

Los Angeles (Romero's Headquarters)

Romero tossed his ipad onto his desk and leaned back. He rubbed his eyes.

"Johanson, get in here," he yelled.

"Sir?"

"Get the unit together. We are bugging out first thing in the morning. Take only what we can carry and get Transport Division to come get the rest."

"Weapons?" Johanson asked. He wrote as they talked.

"Personal arms only. And have the Mess rustle up sandwiches and stuff for the trip. We're going overland."

"Yes sir. Destination?"

"The Authority has not given us the final destination yet, just the general area. It'll be somewhere in Texas. We're to overnight in Alamogordo. We'll find out our deployment location then."

"If I may ask, sir, do we know what the mission specs are?"

Romero looked at his subordinate and made a decision.

"This is not for release to the team yet but we are going back on Covert Protection and Preservation."

"Shit! Sorry, sir. Back to babysitting. The team won't be too happy about that."

"Well," Romero chuckled. "We'll just have to remind them that we obey orders. If any of the boys want to start giving orders rather than taking them, have them fill out a transfer to officers' school."

Johanson laughed.

"Yes sir." He saluted and left the room. Romero shook his head. The salute had bordered on being insubordinate. Maybe, he thought, maybe he needed to tighten up on discipline in his unit. Not a bad idea as it would give his men something to do during what promised to be a very dull and boring assignment. He made a note to himself then picked up the phone and dialed.

"Mark! How are you? Good. Me too. Listen, I don't have much time but I figured you deserved a heads-up. I got word from HQ that Josh Adams has been located and is fine.... No. I don't know where he is." Romero lied. "All I know is that he's okay.... Yeah. You're welcome. Talk to you later."

He hung up. As much as he'd liked to have, he could not tell Wheaton that Adams was millions of miles away on the Home Planet. He probably shouldn't have told Mark as much as he did. He hoped it wouldn't come back and bite him on the ass.

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Home Planet (Prison Cell)

"So, we can jack into anyone and back out without him knowing it and no damage to either the target or us. Cool!" Sarah had been jacking in and out of people in the park all morning and was enjoying it. The others had tried it as well but they were less enthused.

"A neat parlor trick, true, but of limited value," Kevin grumbled.

“You’re not seeing the whole picture,” Sarah teased. “I think this has enormous value. You ever watch the Star Wars movies?”

“No. I never got into science fiction. What about Star Wars?”

“In the first one, Obi-Wan Kenobi, a Jedi, uses the Force to get some storm troopers to let him and his robots go instead of capturing them like they were supposed to. It’s a kind of mind control.”

“These aren’t the droids you’re looking for ...” Josh intoned. “I always liked that movie. The sequels, not so much. I don’t think we can use the Force, Sarah.”

“I know but what if we can do more than just visit other peoples’ bodies? What if we could actually get them to do stuff we wanted them to do? You know, nudge them a bit.” Sarah waited and felt when the other two realized the potential. Kevin returned their gaze to the park outside their window.

“Sarah, you see that guy by the fountain? Can you convince him to change direction?”

They watched as the young man stopped and turned around. After a brief hesitation, he started walking back the way he had come.

“Dynamite!” Josh was excited.

“I think that man by the food cart has had enough to eat. Be right back.”

Sarah and Kevin saw the target toss what was left of his lunch into the trash barrel and walk off. Kevin looked out across the green space to where two people sat, sharing a bench. One, a young man in his twenties, was reading a magazine. The other, a woman, slightly younger than the man, was focused on her iphone.

“How far can we push it, do you think?” He asked. Neither Josh nor Sarah responded but as Kevin watched, the two on the bench put their magazine and phone down, leaned over and kissed each other. Sarah and Josh laughed at the looks of confusion on their targets’ faces.

“I got the sense that these two were aware of each other but otherwise were complete strangers.”

Well, they’re busy talking to each other now. I’m afraid that you two have started something here.” Kevin laughed too.

The door flew open and Tartarus strolled in.

“Glad to see you’re in good spirits, my friend. You need to enjoy yourself while you can.”

“What do you want from me?” Josh spat out.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. I just wanted to apprise you of our progress. Your new target bodies are in place and your security teams are en route to the designated holding areas. I have to tell you I have worked hard to find the right venues for you and they are perfect. Perfect.”

“Are we supposed to congratulate you or something?”

“No. Of course not. A job well done is reward enough. Shall I tell you what I’ve come up with?”

“Don’t bother. Not interested.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. I want to tell you so you can anticipate what is to come. Makes it more fun for me.” He sat down on the bed.

“It’s genius, pure genius. I’ve selected three different STDs for you so that even if you go looking for each other, you won’t be able to track the moves from

body to body and I made sure you are nowhere near each other, unlike the previous warden who put you all in the same city to save some money on security teams. We saw how that turned out. Anyway, the first of you will be in your first body for less than two years but, get this, the body belongs to a middle aged homosexual who has full blown AIDS that is slowly killing him. Every waking moment will be filled with pain and suffering. Great, isn't it?"

"You are a son of a bitch. You know that, don't you?"

"Erulus, I pride myself on it. So, while one of you is wasting away in a European hospice, another will join a family in South Sudan, a very poor family with lots of kids and not enough food. But the kicker, the really neat aspect of this family is that they are devout Christians..." He paused. "In a very conservative Muslim nation. Christians are a persecuted minority. Imagine what it'll be like living in a place where everyone hates you. Fun."

Josh was shaking his head. Tantalus was literally squirming with delight.

"Oh but I saved the best for last. You're going to love this. One of your souls gets to be a genius with a strong desire to learn. He, or she, will have the desire to excel in all things. Sound good? Here's the good part. This one is going to be the son of an illegal immigrant from Central America living in the United States. Born in the states but with illegal parents makes a person a non-person, a non-citizen. No access to university education because you need a birth certificate for that. No access to a good job because you need a green card or a Social Security number for that. Whoever gets this body will live a long life full of limitation and frustration. Beautiful. Of course, there are souls in those bodies already but I have no problem ghosting three minor criminals to make room for public enemy numbers one to three.

Josh wanted to stay silent and not give their tormentor the satisfaction of seeing him react but the smug SOB got to him.

"Why tell us this? Aren't you afraid we'll use this information to find each other again?"

"No Not in the slightest. I'm telling you now so you can stew for the next day or two. Then, just before we send you back to Earth, we wipe your memories. You'll remember nothing of this conversation."

He looked at his watched and jumped to his feet.

"Look at the time. Must run. I must say this has been great fun, Erulus. Bye for now."

He pranced out of the room enormously pleased with himself. Josh and the others watched him go.

"Man, I hate that guy," Kevin muttered.

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East Los Angeles (Coffee Shop Near Police Station)

Wheaton thumbed through a copy of the LA Times without really seeing anything but that was okay. He wasn't looking for anything in particular. Instead, he was using the newspaper as a barrier, a protective mechanism to prevent other patrons from striking up conversations with him. He was in no mood. He still stung from the conversation he'd had with the Deputy Chief of his Division.

It had started as a pretty standard meet and greet in the beginning. The Chief had formalized Mark's return to active duty with a handshake and a mention of a commendation. It made Mark feel good but that feeling dissipated quickly because of what came next. The Chief pulled out a file that Mark recognized right away. It contained his reports regarding the hostage situation at the warehouse. He'd told the truth how a non-LAPD force had been in charge. He figured somebody should know. The Chief pushed the file across the desk towards Wheaton.

"Since you were on medical leave when this event occurred, the Commissioner has decided that your involvement in the hostage situation should be downplayed. As far as the LAPD is concerned, you were never there. That makes these reports unnecessary. Take the file and, if you know what is good for your career, destroy it and any other copies you have. Otherwise, Internal Affairs will want to know why a detective on leave happened to be doing police work."

"But sir ..." Wheaton tried to argue.

"Detective, this hostage situation is being reported as a joint operation between the LAPD and Homeland Security against a bunch of terrorists. National security is at stake. So, from this point forward, the events of that day are classified 'top secret.' Your report is a technical violation of the Official Secrets Act. Shred it or face the consequences. If you weren't such a valuable member of the LAPD, you'd already be in interrogation over at Homeland. Do you understand, Detective?"

"Yes sir," Mark intoned, outwardly calm but seething inside. He kept his emotions in check as he left the Chief's office and the precinct building. He ducked into the coffee shop and grabbed a back booth, a coffee, and the paper. Half of him wanted to thumb his nose at the Chief and send the report to the media. The other half didn't know what to do. Well, actually it did. Mark knew this was a battle he could not win. The powers that be, including the LAPD, Homeland Security, and, in the background, the Authority, were aligned against him. He'd have to bury the report. It just pissed him off, is all.

"Excuse me, sir. Is this seat taken?" A well-dressed African American in his mid- to late 30s stood at the edge of the table, cappuccino in hand. Mark barely glanced at him.

"Sorry. I'm waiting for someone," Mark mumbled then went back to the paper. The man sat down anyway. Mark tossed the paper aside and leaned towards the intruder.

"Look! I told you I was waiting for someone. Go sit somewhere else!"

