to be very careful.”

Orion and Josh sat facing each other at the dining table although the meal had been over for a while. They were discussing what Josh considered to be “Orion’s Theory.” Orion seemed to be willing to try and answer all of Josh’s questions but Josh felt the answers were too pat. They sounded rehearsed and seemed more religious than scientific. He felt he was being preached to. It was making him uncomfortable.

“I guess I should go. It’s getting late.”

“Stay a few minutes more, please. I have been thinking a lot about your girlfriend and the effort she went through to warn you about the danger. I really would like to meet her, even if she is pissed at me.” Orion tried to mask his anxiety but Josh saw through the mask. This was important to Orion. Very important.

“Why?”

“She could really help our cause. She has skills that we need.”

“It won’t happen. I know she won’t meet with you. You did kidnap me, snatched me off the street. How do we know you won’t do the same to her?”

“True. You don’t. She has no reason to trust me. And you have no reason to trust me either. I have been trying to find a way to build some trust. Maybe this will help.”

He handed Josh a state of the art laptop.

“It’s equipped with an internal cellphone modem that will work anywhere. And there is no way for me to monitor it. Connect with Sarah and convince her to chat with me – even if it’s only online. I’ll accept that for now.”

“You still haven’t given me any reason why I should connect you and Sarah.”

“Let me talk to Sarah online, give me a chance to tell my side of the story and you’ll be free to go. We’ll take you back to LA or wherever you’d like to go and drop you off. Hostage released.”

Josh stared at Orion for a couple of moments trying to assess Orion’s motives and intentions. He leaned forward and pushed the laptop across the table to Orion.

“No.”

“No?”

“No. You said it yourself. We can’t trust you. So you talk to Sarah and then renege on the deal. You get what you want and I get nothing. No. If you want to talk to Sarah, you take me home. Give me the IP address for your computer and she’ll contact you once I am home safe. Otherwise, you can take your laptop back and forget about it.”

Josh sat back and crossed his arms, trying to look tough. Orion smiled.

“Done.” Orion stood. “Take the laptop with you to your room. Talk to Sarah. Tomorrow, we’ll get you home. I have to make the arrangements. Good night.”

Josh sat, stunned. He was going home. Briefly, some doubt slid into his mind. Was Orion just playing with him? No. He’d accept Orion’s word for now. He headed downstairs, anxious to connect with Sarah. His mind barely registered that there were no guards between him and the front door, no one to stop him if he left right now. He booted up the computer as he raced down the stairs. That way, he’d be ready to talk to Sarah sooner. He had a lot to tell her.

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Los Angeles (Hospital)

Wheaton sat up in his hospital bed. His arm hurt like hell but he’d had enough ‘laying about’ as he called it. As soon as the doctor came by and signed the papers, he was gone. He told himself he’d heal better at home but in reality he hated hospitals. The smell reminded him of death. Both his parents had passed away in hospitals and the smell of disinfectant typical of hospital rooms was indelibly imprinted on his mind. A knock on his door interrupted his reverie.

“Excuse me, Detective Wheaton?”

“Yes. What can I do for you?” The man who stood in the doorway seemed comfortable in the hospital setting but he was not dressed like a staffer. He leaned against the doorjamb and smiled.

“Not a thing. I just wanted to see how you were doing. Last time I saw you, you were in pretty bad shape.”

“You a doctor? We met?”

His guest laughed.

“No to both. I’m Kevin Treacher, EMT Shift Supervisor. I found you in a ditch near Bailey Park.”

Mark stood up and offered his hand.

“So you’re the guy who saved my ass out there. The doctor said I’d lost a hell of a lot of blood.”

“True. Your tank was close to empty by the time I got to ya. I topped you up and sent you over here.”

“Thanks. I owe you big time! I have a question though. Before I passed out, I remember crawling into the underbrush. How did you find me?”

“Hey, when I got to you, you were half in and half out the shallow ditch right next to the Hilliard entrance to the park. You must’a crawled further than you remember.”

Wheaton felt Treacher was lying but didn’t push it. He was just grateful to be alive. Treacher changed the subject.

“The nurses tell me you are being discharged later. That’s good news.”

“Yeah. I am looking forward to some real food.”

They both laughed. They chatted about their jobs for a while. Treacher’s radio beeped and he headed back out to the streets. Wheaton laid back down, too tired to even bother turning off the TV.

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Unspecified Location

They came for him early but he was already up. He’d been up all night sharing thoughts with Sarah but he wasn’t tired. He was excited. He was being released and he was ready. Sarah and he’d discussed it and agreed that their old apartment was out of bounds. Both Orion and the Authorities knew about it. Besides, it’d been trashed so technically Josh was homeless and Sarah didn’t need one. They’d decided to go back to Wheaton’s place. He was the only one they really trusted. The fact that he carried a gun helped a lot.

Sarah had been pretty convincing arguing her case that they should stay as invisible as possible although Josh thought she was being a bit paranoid, not that he disagreed with her. He’d been through a lot in the past few weeks. If their location was known, Orion could snatch Josh again at any time. For that matter, the Authorities could take an interest in Sarah again and try to get at her through Josh. It was better to be hard to find. To that end, he’d told Orion he wanted to be dropped off at UCLA not far from his apartment. If Orion got the idea that he was going back there, that was okay. He’d make his way to Wheaton’s once he was clear of Orion’s men.

As he climbed into a van driven by Horatio in a new avatar, he shook hands with Orion.

“I shall miss our conversations, Josh, but perhaps we will meet again.”

“No offense but I hope not.”

Orion laughed and handed Josh a thumb drive.

“Here’s my contact information. Give my regards to Sarah.”

With that he nodded to Horatio who pulled away from the curb. Josh leaned back and closed his eyes. It was going to be a long trip.

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Los Angeles - UCLA Campus

Several hours had passed and it was late afternoon by the time Horatio dropped Josh off outside the Astronomy building. With a nod and a smile, Horatio was gone and Josh was alone and free. He checked his watch before heading down the street. His first stop was an ATM at the Student Union Building followed by a visit to the campus clothing store where he bought several changes of clothing – from top to bottom. He showered and changed at the Y, leaving everything he had been wearing behind. So much for bugs or trackers hidden in them. He hit the library next. There, he placed the computer Orion had given him in a study cubicle and abandoned it. He had no doubt some poverty-stricken student would have acquired a new laptop before the library closed tonight.

Now he felt truly free and started uptown towards Wheaton's place. He took two buses, a cab and then walked partway, stopping frequently to check for tails. He indulged in a large pizza at Domino's before taking a second cab to Wheaton's.

He knocked and Mark opened the door. He looked tired and pale but he had a big smile on his face.

"Welcome back, Josh. We've been expecting you."

Mark stepped back to let Josh in. At the same time, he pointed to the coffee table and a brand new laptop that had been delivered a few hours earlier.

"Hi Josh. What took you so long?" Sarah's voice teased from the laptop. Josh just laughed.

* * * *

Area 51, New Mexico

"What the hell were you guys thinking – coming down in daylight? You're all over the news and the internet!"

The five newcomers just stared at Swanson who'd been sputtering on for several minutes. When he paused to take a breath, the leader spoke for the first time. It was clear he was not pleased with the apparent insubordination.

"Get our gear and load it into the van. We're going to grab some food and we want to hit the road in half an hour. Be ready." He spun and he and his crew headed for the mess hall. Swanson stood and watched them go. He was furious. No one can treat him like that and get away with it. They wanted the van loaded up and he'd do it but he swore he'd even the score in the future. Not now but soon. They had no idea who they were talking to.

While Swanson fumed and tossed bags and boxes towards the van, the new arrivals ate in the Officers' Mess. They shared a single table while all of the other tables near them stayed empty. The base personnel had been told to stay away from them and they obeyed. Although the base was technically a military one run by the United States Air Force, it was occupied by members of the Authority and used as a portal for arrivals of prison staff and dignitaries and orders from the Authority were obeyed without question.

Even the old hands agreed that these new arrivals were different from the usual. They arrived in uniform and during daylight hours both of which violated long-standing Authority policy.

“What an asshole.” Kreiger, the youngest member of the new team, observed in reference to Swanson. “No wonder he got things all screwed up.”

Romero, team leader, nodded and smiled.

“He may be an asshole but even assholes are useful. We’ll keep him around as long as he does what he is told.”

“He did ask a legitimate question though.” Johanson, the team’s communications coordinator, wasn’t hostile but he was curious. He knew the others were too. “Why did we come blasting down in the middle of the afternoon? Aren’t we supposed to low-profile it?”

“Old news, boys. Just before we launched, I was given new orders. No more covert operations. The Authority feels it’s time these cockroaches learned who their true masters are.”

“Hot damn. No more blending? No more playing nice?”

“No more, my man. There’s a new marshal in town! And that’s us.”

They high-fived, laughed and got ready to go.

“So, Boss, what’s the mission? Where we headed?”

“Los Angeles, men. We are going to tidy up the mess Swanson created. Orion is to be eliminated, after we acquire his technology, and that genius student needs to be contained and tamed. We are going to take control of this prison again. We can’t have inmates running the asylum anymore.”

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CKBY Newsroom, Alamogordo, New Mexico

The newsroom was abuzz as the team prepared to cut into regular programming for a special news bulletin. History was in the making and the news team was going to help make it. The graphics group was generating the ‘breaking news’ banner that would speed along the bottom of the screen. It would read “We are not alone” in big red letters. The news editors were tweaking the wording to get the proper balance of seriousness and elation. The newsreaders were practicing their body language and facial expressions. The whole team realized they had to tread carefully to get the information out while avoiding unnecessary panic in the streets. CKBY’s lawyers paced and wrung their hands in worry.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt our regularly scheduled broadcast to bring you the following special report. For a long time, scientists have searched for evidence of life on other planets. Today, that evidence came to us and it is spectacular. Seen here, captured on an amateur UFO watcher’s videocamera, is proof positive that we are not alone.”

As he talked, a clear video of what looked to be a streamlined space shuttle almost as large as an ocean going cruise ship floated down to a landing. Although the video was a bit jumpy at this point, several individuals appear to leave the craft and enter a hanger. The video focused on the spacecraft for several seconds before ending.

“As you can see, an alien space craft has landed on a U.S. military base on the edge of what is known as Area 51 in southern New Mexico. The landing took place this afternoon in broad daylight in full view of dozens of civilian witnesses and many cameras.”

“Military spokespeople have denied that there was any alien landing, suggesting instead that the video is of light reflection off a partly deflated weather balloon.”

