

### **Los Angeles (Outside Orion's Apartment)**

Romero stood beside Swanson and inspected the building while his team selected the equipment they needed for the takedown.

"I have to admit after the fiasco at the stake out, I had my doubts about you. But if you're right, and Orion is up there, you'll have proved yourself."

Swanson kept a straight face and even managed to look a little hurt.

"Just make sure the Authority knows that I found him."

"Don't worry. The credit is yours. I'm only interested in putting this guy away. He's come too close to crashing the barrier"

"How are you going to take him? If he jacks, we'll lose him."

"We are trained in non-lethal takedowns. None of us will be carrying lethal weapons. Just stun guns and the like. Come with us and see how the pros do it."

The team eased into the building and as quietly as possible, climbed the stairs to the second floor. They paused on the landing while Kreiger laid down face down and edged along until he was inches from the door to the apartment they believed Orion was in. Bit by bit he slid a flexible tube under the door. The camera mounted on the end of the tube broadcast an image to the ipad in Romero's hand. He showed the image to Swanson.

"This the man?"

Swanson, going on Priam's description, nodded. Romero clicked his microphone twice. Kreiger slid a second tube under the door and opened the valve of the small canister attached to the tube. Swanson and Romero watched as the gas filled the room and Orion slid into unconsciousness. His body slumped forward but before it could fall to the ground, Barker and Vasquez were through the door and had Orion in restraints. Johanson and Kreiger followed with a gurney. They loaded Orion onto it and the four of them carried him to the waiting van. Romero and Swanson followed behind.

"Well done, Romero. Smooth and efficient."

"Thanks. I wish all of our takedowns were this easy."

"Where will you be taking him?"

"Sorry, Swanson. I can't tell you that. It's on a need-to-know basis."

"I understand," Swanson stated. He kept his voice calm even though he wanted to scream. Romero was keeping him out of the loop for spite. He was sure of that. No problem. Priam and his men were in position and would follow Romero and the van. There was more than one way to get what he wanted.

"Don't forget to tell the Authority who found Orion for you."

Swanson didn't wait for a response. He turned and walked to his car. Romero watched him go and waited until Swanson's car went out of sight before signaling his men to head to their new quarters – the warehouse where they'd built the cage for Josh. Now, they believed, it would hold a much more important prisoner. They didn't notice the dark suburban that stayed one half a block back for their entire journey.

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**Los Angeles (EMT and Firestation #124)**

“Kev! Hey Kev, the news is starting. Get your butt in here. We need your independent witness.” Treacher sighed and set the dish he had been drying down. His coworkers were all gathered around the television set ready to play their nightly game of “guess the lead story.” He refused to play so he was automatically assigned an adjudicator role. When there was a dispute, he declared what story was the lead, which story was the second and which was the throw away story – the one worth no more than a few seconds of the news reader’s time. His coworkers took the game seriously with each kicking in \$10.00. The backer of the second story got his money back while the one who chose the throw away story had to pay twice. The winner, the chooser of the lead story got the cash. If no one won on a particular night, the money was added to the next day’s pot.

Without prompting, the whole room fell silent as the CNN World News anthem came to an end.

“In a move that is being heralding by many as bold and decisive, U.S. air forces struck at economic targets in Tikrit in an attempt to cripple ISIS forces.”

CNN ran film of destroyed bridges and oil wells, several still burning behind the news report.

“A pentagon spokesman put the estimated deaths at 27 and credits the Air Force for its accuracy.”

“Yes Sylvia, according to the pentagon, three X-113 drones penetrated ISIS air space to take out targets in the oilfields and others related to the transport of oil. The spokesman told CNN they were sure that all the dead were ISIS military personnel.”

“Thank you, Mark. The President’s approval rating spiked to an all time high when news of the drone strike was made public. It had plummeted last week after the terrorist attack in Los Angeles but this retaliatory strike has really turned things around. The President’s detractors have gone quiet.”

“I think that is true. A President who has not done military service faces sharp criticism until he proves himself a worthy Commander-in-Chief. I think this President has just established his reputation as a tough leader. He recently issued a statement that the attacks on ISIS economic infrastructure will continue, depriving ISIS of the funds it needs to keep their fighters equipped”

“It’s hard to get information at this point. ISIS has refused all requests from reporters for visas to see the damage firsthand. Everything we get is second hand. Just a few minutes ago, the ISIS commander issued a press release claiming that the body count is over 100 and, in that same statement, claims that the targets hit by the U.S. drones were all civilian buildings including a hospital and an apartment building. Of course, there is no way to verify these claims.”