The gentleman raised his hands and gestured for Mark to relax.

"Just cause you had a bad morning, no need to take it out on your fellow citizens. You need to chill, man."

“Why you ...” Wheaton searched for the right word but the intruder just laughed.

“Hey man, don’t you recognize me? No, I guess you wouldn’t. The last time we met, I was a middle-aged, somewhat overweight white guy with a bad haircut.” He waited for Wheaton to connect the dots.

“Orion, is that you?”

“In the flesh, so to speak.”

“Jesus, I thought you were dead or a ghost or both.”

“It was close. I jacked blind, just grabbed the first body I came across. I think I did alright, don’t you think?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I wanted to talk to you but didn’t want to go into the police station. Cops ask too many questions.”

“No kidding. Hey, I’m glad you made it.”

“Me too. Do you know if anyone else made it out? I can’t find any media reports and my sources have nothing.”

“They are covering it up. A matter of national security but I did get a call from Romero. Josh is okay. The Authority have him somewhere in Texas, so he thinks.”

“A mix of both good and bad news. He made it so maybe others did too. That’s good. That the Authority has him is bad news. The Authority does not necessarily have his best interests at heart.”

“You mean he might need our help. What can we do?” Mark was suddenly feeling better. Orion was offering a way Mark could get back at the Authority.

“Right now, not much. They’re going to be guarding him pretty close. Hopefully they’ll make a mistake that’ll lead us to him. For now, we wait and see. Wait and see.

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Home Planet (Prison Cell)

“So far, all we’ve done is nudge people in a direction they want to go. Do you think we can go beyond that?” Josh was concerned. What had been proposed was dangerous. Kevin, equally concerned, responded.

“I don’t think we have a choice. You heard what the warden said. We’ll be ripped apart and sent back to Earth. We won’t remember but we’ll still feel. I, for one, do not want to be that lonely again.”

“I agree,” Sarah stepped in. “We need to do this or die trying. And we need to do it soon.”

“Okay,” Josh nodded. He sat on the edge of the bed and they waited.

“Here he comes,” Kevin observed. He was still better than the other two at detecting souls from a distance although the others were improving at it. The guard opened the door and brought in a tray of food. The three tensed and as soon as the food was safely on the tabletop, Josh jacked. With only minimal effort, Josh entered the guard and forced him to stand still. Mentally he ordered the guard to turn and face his body. He could feel the guard’s soul fighting to regain control and decided it would be easier to maneuver the body if the soul was incapacitated. A little mental squeeze put the guard’s soul to sleep.

Josh, from inside the guard, called the other one who responded, weapon drawn, expecting trouble. He didn't see any. Instead, all he saw was the prisoner and the guard facing each other several feet apart. He was confused and was about to ask his partner why he'd called out. He didn't have time. His mind went blank as Sarah took over the body.

"Good. Now let's see if these two can escort us out of here. Hopefully there are not too many gates to go through."

Josh laughed.

"I guess we should have asked them about security and all that before we put them to sleep."

"Naw. That would have made it too easy," Sarah joked.

As it turned out, once they were outside their holding cell, the structure was more typical of an office building or a hotel than a prison. A narrow corridor lined with closed doors at regular intervals led straight to a staircase which they took to ground level. No one challenged the two guards and their escort as they walked across a small lobby and out the front doors. Kevin paused next to the coffee cart and took a deep breath.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

"Absolutely but let's put some distance between us and this place before we celebrate."

The trio strolled to the far edge of the park where Josh and Sarah left the guards sleeping it off on a park bench. Kevin grabbed a taxi driver and with a tiny mental nudge, got him to take them to a hotel across town. Leaving him with a false memory, they walked a few blocks to another hotel.

Kevin asked the clerk for a large room and was registered into the penthouse suite. With the key in hand, Kevin erased the clerk's memory so that, as far as the hotel was concerned, the penthouse suite was empty. To make sure they wouldn't be disturbed, he tossed in a suggestion that, for some vague reason, the suite was unavailable for the foreseeable future, under renovations or something.

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Alamogordo, New Mexico (Area 51)

It had been a long drive and the boys were tired. Although Romero had had them switch drivers every 150 miles, fourteen hours on the road in military vehicles had beaten them all up and they were looking forward to some down time. Romero mentally thanked the military bureaucrats at HQ for placing limits on the distance travelled in one day. He and the rest of his team were already anticipating hot showers, good meals at the Area 51 Mess Hall, and a few hours in the sack as they pulled up to the gates of the base that officially didn't exist.

The guard at the gate took Romero's itinerary and travel order into the guard shack and placed a phone call. He was only on the line for a few seconds and then went back out to speak to Romero.

"Thank you, sir. You are cleared." He handed the papers back.

"Thank you, Sargent. How do we get to ..." Romero started.

“Sir, you are to report to hanger 17A ASAP, straight down the road four clicks. It’s on the right. There is a transport fueled and waiting for you, sir.”

“I don’t understand. We ...” He started again but then realized the guard probably knew nothing else about this apparent change in plans. “Thank you, Sargent. Have a good one.”

Following directions, they pulled up outside the hanger and shut their vehicles down. The men climbed out to stretch and unkink while Romero headed straight for a small cluster of personnel just inside the hanger. One of the uniformed officers, a general judging from the stars on his shoulders, broke away from the group and approached Romero, with a big smile and his hand extended.

“Colonel Romero, welcome to Area 51.”

“Ah sir, it’s Captain, sir.”

“No, son. It was Captain. It’s Colonel now. Congratulations.”

“Thank you sir.” Romero was confused. Normally one gets promoted one grade at a time but apparently he’d been bounced up three grades. “The guard at the gate said there was a transport waiting for us. We just got in from L.A. My men need food and rest before we head for Texas.”

“There’s been a change in plans. Your assignment in Houston has been put on hold. Come with me. I’ll explain your new orders.” He turned to his aide. “LT, look after Romero’s team. Get them fed and loaded up. We’ll be back shortly.”

“Sir.” The LT marched toward the new arrivals while the general and Romero went into a small office. The general closed the door behind them.

“You can fill your men in on your new orders once you are away. Not a word until then. Understand?”

“Understood sir.”

“God. We’re sending you back to the Home Planet. The head of the Interplanetary Penal System and several higher-ups have got their knickers in a twist. They’ve been burning up the phone lines for hours. I tried to explain that you were in transit and unreachable but I’m quite sure they weren’t listening because I was giving them an answer they didn’t want to hear. Anyway, the Authority is in crisis mode.”

Sir, is it something I did? We did?” Romero was concerned. Being sent to the Home Planet was rarely a good thing.

“No, not at all, son. It is something you can do for the Authority. Apparently the terrorist you’ve been handling here on Earth, Joshua Adams, and his cohorts, broke out of prison on the Home Planet and are now on the loose. The Authority is afraid they’re planning some violent attacks. The bureaucrats in the Interplanetary Penal System believe you and your team, having worked closely with this Adams, know him and can find him faster than anyone. To that end, they have bumped you up a couple of grades. Every member of your team gets a bump up too, by the way. I can see this is a bit much for you to take in but let me finish. Then we can deal with your questions.”

“Yes sir.”

“You are to leave right away. Transit will take six days. In the meantime, Home Planet HQ is putting together a search team for you to command. When you land, you will take command of Company B of the 121st Eastern Command

which is why they pushed your promotion through the three grades. Only a full Colonel can command a company. Company B's current deployment is near the southern sea but it will be stationed at Fort Ferrell by the time you arrive to take over. You have only one mission – find the terrorist and return him to prison, hopefully before he blows something up. The Authority has instructed me to tell you to do whatever it takes to get him back. You have Carte Blanche.”

“Wow. Pretty heavy responsibility.” Romero observed.

“Yes. Yes it is but according to your supervisors, you can handle it. Go and make us proud, son.”

“Yes sir.”

Romero barely had time to breathe before he was hustled aboard the shuttle that would take them home. The crew completed the pre-flight checklist while Romero and his team settled into the staterooms. They were impressed by the Class A shuttle usually reserved for VIPs and high-ranking officials. It had private rooms and, much to Romero's relief, room service. He was enjoying a hamburger when the liftoff announcement came over the PA. One by one, the team members joined him and to their credit, no one said anything until Romero had finished eating and the whole team was present. Johanson asked the question that had been bugging them all.

“Sir, are we in trouble?”

“No,” Romero responded. He went on to explain the mission parameters. His team listened.

“The Authority wants this terrorist badly enough to ship us out in a luxury shuttle. You know we are the only passengers on this flight even though this baby can hold up to two hundred people plus crew.” Kreiger was looking forward to the trip home and intended to take advantage of every luxury available. “He must be some kind of monster.”

Johanson spoke up.

“Sir, they are talking about the Adams kid we were watching in L.A., aren't they?” When Romero nodded, he continued. “He is a college kid, a nerd. There's no way he goes from science geek to terrorist in a few days. HQ can't be telling us everything. That sucks.”