The video and accompanying report got no further than the local TV station. Despite the clarity of the video, lawyers from the major networks advised against running the news story. They feared a hoax and the subsequent embarrassment of a retraction. The video did make it onto YouTube where, over the next twelve hours, it got over a million hits. However, in the age of Photo Shop, few took it seriously. By the next day, it was all but forgotten by everyone except for a few alien enthusiasts.

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Los Angeles (Wheaton's Home)

Mark and Josh had watched the YouTube video of the UFO landing several times on Sarah's computer. Josh started talking, mumbling more to himself than to anyone else.

“A few weeks ago, I'd have been shocked and elated by this. Now, shit, This kinda confirms Orion's prison planet thing. I was happier thinking he was nuts.”

“You think this is connected?” Sarah asked.

“What? Oh. Yeah. It's related. Somehow it's all connected.”

“Could be a coincidence?” Mark offered, trying to make Josh feel better.

“You're a cop. I thought cops didn't believe in coincidences.”

“As a rule, we don't but I was hoping.” Mark shrugged. He looked tired. He'd been patched up after his escape from Swanson but the doctor told him he needed several weeks to fully recover. The Department had put him on sick leave with orders not to come back for two months despite his vehement protests. He needed to be busy. The last thing he needed was more time to do nothing but brood over his encounter with Swanson. Josh and Sarah showing up at his door had been a godsend. They kept him busy. They also filled in a lot of holes in his information and gave him lots to do.

He divided his day based on their new information. He spent most mornings doing the exercises his physical therapist had prescribed. He pushed his body hard in the hopes of hurrying his recovery. Some days, he melted old silver coins on his stove to make silver bullets for his pistol. He wasn't going to be taken unprepared again. When he wasn't thus occupied, he talked to the kids, planning their next move. Mark wanted a rematch with Swanson, one he was prepared for. That was the main reason he had watched the landing video. Mark was concerned the new aliens were reinforcements. He couldn't be positive but he thought one of the men escorting the aliens from their ship was Swanson. The video quality wasn't good enough to be sure. His gut told him it was Swanson.

“Earth to Mark! Earth to Mark!” Sarah interrupted his train of thought.

“Sorry. You were saying?”

“I was wondering what we should be doing now. Obviously Josh and I can’t go back to the university since our advisor and major professor turned out to be an alien. Not to mention that the universe as we know it may not even exist. It could be an illusion created by the Authority. That’s what Orion thinks anyway. So what do we do now?”

“I could get a job.” Josh interjected.

“No need, silly. We can get everything we need online using my accounts. I meant the big picture kind of thing.”

“Oh, like we need to reevaluate our priorities and come up with a fulfilling career path? Are you forgetting that we are prisoners doing time on Earth before going back to our real lives? How can we take anything on Earth seriously knowing that?” Josh had had a lot of time to think about the future, any future, with no real solution emerging. It was frustrating and so he lashed out. Sarah pushed back.

“You suggesting we sit on a beach somewhere waiting to die? Is that it? Is that the best you can come up with?”

“Actually you thought of the beach thing, not me. However, it could be a viable alternative. I could stand a bit of surf therapy right about now. But too much sand and salt might fry your circuits. No, I can’t see us retiring and waiting it out. The one alternative I can see that has any real potential at all, in my opinion, is suicide.”

“What?”

“What?” Sarah and Mark reacted in unison.

“Hear me out, guys. If I duplicate the way you died, Sarah, perhaps I’d become like you and we could share the internet for eternity. We could call it the Internity.”

“Have you gone crazy? You could end up a ghost floating through space for ever!”

“There is that,” Josh admitted. They fell silent, each with their own thoughts. Mark finally spoke up.

“Can I throw my two cents in here? I know you are tired and confused, both of you. You’ve literally had your lives torn apart over the last little while. Now is not the time to be making decisions. Now is the time to gather information and evaluate things so you can make informed decisions later on.” He stopped and shook his head. “Listen to me. I sound like my father.”

“Okay, Dad. What do you think we should do right now?” Sarah teased.

“I’m not sure but we know things are changing. Orion is working hard on a mass prison break and the Authority, in trying to stop him, has become more brazen and starting to operate out in the open. How long will it be before the secret of the prison planet is out? What then?”

Josh added: “And let’s not forget that Sarah and I were being watched long before Orion started his little rebellion. Dr. Ross was not only our astronomy prof, she was our baby sitter. What was all that about?”

“So it seems to me that the Authority either had plans for you two or are afraid of you. Until we find out which is which, there isn’t a lot we can do.” Mark stopped. It was obvious he had more to say but was reluctant. Sarah prodded a bit.

“Go ahead. Spit it out, Mark. We know you got something going on in that brain of yours.”

“Well, it is something I have to do and I’m not sure you should be involved.”

“We’re already involved.” Josh stated it as an obvious fact as far as he was concerned.

“Okay but don’t say I didn’t warn you. Swanson put a bullet in me and I suspect he’s done far worse to other people. As a cop, I should arrest him for attempted murder at the very least but I imagine the courts are controlled by the Authority, making him and his kind above the law.”

Both Josh and Sarah agreed.

“Even if he is above the law, he still needs to be brought to justice.”

“You are planning to go after Swanson?”

“Yeah, I am. And I’m going to have to kill him. If I don’t, he’ll kill me.”

“How?”

“I have some silver bullets in my gun but I’d like to talk to him first. We really do need information.”

Josh leaned forward. He was smiling.

“Kemo sabe, we’re with you. What can we do to help?”

Entering into the spirit of it, Mark replied: “Well, Tonto, first we have to find the SOB. Maybe Sarah can run a search online for any sign of him.

“I’m already on it. If he surfaces anywhere, we’ll know it.”

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Los Angeles (Outside Wheaton’s Home)

Priam sat in his car half a block from Wheaton’s place. He couldn’t see much of what was happening inside but he knew people were there. Shadows on the window shades kept changing. It was starting to cool off as the sun set and he’d have to decide pretty soon how long he’d stay and watch before heading home. A knock on his window interrupted his train of thought. It was a cop. Damn. He hadn’t seen or heard him approach. These damn lowmen can be sneaky when they want to be. He rolled his window down and did his best to smile, keeping his hands in full view. He wasn’t in the mood for a shoot out.

“You okay?” We got a call from some folks on this street. You’ve been sitting here for a while.”

Yeah. My car overheated and I pulled over to give it a chance to cool off.” He lied.

“Lady says you’ve been here almost two hours. That’s a long time to let an engine cool down.”

“Has it been that long? Tell you the truth, officer, I was exhausted. I must have dozed off.”

“Okay but you better move along. Folks in this neighborhood get nervous when strange cars park on their streets.”

“You bet. You have a good night, officer.” Priam smiled and waved as he started his car and pulled away from the curb. He watched the police officer watch him drive away.

“Nosy lowmen. Should mind their own business.” He circled the block to make sure the cop was gone.

“I’ll bet the old broad directly opposite Wheaton’s place called it in. Maybe I should pay her a visit.”

He pulled into the driveway across from Wheaton’s and rang the door bell. When the old woman answered the door, he flashed a police badge that he kept around for just such occasions.

“Evening, ma-am. Thought I’d let you know it was a guy with car trouble parked down the block. He’s gone now.”

She looked past him and he felt her tense up. “Probably recognized my car,” he thought. He shoved her backwards. She staggered and fell onto the hall floor. He stepped in and closed the front door.

“Nosy bitch. It was none of your business.”

He grabbed her by the throat and squeezed until she went limp. He squeezed a bit longer to make sure. He let her go and headed for the kitchen where he grabbed a beer. He then made a quick tour of the house. As he suspected, she lived alone so he didn’t have to kill anyone else. He was a bit disappointed at that.

The master bedroom overlooked the street and offered Priam an excellent vantage point. He imagined he was a mighty hunter and this room was his blind from where he could watch and learn about his quarry without revealing himself. The kid was going to die this time. Priam was going to make sure. He intended to do it right. If he watched long enough, he knew the perfect opportunity would present itself.

He watched the house across the street until all of the lights went out. Then he checked the food situation – the old lady was a bit of a hoarder. There was plenty of dried and canned food in the pantry. The basement was next and he found an old freezer in one corner. It was unplugged and covered in dust but would make a perfect coffin for the old lady. It would keep the smell of decomp under control for a while. She was tiny and hardly took up any space in the freezer. “Room for lots more,” he thought.

He moved his car out of sight into the garage and with that was ready to turn in. It had been a good day. Tomorrow, he believed, would be just as good.

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New York City

It was rush hour and as usual, traffic was bumper to bumper inching its way forward. The heaviest traffic flow was heading out of Manhattan towards the other boroughs and New Jersey but with lane closures and construction zones, the in-bound traffic wasn’t faring much better.

A box van, vaguely similar in size, shape, and color to a UPS delivery truck sat at a light on the west side, not far from the National Museum of Natural History. Still basking in the glow of their success on the west coast, the occupants of the rental truck were in a collective good mood and didn't mind the slowness of their journey. They had a rough plan but no firm timetable or schedule. No rush.

The device in the back was primed and ready. All that needed doing was to push one button on the side. An internal clock would then start counting down for twelve hours. Then the device would go off. The crew would stay with it to the end.

On the drive from San Francisco, there had been many discussions regarding the location – the final resting place – of the device. The talks had been lively and the opinions many but it was good-natured banter. It didn't really matter. They hadn't come to any conclusions except they were going to get some pizza from Pellegrino's in Little Italy before pushing the button.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Wheaton's Place)

"Hey guys," Sarah was excited. "Guys!"

Both Mark and Josh looked up. As soon as Sarah was sure she had their attention, she announced: "I just got a hit on Swanson's credit card."

"Really? Where?"

"Here, in LA. He just picked up a rental car at LAX. He headed south from there, maybe ten minutes ago."

"So he's back in town. It's a big town." Mark didn't seem all that pleased. Sarah finished her news.

"We may not know where he is but I do know exactly where his car is."

"What?"

"He rented from AVIS. About three years ago, AVIS got tired of customers ditching cars in weird places. It was costing the company a fortune to have people prowling the streets looking for missing cars. So they low-jacked all their vehicles. I used the info on Swanson's rental car and tapped the company's low-jack system. We can monitor when and where that car goes anyway and we can pinpoint it down to about three car lengths give or take. Will that help, Mark?" She was teasing but he was clearly impressed.