“Thank you for that, Peter. What is the reaction from other countries?”

“That’s a different story, Sylvia. Most of the Middle East nations applaud the move. Egypt has gone on record as saying that ISIS is a strain on the landscape and should be destroyed. It has strongly urged the U.S. to launch further attacks. Countries normally critical to the United States – especially Lebanon and the

U.A.E. – have remained silent, a move many are suggesting is their way of expressing approval and saving face.”

“In other news, a fishing boat carrying migrants from North Africa sank off the coast of Sicily this morning. The death toll sits at six hundred and is expected to rise although the exact count may never be known as the exact number of people on the ferry is unknown. Reports from survivors suggest most of those who died were locked below decks.”

“Rescue ships from several E.U. countries are searching the area between Sicily and the Italian mainland and so far have pulled fifty seven survivors out of the water. A spokesman for Italy’s Mare Nostrum, the Coast Guard task force responsible for dealing with the flood of illegal immigrants, expressed doubt about finding any more immigrants from the vessel alive.”

“This is the latest in a series of immigrant vessels that have sunk and E.U. officials have expressed deep concern. Gunter Volks, acting Security Secretary for the E.U., pointed out that so far this year, more immigrants have died trying to get to Europe by boat from Africa and the Middle East – especially Somalia and Yemen – than have died in the past five years combined. He noted that five boats have sunk in the Mediterranean in the last month with a total estimated death toll of 1200. Mr. Volks stated that the problem has reached crisis proportions and Europe’s leader need to act before many more die.”

There were no winners in the “guess the lead story” game and everyone scattered to their respective duty stations. Treacher watched the last few seconds of the news program, fascinated by the aura that surrounded Sylvia Brennan, anchorwoman for CNN. He knew she’d be dead soon – that’s what that aura signified. He didn’t tell any of the other EMTs. They already thought he was too creepy.

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### **Los Angeles (Shady Glen Sanitarium)**

There were six psychiatrists, four psychologists, ten nurses, and three orderlies at the regular Monday morning staff meeting at Shady Glen. They were there to hear an overview of the weekend’s happenings and to get a handle on the week’s upcoming schedule. Those not in attendance, those who worked evenings or overnight, would read the meeting’s minutes in the duty log at the start of their respective shifts.

There were the usual adjustments to the medications given their psychiatric patients, comments on therapy sessions, and successes or failures to discuss but there was also an unusual event to share. Lisa B., the Admissions Clerk, had been called in on Saturday to process three new patients. One had been delivered by the police but the other two had simply showed up asking to be admitted. One had gotten a referral from his family doctor while the other had looked in the Yellow Pages for the nearest psychiatric hospital.

Reading from notes she’d prepared, Lisa informed the group of the admissions.

“They arrived within minutes of each other which is why Stan called me in. They needed help and he didn’t want to leave them dangling.”

The others nodded in understanding. They knew that if a troubled patient was left alone with his own thoughts for too long, it would lead to trouble.

“The timing was weird but that was not the only coincidence. All three are suffering from an acute psychotic break, possibly rapid onset schizophrenia – they all claim to be hearing voices – and there is no history of mental illness in any of their families. It was like déjà vu. I could have just interviewed one of them and cut and paste his information into the other two’s files.”

“That is quite odd, I agree. Is there any thing linking these patients?” asked Dr. Borge, Head Psychiatrist.

“The link is so tenuous, I’m almost reluctant to bring it up. They were all involved in the recent riots and were treated at the new critical care unit at East L.A. Medical Center for injuries sustained in the riots. I checked and although they participated in the riots, they were in different parts of the city. They have never met, not even at the East L.A. Medical Center. So there is a link in that they were all treated at the same hospital at or around the same time. Otherwise, they have never had anything to do with one another.”

“Interesting,” Dr. Borge signaled that that topic was now closed. “Treatment assignments?”

“After talking to Dr. Latke who was on call Saturday, we started all three on a lithium/valium cocktail to get them calm. Normally, each intake would be assigned to a team in rotation but given the similarities, Dr. Latke and I agreed that the team headed by Dr. Stevens would get all three.”

Several nurses started mumbling.

“I know. I know,” Lisa rushed to reassure them. “It’s a lot of work but we felt it was justified and we’ve adjusted the duty roster. Dr. Stevens’ team will not get any new patients for the next while.