“We have our orders, gentlemen, and we will do what our superiors demand of us. In the meantime, we have a few days off to enjoy ourselves. We get back together the day before we make landfall. Dismissed.” He couldn't admit that he felt the same way Johanson did. Something was off about this mission. It just didn't feel right.

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Home Planet (Penthouse Suite)

With a bit of help from Kevin's ability to detect souls at a distance, Josh and Sarah spent the days jacking into various Authority bureaucrats trying to locate someone who had knowledge of the barrier controls. It had started as a vague goal.

“The only way the Authority is going to stop hunting us is if we do what they are afraid we will do – shut down the barrier around the prison planet Earth,” was the way Kevin put it. The others had agreed that it might work although it was a long shot that could possibly cause a backlash. It gave them something to do instead of meekly hiding in their hotel room waiting to be caught. They couldn’t physically go outside because the Authority had blanketed the news media with their photograph and a made-up story of domestic terrorism in the works. Fearful people were watchful people.

Their task seemed simple enough – jack into government officials until they found the right one and then extract the information they needed regarding the location of the barrier control system. It turned out it wasn’t exactly simple. There were literally tens of thousands of government employees and despite several days of searching and questioning, they had yet to find anyone who knew anything useful about the barrier. They learned all kinds of secrets but nothing about the shield that kept the prisoners confined to Earth.

Sarah was getting thoroughly bored with the endless and fruitless interrogations. She began arguing for a new approach.

“This is getting us nowhere. We’ve spent what, six days, and nada, nothing?” There must be another way.”

“I hear you but we need to stay focused a little longer. We have learned something after all.” Kevin responded.

“What? What did we learn?” Sarah asked, a sarcastic edge to her voice.

“We now know that the barrier is as big a secret here as it is on Earth.”

Sarah burst out laughing.

“Leave it to you to find the positive in all this. You are right.”

“But we still need to find someone who knows the secret,” Josh added. “And so, we keep going. It’s not like we have a deadline or anything.”

They laughed together and then went back to the search. Each floor in each government building was scanned and senior bureaucrats jacked and questioned. On the seventh day, they began checking out an innocuous little department simply called ‘Facilities Management.’ The offices were almost empty except for a receptionist and an IT guy doing computer upgrades. They considered skipping it but Josh jacked into the receptionist anyway.

“Might as well be thorough.”

She knew nothing about the barrier but was in serious need of distraction. Josh relayed the conversation she had with the IT technician.

“Come on, Pete. Who would know? Just a little internet link to my computer so I can play games or read email or something.”

“No can do. You know the rules. This office is strictly offline. If I got you online in here, they’d fire my ass and most likely throw me in jail..”

Shit, Pete. This place is boring. I sit at my desk all day with nothing to do. Shapiro and Wesley never give me any work to do even when I beg. So I sit waiting for phone calls that never come and visitors we never get. I need something to do. I am desperate here.”

“Sorry, Jan. The bosses are paranoid. No internet. Nothing online. Period. They even have me sweeping for bugs every week.”

Josh jacked back.

“Sounds promising. I guess we need to question the bosses, a Mr. Shapiro and a Mr. Wesley.”

“Both are out of the office right now. I checked.”

“Got him,” Sarah was excited. “Isaac Shapiro, Deputy Director, Facilities Management. He seems to be having lunch, by himself, poor thing. Shall I?”

“Please do.”

Sarah jacked in and started an internal dialogue with the target. In order to avoid detection, she could only gently steer her host’s thoughts in the general direction she needed him to go. He knew about the barrier. “Yes!” He knew where the controls were kept. “Yes!” but he didn’t even want to think about the location. He was worried about people reading his mind. “If he only knew the half of it.” She guided him by appealing to his paranoia. “Maybe it isn’t protected well enough. Maybe we need to beef it up somewhat.” An image of the location jumped into his thoughts. Sarah recognized it instantly and jacked out.

“You are not going to believe this. The controls for the barrier aren’t here. They’re back on Earth.”

“Crap,” Kevin mumbled. “Where on Earth,” he asked even though he figured there was little they could do with the information.

“The control room is at the Hoover Dam, not far from Las Vegas.”

Josh started laughing. It was quite a while before he could get it back under control.”

“I’m sorry but that is precious.”

“What?”

“Do you remember the first Transformers movie? They hid the All-spark in a secret facility inside the Hoover Dam. The Authority must’ve had a bird when that movie came out.”

They all had a good chuckle at the Authority’s and the Facilities Management’s expense. Then they went quiet. Earth was a long way away especially if the trio wanted to remain together in the same body. They had no idea how they’d get there but they knew it had to be their next step.

“We need a spaceship, a shuttle, something to take us there. Do you think we could jack into a couple of pilots and steal one,” Josh wondered.

“The spaceport is the most heavily guarded site on the planet. Virtually impossible.” Sarah eliminated that option. “But we know who has a shuttle we might be able to borrow. He was on the news earlier.”

Together, Kevin and Josh shouted: “Romero!”

Earlier in the day, there had been a short news item with live video showing the arrival of the terrorist hunter, Colonel Romero, as he stepped off his shuttle to assume command of the search for the most feared terrorist, Erulus.”

“It looks like we are going to have to be captured after all. Maybe if we ask nicely, he’ll give us a lift back to Earth.”

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Home Planet (The Street Outside the Hotel)

Getting Romero's attention proved to be an easy step in their quest for a spaceship to take them to Earth. Sarah jacked into the first person who caught her eye and had him place a 911 call giving away their penthouse hideout. A mental nudge forced her target to forget all about the phone call as soon as it was made and he was sent on his way. In the meantime, with the police on high alert because of the dangerous terrorist on the loose, a recording of the call was instantly forwarded to Romero's new office along with notification that the police Special Weapons and Tactics Team was on its way to the hotel.

Romero ordered the mobilization of two platoons of his best and, at the same time, connected with the SWAT commander asking him to begin an evacuation of the hotel. He managed to extract an agreement to wait until he arrived to begin any direct assault on the penthouse.

It was a chaotic scene by the time Romero arrived. Hotel guests and curious bystanders filled the spaces between what seemed, to Romero, to be a sea of official vehicles. Uniformed officers came and went out of the hotel and adjacent buildings. Others stood by their vehicles waiting. There were SWAT vans, police cars, ambulances, a fire truck or two, and a huge command trailer where the brass could hang out. His men parked a half block from the hotel and marched in formation from there. Nothing, Romero believed, got people to clear a path than fifty heavily armed soldiers beating a rhythm on the pavement with their boots. As ordered, his men surrounded the command trailer, forming an effective barrier. Romero strode into the trailer and looked around. There were too many people inside. He knew some had to be there but most did not. They were probably wanting to be close to the capture of the terrorist of the century. Being there would give them bragging rights for the foreseeable future. Chances are their presence would make the capture more complicated than it needed to be.

"I'm Colonel Romero and, effective immediately, I am in charge."

He had everyone's attention and he took advantage of the brief moment of quiet.

"This is a national security operation so anyone who does not have a "Secret" or "Top Secret" security clearance should leave the trailer right now or risk being arrested for violation of the Official Secrets Act. Commander Argent, a word." He singled out the SWAT commander who watched as the rest of the people made their way to the exit. Several grumbled but none chose to challenge Romero's authority. Once the space had been cleared, Romero turned to the commander.

"Now we have some room to work. How goes the evacuation?"

"We're working our way up. Everyone is out except for the people on the upper three floors. They'll be cleared out in the next few minutes. I need to get my communication guys back in here but they don't have any official security clearance. Is that a problem?"

Romero chuckled.

"To tell you the truth, neither do I but demanding it sure clears the dead wood out of a facility in a hurry. Get whomever you need set up. I need my command team as well. Do we have plans of the penthouse floor?"

“My Number Two is getting them right now. Ten minutes, they’ll be here.

Both commanders spent a few minutes organizing their teams and when ready, Romero gave the order to deploy. SWAT took up positions in the stairwells on the 32nd floor, just below the penthouse, and on the stairs leading to the roof. Although the elevators had been shut down, Romero placed men near the elevators on the parking, main and mezzanine levels as well as on the stairwells on those same levels. He also placed snipers on the roof of the building across the street with a clear view of the penthouse suite’s windows.

He was satisfied that he had the hotel locked down as he took a team of about a dozen men up the 33rd floor and prepared to breach the door to the suite. He had Johanson and two soldiers ease up to the door and slip a tiny snake-like video camera under it. Eyes locked on the small hand held monitor, Johanson manipulated the camera until he had covered the entire room. He reported back to Romero in a whisper.

“Sir, the room appears to be empty.”

“What? Empty?”

“Yes sir. I can’t see anyone in there.”

“Look again.”

“Sir. Yes sir.” Johanson followed orders and repeated his video search of the room.

“Empty, sir.”

Cursing, Romero broke cover and joined Johanson outside the penthouse suite. He used the key the hotel had given him and entered the room. There was evidence that someone had been in the room – unmade bed, dirty dishes – but whoever had used it was gone.