"You are a genius, Kiddo. Let's see where he goes for a while. Maybe we can locate his home base. We know he hasn't been back to his old place since our little run-in."

"Great work, Sweetie." Josh was proud of her. "Information is power and you, Sarah, are the all-powerful wizard of Oz."

* * * *

New York City (CNN Newsroom)

“Hey Chris, we got a loony toon on line 5. Says he has some info about terrorists.” The cameraman waved the phone in the air.

“Tell him to call Homeland Security instead of the newsroom. They’re the ones who deal with terrorists, not us.”

“I already did that. He saw your piece on the 9/11 Memorial. He wants to talk to you.”

“Shit. Okay, put him on. Hello, this is Christopher Cummings. What can I do for you?”

“Mister Cummings, it ain’t what you can do for me. It’s what I can do for you.”

“Let’s get one thing straight right from the start. Neither I nor my network pays for information.”

“I ain’t after money, man. I got information. I was in a coffee shop – one of them Starbucks places – and I overheard these towelheads talkin’.”

“If by towelheads, you mean Muslims, then say so. Racial slurs are unacceptable.”

“Yeah, yeah. Muslims. This Starbucks is just around the corner from the Muslim church in Tribeca. Anyway, I hear these two ... fellas talkin’. Sounded to me like they were planning some big attack of some kind. Made it sound like it was gonna happen soon.”

“What exactly did they say?”

“It was hard to hear, ya know. Them places can be really noisy. I just got a word here and there.”

“That’s not a lot to go on, Mister . . . ?”

“I ain’t givin’ you my name. You think I’m nuts. I tell you who I am. You tell Homeland Security and I can’t take a dump without someone watchin’ and takin’ samples. No sir!”

“Okay. But can you be more specific. What did you hear that makes you suspect a terrorist attack?”

“Like I said, I caught words and phrases. One of them said that America will pay. The other said somethin’ like it’ll bring the financial market to its knees. I heard the words bomb and parkin’ garage over and over agin. I don’t know what it means but they said ISIS quite a few times. No. They didn’t say it. They spelled it out like ya spell bad words in front of kids. Right about then, I think they caught me listenin’ in. They switched to some foreign language.”

“And you are sure they were Muslims?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. They were wearing turbans or whatever you call them on their heads. And one of them was carrying a book with scribbly writing on the fronts. Maybe it was one of them Muslim Bibles.”

“One last question. Why call us and not the authorities – Homeland, NYPD, FBI?”

“You kiddin’ me? I ain’t gettin’ involved with them. I don’t want them knowing who I am so I thought I’d tell you and you can pass it on, if you want.”

“Right. Anything else?”

“Nope. That’s it. Gotta go. Bye.”

Cummings stared at the phone before sitting back.

“Well, shit. That was pretty vague and useless.” He turned towards his cameraman. “Anything useable?”

“Nah. I got it on tape but it’s really nothing. Some nut job overheard some guys discussing the news or something and fills in the gaps from his imagination.”

“Is it even worth forwarding or pushing it upstairs just to cover our asses?”

“Might as well send it on. Let the boys upstairs worry about it. That way, there’s no possibility of blowback if something comes of it.”

“Good thinking. Let’s get back to work then.”

Cummings and his cameraman spent the rest of the day editing a segment on polluted water systems in the northeast. It aired that night on CNN.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Across from Wheaton’s Place)

For several days, Priam sat in the master bedroom watching the house across the street but hadn’t gained a great deal of information in return for his time. It was frustrating.

Every morning, the cop would head out with what looked like a gym bag and be gone for an hour and a half. Once or twice, he’d ventured out in the evening and come back with what looked like takeout food containers. That was it. There were other people in the house, at least one, since he could see movement behind the curtains when Wheaton was out. But Priam was unable to confirm that it was Joshua Adams because the person never left the house and never showed themselves at the windows. It was reaching a point where Priam would have to break in across the street and take his chances. It would be best to do it when Wheaton was out – one less person to deal with. Perhaps he’d try it tomorrow in the morning when Wheaton went to the gym or wherever he went.

He stood and stretched. Then he froze. Someone was downstairs. Squeaky hinges and loose floorboards made stealth impossible. Keeping close to the wall, he inched down the stairs, pistol out and ready to fire. He reached the hall and eased his weight onto the carpeted floor. He sensed movement off to his right – in the kitchen. He stood just outside the kitchen door, took a deep breath and then tensed ready to spring.

“I never imagined you as a suburbanite, my friend.”

Priam whirled around to see Swanson, smiling, empty hands in the air.

“Is this how suburban folk greet their friends?”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“I came to save you from making a terrible mistake. Can I put my hands down? I’m not armed.”

Priam nodded but kept his weapon aimed at the other’s chest

“Give me a good reason for not killing you right now. After what you did to me, you deserve to die.”

“What I did to you? Please. We made a deal but your intel was worthless so The Authority nullified the deal. I had nothing to do with that.”

“Nothing to do with it, my ass.”

Okay. Maybe I had a little to do with it but to be fair, you made me look bad. I had to explain to my bosses how we missed Orion. It wasn't fun at all.”

Priam holstered his weapon and pulled beers out of the fridge. He gave one to Swanson who nodded a thank you.

“Tell me again why you are here.”

“Like I said, I'm trying to keep you from making a big mistake.”

Priam signaled for Swanson to continue.

“I know you got a hard on for the Adams kid.”

“He's turned out to be harder to kill than a cockroach.”

“That's a good thing since the Authority wants him alive for some reason, a reason they haven't bothered to tell me.”

“Do I detect a note of dissatisfaction there, Swanson?”

“Shit, man. I gave the Authority a lot of good years in this shit hole. Instead of a reward for those years of service, they treat me like a dog, or worse, a lowman. They've made it clear I'm stuck here forever. I want to go home and as you've made clear earlier, so do you. I think I may have a way for both of us to get what we want. For that, we need Mr. Adams alive.”

“I'm still listening.”

It took Swanson more than an hour to convince Priam that his plan would work. Then they spent another hour working out the details and roles. Swanson added a final bonus that made Priam smile.

“Once we know why the Authority needs Adams alive, he'll be of no further use to us. You can kill him then.”

With that, Priam agreed to abandon the hunt and his blind and turn it over to Swanson. In return, Swanson tossed him the key to a suite at the Hilton.

“For now, I'm right next door in 1406. Shall we meet there in an hour?”

“Better make it two. I got a few things to deal with first.”

Swanson nodded and left. After wiping down the house and removing all traces of his residency, Priam followed.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Wheaton's House)

“Guys! We might have a problem.” Sarah sounded worried.

“What's up?” Josh asked.

“Swanson's car – the lowjack puts his car in the alley just behind the house across the street. It's literally 100 yards from here.”

Wheaton did a sweep of the house to make sure all of the doors and windows were still locked and the blinds still closed. He turned on all of the lights in the house and took up a position near the back door.

“If he's coming after us, he'll come this way. Too many potential witnesses out front.”

He gave Josh a shotgun and a quick lesson on how to use it. He positioned Josh on a chair in the hall where he could see both the front door and Wheaton himself. They stayed that way for what seemed like forever. Every fifteen

minutes, Wheaton would ask: “Any movement?” and Sarah would respond with a no. The eighth time Wheaton asked, Sarah responded with: “Hold on. Looks like the car is moving, heading uptown.”

Wheaton and Josh stayed in position until Sarah was able to report that the vehicle had stopped and stayed put.

“Looks like a hotel parking garage.”

“Okay. I think we can relax.” Wheaton holstered his weapon and reclaimed the shotgun from Josh. He leaned it against the wall in the front hall, only a few steps from the living room. “For now, I think we have to assume that Swanson knows we’re here and we need to prepare accordingly.”

“Should we relocate?” Josh was worried.

“No. I think we’re okay for the time being. He doesn’t know we can track his car so we have the advantage. Tomorrow I’ll have a security system installed to improve our odds. And we do have Sarah to watch over us. Right, Sarah? Sarah?” Wheaton started to rise out of his chair.

“I’m here. I’ve taken a look at the hotel’s records and Swanson has two rooms on the fourteenth floor. He’s just ordered room service. Enough food for two people.”

“Interesting. I wonder who is with him?” He settled back down and willed himself to relax.

* * * *

New York City (Pellegrino’s Pizzeria, Little Italy)

The three sat at a table near the window and watched as people headed home after work. It was already dark but the streets were still full of cars and pedestrians. Some stopped in for a slice of pizza but most just went on by. The three enjoyed watching the world outside the pizzeria. Their truck was already parked on the upper level of a parking garage a few blocks away and they had had their New York pizza. All was well in their world.

There was one last step to be completed before they could complete their task. For the past few days, they’d gone from coffee shop to coffee shop with their little skit, always making sure that they were overheard. Planting seeds, that was what Orion had called it. Planting seeds. They intended to continue doing it until someone took notice.

They asked the guy behind the counter to turn the television to CNN so they could check the news as they ate. He was happy to oblige them since they had become semi-regulars coming in every evening and making the same request for the past several days. They also tipped well.

At sixteen minutes past the hour, they finally heard what they had been waiting for. Someone had noticed.

“Homeland Security has issued a bulletin raising the terrorist threat level for the northeastern United States.” The newsreader put on a serious face and continued.

“There is no specific target identified but Homeland Security feels the threat is viable as there has been increased activity among certain groups on their

watchlist. The increased terrorist threat level – the old orange alert level – is to let the general public know to be more vigilant for the next few days and Homeland Security wants to encourage you to contact the authorities if you witness any suspicious behavior.”

“Other sources, unconfirmed by Homeland Security, point to one of several Mideast extremist groups as being responsible for the potential threat.”

“Again, Homeland Security has issued a terrorist threat alert and asks everyone to be watchful and report any suspicious activity. The hotline number is on your screen now or you can call 911.”

The trio gathered their things, thanked their waiter and headed for their hotel. Their leader was jubilant.

“No more coffee, gentlemen. We are ready. Sleep well tonight for tomorrow we shall change the world.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Across from Wheaton’s Place)

Swanson stood in the master bedroom recently vacated by Priam and pointed across the street.

“Both Adams and the computer freak are holed up over there, in the home of Detective Wheaton, LAPD. This is the best spot for you to keep an eye on them. There is a back door but it opens onto a small fenced garden. The gate is at the side of the house so all exits are covered from here.”

He stepped back to let the team – his new bosses – have a look. They seemed satisfied with their vantage point but were not about to offer any praise to Swanson.