“Seems fair,” Dr. Borge stated, quickly preventing any additional complaints from the nurses on Stevens’ team. “Let’s get their charts started and schedule interviews. Bob, let the evening shift know they’ll need to watch these new admissions closely. There is a degree of suicide risk here, until the meds kick in.”

“I’ll make sure they know.” Dr. Robert Starkie made notes. “Anything else?”

“No. I think that’s it.” Lisa was relieved that that was over. Dr. Borge dismissed the staff.

“Okay. Then let’s get back to work. Thanks, Lisa, for your report.”

No one at the meeting was aware that similar admissions had occurred at seven other psychiatric facilities across the region.

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### **Los Angeles (Warehouse with Cage)**

Romero inspected the facility and decided it was more than adequate. The cage consisted of three walls of metal bars fastened to the fourth wall of reinforced concrete. The floor and ceiling of the cage were metal. The only

potential weak point was the door that was held shut with a heavy chain and padlock. It would do. His team had done well.

The cage took up part of the large open area that would also serve as a common room and meeting area and there were several side rooms, former offices, that could be used for storage and as sleeping quarters. His boys had laid in enough supplies to last them several days as well as a portable generator and strings of lights if needed. They were self-sufficient and self-contained. Romero was pleased.

Johanson brought him a coded message from the Authority and he had to chuckle. There was no strategic reason for the encoding of messages other than to make sure the officer receiving it got a chance to read it before his men did. That was ridiculous of course because most officers couldn't be bothered spending the time decoding any message and left it to his radioman to do that for him. Johanson, being the best radioman Romero had ever worked with, provided the coded text and on a separate page, the decoded readable version.

The message at first complimented Romero on the capture of Orion. It was insincere but served as a lead-in to the real message. It specified what information the Authority wanted out of Orion. Their top priority was the location of the machines Orion used to jack from body to body or, failing that, plans to build the machines. The Authority wanted the jacking technology for itself, that much was clear with the equally clear proviso that the technology was to be destroyed if they could not be guaranteed sole ownership.

Orion was to be wrung dry and then eliminated. That bothered Romero a little. To him that was the same as mistreating animals but he was not bothered enough to risk court martial by refusing the order. He reread the message aloud this time so his crew knew what they had to do. He then outlined a strategy. He watched as smiles formed on the faces of his assembled team. They were happy.

He assigned tasks based on the skill sets of his team members but made sure those tasks also played to the interests of his guys. He'd learned a long time ago to give people jobs they do well and that they enjoyed doing if you want them happy and willing. The tasks were often difficult and, occasionally gross and disgusting so you might as well give it to the one who likes it. If you need to torture someone, assign a sadist to the work. Kreiger was one so Romero put him in charge of causing Orion pain. He placed two limits on the torture and on Kreiger but otherwise gave him free rein. First, Kreiger could not kill Orion and, second, he was not to speak to Orion at all – not one word.

Kreiger, anxious to get started, resisted questioning the second limit. Usually, the subject was asked for information. Romero needed to extract that info from Orion so to avoid speaking to him seemed counterproductive but Kreiger wanted to get started before his boss changed his mind. As he headed to the cage, he mentally checked his equipment and plotted the torture sequence. He was beaming as he reached Orion who awaited him in the cage. This was going to be fun.

He stood and watched his subject for a few minutes. Orion pretended to ignore his captor but they both knew he was faking it. Orion did not like the smile

on the other's face. It made him nervous. He looked around his cell for anything that he could possibly use as a weapon but found none. As Kreiger unlocked the cage, Orion backed into the far corner. Kreiger gestured towards the chair with his weapon but Orion shook his head. He was not going to cooperate. Kreiger grinned and fired his taser at Orion's chest. He watched him as he dropped to the floor and began to flop around. Kreiger allowed himself a few minutes to enjoy the sight then he hauled Orion into the chair and strapped him in.

Once Orion was conscious again and in control of himself. Kreiger started. He began simply, using just his fists. It was hard work but it felt good. He then selected a hammer from his toolkit and used it on Orion's left hand, breaking each small bone with methodical precision and all the while enjoying the screams. He decided to take a short break so he tased Orion into unconsciousness. He did not want Orion to get a break from the pain. He passed out in pain and he would awaken to more pain, unaware that there had been a brief period of painlessness.