“Stand down,” Romero spoke into his radio. “He’s not here.” He turned to Sargent Johanson and asked him to oversee the departure of the troops while he took a quick look around the room for clues. In seconds, he was alone in the room but he had an uneasy feeling. For some reason, that last statement he had made to Johanson had sounded stupid. It was something he wouldn’t normally say. He was a soldier, not a cop. He didn’t search for clues. More importantly, he did not have to explain himself to a subordinate.

“Sorry. It was the best I could do. I needed a moment alone with you,” said a voice inside his head. “I’m going to leave your mind right now but I’m going to prevent you from moving for a few seconds.”

Out of nowhere, a man stood in front of Romero. Instinctively, he reached for his gun or tried to. His arms refused to obey his orders.

“I’ll release you soon.”

“Who are you? Where did you come from? The room was empty.”

“No. I have been here all along but we simply told your minds to ignore us. I was invisible to you.”

Romero shook his head as if to clear it.

“You are in my mind. Get out!”

“Okay. As long as you promise to keep your weapon in its holster. We do not intend to harm you and we’d rather not get shot.” Josh didn’t wait for Romero to agree. He released Romero’s mind and body.

“Please sit down. We need to talk.”

Romero reluctantly complied but sat so that his side arm was easily accessible.

“Who are you? I know they call you a terrorist but who are you, really?”

“My name is Erulus but you may know us as Joshua Adams, Sarah Cunningham, and Kevin Treacher. We are who they call the Creator. We designed and built Prison Earth.”

“The ... the legend is true?”

“Indeed it is, as is the Authority’s shattering of my soul into three and then keeping us in our own prison. The Authority was about to do that again to us but this time, it is not going to happen.

“What do you want from me?”

“That is simple, Colonel. Congratulations of the promotion, by the way. We/I need to get to Earth in this body, my body. You have a shuttle at your command.” Erulus shrugged. Romero was shaking his head.

“No way. I can’t help you. You are a criminal, a terrorist. You need to be imprisoned. That’s the law.”

Erulus laughed.

“How ironic. You want to put us in prison but you refuse to take us to prison. Romero, I am neither a criminal nor a terrorist. I am a victim of a bloated, vindictive, and fascist government and I am asking you for your help.”

“No can do. I have my orders.”

Erulus stared at him for several seconds while he engaged in an internal debate. A decision was made. An action was selected.

“We are sorry you feel that way, Colonel. We’ll just have to do this a different way.”

Kevin entered Romero’s body and took over. He put Romero’s soul to sleep then keyed the radio mic.

“Johanson, notify the shuttle crew to prepare for immediate launch. It looks like our terrorist is heading for Earth. We can catch up to him if we hurry.”

“Yes sir, how big a team do you want on the shuttle?”

“Just the core team. It’ll take too long to get the division equipped and loaded. We can use forces that are already on Earth once we get there. Get the paperwork started to have the rest of the division follow us as well on the next military shuttle.”

“Yes sir. Are you coming down soon?”

“I’ll be a few minutes. Take the team to the spaceport. Leave a transport for me. I’ll follow when I finish here.”

“Yes sir. I’ll have everything ready by the time you get to the space port.”

“Good. Romero out.”

Johanson was true to his word. Romero walked out of the hotel, apparently alone, and drove to the spaceport to find the shuttle ready to launch and his team loaded and ready to go. He gave the order to launch.

Erulus connected with Romero’s entire team, providing a mental suggestion to relax and to stay away from one area of the ship. He also adjusted the shuttle’s crew so they believed they had a secretive VIP in that area of the ship.

Their orders were to provide food and drink for that VIP but otherwise not to engage with that person or talk about him even among themselves. He then settled in for a week of quiet, the quiet before the storm.

* * * * *

Home Planet (The Authority Security Office)

Six days after the unsuccessful raid on the hotel's penthouse suite, bureaucrats were finalizing reports, justifying expenses, and adjusting budget balances. One bureaucrat, Michael Helmsley, a career civil servant with an obsession with the bureaucratic process, found a discrepancy. Pleased with himself, he picked up the phone and called Military Command.

"General, Colonel Romero was issued a CRT-94 taser weapon that was part of the HQ inventory. It was to be returned upon completion of the joint military/police operation. My records do not show its return to inventory."

"I'm certain it's a simple oversight, Mr. Helmsley. Colonel Romero left directly from the operation site to the spaceport. He is presently enroute to Prison Earth. Just log the weapon as on loan to the Colonel for now."

"General, how am I to know it is still in his possession. Perhaps he left it at the operation site or handed it over to SWAT or ..."

Stifling a sigh, the general interrupted.

"Mr. Helmsley, as per standard operating procedure, we had the scene recorded on video. I am sure we have video of the colonel leaving the site and getting into his vehicle and he drove straight to the spaceport. Perhaps if I email you the video, you can determine if he still had the weapon in his possession. Would that work for you?"

"Indeed. The weapon is quite distinctive. Send me the video."

"Gladly, the general stated as he hung up. "Bureaucrats," he mumbled and sent off the email which was instantly accepted and opened by the recipient.

The attached video showed the street in front of the hotel and provided a clear view of Romero as he exited the hotel – just as the general had said. Helmsley noted the taser holstered on Romero's belt. He could extend the loan of the weapon as suggested but he decided to also send a stern rebuke to the Military HQ reminding all of the need to return items to inventory in a timely manner. He was preparing it in his mind. He let his eyes wander back to the video still running on his monitor.

He sat upright, all thoughts of loaned weapons and finished reports drive from his mind. He could see that Romero was not alone and he recognized the civilian with him. He redialed the general. Without preamble, he asked his question.

"You said Colonel Romero went directly from the raid site to the spaceport and boarded a shuttle that took off shortly thereafter. Is that what happened?"

"Yes."

Helmsley cut the connection and dialed spaceport security. He demanded security footage of the shuttle in question. Reluctantly, they sent it over by email. Helmsley ran it immediately and confirmed the same man had boarded the

shuttle with Romero. He raced upstairs and burst into the office of his section chief and, out of breath, blurted out his discovery.

“The terrorist, the one that was all over the news last week, from the hotel, he’s escaped. He’s on his way back to Earth.”

“What!?” The senior bureaucrat jumped to his feet. “You sure?”

Helmley didn’t say anything. He gave his boss the ipad he’d been carrying and started the video of Romero and Erulus boarding the shuttle.

The news of Erulus’s escape created a panic within the upper echelon of the Authority. Orders flew, were contradicted, rescinded, reissued and ignored. The military commander, apparently immune to the bureaucrat buzzing, issued concise orders to his commander on Earth: Meet the shuttle due to land within the next twenty-four hours. Prevent anyone from leaving the craft. Arrest and detain everyone from the spacecraft who tried to defy the quarantine. He then ordered two divisions of Home Planet troops presently stationed on Prison Earth to deploy to the spaceport to take over the quarantine duty and relieve the spaceport personnel.

“Problem solved. Damn bureaucrats.”

* * * * *

Area 51 (Landing Pad)

Mark reviewed a copy of the Authority’s orders as they watched Romero’s shuttle ease down onto the runway edge.

“These orders require the arrest and detention of everyone on board. Pretty draconian. I count twenty men on the ground. There are more in the hanger bay but we can’t see in. How are we going to get past them?” Wheaton sounded discouraged.

“We don’t have to. We wait here. The message I got from Josh was to have a vehicle ready just outside the spaceport. He said he’d come to us.”

“How is he going to get past all that?” Mark waved in the general direction of the heavily armed platoon.

Orion laughed.

“Have faith, my friend. Wait and see. We might have to help him a bit. That’s why we brought the heavy artillery.” He gestured with his chin towards the camouflaged jeep and its 50 mm machine gun. He also pointed to his men hidden along the fence line. They were armed with RPGs and rocket launchers.

“That bunch down there won’t give us any trouble. We also have another advantage.”

“What?”

“Those soldiers down there do not want to die. My men don’t care if they live or die because they know the truth. So, relax, my friend. Sit back. Enjoy the show.”

Wheaton watched as the shuttle’s hatch opened and Romero’s men started to emerge. As each soldier came through the opening, he was disarmed, cuffed and escorted back onto the shuttle under guard. Mark had to admit that the ground troop was efficient. The flight crew came next and the process was

repeated. Each one was searched, restrained and forced back onto the craft. Mark noted the looks of confusion on everyone's faces as they were arrested. Apparently it was not the welcome they were expecting.

"Get ready," Orion whispered even though there was no reason to be quiet.

Mark tensed as he watched two more men emerge from the hatch. Romero, unlike the others, expected to be arrested. He raised his hands high in the air as several soldiers rushed him, forcing him to lie face down on the tarmac. The second man, from Wheaton's perspective, seemed to be ignored by everyone as if he wasn't there. Several times he had to quickly move out of the way to avoid being trampled as he made his way through the cordon and out onto the runway. Once there, he looked back once and then began walking towards Wheaton's position. Mark readied a rifle and aimed it at the stranger. Orion reached over and pushed the gun's barrel down.

"That's our boy."

They watched as Erulus made his way across the tarmac and onto the grassy verge between the runways and the perimeter fence. He stepped through a hole in that fence and was soon standing in front of Orion and Wheaton.