“I’d feel a whole lot better if we could get some eyes and ears inside that house,” the leader commented as he looked at Swanson.

“Not possible,” Swanson countered. “There is always someone there. They go out from time to time but never together. Besides, we don’t know what the computer freak has arranged for security. We have to be content with watching from the outside.”

He had trouble keeping a straight face since he had, in fact, just finished planting both video and audio bugs in this house so he could find out what the team from offworld was planning.

“There’s plenty of food and we have the place for as long as necessary.”

“How’d you find this place, Swanson?”

“I’ve been watching for quite a while when I saw the bank had foreclosed on this house and tossed the people who lived here out into the street.” He lied. “I went to the bank and got them to give me a short term lease. It’s all good.”

“Okay. We’ll set up a round-the-clock schedule. Swanson, you can go but be back here by midnight. You get the graveyard shift.” His lips formed a smile but the leader’s eyes were flat. It was clear to everyone that he was being dismissed. Swanson smiled back while cursing these intruders for treating him like a lowman.

“You bet. I’ll be back later then.”

Swanson drove his car around the corner just out of sight of the house and pulled over. He fired up his computer and immediately opened access to his bugs. The leader and his four henchmen were all still in the master bedroom and seemed to be discussing logistics – who would watch when, who would handle food, and other mundane aspects of a stakeout. He listened for a while before switching the bugs to auto record mode and heading off for a planning session with Priam. He was looking forward to making these offworlders' lives a living hell.

* * * *

New York City

They'd moved the truck so that it sat in the middle of a large open area in the center of the upper level of the parking garage. Standing beside it, they could see the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings in the distance but the view didn't interest them. It was going to change soon anyway. They were in their characters and had been since before dawn. They were being watched and recorded by CCTV systems and they were glad of it. They had actually chosen this location because of the number of closed circuit cameras that could pick them up. They wanted, no, needed a record of their production if it was to have its desired effect.

Each team member was dressed in traditional Sunni garb with the addition of body armor. They looked like Islamic soldiers, an appearance they'd worked hard to achieve. At the appropriate times, they set out prayer rugs and offered prayers to Allah. The rest of the time, they stood guard, ready to defend the truck and its "holy" cargo. Several times, other vehicles had driven up onto the roof only to be chased away by armed men shouting in some foreign language.

"This is fun," one of the team remarked. The others nodded in agreement. They did not smile though. They had to remain serious and sober looking for the cameras while they pretended they didn't know the cameras were there.

"How much time?"

"Not much. A few minutes perhaps." The leader glanced at this watch to confirm his estimate. The button had been pushed the evening before and the subsequent twelve hour count down was almost over. There was no external off switch and all of the critical components had been welded inside a steel box that could not be cut open quickly or easily.

"Movement over by the entry port. Police, I think."

"Finally. It's about time. Ready your weapons." The leader ordered and the others obeyed. Each cocked his AK-47 and set it to full automatic. They had plenty of ammo within reach as well as side arms and grenades. They made sure the police had a good view of the kinds of weapons they carried. They wanted the watchers to be wary. One of the team mumbled: "I think they are cowards, hiding in the shadows."

"Maybe just being prudent. They are limited in what they can do. They think we are terrorists so they won't shoot the van. They think it might blow up if they do." They all laughed quietly. "They can't fire gas because the wind up here will just blow it away. They can't attack because there is no cover and they are not

suicidal.” Another group chuckle was shared. “My guess – they’ll keep us here until they can get air support in. Of course, by then it’ll be too late.”

The leader moved to the side of the van so that any shot fired from the entry way would hit the van as well as himself. Of course, it would not affect the contents of the van at all but the police didn’t know that. He checked his watch and then started shouting in Arabic. He had no idea what he was saying. He’d learned the speech by rote and cared nothing for the meaning or content. He’d been told to recite it loud enough for police microphones to record his message. After a brief pause, he repeated the message just in case they missed part of the first one. When he finished, he leveled his AK and fired towards the entry port. His companions followed suit. Some of the police instinctively returned fire but were ordered to cease fire almost immediately. The terrorists reloaded and fired again. They had no real definable targets so they just sprayed the area with bullets.

Overhead, there were several helicopters – newshounds and ‘eyes-in-the-sky’ – attracted by the gunfire. The leader fired into the air and some of the helicopters backed off a bit, cameras still rolling. He imagined the arguments taking place inside the cockpits with the reporters demanding being taken in closer to the action and the pilots insisting on safety over story.

The police chopper, the anticipated air support, approached slowly out of the sun. A marksman on board fired one shot at the leader, killing him instantly but before anyone really noticed, the device detonated and the parking garage and all of the buildings in a four block radius simply ceased to exist. The helicopters dropped from the sky and the shock wave from the blast collapsed skyscrapers all across Manhattan. The bridges over the Hudson and East Rivers bucked and shook as if trying to throw their riders off their backs. In New Jersey, there was a second sunrise and this one was many times brighter than the original one. The mushroom cloud that followed the flash confirmed the nuclear nature of the bomb and the United States became the second nation in the world’s history to have an atom bomb detonated on its soil by an enemy.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Wheaton’s Place)

It was as if 9/11 had happened all over again. Every channel on television ran non-stop coverage of the aftermath of the explosion in New York City. Hundreds of people were known to be dead. There were thousands missing and presumed dead. Dozens of fires burned out of control around the edges of the bomb crater but no firefighters approached them. On orders from the Governor of New York and the Mayor of New York City, a cordon was thrown up around the southern end of Manhattan as far north as Columbus Circle. Inside the cordon, the radiation levels were too high so all emergency personnel were ordered to stay north of the demarcation line. If anyone came to them out of the contaminated area, he or she was to be taken to a hospital and treated but under no circumstances were the EMTs or anyone else to go into the hot zone.

There were several stories of heroes who defied the orders and rescued the sick and the injured. These sidebars were included in the broadcasts as a way to relieve the tension and the fear among the viewers. The news reports did not include the information that all of those rescued by the heroes died shortly thereafter of acute radiation poisoning and so did the heroes who rescued them.

Like most Americans, Josh and Mark were glued to the television. Josh secretly hoped it would turn out to be a hoax like Orson Wells' War of the Worlds but assumed it was one of Orion's events. That all of the news outlets were talking about Mideast terrorist cells confused him. He broke away from the news coverage to get a drink from the fridge. On the way, he stopped to chat with Sarah.

"Is there any good news?"

"Sorry, Josh. It's all bad. New York is a real mess. Scientists figure that southern Manhattan is going to be uninhabitable for at least fifty years."

"That was a bit extreme, even for Orion, don't you think?"

"I'm sure he had his reasons for doing it. He is a devious SOB and speaking of SOBs, Swanson's car is back across the street. He is definitely warching us and I don't think he is alone."

"Why do you say that?"

"He comes and goes on a regular schedule. Yesterday and today, he arrives just before midnight and leaves around breakfast time. It's kinda like he's taking a shift. Others have to be on while he is off. Otherwise why would he come alone and watch us sleep?"

"Okay, I got it. Let's talk to Mark. Maybe there is some way we can use that to our advantage."

* * * *

Washington, D.C.

Addressing a joint session of Congress and the Senate that was broadcast live on every network, President Monroe read a prepared speech from a teleprompter without even trying to pretend it was spontaneous. He looked haggard and some commentators said that the events in New York had aged him. He hadn't slept in days and had been under constant pressure from all sides to DO SOMETHING. No one had any idea what that something was that he was supposed to do but he had to do it. His advisors reached out to the FBI who traced the suicide bombers back to a hotel room in Queens. They had found clothing, Iraqi passports and several letters written by the alleged terrorists vilifying the United States and glorifying ISIS.

Based on the FBI information, the President stood at the podium and offered an action plan to the American people.

"My fellow Americans, a few days ago, a foreign power sought to bring the United States of America to its knees by setting off an atomic bomb in New York City. I will not sugar coat the facts. The final death toll will never be known and the damage exceeds a trillion dollars but this heinous act has not brought us to our knees. On the contrary, we stand proud and defiant."

“We have reason to believe that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIS or Daesh, is responsible for this terrorist act. As a result, I have ordered an immediate embargo on arms shipments to the region and a seizure of all assets of identified citizens of ISIS. I have spoken to member states of the European Union as well as the leaders of Russia and China and they all support the embargo. They will participate in our endeavor to isolate the terrorist organization turned state and to punish those responsible for the attack in New York.”

“I have also asked the FBI to issue a world-wide arrest warrant for the current leader of ISIS – Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. He is wanted on multiple counts of murder and espionage. I have been assured that our police forces and those of our allies will not rest until he is brought to justice.”

The applause was thunderous and the President received a standing ovation. Everyone was on their feet since none dared risk being seen as pro-ISIS and anti-President Monroe. For that televised moment, the branches of the U.S. government were united with a common goal.

* * * *

Los Angeles (EMT Station House)

“You’re a hard man to catch up to.” Orion stood in the doorway of the locker room, effectively blocking the exit. Treacher, on a bench tying his shoes, looked up.

“Depends. If you’re an insurance salesman then I’m hard to get ahold of. On the other hand, if you are a cute blond, I’m easy. Most other folks sit somewhere in the middle.”

Orion stepped forward and extended his hand.

“Call me Orion, Mr. Treacher. I believe we can trade information.”

They shook hands but Kevin was wary.

“Sounds like a sales pitch to me. Sorry. I’m not buying.” He rose and started to edge past Orion who, wishing to avoid confrontation, stepped back to give the EMT room.

“I’m not selling anything. Give me five minutes to explain why we need each other.”

“You got ten seconds. Why would I need you? What information do you have for me that I could possibly want?”

“That’s simple. The questions you want answered is this: Why do I see auras when others do not and what do those colored auras mean? Am I right?”

Treacher sat back down on the bench hard. His legs had given out under him. He spoke quietly, all hostility dissipated.

“You can answer those questions?”

Orion nodded and smiled.

“But what could I give you in exchange. All my patient records are confidential. I can’t give you those.”

“And I wouldn’t ask for them. No. You see auras and I need to find people with auras of a specific color. I’m going to ask for your help.”

"I'm not sure I want to get involved in this. It sounds fishy."

"I assure you that our intentions are good. You will be helping, not hurting." Orion lied instead of trying to explain. He looked around. The locker room was empty but shift change was coming up. "Let's go somewhere where we can talk."

"I start my shift in a few minutes."

"Then why don't I ride along for a bit and we can chat while you work."