A quick coffee and Kreiger was back. This time he repeated the beating with his fists and then inserted acupuncture needles into the spots where nerve bundles were near the surface – the elbow, between toes, behind the jaw, under the nose. He eased the needles in slowly and watched Orion's eyes. He could see the confusion. The needles didn't hurt. No pain during torture? Very confusing. Kreiger enjoyed that almost as much as the screaming.

Once he had all of the needles where he wanted them, Kreiger cracked his knuckles and poised like he was about to play a piano. With the tips of his fingers, he brushed the exposed ends of each needle so that the buried tip touched the nerve bundle and sent a shock wave of pain straight to the brain. One needle stroking a nerve is enough to bring a man to his knees. Ten, vibrating together, overwhelmed the brain, sending it crashing into oblivion. Kreiger timed the next round so that the needles were vibrating against the nerve bundles just as Orion regained consciousness from the previous wave. Time after time, Orion's synapses fired altogether in response to the waves of pain that cascaded through his brain. He knew nothing but pain, the ever-present pain that demanded his total concentration. He was unable to think or feel anything else but the pain. He couldn't even beg for mercy.

Romero called a halt to the torture to tell him that supper was ready and six hours of torture was enough for one day. Reluctantly, Kreiger removed the needles and put them away. He headed for the makeshift kitchen, suddenly ravenous with hunger, while Romero watched Orion for a while. As he saw intelligence seep back into Orion's eyes, he leaned forward and whispered:

"That was only the beginning. Next time, we'll be asking questions and you will answer them. Otherwise, Kreiger will let you experience whole new levels of pain." Orion did not respond. There was nothing to say.

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### Los Angeles (The Safe House)

"Hey, Mark. Glad you got my message." Josh stepped back and let him squeeze past into the warehouse. It seemed to be just a concrete and steel shell with broken windows and discarded machinery strewn across the floor.

"I like what you've done to the place," Mark looked around. He didn't like what he saw. "This is a hellhole. It's impossible to defend. It stinks too."

"Good. I hoped you'd say something like that. So anybody looking for us takes one look and moves on. Only rats and lice live here. Come on." He grabbed Mark's arm. "Follow me."

He took Mark through a maze of workstations and stopped, facing a wall of shelves. He reached out and tugged on a shelf. It swung forward revealing a dark hallway and a well-furnished apartment beyond.

"Isn't it neat? All the comforts of home away from home."

Mark inspected the place and had to admit that he was impressed.

"You'd never guess this little nest was here, in what looks to be a rat infested old shell."

"Orion really came through with this place. We can hide here for weeks if we have to. There's a generator with plenty of fuel, tons of food, even stuff to read." Mark recognized that Josh hadn't been this positive, this up, in a long time. He hated to be the one to bring him down but it had to be done.

"Speaking of Orion, I got word from one of my informants that Orion was picked up by the Authority's goons. I am assuming that they followed him from your meeting."

"Damn. Where is he?"

"Nobody knows or if they know they aren't saying. I've asked around. Nothing. He isn't in any jail or precinct house. He's gone. My guess is that the Authority has him holed up somewhere outside official channels."

"That's not fair! We need to do something."

"Nothing to do, Josh."

"No. I don't accept that. He is our friend, well, sort of. If we were in trouble, he'd help us. Already has. Think, Mark! We have to find him and help him."

Josh had locked onto a goal and could not be dissuaded from his chosen objective. Mark saw this and sighed.

"Okay. The only person we know with any direct connection to the Authority is Swanson and we can track his movements. We still have the GPS fix on his lowjack, don't we?"

"Good idea, Mark. I knew you'd come up with something. I'm pretty sure we still have his lowjack but I'll check with Sarah later. Right now she's recharging her laptop and it's a slow go with the generator. Being off the grid presents special problems for her."

"So we wait for Sarah. How about pointing out my room. I need to rest for a bit."

Josh was about to argue that there was no time for rest when he noticed that Mark was pale and his hands were shaking, just a bit. He wasn't fully recovered from his gunshot wound. Josh took him down the hall and left him

alone. He laughed and decided he should have a siesta too. He kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the couch. It didn't take long.

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### **Los Angeles (County Psych Ward at St. Andrew's Hospital)**

He'd arrived a few days earlier complaining of headaches and noises in his head. He'd been found wandering around, ranting and raving in one of the ritzier neighborhoods in BelAir. A private security guard had coaxed him into his vehicle and then dropped him off at the only 'nut house,' as he put it, that he knew. The guard left the facility as quickly as possible, confident that he'd protected the community he served. The staff did a quick assessment and arrived at a diagnosis of acute adult onset schizophrenia. Then the head of the unit and the head nurse got into an argument. The patient was clearly indigent and without the means to pay for his treatment at St. Andrews. That meant he was going to be a charity case. The unit head wanted to medicate him and turn him back out onto the street.