"Good to see you two again."

"Josh?" Mark recognized the voice, sort of. It sounded more mature than he remembered it but the accent and cadence were Josh's.

"Yeah, it's me, and Sarah, and Kevin. We are all here."

"Wow." It took a few minutes to process that information.

"You are ... you are ... all together in there?"

"That's true. We are but before you ask, it is not crowded. We fit together quite nicely."

"What did you do down there?" Mark gestured towards the shuttle. Rather than tell him, Josh chose to show him. He slipped into Mark's mind and erased his own image from Mark's eyes. Then he gave him back his sight and his mind. What Wheaton saw was Erulus fade away to nothing and then reappear.

"That's pretty spooky. Some cultures would call that magic. You did that inside my head, right?"

"Right."

"I felt you in there. That's quite a gift."

"One of the side benefits of being a three-in-one."

Orion interjected: "We're ready to roll. The compound is a long way off. I've split our crew into three teams. One will remain here to cover our departure. Another will head by chopper for the compound to prep it for our arrival and also to act as a decoy if we are detected. The third will escort us, in case we need some protection on the road."

"We won't need them but if it makes you more comfortable, my friend, bring them along." Erulus shook Orion's hand. "Are you ready for this?"

"I have been waiting all of this life for this. Of course I am ready."

"Good. Then let's go. I'd like to be brought up-to-date on what's been happening here. What happened after we jacked at the warehouse? What happened with Swanson? How have you two been?"

“It’s a long story but we’ve got lots of time. We’ve got a ten hour drive ahead of us.”

* * * * *

Area 51 (Authority HQ)

“You expect us to believe that you were forced to rescue Erulus and bring him here? He controlled your mind? Mind control? Really, Colonel?”

“That’s the truth! Ask the rest of my team, the shuttle’s crew. They’ll back me up.”

“That’s the problem, Colonel. We have asked your team and the ship’s crew. All say the same thing. You and your team rushed onto the shuttle and ordered an immediate launch. No one saw the terrorist. We have only your word that he was on the shuttle. Could be this is all a ruse and the terrorist is still back on the Home Planet, hiding, waiting for the heat to die down.”

Romero leaped to his feet.

“Damn it. He is here! He was on the shuttle and he escaped when your men met the shuttle. He walked right past all of them.”

“So he was invisible?”

“I told you. He messes with your mind. Makes you see or not see whatever he wants.”

“I see. Sit down, Colonel.”

“Look! Every minute you spend interrogating me is one minute further away he gets. We are wasting time!”

“Sit down, Colonel. I can assure you, we are not wasting time. If what you say is correct, the terrorist is heading for the Barrier Controls. The security there is being ramped up as we speak, although, in my opinion, if he’s here, he’s just going to try and disappear somewhere on Earth. He wants to hide out here but he won’t be able to. We have his photo and description all over the airwaves along with the offer of a substantial reward for info. Few will be able to resist the price on his head.”

Romero sat down.

“I know this guy and I know what he can do. I should be out there coordinating the manhunt.”

“I’m sorry, Colonel. You had your chance and we can all see how well that turned out. No. As soon as the fresh shuttle crew arrives – should be within an hour – you and your team are on your way back to the Home Planet. There are several very important people who want to talk to you. I should think a Section 8 Discharge awaits you back home. That is, if your superiors chose to forego a court martial.”

As Romero was lead away, the general’s aide entered the office.

“Think he bought it?”

“I think so. He’ll head back to the Home Planet convinced that we do not believe the terrorist is here on Earth. If he is part of the terrorist conspiracy, he’ll get word to Erulus that he is safe here. Then the terrorist will let his guard down. If Romero is not on the side of the terrorist, then his career is ruined for nothing.”

The aide nodded. "Sometimes, it is necessary to sacrifice the one for the good of the many." He quoted a basic tenet of the Home Planet Military Service.

"Amen, Captain. Amen. And, Captain, send a note back to Home planet HQ commending whoever it was who discovered the video recording of the terrorist boarding the shuttle. We saw him exiting the shuttle here on videotape because of him. Alert the command at the Barrier Controls to be on the lookout for anything suspicious. Have them activate the infrared sensors. The terrorist may be able to cloud people's minds but he can't beat a body heat detection system."

* * * * *

Boulder City, Nevada (Compound Outside City)

Erulus stood in the parking lot and pivoted around to take it all in. The compound was in a notch in a hill that was covered with mesquite and sage. Nowhere to hide up there. Chain link fencing was invisible along the top edge of the notch. There was a narrow cut leading up from the desert floor below and it was the only road access available. Josh noted two observers' posts on the hill one on each side of the road. A quick jack into one of the sentries showed him the view. An observer would be able to see any traffic approaching for more than a mile.

"This place is a natural fortress," he observed. Orion nodded.

"I thought so. It has its weak points but we've got those covered. Both sides of the chain link fence have been mined. Any approach from that direction will get loud and messy quite quickly. There is no gate on the road but we have a couple of EIDs hidden in the hill. They rush up the road, we blow them and enough debris hits the road to bury it."

"Sounds good. What about the buildings?"

"This used to be a kind of dude ranch. We have two large dorms with a corridor linking the two. My men are reinforcing the windows and doors but if you are right, we probably won't need the defensive inner ring." Orion looked to Erulus for reassurance.

"Hopefully, we can get done what we need to do before they even know we're here. But if they find us, we should be able to stop them at the outer ring." He paused. "But if I know you, you have a Plan B in your head."

Orion chuckled.

"Indeed. The men and most of the equipment are housed in the dorms but you, Mark, and I will be in the main house behind the dorms. There is a tunnel in the basement that runs south parallel to the access road and comes out under an old abandoned gas station on the highway about a half mile from here. I have a couple of vehicles stashed down there just in case."

"Another tunnel," Josh teased. "I noticed you hesitated before you said Mark's name. Is there a problem?"

"No. No. He's having a bit of trouble making the transition from law-upholding cop to revolutionary. Until you arrived and all the guns came out, it was all theoretical to him. Now, it's real."

Erulus nodded. He looked up.

“He’s coming.”

Barely were the words uttered when Mark burst into view. He yelled before turning away.

“The drone is back.”

Orion and Erulus headed for the house and soon reached Mark. The three entered the main house together and noted that one of the sentries was setting up a video screen hooked up to a computer. He looked at Orion for permission to report. His boss nodded.

“While waiting for you to get back from New Mexico, we sent a drone equipped with a video camera and recorder over to Hoover Dam. We figured it was small enough to go unnoticed. It was preprogrammed to fly a standard surveillance pattern then return here.”

Wheaton was curious.

“No pilot?”

“No. We needed absolute radio silence as we expected Hoover’s defense system to monitor all radio frequencies. No pilot, no radio signal to track.”

Wheaton nodded. The sentry continued: “I’ve had a quick look at the footage. Do you want to see it or would you prefer I give you a summary?”

“A summary will be fine, George. Go ahead,” Orion responded.

“There is an observatory/look out on the north side of the dam. We think access to the Barrier Control is through there. It’s right off the main road but that is the problem. There is only one road, a winding road with fences along both sides. It acts as a funnel, so once you are on the road, you cannot get off. The drone footage shows two parking lots, one on each side of the dam and both have been turned into military encampments.”

He turned on the monitor.

“As you can see, there is a heavy military presence there. We estimate upwards of three or four hundred soldiers.”

He fast forwarded the images.

“They have road blocks in both directions with anti-tank barriers across each lane. To get in, you have to weave around those barriers very slowly until you reach the checkpoint. It looks like they are checking IDs and turning back anyone not authorized to be on the dam.”

“So George, what is your assessment?”

“It would take a major assault with heavy artillery and air support to breach their defenses.”

Wheaton interjected: “What about a water approach?”

“You can barely see it in the videos but there is a substantial mine field in the lake near the dam. That’s a no-go, sir.”

Mark nodded and looked at Orion and Erulus. He noticed that both were smiling.

“What?”

Josh spoke up.

“This is perfect, exactly what we hoped for. They have committed a large military force to guard the dam from a conventional attack. Our assault on the Barrier Control room will be any thing but conventional. Over the next few days,

some of Orion's people will test the defenses, ostensibly probing for weaknesses. But that's just to keep them distracted. We, Sarah, Kevin, and I, seem to be able to invade other peoples' bodies at will. We are going to jack right into the control room and bypass all of the surface security."

"So, why the compound? Why all of the firepower here?"

"It's possible we will be discovered before we can get the job done. Our preparations here are specifically to stall for time until we can complete it."

"And the job is to bring down the barrier?" They could tell this had been bothering Mark. "Won't that kill everyone on the planet?"

"Yes and yes. We intend to shut down the barrier and if the barrier stays down, life on this planet will go extinct and the Home Planet will have to find somewhere else to put their criminals and dissidents. However, that will take time. The radiation won't start affecting people for at least a week or so and we do not plan on disabling the barrier permanently. We want to take control of it and hold it hostage for a while."