They made their way out to Treacher's explorer and cruised away from the station. Kevin parked on a side street and turned towards Orion.

"We can talk. I just have to keep an ear on the radio in case something comes up."

Orion looked Treacher in the eye and grinned.

"You are looking at my aura right now. What color is it?"

"A kind of deep orange. What does that mean?" It felt odd discussing auras with another person after so many years of staying silent.

"What does it mean to you?" Orion countered.

"When I see that color, I get the feeling that the person is dead but not dead. Drives me crazy."

"Very good, my friend. You do not know how right you are." He went on to explain that as death approaches a person, his aura changes radically. A bright yellow aura means that a person is dying and is in need of immediate help to avoid that outcome. Treacher nodded as he had already figured that out. A bright orange aura, Orion pointed out, indicates that a person is dying but that it is his time to die.

"And a deep orange like mine indicates that the soul that originally inhabited or occupied the body is gone and has been replaced by another 'visiting' soul kinda like a squatter occupying an abandoned building." Orion paused to assess Treacher's reactions. Kevin was shaking his head.

"That's plain crazy. Twilight Zone stuff. Replacing souls?"

Orion noted that Treacher did not argue about the auras' colors. He decided to push it.

"Do you believe in fate, Kevin?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you believe that there are certain things – like when you die – that are predetermined, preordained? I do. Oh, we can change our fate. We can do something really stupid and seriously hurt or kill ourselves long before our time. You see that as an aura going bright yellow. If you can get to him or her soon enough, you can save the person. And that is a good thing. On the other hand, if it is a person's time to die, when fate has determined that that person should die, their aura goes bright orange. You can still save them. Cure their cancer, restart their hearts. Give them life-saving drugs. Perform emergency surgery to reduce brain swelling or to remove a burst appendix. There are a lot of things one can do to prolong a life but God, or the universe, or whatever has said it is that person's time to die. Is saving him still good? There are many who would say that is evil."

Treacher stared at Orion before responding.

“As an EMT, it is my responsibility to save a life when I can, regardless of the color of that person’s aura. Whether what I am doing is good or evil is irrelevant.”

“I suppose that’s true. Most EMT’s can’t see the auras but you, my friend, are placed squarely on the horns of that dilemma. If it is that person’s time to die, should you play God and prevent that death knowing that no good will come of it. Any person who outlives their fate suffers greatly, physically and mentally. Dementia is a common outcome or a paralyzing stroke often occurs. Believe me, if people never lived past their time, there would be no such thing as dementia or stroke.”

“Further, you are always doing triage at sites where there are casualties, am I right?”

Treacher nodded.

“You look at the victims and prioritize. Some need immediate attention. Others can wait. And some are past all help even if they are still alive. You have to organize your resources to save the most you can. If that means letting one man die so you can save another, you do it. I’ll bet that when you are working, you use auras to help. Bright yellow goes to the top of the list and bright orange drop off the list altogether.” Orion paused. He saw that he was right. Treacher’s eyes said it all. He waited. He’d pushed enough.

“I need time to think about this. It is upsetting.”

“Of course.” Orion could see Kevin’s struggle with his role as a life-saver. “We can talk about this more another time.”

“But you said you could tell me how I can see auras when no one else can.”

“True. We will get to that but I need to give you some background first. Okay? Here goes. In the human eyes, there are normally two kinds of receptors – cones and rods. One set of receptors works when there is a lot of light – during the day or in brightly lit spaces. These receptors can interpret millions of colors. The second set of receptors operates in low light situations and presents everything to the brain in grey scale. That’s why everything seems black and white at night.”

“For a very few people who have a rare mutation on the sixteenth chromosome, their eyes have a third set of receptors tuned to see auras. I am sure if you had your DNA tested, you’ll confirm the mutation on C16.”

“There are others like me?”

“Absolutely. Roughly a tenth of one percent of the population can see auras. That’s about seven million world-wide. Twelve thousand in LA alone.” Orion felt bad but needed Kevin’s involvement so he lied again. There were far fewer who could see auras.

“Do you know others? Can I meet them?”

“I’m sure we can arrange for you to meet some of the others but first, you have to do something for me.”

“What?” Treacher was desperate. He’d always believed he was a freak, alone with his secret. To discover there were thousands like him in his own city was exciting. He wasn’t alone. “Tell me. What do you want me to do?”

“My people often have need of the bodies of those whose time has come. If you work with us, more will be explained later. When we have a need for a person with a bright orange aura, we send a text message to the others like you, asking for information. I’ll add you to the list. When you get the text and you are near a person with the right colored aura, you respond with a brief description and a precise location. That’s it.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. Once we have received three responding texts from you, we will arrange for you to meet some of our other spotters.”

Treacher was disappointed.

“It could take forever to spot three orange auras.” Orion knew he had Treacher now.

“In your line of work, I expect you will come across a lot. You should be able to meet the basic requirement in a very short time – a week or two at the most. These days, the demand for new bodies is high so you can expect texts two or three times a day. Are you with us?”

Treacher nodded. “I’m in.” He didn’t think he really had much of a choice.

* * * *

Los Angeles

The streets filled quickly after the President’s speech. The crowds were angry and took out that anger on anyone who looked vaguely Arabic – these included several Jews, a smattering of Mexicans and one or two dark skinned Russians. The crowds were not very discriminating and few had heard of ISIS before tonight. The enemy, the one who dared attack America, was unknown so they lashed out in all directions.

Soon after midnight, the anger and frustration, fueled by alcohol and the crowd mentality, degenerated into lawlessness. Stores were looted. Shop keepers were beaten and police officers were threatened. Several people took advantage of the riotous chaos to settle scores with personal enemies, old and new. Block after block went up in flames.

The LAPD, in full body armor and riot gear, started to push back. Rubber bullets and water cannons backed up by tear gas and pepper spray forced most of the rioters to disperse and hide. Some fought back with gasoline bombs and guns. Within minutes, the streets of LA became a battlefield with members of various gangs, in support of their communities, blasted away with automatic weapons at the police who were attempting to restore order. Thankfully, the gangsters had little or no weapons training and simply sprayed bullets in all directions hoping to hit someone or something. The SWAT teams used their sniper rifles to pick off the gang members one at a time until the survivors surrendered or disappeared down dark alleys.

By morning, over a thousand rioters, looters, and gang members had been arrested while the hospital Emergency Rooms were full of the injured from all sides. They were violent killers, rioters, looters, and innocent bystanders waiting their turn for medical treatment. Triage teams made sure the most serious got top

priority and put all of those with minor injuries on a list and told them it would take several hours to get to them. Some complained but most were too exhausted to argue. While they waited, they slept wherever they could.

At the East L.A. Medical Center, those with head injuries were moved up to a critical care unit that had just opened up. The patients were sedated and stabilized and then, one at a time, wheeled into surgery where a team of three doctors and six nurses repaired what damage they could. Over the course of eight hours, three patients died but twelve others survived the surgery with reasonable chances for complete recoveries.

Each of the families were told that their injured was to see his or her own doctor as soon as possible for follow-up and long term treatment. The families were not to be alarmed when told by their own doctors that there was a small implant lodged in the brain stem. It was indicated that the implant was necessary to insure the survival of the patient – kind of like a pacemaker for the brain. Of course, that was not the real purpose for the device. Not even close.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Wheaton's Place)

"Imagine. Someone managing to set off a nuclear bomb in the U.S." Sarah flashed the message across Orion's computer screen. "Do you think a group as unsophisticated as ISIS was responsible?" She managed to get just a bit of sarcasm into the text.

"Quite an accomplishment indeed! I am glad to finally make your acquaintance even if it is only online." Orion responded.

"Maybe we might have met sooner if you hadn't tried to kill or kidnap Josh." She turned the text red to signify her anger.

"I know. Not my finest hour. I apologize. When I initially discovered the Authority's interest in you two, I presumed it was because you were a new secret weapon to be used against me."

"And now?"

"I must admit I am not sure. You could still be used against me. Or you might be on my side and could be a great help."

"Or we might not be interested in taking either side." Sarah teased.

"That is a possibility but not one I'd like to consider. I would like to believe you will be joining my team."

"We'll see." Sarah was noncommittal.

"Of course. But in the meantime, we should try to find out why the Authority expended so much energy looking after you and Josh."

Josh, who had been monitoring the conversation, interjected: "I believe it was because Sarah and I were going to discover the false nature of the universe and eventually reveal Earth for what it is. They were trying to direct our research away from that."

Orion responded: "I wish it were that simple. You see, if the Authority believed you were going to discover their big lie. They'd just have had you killed. Problem solved. No, I am afraid it is something else."

“I have to agree, Josh. We are important to them somehow.”

“It’s probably not relevant but I haven’t seen this kind of attention being paid to Earth people since I was a kid. Before I was sent here, my off-world mother, my real mother, used to tell me a story about the Creator, the person who designed and built this prison. Creator is the wrong label of course. He did not create this universe or this planet. He found it and made order out of chaos. At least, that’s the story. Plato wrote about him in ‘Timaeus.’ But Plato missed the best part of the story. Here we learn that on the seventh day, he rested. Actually on the seventh day, he went nuts.”

“After the make-over of Earth into the prison planet it is today, they say, it weighed heavily on the Creator’s mind. Did he do the right thing? Stuff like that. He was so insecure and unsure that eventually his mind broke. The story my mother told me had his mind fracturing into three distinct personalities because the enormity of what he had done couldn’t be dealt with by just one.”

“They say that the three personalities could work together when you’d expect them to oppose one another. Indeed, the Creator became the Destroyer and tried to undo everything he’d accomplished on Earth. The Authority, that existed even back then, couldn’t have that so they sent him down here, to his own prison, for his own good. But they split him up and sent each one of his personalities into different bodies, each with widely differing STDs. When one of the personalities reached STD and returns home, it is immediately returned to Earth for another rotation.”

Josh was curious. He typed: “What was the Authority afraid of? What happens if all three get back together?”

“According to the myth, Armageddon, the Apocalypse, the Second Coming. These are all words that stand for the destruction of Earth, for the end of Earth as a prison planet. Before he was sentenced to eternity here, he vowed to correct his mistake and return Earth back to its original state. From the Authority’s point of view, that is the release of all of the prisoners housed here. For human beings, it means extinction.”

“Of course, it is just a myth. He never existed and Earth has always been this way. The Earth is 5.4 billion years old, not 6,000, as the myth of ‘Timaeus’ claims.”

Sarah was bored.

“Why are you telling us this bedtime story then?”

“Sarah! Be nice” Josh admonished.

“I tell you this because the Authority, once it locks onto something, does not let it go easily. The myth of Timaeus has been around for 6,000 years but the Authority still maintains a small department with one function – keep Timaeus under control. Of course, nowadays all that department does is dispel rumors and sanction anyone who claims to have God-like powers. It has its own little independent country and its power and authority extends world-wide. What I am saying is that if the Authority has expressed an interest in someone – in this case, the two of you – it is not about to stop until it is satisfied with the outcome. The Authority is not going to go away. Having said that, how shall we proceed?” Orion asked.

Sarah was glad for the opportunity to get going.

“The Authority is a bureaucracy and, in that case, they had to have written down what their interest in us is and why. I can scan all of the records I can find while you touch base with all your informants. It’s in their records somewhere. All we have to do is find it.”

“Indeed. Till next time, then.”

They disconnected and Josh sat back. He had initially been reluctant to have Sarah and Orion talk, even on line, but Sarah had convinced him it was okay. He had thought that maybe once they talked, the feeling would go away. That was not the case. His gut was in a knot and he didn’t like the feeling.

* * * *

Iraq

Abu Bakr al Baghdadi sat at a desk facing the camera. A single microphone was before him and an ISIS flag stood behind him. He didn’t need a written text or a teleprompter. He knew exactly what he was going to say. His cameraman nodded and the ISIS leader began to speak.

“For centuries, our people have suffered at the hands of oppressors. We have endured much and these new sanctions imposed by yet another would-be oppressor will also be endured. But let it be known that these accusations brought against us by the government of the United States are false. We deny any involvement in the bombing of New York.”

“We had nothing to do with that bombing and yet we are being punished for it. My people are denied fuel and food and freedom for trying to live peacefully in a hostile world. So be it. We will endure but we will not lie down and let the devil trod over our bodies.”

The United States has insulted ISIS and Allah with its false claims and its lies and its brutal sanctions against our government and our people. We are a peace loving people but we are not helpless. So, we say this to the people of the United States: Lift the sanctions. Leave us to live in peace or face the consequences. You have brought your war to our land and so we shall bring our war to your land should your oppression continue.”

“Once again, to America, remove these unjust punishments of our people or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria will respond.”

He stopped and stared straight into the camera for several seconds. When the cameraman shut off the recording, he stood.

“Perfect, Sir. I shall get your message ready to send to Al Jazeera today. By tonight, the world will know of this injustice and our response.”

“Allah be praised.”

“God is great!”

* * * *

Los Angeles (Across from Wheaton's Home)

Romero called his team to the living room. He did not invite Swanson but he too was part of the meeting. He sat in his car down the street and listened as his bugs broadcast it. Romero paced in front of the television as the rest of them got settled. He noticed that each had already staked out their favorite spots. Barker, for example, preferred the armchair by the window while Johanson sat on the couch closest to the TV and stereo. Romero cleared his throat and his team stopped whatever they were doing and looked to him.

"Gentlemen, this morning I received a communiqué from the Authority on the Home World. I'm afraid the news is not good. The security barrier is weakening despite our engineers' best efforts to feed more power to it. The bombing in New York hit it pretty hard and the Authority is concerned that another similar release will cause a catastrophic failure of the barrier."

"So what?" Kreiger mumbled.

"You do not seem to appreciate the seriousness of the situation."

Kreiger tensed. "The barrier goes down and some lowmen escape. I don't see the big deal."

"Let me spell it out for you. The security barrier goes down and SEVEN BILLION souls are released. Seven billion! The system of the Home World will be overwhelmed. It will be chaos. Plus, here, the bodies that housed the souls will die and begin to rot. The only ones left behind will be our staff – roughly ten million of us – who are here physically. Do you think the Authority will be able to send enough transport to rescue ten million before the planet becomes totally uninhabitable? There is no way. So seven billion criminals escape to the Home World and we are all left here to die. Do you get the picture?"

Kreiger, who'd been the target of Romero's anger, could only nod.

"Sir, what is the Authority doing about it?" Barker, in an obvious attempt to take the heat off his teammate, wanted to change the subject.

"The Authority is doing all it can. Very soon, a large contingent of engineers will be landing in New Mexico to try and reconfigure the barrier's system. Plus, they are sending down more teams to try and stem the soul leaks. They'll be landing north of LA, near Malibu."

"It all comes back to Orion, doesn't it." Kreiger asked. He wanted to make up for his earlier error.

"Yes, it does ... In two ways. He needs to be stopped before another event like New York brings down the barrier." Romero paused. Kreiger, encouraged by his leader's response, filled the silence.

"You said two ways?"

"Depending on what the engineers can do with the barrier, The Authority is questioning the continued viability of this planet as a prison facility. If the engineers cannot reacquire the barrier's stability, they are going to shut the planet down."

"Wow. What'll happen to the staff?"

"The Authority feels that Orion's jacking technology may be the only way to get everyone safely off Earth so capturing Orion and getting his technology becomes priority one."

Barker was curious and hopeful. “We focus on Orion but what about the other issue?” He cast his eyes in the direction of the house across the street.

“I’m afraid our goals remain unchanged. We have to keep the Adams kid under surveillance and provide protection if and when that becomes necessary. According to the Authority, that is as important as finding Orion.”

He continued: “Up to now, we’ve been dividing our resources and manpower between our search for Orion and watching Adams. The Authority is sending more men – a lot more men – to hunt for Orion. We will be part of that hunt. And before you ask, the Authority feels that we should apprehend and incarcerate Adams and company. We won’t have to keep an eye on them and wonder what they are doing if we got them in a cage.”

“Right on.”

“Far out.”

The team was pleased. They’d been getting more and more bored staring at a house day after day. The house might as well be empty given the lack of visible activity from the inhabitants. The team members craved action and it looked like they were going to get it.

“When are we going to take them?” Vasquez spoke for the team.

“Probably the day after tomorrow.” He saw the looks of disappointment on the faces of his men. “I know. I know. We could take them right now but where are we going to put them? How are we getting them there? There are logistical considerations that need to be addressed. I assure you that between now and the day after tomorrow, you are all going to be very busy. Johanson, I need you to find us a location, an old warehouse or the like. Good access but not too many neighbors. Kreiger, we are going to need to build a cage or two. Organize the materials and equipment to get that done. Barker and Vasquez, put your heads together and come up with an extraction plan using what we already have on hand. Keep in mind that one of the targets is a cop so he is probably armed. Okay, men. Get to it.”

The meeting broke up at that point and Swanson relaxed.

“So they are protecting the Adams kid. They told me a different story. Serious food for thought.” Swanson spoke aloud to no one. He sat staring at nothing while he considered the implications of this revelation. They were huge.

“If I can be the one to get the jacking technology from Orion, I’d be a hero again. I’ll be able to go home.” He talked to himself as he drove towards his hotel. “Of course, I’d have to do something about Romero and his bunch of thugs. They’re going to get in the way otherwise ... and I think I know just how to take care of that. Priam is going to love this.”

* * * *

Los Angeles (Wheaton’s Home)

“Swanson’s car was parked about three blocks west of here for an hour or so. Now it seems to be on the way to his hotel. Predictable. Takes the same route every time.”

Sarah’s update started Josh thinking.

“He’s been hanging around every day. One of these days, he’s going to make his move, whatever that is. I know it’s not going to be good. We need to disappear before he gets his chance ... relocate to someplace where he can’t find us.”

“Don’t be silly, Josh. He was one of our babysitters. Why would he want to hurt us?” Sarah sounded a bit patronizing and that hurt Josh’s feelings.

“Are you forgetting that our other babysitter tried to kill you and wanted to do the same to me? And what about Swanson shooting Mark? Get real, Sarah. We need to protect ourselves from our babysitters. We need to hit the road ... and soon.”

“Okay, Josh. Okay. I see your point. Let’s go. But where to?” Sarah surrendered.

“No idea. We’re amateurs here. We hide but someone always seems to find us. Maybe Mark has an idea.”

Josh picked up the laptop and carried it into Mark’s home office. After explaining the problem, he asked Mark’s advice.

“You know, Josh, that I’m usually the one doing the looking, not the hiding.”

“So you do know lots of things not to do if you want to disappear.”

“True. The list is a long one but there are some pretty major ones like no credit cards or banks. Cash only. No telephone calls in or out of any kind.”

“Not even cell phones?” Josh was curious.

“No cell phones. If they tap into your phone, they can find you. The U.S. government requires that all cell phones be satellite trackable. You make a call, they can locate you in less than five minutes.”

“Okay. Big brother at work.”

“Big time. No travel that requires identification – so no bus, train, or plane rides. And it used to be big cities were good places to disappear and hide in. You could get lost in the crowds. Not any more. The average American gets photographed about seventeen times a day on security cameras but in the cities, a person will have his picture taken nearly two hundred times a day. Since 9/11, the government and Homeland Security have been linking those closed circuit cameras into a huge network. With facial recognition software, computers can scan every photo at lightning speed. Once it recognizes someone who is being looked for, it sends that person’s location and direction of travel to the appropriate authorities. The LAPD uses it all the time.”

Sarah, who had been unusually silent, wondered: “What about cellphone cameras?”

Mark snorted: “That’s another issue altogether. I read somewhere that if you are in a tourist area like Hollywood or Disneyland, the number of times a person is photographed jumps into the thousands daily. So appearances in public places will get you caught too. Oh, and I haven’t mentioned computers and the internet since I am assuming Sarah here covers our tracks in that regard.”

“Of course. Anybody comes looking for me, I’ll be in Sudan or China as far as they can tell.”

“This is really depressing. We need to disappear but it looks like they’ll be able to find us no matter what we do.” Josh threw his hands into the air. Mark tried to cheer his friend up.

“The LAPD does get a lot of folks who try to disappear but we still have a ‘most wanted’ wall with hundreds of people we can’t find on it. If you are serious about disappearing, it can be done. You just need to find a place where the long arm of the law can’t reach.”

“Like where?”

“Ha. If I knew that, I’d be able to catch a lot more fugitives.”

“What you are really saying is we need advice from someone on the other side of the law. True?”

“Unfortunately yes. But most of the ones I know got caught so ... “

Sarah interrupted: “We do know one who has never been caught. What about Orion? He’s been on the run for years and he’s still free.”

Josh shook his head. “I’d like to stay away from him for a while.”

“Oh Josh, we need his help. When I explain what we want to do, he’ll help us. I’m sure of it.”