Josh spent some time explaining exactly what they wanted to accomplish. By the end, Mark was a convert. He took the last step and made the transition to revolutionary.

"I guess you better show me how to jack out when the time comes because I got a feeling this body isn't going to make it out of this mess alive."

Everyone laughed.

* * * * *

Boulder City, Nevada (Hoover Dam Military HQ)

"General, we have them! They were arrogant enough to try and sneak a drone past our defenses." The general's aide was excited. "The new MicroRadar system can detect a small bird or even a large moth at 100 yards. The smallest drone is huge to MiRa"

The general waited. He knew the young captain would get to the point eventually.

"MiRa sent one of our chase drones and it tailed theirs back to them. They appear to be holed up in the old dude ranch off Veterans Drive."

"Any assessment of troop strength or ... ?"

"We are getting live feed from the drone but it isn't too helpful yet. It has detected several lookout posts around the perimeter but no way to know how many men are inside the buildings.

"So better to overestimate. Get the commanders of the 16th and 32nd Divisions in here. We'll want to mobilize asap."

"Sir, why risk a physical encounter. We have a UCAV drone ready to take off, sir. One hellfire missile will flatten their entire compound. One to zip for us."

The general worried that most of the new officers were too narrowly focused on what he called video-game weapons like the unmanned combat aerial vehicle or UCAV that was guided by a pilot sitting in an office well away from the conflict zone. He decided he needed to teach his officers what a real battle was all about, starting with his aide.

“For reasons above your pay grade, we have to go in on the ground on this one. Get the commanders in here. I want to be out the gate in two hours. Get your gear. You’ll be coming with us as well.”

Yes sir!” the aide responded. Maybe this would count as combat experience, something the promotions board had told him he needed if he wanted to rise any further in the ranks.

“Yes sir,” he whispered as he headed for his desk.

* * * * *

Boulder City, Nevada (Dude Ranch)

Erulus sat quietly in one of the bedrooms in the main house. He’d asked to be left alone and undisturbed so he could do what needed doing. It was proving challenging however since along with their newfound ability to jack into anyone they chose came a hyperawareness of all the souls around them. It seemed like they were in the heads of everyone all at once. Those physically closest gave off the strongest signals and thoughts but it felt like they were aware of every living human soul in the southwest.

Josh wondered if this was why so many religious recluses abandoned civilization to become hermits living in deep caves. Thick rock walls might help cut down on the mental invasions. Sarah wanted to move into the tunnel to test that theory while Kevin argued that the other two should stop complaining. Erulus faced a blank wall and practiced deep breathing. His souls reached out looking for souls with a working knowledge of the barrier and its controls. With all three actively searching, they hoped they could beat the Authority’s military and they were close. Kevin had felt the soul of a guard who helped provide security for the Barrier Control. After a quick consultation, Kevin jacked into that guard and found himself inside the dam not far from their ultimate goal. He immediately started probing all the souls close by. There were hundreds of souls clustered around the dam – power plant workers, soldiers, tourists.

Kevin suggested that one of the others join him in the search and offered a likely target body but his idea was ignored. Sarah and Josh were too busy closer to home. They had detected the arrival of a large number of souls and that was confirmed by Orion. He burst into the room.

”The Authority’s army has arrived. They’ve stopped at the main highway. Looks like a couple of hundred.”

“Two hundred and nineteen,” Josh observed.

“I’ve ordered all the men to the outer perimeter. The next move belong to the army.”

“Okay. Keep me posted but make sure everyone knows to hold their fire. We do not want to provoke an all-out assault.”

“You got it.” Orion ran out to pass on the orders. Sarah started scanning the army outside the compound, trying to locate the upper echelon, the leaders at the top of the command structure. The soldiers had encircled the compound but she ignored the closest ring of souls and looked for a cluster well back from the front. She found it near the highway as Orion had mentioned. Ironically, this command

post was situated not far from the abandoned gas station that was their fallback escape hatch. She skipped from one soul to the next and settled on the person who seemed to be running the show. Everyone deferred to him and kept him as the center of attention. She learned, by listening to the conversation, that he was a three star general and he was indeed the man in charge. She was about to settle into his body when she heard the call from Kevin.

“Sarah, Josh, I’ve found the engineers overseeing the barrier but it’s not going to be easy. I need your help.”

Sarah returned to Erulus and learned what the problem was. The engineers had, over the years, added a number of fail-safe features to the control system with each new addition making it harder to shut it down. There was no on/off switch but Kevin had found a way around these new safety features and explained that it was going to take all three of them. Each one had to perform a specific sequence of actions and they had to be done simultaneously for it to work.

“I could do them one at a time but while I work on the second one, the first fail-safe would be rebooting. I think by the time I got the third one ready, the first one will be back online and the shutdown will fail. We need to work together on this.”

Sarah left an awareness in the general and joined the others in the barrier control room, each in one of the supervising engineers. Kevin quickly explained what had to be done and reinforced that they had to be subtle as there were upwards of thirty other people in the room.

“Is there no way to clear the room?” Josh asked.

“No. Even if there was some kind of disaster, the minimum staffing can be no less than twelve. Those men wearing these red name badges ...” He pointed to the IDs worn on their host bodies. “They are to remain and die if necessary to keep the barrier functional. We have to work with what we have. Let’s get to it.”

Kevin moved away, pretending to check dials and gauges as he made his way across the cavernous space. Josh and Sarah set to work side by side on adjacent computer terminals. They whispered as they worked.

“Is your guy fighting you for control? Mine is driving me nuts,” Josh asked.

“Yeah. Mine really doesn’t want me to override the controls. If it keeps up, I’m going to have to put him to sleep.”

“We can’t. Remember? Our guys have the knowledge we need to do this. Knock him out and you won’t be able to get the override right.”

“Shit. Yeah, I know. But I’ve got the general tamped down back at the compound. I’m stretched pretty thin.”

“I hear you. The faster we get it done, the sooner we can get back to our body.”

* * * * *

Boulder City, NV (Authority Command Post)

The general laid out a battle plan and assigned each of the platoon leaders to specific tasks. He then dismissed them all with the order to take up and hold

their positions and stand-by. He made sure they knew the attack order could be hours or even days in coming. The latter proviso was Sarah's doing.

"I must say, sir, that your plan is brilliant," his Aide fawned. "Simple, decisive and direct."

"But like all plans, it'll go to shit as soon as we engage. I've never known a raid or a campaign to go according to plan. Once you set something in motion, you have to rely on your men in the field to adjust on the fly. Remember that, Captain."

"Yes sir. Good advice. How long before we go, sir?"

The general hesitated while Sarah prevented him from saying what he was going to say and replaced it with her version.

"We wait. So far the people up there have not given us a reason to attack. Be patient."

"Yes sir," his aide responded. As he left the trailer, he mumbled: "We wait. Every minute we wait, they have an extra minute to get ready for us. That doesn't make sense."

* * * * *

Hoover Dam (Barrier Control Room)

A loud claxton violated the quiet of the control room, changing the steady background hum of servos and conversations with an overriding braying. It seemed to come from everywhere.

"Crap!" Sarah muttered. "I was working on the general back at the dude ranch. I'm going to have to shut the general down for a few minutes because I can't do both at once. I lost focus here. I think I just tripped an alarm."

Josh looked up to see a rush of people heading for the door.

"Keep going. Let's get this done quickly before the evacuation is complete." He put his head down hoping no one would notice him, knowing that it was probably a lost cause. The fewer people there were in the room, the more conspicuous the three of them became. As expected, his tactic didn't work.

"Hey Gerry!" someone yelled. Josh felt his host soul react so he turned.

"What?"

"What are you doing at Bob's station. Aren't you supposed to be recalibrating the online capacitors, not the stasis generators?" The questioner approached.

"I know but I noticed some variance. Thought I'd tweak the generators a bit." Josh bluffed.

"That's Bob's job, not yours. Hey ... Phil, the gateway isn't your area either." He turned to Sarah. "What's going on here?" He demanded.

Josh sighed and hit his questioner with a handy and huge book. He went down and stayed down. Unfortunately, the altercation was witnessed by another staffer who punched an alarm button. A ringing bell joined the claxton. It was deafening. Inside their heads, Josh and Sarah heard Kevin: "Get them out. Push everyone out!"

Feverishly, they jacked into each of the remaining engineers and forced them into panic mode. Each ran for the door, terrified without knowing why. Kevin shut and barricaded the control room door and then resumed his work on the barrier. He advised the others to do so as well.

“Hurry. We are running out of time.”

* * * * *

Boulder City, NV (Authority Command Post)

The general’s aide burst into the office trailer waving a piece of paper.

“Sir! Sir!!”

“What is it, Captain?”

“Sir. A message from Barrier Command. Three of the engineers have barricaded themselves in the main control room. No one knows what they are doing but I’m betting they are terrorist sympathizers.”

“Terrorist sympathizers? What nonsense. Captain, I am sure there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for their behavior. Terrorist sympathizers ... You are imagining things.”

“Sir, they have broken protocol. The minimum number in the CR is twelve, not three. They refuse to respond to all attempts to communicate with them. They’ve locked the doors from the inside.”