Josh left the room. The thought of Sarah talking to Orion again bothered him.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Across from Wheaton’s home)

Romero sat at the dining table cleaning his weapon. At the same time, he was watching his men as they all made final preparations for the raid set for the morning. There was excitement in the air. The boys were anxious to get back into the action. Sitting around watching the Adams kid had been hard on them but they were bouncing back. Kreiger was trading lowman jokes with Barker as they checked their gear while Johanson tested the communications equipment. Vasquez appeared to be asleep but Romero knew different. Vasquez was mentally reviewing the route he was to drive to the warehouse where the cage was waiting. Romero looked for signs of tension but saw none. His team was ready and their collective mood was positive.

There was a loud banging on the front door. The team froze and looked to Romero who rose to answer it. He opened the door only slightly.

“Sorry to disturb you.” It was a uniformed police officer. “We’re trying to locate Mrs. Betty Fisk.”

“Who?!”

“Mrs. Fisk. This is her last known address. Is she home?”

“I’m sorry. There is no one by that name here. We’re renting the place from the bank.”

“Okay. Thank you for your time. Sorry to have bothered you.”

“No problem. You have a good night now.” Romero started to close the door but found himself staring down the barrel of a pistol. Behind him, he could hear dozens of people – police he assumed – pour in from the kitchen entrance. He was professionally turned and restrained in plastic cuffs. He was then escorted

into the living room where his team was similarly tied up. They looked at him and he gave them the signal to stand down and do nothing.

There was no doubt he and his team could take out the SWAT team even while cuffed but he needed more information before deciding on the appropriate course of action. The SWAT commander, unaware of the team's communication, stepped forward and laid a piece of paper in front of Romero.

"This is a search warrant. It allows me and my men to search the house and property. It looks like we've already found enough illegal ordinance to lock you all up for a long time. Anything to say? No? Okay."

"This is going to be good," Priam whispered. He and Swanson had been enjoying the raid courtesy of Swanson's listening devices. "We shoulda brought some popcorn." He was having a great time. So was Swanson who shushed Priam. The SWAT commander was speaking again.

"I think there is enough weapons and explosives in plain sight to arm a terrorist cell. Is that what you are? Terrorists? Help me out here and maybe help yourselves too."

The offworld team remained silent and sullen. Romero was trying to figure out what had triggered the incursion and why his informants at the LAPD hadn't alerted him. He was pissed off at the lack of communication. He was already planning to punish those responsible for this humiliation. Somehow a lowman squad had gotten the drop on his elite team and that was going to be hard to live down. He was so focused on it that he almost missed vital information.

One of the members of the LAPD search team raced into the room to update his boss.

"We found her ... right where the caller said she'd be ... old freezer in the back room in the basement. Coroner is on his way but she's been there quite a while. Advanced decomp." He stopped to take a breath and appeared ready to go on. His commander stopped him and moved them both out of earshot of the prisoners before letting him continue. Romero tried to read lips but gained no additional info. The SWAT commander came back into the room.

"You are under arrest – suspicion of murder." As he shifted his gaze from prisoner to prisoner, he read them their Miranda rights. Then he ordered his men to move them to the waiting vehicles for transport downtown. The offworld team again checked with Romero who flashed the "be cooperative" sign. He allowed himself to be guided to a waiting squad car. As he sat in the back seat of the car, he resigned himself to a night in jail. The Authority's legal team will have them back on the street by lunch tomorrow but Romero had to face the fact that the raid was to be aborted and Adams was unprotected. It would take days to reacquire the weapons and other stuff taken from them by SWAT. With luck, they could resume watch tomorrow or the day after. Adams would be on his own for a day or two but Romero reminded himself that Adams was with that LAPD detective. He'd be okay. Romero decided to relax and enjoy the enforced leisure. Maybe they'd put him in a cell with some lowmen tough guys. It had been a long time since he'd beaten anyone up. In his current mood, he would enjoy that.

“Show’s over.” Swanson closed the computer and turned to Priam. “It won’t be long before they figure out we ratted them out. They are going to be pissed so we’re going to have to distract them a bit.”

“Already in motion, my friend. The 911 call about the body was sent up to the Geek Squad at LAPD for analysis. Our guy there will make sure they compare it to Orion’s voice. Since I built the message using recordings of his voice, they’ll suspect him of making the call. It’ll be up to you to get Romero to buy that.”

“Oh, he will. He will.” Swanson was smiling. “I just had a thought. Once the Authority gets its lawyers involved, they’ll have Romero and his henchmen released forthwith. We need to stall them so we have the time to get what we need done done.”

“Got that covered too. The same guy who is doing the voice analysis will make sure the paperwork gets sidetracked for a few days. No phone calls to lawyers until tomorrow night at the earliest. We have 48 hours.”

“Good. Really good! You’ve managed to put together an impressive organization in a very short time.”

Priam, inwardly pleased with the praise, outwardly brushed it off.

* * * *

Los Angeles

“Allah be praised. God is good.” The young man repeated those words silently over and over in his head as a kind of mantra. In his heart, he knew he was doing the right thing. It was racing but it was in anticipation rather than fear. Sayed was ready.

He had spent most of last night checking and double-checking that the mixture of fuel oil and fertilizer was just right and that the blasting caps were securely connected to the trigger he’d bought at the local electronics hobby shop. He’d washed the van, filled it with gas and added air to the tires to disguise the heavy load it was carrying.

As he drove into downtown, he was careful to keep pace with the other traffic. He’d been told nothing stands out more than a driver who travels too fast or too slow compared to the rest of the vehicles. It didn’t take long for him to reach Rodeo Plaza, an upscale mall with underground parking. He eased the van down the ramp and headed for parking area G. According to the calculations that Emil had done, it was directly below the multiplex theater. He parked and waited. He sent a brief text from his phone. It simply said: “I am here.” He waited some more. As he waited, he allowed his mind to drift back to the events of last week. He and Emil had been taken aside by the Imam and offered a chance to strike a blow for Islam and for ISIS. They’d both wanted to fly to the Middle East like so many other young people were doing but the Imam felt they could do more at home. They’d sat in the Imam’s office as he read them the fatwa issued by the Holy Leaders of ISIS. In it, were calls for terror strikes against the United States so that the Americans could see the error of their ways. The Imam gave them directions to an abandoned warehouse where the van and the raw materials for

the bomb were stored. He also provided the target and the suggested date and time of the attack then left the rest up to Sayed and Emil.

They'd cased the mall and selected their spot. They followed the Imam's suggestion to prepare a video in which they claimed responsibility for the attack on behalf of Isis. They took it a step further and while he drove to the mall, Emil uploaded the video to the web, the news media, and the police from a cybercafé in the mall itself. Emil had waited in the café until he received the text from Sayed before making his way to the parking garage and parking area G. As he climbed into the van, he smiled. "It is done." Sayed nodded and picked up the detonator. He pulled two batteries from his pocket and put them into the detonator.

"Allah be praised. God is good," he chanted under his breath and flipped the switch. In a fraction of a second, Sayed and Emil were dead, and as the floor above them lifted up and then collapsed, dozens more joined them. As far as bomb blasts were concerned, theirs was puny but the resulting damage was extensive. The Saturday afternoon matinees in the multiplex above were near full capacity. The victims were mostly children out with their mothers for an afternoon of cartoons and fast food.

One by one, the news media interrupted regular programming to cover the bombing and included the ISIS claim of responsibility. Several ran the video made by the terrorists. Government and law enforcement offices were deluged by calls demanding action. Prominent Muslims asked for and got protection teams assigned to them. As the day progressed and news programs gave way to talk shows, the anger increased. With the help of Republicans, that anger centered on the President. Half of his opponents demanded the President resign because it was his fault ISIS was attacking the U.S. The other half screamed for a declaration of war. People talked of nothing else for days.

* * * *

Los Angeles (A Coffee Shop)

Orion was already seated at one of the tables on the sidewalk outside the café when Josh arrived carrying his laptop. They shook hands and Josh sat across the table. He put the computer on the table near a third seat.

"Before you ask, the attack on the movie theater at the mall was not one of mine although I should have thought of it."

"Why? Women and children?"

"Children especially, my friend. Don't think of them as kids. Think of them as inmates just beginning their sentences. They die and their souls hit the barrier the hardest. What do you think, Sarah?"

"Kids are kids and need to be protected, not murdered." Sarah's voice was flat, her anger near the surface.

"No matter. It is nice to finally meet you in person, so to speak." When Sarah had contacted Orion regarding their meeting, she'd revealed to him that she was without a body. Josh had wanted to keep it a secret for a while longer but she ignored his protests and told Orion anyway. Orion did not seem surprised.

“I have prepared a step-by-step manual for going off the grid and becoming invisible. All of my people use it. I’ve included the contact information for some people you can trust.” He put a thumb drive into the laptop and transferred the information. He then asked Sarah to open the manual and turn to a specific section. He talked Josh and Sarah through the more complex aspects of disappearing. Coffees went cold as the discussion continued. After about an hour, Josh’s attention began to wander. He scanned the street and didn’t like what he saw. He leaned forward and whispered: We are being watched. There are three of them.”

Orion tensed and looked around. Sarah was somewhat unconvinced.

“How do you know?”

“I just know.” He was a bit hurt that she would question him. “But don’t take my word for it.” He turned the laptop so its camera had a good view of the street. He ordered: “Take a series of photos – one every ten seconds. Let me know when you have fifteen of them.”

“Okay.” Sarah did as requested but did so exuding a this-is-a-waste-of-time attitude. “Got it. Fifteen photos of the same thing.”

“Now open Photoshop. Then go File>Scripts>Statistics and choose ‘median.’ Open the photos in a batch.”

As she did so, Josh explained: “This is a way to get rid of tourists in photos of monuments and stuff. Photoshop compares all of the photos in the sequence and removes anything that is different. Pedestrians and cars that are moving will be eliminated. Anything, or anyone, not moving – sitting still like watchers – will remain in the picture.”

“Damn! You were right, Josh,” Sarah commented as she flashed the finished composite photo onto the screen. There were three people – not moving – one in a car, one leaning against a wall, and a third in a doorway. All of them were looking directly into the camera lens or, more accurately, at Orion, Josh and the computer. Orion recovered quickly from the shock.

“I don’t know if you brought them or if I did but it is obvious that we are going to have to shake them. I’ll contact you later, once we are in the clear. Nice chatting with you.”

The watcher in the car raised the radio microphone to his lips.

“It seems like they’re leaving. What should we do?”

“Follow them, you dolt.”

“Yes sir . . . but it looks like they are splitting up.”

Well, duh. What did you expect. They arrived separately so they are logically going to leave separately. Willard, Cates, you follow the Adams kid. Maybe between the two of you, you can manage to keep an eye on him.” Priam’s tone clearly indicated he didn’t think that was possible.

“Yes sir. What about the other one?”

“I’ll take him. There is something familiar about him. I want to watch him for a while longer.” With that, Priam dismissed his team.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Back Streets)

Priam stayed behind his quarry as he wandered, seemingly aimlessly, along several streets and down a narrow alley. It was in the alley that Priam realized what had been bothering him about the black man he was tailing. The body was that of a stranger but the way he walked, the way he moved his arms were so familiar.

“I’ll be damned. It’s Orion. He’s jacked into a new body.”

Priam moved in closer, risking discovery, to confirm his identification. Finally, Orion turned into an apartment building and disappeared inside. Priam relaxed against the wall of the building across the street while he figured out what to do. Ideally, he should kill the bastard. That would be the most satisfying outcome but then he’d probably just pop up in some other body. Where’s the fun in that? Reluctantly he gave up on that thought.

“If I turn him in to the Authority, I’d score some major points. It might even square me with them,” He thought. “If I can’t kill him, I might as well use him.”

He called Swanson who quickly joined him in his vigil.

“You sure it’s Orion?”

“Absolutely. I’d recognize that son of a bitch in any body.”

Swanson nodded and looked across at the apartment building.

“I like your idea. We turn him over to Romero and his boys. We’ll get major kudos and be on our way home.”

“So let’s go get him.” Priam launched himself off the wall and headed towards the entrance. Swanson jumped forward to stop him.

“Wait! If we try to take him ourselves and screw up, we get nothing. If Romero’s goons try and fail, they get the blame and we still win. We get the credit for the find.”

“I’m willing to take that chance. I want to wrap my fingers around his throat.”

“So do I but patience, my friend. Patience. You will get your chance soon enough.” Swanson whispered his long-term plan and Priam laughed.

“You are one devious SOB. Call in the cavalry.”

“It’ll take some time to get them mobilized. Romero might still be pissed. He spent the last few days in jail. Remember.”

“True.”

“So get your crew back here to take over the surveillance while we go set this up.”

“Good idea. They’re not too bright but they should be able to handle this kind of job. I am amazed lowmen survive at all.”

He made the call while Swanson connected with Romero.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Back Streets)

Armed with the knowledge that he was probably being followed by the men he'd spotted, Josh moved quickly. He planned each change in direction several moves ahead so that he could turn without hesitation. The streets were largely deserted so his trackers could hang back a fair distance and still keep him in sight. He planned to use that information but he instinctively knew he'd have to find a crowd if he was going to shake the tail. He crossed into a small park and popped open the laptop as he walked.

"Sarah? I need a crowded space nearby. Otherwise I'm stuck with these guys."

"There's a mall three blocks east of here. It's popular with tourists. Should be jammed this time of day."

"Sounds good. Give me directions."

Sarah flashed a map onto the screen. Josh closed the computer and increased his pace. As he neared the mall, he began to run. He went through the main doors and up the escalator so that by the time his followers burst into the shopping center, Josh was at the second floor railing looking down. He watched as the two men frantically scanned the crowd for a sign of their quarry. Josh backed away from the rail before they thought to look up. He opened the computer again.

"If we head down the hall, we can be out on the street and in a cab before they see us," Sarah whispered.

"But where'll we go?"

"Just do it, Josh. In the information packet Orion gave us, there's the address for a safe house – well, actually, it's an old store-front – north of here. We can hide out there for now."

Okay. Let's go." In seconds, they were on their way.

"Shit. I think we lost him."

"The boss is gonna kill us."

The trackers stood in the food court scanning the crowd. There were hundreds of people stuffing their faces and none of them was their guy.

"Shit. Shit!" The senior partner couldn't believe a college kid had ditched them.

His cell phone chimed and call display told him who was calling. It was Priam. He looked at his cohort, took a deep breath and asked: "What do I tell him?"

"As little as possible."

He answered the phone.

"Yes Boss?"

As he listened, a big smile crossed his face. "Yes Boss," he repeated and disconnected.

"You are not going to believe this. We've been ordered to abandon the kid and go meet the boss right away for a new job."

"We're saved."

"Yup. He never needs to know we screwed up. We get to keep our balls for now."

Los Angeles (S. Atlantic Blvd near the Los Angeles River)

It was a mess. Treacher sat in his vehicle and watched the carefully orchestrated chaos. Just after midnight, they'd gotten the call. A freight train had derailed, scattering about two dozen tanker cars all over the rail bed and the embankment of the river that thankfully was dry this time of year. Those rail cars, some of which had ruptured, spilling their contents, were loaded with a variety of volatile chemicals – some were flammable, some were explosive, some were corrosive and a few were just plain toxic. The containment and cleanup had begun as a nightmare and it was far from over.

Officials at the Burlington Northern Railroad had been reluctant to hand over the train's manifest, hoping, Treacher thought, that no one would notice the dog's breakfast of a chemical cocktail loaded on the train. No one knew how many regulations the BNR had violated with that insane load. But that was for the lawyers to battle over later. The LAPD had to deal with the here and now and without the manifest, each overturned car had to be approached with extreme caution. Somebody had to get up close and personal to read the contents label located on the sides of each car. The possibility of injury was high and so Treacher and a couple of ambulances sat on the side of South Atlantic Blvd and watched the operation.

There had been a couple of minor injuries but they'd been dealt with quickly. One firefighter got cut by some twisted metal he didn't see until too late. Another had stepped into a puddle of concentrated ammonia, a nasty corrosive. His boots dissolved in seconds and he came close to losing a foot the same way. His quick thinking partner had sprayed him down with a fire hose and then carried him to the EMTs who were able to neutralize the chemical. The firefighter's partner had saved his buddy's feet but had spread the corrosive puddle further across the landscape.

Treacher felt sorry for the supervisor who certainly had his hands full mapping the distribution of chemicals and then deciding how to tackle each type of chemical spill independently of the others. The flammable stuff needed to be sprayed with water but the corrosive needed to be foamed. But when it was foamed, they expected there to be a chemical reaction that would release a toxic gas that needed to be rehydrated with hoses spraying a fine mist. The explosive material was a powder that the wind liked to stir up and toss around. And everything had to be done in full protective gear including Scott Air Packs and the works, adding about forty pounds to each step those firefighters took. Treacher expected to have some men suffer from heat exhaustion or dehydration before long but his men knew what to do.

With all of these complications following a major rail accident, Treacher had been surprised there had been so few casualties so far – just the two injured firefighters who would be off work for a week or so and the engineer responsible for the wreck. He'd died when his engine had rolled down the embankment. His body was still in the wreckage and would be until the Fire Department declared the site safe. Treacher figured that could be two or three days from now. Thankfully, the derailment wasn't blocking any roads so the crews could take their time.

Of course, traffic on South Atlantic Blvd was already barely crawling as rubberneckers slowed to see what was going on. Several had stopped their cars so they could get out and get a better look. Since they were blocking part of a lane, the traffic slowed even more. Kevin figured the LAPD would have to move the bystanders along before the road got really jammed up. He watched the gawkers for a few minutes then turned back to survey the accident site but something in the corner of his eye stopped him. He scanned back across the crowd. There. Standing beside an old Volkswagen beetle. A young man was smoking a cigarette and shifting from one foot to the other trying to see past the people in front of him. He was almost invisible to Treacher but his aura wasn't. It was bright orange and vibrant. He grabbed the phone and dialed. It was answered immediately.

"Orion? I have one for you. Do you want him?" Treacher hadn't waited for the person on the other end to say anything.

"I'm sorry. Orion is not available right now."

"I need to speak to him right away." Treacher pushed, trying to hide his desperation.

"Sorry, Mr. Treacher. He's not here but I can help. Did you say you had one?"

"Yes. Yes. His aura is neon orange. You guys sent out a text this morning saying you needed an orange aura and to let him know if I saw one." He was out of breath.

"Give me a sec...I see you are near that railroad accident. What's the condition of the subject? Is he injured?"

"No. No. He's in the crowd of bystanders. He's fine, except for the, you know, the aura."

"Good. I was about to send out a second text but you beat me to it. We can use him. We'll send someone in about five minutes. Can you get close to the subject?"

"Sure. What do you want me to do?"

"Just be close. Start a conversation if you can but if not, that's okay. Just get close. Sometimes these things don't go quite as planned."

The line went dead. Treacher put the phone in his pocket and headed into the crowd. His EMT uniform guaranteed him clear passage. People got out of his way and in short order, he was standing next to his target.

"Hey man, can I bum a smoke? I've been here all night and I am dying."

"I hear you, dude. Go for it." The young man held out the pack but as Treacher reached for it, the body twitched. Then the pack was quickly withdrawn. The young man looked Kevin in the eye.

"Really, Mr. Treacher. Since when did you start smoking?"

Kevin sputtered but couldn't get his tongue to work. He was distracted by the man's aura, now a deep dark orange.

"He's dead then?" He finally managed to say.

"Yes. His soul has gone home so to speak. He's gone. Thanks for calling in. I was in a bit of a pickle. Your call got me out of it. I owe you one."

"Just make sure Orion counts him."

“Don’t worry. I will.” Pulling car keys from his pocket he jingled them and raised an eyebrow. Treacher laughed and pointed to the VW bug they were standing beside.

“Damn. I was hoping for a Mercedes or something, anything but this piece of shit.”

“Sorry. You could just leave it here, I guess. I can get the PD to tow it away.”

“Nah. I gotta get going and I need the wheels. Thanks again.”

They shook hands. Treacher watched him drive away, wondering what had just happened, wondering if he’d done the right thing. For all the crowd around him knew, he’d just had a brief conversation with a friend but that wasn’t it. He’d watched a man die and be replaced by the soul of someone else. Was he playing God? Treacher needed to think about it some more. When he’d agreed to this, it had all been hypothetical. This was real.

“Later,” he mumbled to himself and went back to his vehicle. It had been a long night and rush hour was starting. He needed to finish up his shift and go home to get some sleep. Maybe it’ll make sense then. He didn’t really think so but he pushed his thoughts aside and resumed his watch over the train wreck.

“An appropriate metaphor,” he chuckled.

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