“Captain! That’s enough. If you are so concerned, contact the commander of the Ninth Division and have him make an assessment. He’s had more experience with this kind of stuff than you’ve had.”

“Yes sir.” The general’s words stung but he bit his tongue. “And what should I tell the platoon leaders here? A couple are wondering if they can begin rotating their men off the front line so they can get something to eat. Also, Colonel Fielding is asking if he should shut down the assault vehicles to conserve fuel. If you want to keep them at the ready, we are going to have to order up a fuel truck from the dam.”

The response was slow in coming or so it seemed to the aid and not at all satisfactory.

“I should not have to look after every little detail. Use your initiative. You give the orders.”

“But ...”

“Now go and leave me alone. I have things to do.”

“Yes sir.” The Aide exited the trailer and stood on the side of the road for a minute, digesting what he’d just heard. He paced. That was not how the chain of command worked. He was a captain but he’d just been told to order Colonels and others above his rank. It doesn’t work that way. He was about to go back in and discuss it with the general when Colonel Fielding, second in command, strolled up.

“Did he tell you what he wanted? We are going to lose the light soon. Do we go, stand down, or hold positions? I need to know. My men are hungry.”

“I understand, sir. I was about to bring new orders to you but since you are here, you might as well get them directly from the general.”

He stepped aside and let the Colonel lead the way back into the trailer.

“Here was a way to get around the general’s directive,” the Aide thought. The general was going to be pissed but he’d be pissed at the Colonel, not him.

“Captain, come here!” The Colonel shouted. The general was slumped over his desk as if asleep but he could not be awakened no matter what the two officers tried. The Aide called for a medic and an ambulance.

“His heart is good but there might be brain damage. We’ll have to airlift him to the base hospital,” the corpsman explained after examining the general. “He’s in some kind of coma. Might’ve been a stroke. Won’t know till we get an MRI.”

“Do it,” ordered the Colonel who was now in charge. He turned to the Aide as the medics wheeled the general out of the trailer.

“You said he’d issued orders for us. What are they?”

The Aide looked at the Colonel, unsure of how to proceed. A thought he’d had earlier came back to him: “Combat experience. I need combat experience” and he decided to take advantage of the situation to further his career. He lied:

“Attack, Colonel. The general gave the attack order.”

* * * * *

Boulder City, NV (Dude Ranch)

To Orion, it felt like an earthquake. The ground heaved and a roll of thunder followed. Gunfire and small explosions seemed to be coming from everywhere as the Authority’s troops raced up the main road towards the main entrance to the compound. In a few seconds, the forward observation posts were overrun but not before the buried IEDs were triggered. The first wave of soldiers was buried by the debris from the blast. However, the Authority had anticipated that kind of move. The second wave consisted of motorized ramps that settled on top of the debris field to form a roadway for the LAV-25s, light armored vehicles that dashed over the ramps and into the compound. They concentrated their 25 mm machine guns on the closest of the dorms. At a cyclic rate of 200 rounds per minute, they pounded the structure, tearing its façade to pieces.

Orion ran into the house and told Erulus to head for the tunnel. His thirty men were no match for the 200 troops that were being thrown at them.

“We are falling back here but we can’t hold out long. You need to go.”

Josh, busy in the Barrier Control Room, urged Orion to stand his ground as long as possible.

“We are close. If we pull out now, we may never get another chance.”

Outside, the troops had completed clearing the two dormitory buildings and were in the process of surrounding the main house. The Aide, standing at the Colonel’s side, argued for an immediate breach.

“We have the momentum. If we wait, they get more time to prepare for our attack. We should go now.”

The Colonel responded: “They are badly outmanned and outgunned. There can’t be more than ten fighters left in there. They know they can’t beat us. Give them time and they will realize the only way out of this alive is to surrender. The longer we wait, the fewer soldiers we lose. We wait.”

The Aide wandered off by himself muttering. He wondered what good foot soldiers were if you couldn't throw them at a target.

"So some die. That's expected. Fielding is coddling his troops."

They waited for an hour although to the Aide, it seemed like forever. The Colonel approached the house and announced over a bullhorn: "This is Colonel Fielding, field commander Earth Protection Force, 32nd Division. I am prepared to accept your surrender if you come out with your hands up. This is your one and only chance. Surrender or die. You have five minutes."

There were no visible signs that those in the house had heard but they had. The six remaining soldiers looked to Orion who shook his head and smiled.

"We hold out to the bitter end, my friends. Once this is over and we've all jacked out, we'll regroup in Omaha."

Erulus emerged from the bedroom, looking pale and tired. Josh spoke.

"Orion, take your men and go down the tunnel. I need you well away from here before we finish. Mark is already there waiting for you."

"It's okay. We can stay. We can hold them off a bit longer," Orion protested.

"No. No need. I want you gone. You've done enough. Go. We'll meet up later."

"But ..."

"Go. Please. I need you to go now."

Reluctantly, Orion gathered his fighters and entered the tunnel. Erulus watched them go, feeling their location through their souls. As if from far way, Josh heard the countdown being broadcast by the army outside.

"Four minutes."

"Three minutes."

"Two minutes."

"One minute."

He sensed Orion reaching the gas station exit. He sent him a mental message. Orion laughed in response. Josh nodded and threw open the front door. Hands held high, he stepped out into the late afternoon sun. Several soldiers rushed forward to secure him but before they could reach him, he took a deep breath and mentally shouted: "Stop!" The soldiers closest to him fell to the ground blood pouring from their ears. All the others froze in place, unable to get their bodies to obey any commands.

"Drop your weapons!"

Everyone obeyed immediately. They had no choice.

"Whoever is in charge step forward."

The Colonel walked up to Erulus. The Aide followed. Josh smiled. Obviously the Captain was under the impression he was in control. What a fool, Josh thought. He resisted the urge to squeeze the Aide's mind and settled on sending him to join the rest of the troops. He then ordered the Aide and the soldiers to retreat to the highway and to place themselves under the command of Orion who just happened to be waiting for them there. He kept the Colonel close to him.

* * * * *

Hoover Dam (Barrier Control Room)

“I am impressed, Josh,” Sarah admitted. “It took all three of us to cloud the twenty minds at the spaceport. You just grabbed control of about 150 by yourself. My hero!”

They both laughed. Kevin cleared his throat. They went back to work, giggling to themselves. Despite the blasting alarm bells and sirens and the soldiers pounding on the door, they made progress. One by one, they completed their tasks and then all three hit their computer ‘enter’ buttons simultaneously. Within the control room, nothing changed. No new alarms. No explosions. No fireworks. But deep down in a cavern below the dam, there was a deep groan and a shudder as a cascading power failure shut down one system after another. Finally, there was silence there and in the control room as the sirens and bells ceased as well.

About a thousand kilometers above the Earth, the invisible layer of protective radiation known to the Authority as the Barrier and to Earthlings as the Ozone Layer or the Van Allen Belt winked out. Almost immediately deadly solar radiation began raining down on Earth. Around the world, alarms in observatories and monitoring stations sounded but those people manning the detectors could do nothing except gaze up into the sky and wonder what happened.

* * * * *

Boulder City, NV (Dude Ranch)

Erulus stood across from the Colonel and slowly released control over his mind. He wanted his adversary unencumbered.

“If you contact your base at the Hoover Dam, you will learn that the Barrier has been shut down. We have rigged it so that if anyone tries to restart it, the power sources will be flooded, destroying the barrier forever.”

“That’s crazy! You’ll kill everyone on the planet.”

“If it stays down, yes, we will ... but it can be restarted. I can tell you how to restart the barrier once your leaders have agreed to talk to me and are prepared to meet our demands.”

“They’ll never negotiate with terrorists!” Fielding was adamant. “Never!”

“They will negotiate with me or lose the planet for good. Take my message to them.” Erulus handed the Colonel a thumb drive. “Send the contents to the Home Planet Congress and have them signal me when they are ready to talk. The address is on the drive. But you better hurry, Colonel. In about seven days, the most vulnerable bodies – the sick, the elderly, the very young – will begin to deteriorate. In two weeks, they will be dead and the healthy bodies will start to show signs of disintegration. Let’s not let it get to that, shall we.”

* * * * *

Home Planet (Prison Substation 623)

It started out as a normal day. In the morning, the three staff nurses, two orderlies, and the supervising doctors removed the tubes and wires that

maintained five of the bodies waiting for their souls to return from prison Earth and brought the bodies down to the Awakening Room, the prison equivalent of a hospital recovery room. There, the bodies waited until the Earthly death occurred and the soul returned. Sentence served. The process was designed to smooth the transition and was elegant in its simplicity. An individual's STD alarm would sound a day in advance and the front desk would notify next of kin of the impending release. Often the relatives would gather in the Awakening Room to welcome their loved one home. That seemed to reduce the stress that often accompanied a transition from one life to the next.

There were three more impending releases scheduled for the afternoon and the mostly automated system was functioning as it should. In addition to the medical and reception staff, there were only three maintenance workers on site. Their job was to insure the stability of the racks so they spent their days wandering through the vast arrays of stored bodies, empty shells that needed nourishment and stimulation. New maintenance workers found their initial shifts difficult because they had to be in close proximity to so many lifeless bodies but the thousands upon thousands of exposures to the shells as they called them soon desensitized the workers. After their first week, they hardly distinguished the bodies for the tubes and machines that kept them alive.

At Prison Substation 623, not far from the planet's capitol, was a typical holding facility with 800 racks, each containing between 15,000 and 22,000 prisoners' bodies. Being one of the oldest substations, it had housed many of the first individuals sent to Earth and because of this, several of its racks were filled with bodies of people who never came home.. Their alarms sounded, their scheduled time of death on Earth passed but no soul returned to reanimate the shell. When the first few failed to show up, there was a great debate. No one knew quite what to do with the bodies that were starting to pile up. Rather than expose the flaw in the penal system, it was decided that the bodies should be maintained in stasis forever if necessary. Relatives who questioned the failure to return were shown the bodies and told that additional penalties had been imposed on Earth resulting in an increased sentence. That was impossible as there was no way to change the STD from Earth but the relatives didn't know that and so accepted the explanations. The last thing the prison officials wanted to tell the relatives was that their loved ones were ghosts drifting in Earth's atmosphere for all eternity.

On the 19th day of the 16th month of year 37,672 on the Home Planet's new calendar, everything changed. The barrier that kept the prisoners' souls on Earth fell. Nine million souls, the accumulation of a hundred centuries of unscheduled deaths, the ghosts, were released and automatically returned to their bodies. There were no warning alarms, no inklings or hints of what was about to happen. At Substation 623, roughly 60,000 previously inanimate shells began to squirm and writhe and fight the tubes that had kept them alive so long.

The staff worked frantically to get the newly awakened unhooked and on their feet. Since there were no relatives on hand to assist and take the newly animated home, make-shift dormitories were created. The manicured lawns that surrounded the facility took on the look of a refugee camp. Many of the newly

released needed to be restrained. Too many years as a conscious entity floating in space as a ghost had taken its psychological toll. Many died from starvation or dehydration because, as ghosts, they had forgotten food and water were essential for survival.

The chaos caused by the unanticipated arrival of ghosted souls was repeated at substations around the planet. The entire yearly budget of the Penal System was consumed within twenty-four hours and the government had to convene a special session to authorize emergency funding. Government lawyers estimated the liability costs they would have to payout to former inmates who had been held well past their release dates. They guessed it was the equivalent to one hundred years of the Penal System's current annual budget. New taxes would have to be imposed so that the newly released could be housed, fed, retrained, reemployed and compensated for their suffering.

In a private meeting with the President, the senior officials of the Penal System, known on Earth as the Authority, admitted that no provision had been made for souls whose Earthly bodies died before the STD for the soul inside it. They were forced to admit that the barrier shutdown had released all of the ghosts at once, an event they had sought to avoid for millennia. They quietly accepted the President's rebuke but once he quieted down, ran out of steam as it were, they pointed out that the ghosted souls were a minor inconvenience compared to what was coming.

"Nine million ghosted souls are a problem and we will deal with them," admitted the General Director. "But Erulus has shut down the barrier and if nothing is done, we can anticipate the return of all of the prisoners currently on Earth – approximately seven billion souls – over the next few weeks." He explained the consequences of a non-functioning containment barrier.

The President sputtered and stuttered as he tried to digest this. Finally he was able to speak.

"What does Erulus want? No. Wait. I don't care. Whatever it is, give it to him. Whatever the cost, we need the barrier back up. Failure is not an option here. Get it done or you'll find yourselves down on Earth enjoying the sun's radiation."

The Authority delegation left the President's office willing to negotiate. None of them relished dying from solar radiation.

* * * * *

Home Planet (Outdoor Café)

"So that's what you look like in real life," Wheaton chuckled as he chatted with Orion on a video link. "I pictured you as older and ... um ... taller." He couldn't help but stare at the gorgeous blonde that looked back at him through his computer.

"How does it feel to be home again?" he asked, hoping to distract himself.

"It's weird, Mark. I have to admit that I am somewhat uncomfortable. It seems I was getting used to Earth.

"Is that why you are coming back?"

“Yes and no. Josh – I have trouble calling him Erulus – Josh asked me to head back and help monitor the new rules. He doesn’t trust the Authority enough yet. He thinks they gave in to all of his demands hoping to claw some of them back later on. My job will be to make sure they don’t. He talked to you too, didn’t he?”

“He did,” Mark replied. “He offered me a choice. If I wanted, he’d have my sentence commuted and let me go home or I could stay on Earth and help him create a small police force to keep an eye on the jailers and minders. No more independents like Swanson.”

“Good. Perhaps we’ll get the chance to have dinner or something when I get back.”

“Count on it!” Mark hoped he didn’t sound too enthusiastic. “And did you hear Josh has also recruited Romero?” He changed the subject.

“No. Last I heard, Romero was in an Authority holding cell in New Mexico.”

Mark laughed.

“Yeah. He was not too happy with the way the Authority treated him. It didn’t take much convincing for Romero to switch sides. Ironically, he is now guarding the Barrier Control Room against any attempt by the Authority to regain control of the Barrier.”

“But I thought Josh installed a backdoor so he could disable the barrier from the outside.”

“He did but we don’t want the Authority to know that. Josh has gotten quite devious in the last little while. He and Romero will keep the Authority busy working on ways to retake the Barrier’s physical controls while the on/off switch is literally in Josh’s pocket.” Mark sat back. “The next few months should be interesting.”

“That’s for sure.” Orion hesitated. “Mark, I’ll be arriving on the next shuttle. Do you think you could meet me?”

“Sure.”

“Great. I’ll send you the arrival info. See you in a week.” She terminated the connection. Mark sat, staring at his computer. He grinned. He was looking forward to Orion’s return to Earth.

* * * * *

Las Vegas (Private Residence)

Erulus looked out across the patio towards the all-night glow of the famous Las Vegas strip and decided ignorance was indeed bliss. Thousands of people were enjoying themselves gambling or seeing shows and they had no idea. They didn’t know they were prisoners, criminals sentenced to time on an alien planet. They didn’t know they had been exposed to deadly radiation that would have killed them all had it continued. They didn’t know the truth and they were happy.

He had known the Authority would capitulate without delay. The first round of returnees guaranteed that. Erulus felt the Authority had been a bit surprised when his demands weren’t really too onerous.

He imposed only two conditions on the Authority. First, they were to monitor individuals whose sentences were short (under a year) and if the souls failed to return on their scheduled STD, a team would be sent to collect that individual's soul and return it to the Home Planet. For example, if Earth medicine found a cure for a type of cancer that was being used as a release on the soul's STD, the team would alter the cancer in that individual's body and have it appear in a different part of the body. There were not too many of this type of interference with STDs but Erulus knew that as Earth science and medicine got better, more STDs would be missed and sentences unfairly prolonged. Second, there was to be no more long-term ghosting. Josh laughed when he remembered how quickly the Home Planet lawyers had got into the act over ghosting. Currently, it seemed like almost all of the nine million recent returnees were suing the Authority for false imprisonment. One who had survived several centuries as a ghost was suing for several million dollars per year spent as a ghost. The government agreed immediately. No more ghosting.

Everyone admitted that some bodies would not survive until its STD. Accidents, suicides, murders would all take their toll and ghosts would accumulate in the atmosphere. Erulus's solution was as simple as it was genius. Once a year, the barrier was to be shut down for a single day, allowing the ghosts to be returned to the Home Planet. If their remaining sentences were short, the people would be released and sent home. If the remaining sentence was long, the soul would be sent back to Earth and into new bodies with their original STD activated.

Josh was pleased. Balance had been restored and fairness achieved. He could rest and enjoy himself for a while. He wanted to get to know his other souls again. They had been apart for a very long time. He turned away from the window. He decided to go to the kitchen and get a beer. The others thought it was a good idea too.

"Josh, why did you pick that particular date for the barrier shut down?"

"It's a kind of Earth joke that no one in the Authority would get. I could not resist releasing all of the ghosted souls on November first because that's the Mexican Day of the Dead."

"Cool," Sarah commented. "I like it."

* * * * *

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A work of fiction such as this is rarely the product of a single mind and that is certainly true in this case. My wife, Ellie, had to put up with me over the many months it took to put this story together and, along the way, she made many useful suggestions. Others, who wish to remain anonymous, also contributed story lines and plot twists, some of which I used. I had an enormous amount of help with character names from several people including Judi Becker, Cinnamon Dagsvik, Brenda Clayton, Athena Myring, Sherry Coffey, Serena Gero, and Clare Stewart. Although I didn't use all of their suggestions, I did use some and others sparked ideas that I did use. I might end up using the extra suggestions in another story. Who knows.

When I started writing this story, the 'tongue in cheek' goal was to write a novel that explained all of the world's religions from a fictional perspective. It took a while but I did it, I think. And I am going to assume that since this is a work of fiction and in no way reflects the real world of today, no one will be offended by it.