"Give him a week's supply of lithium and a quick course on how to self-medicate. Release him. We need the bed for paying customers."

"Dr. Campbell, you and I both know the drugs take a couple of days to kick in. We release him now, who knows what will happen. What if he throws himself in front of a bus with a prescription bottle from St. Andrews in his pocket? The PR blowback could be enormous. Let us sedate him and get him stabilized before we throw him out."

If there was one thing Dr. Campbell hated more than charity cases, it was bad publicity so he grudgingly gave in. The patient who had yet to provide a name was checked in and sedated. Dr. Campbell had to have the last word.

"Forty-eight hours. I want him out of here in 48 hours."

A room was found for John Doe who refused to answer any questions – mostly by simply ignoring them. One particularly perceptive nurse suggested he wasn't ignoring the questions. She thought he simply couldn't hear them over the noise in his own head. She also noticed that although the tranquilizer calmed the patient, the anti-schizophrenia meds – a cocktail of various compounds – was not silencing the voices in the man's brain. He sat and rocked and mumbled to himself when he should have been sleeping peacefully.

The nurse made a note on his chart and the attending physician authorized an increase in the dosage. In fact, he doubled the dose and jokingly pointed out that it was enough lithium to silence even his ex-wife's incessant chatter. He left, laughing. The nurse just shook her head. Then she gave her patient a little bit more medication, not the massive dose the doctor had called for. It seemed to do the trick and the patient slept.

As the forty-eighth hour approached, the staff reduced the amount of tranquilizer he was getting as they needed him awake and ambulatory. As the drug wore off, he seemed much improved. He chatted with the nurses coherently so the head nurse took advantage of his state of mind and sat down with him intending to complete the admission forms he hadn't been able to handle when

he came in. She got his name and address – he actually lived in the BelAir community where he'd been picked up – and she was delighted to discover he had health insurance. As she fired question after question at the patient, he seemed to lose interest and he began staring at a spot just beyond the nurse's right shoulder. His answers degenerated and she looked up from her clipboard when his answer to a question made no sense.

"You sure?" he said. "Really? Right now? Okay. If you say so." He looked at the nurse. "Could I borrow your pen for a second, please?"

"Sure," she said and handed it to him. He stared at it, rolled it around with his fingers and then slammed it into the nurse's left eye. It smashed through the eye and the thin bone at the back of the socket and found the brain. She automatically raised her hand to pull it out but died before she could reach the pen.

The patient sat and looked at the nurse who remained seated across from him. He pressed the emergency call button.

"She doesn't look all that dangerous," he mumbled. Several staff came rushing into the room. Their focus was on the patient as was dictated by their training so it took a few seconds for them to see the nurse and her wound. The patient grinned. "I'm safe now. She can't hurt me anymore."

Subsequent investigations by the LAPD turned up no motive or any connection between the patient and the head nurse. Indeed, the patient had been a model citizen. The only blip on the guy's radar was an incident where some rioters had beaten him and hospitalized him for no other reason that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

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### **Los Angeles (Back Streets)**

Swanson drove slowly and listened to an all-night jazz radio station. He had to admit that lowmen were geniuses when it came to music, especially progressive jazz. The complex rhythms and ever-changing riffs invigorated him. Too bad lowmen were useless for anything else although they were predictable and easy to steer in the right direction. Case in point, the two idiots, the college student and the cop, were in a car three of four vehicles back trying to tail Swanson just like he wanted them to do. He'd let them find out that Orion had been captured. The snitch that gave Mark the info worked for Swanson. He'd hinted that Swanson was in on the questioning when Mark had pushed him about it.

Swanson had left the lowjack functioning in his car to give them a link. It had taken them a few days but they got the idea. He figured they'd spend those couple of days following his car on their computer before they realized that a significant part of his day was not spent in his car.

"Real people would've gotten that idea a lot faster, of course," he thought. "Lowmen need extra help."

He turned left onto a ramp leading to the Ontario Mall parking lot. Just as he pulled into a spot, his phone rang. He activated his Bluetooth but didn't bother

with phone etiquette as none was needed. He knew who was calling. Only one person had the number.

“Well?”

“They took the bait. They’ve pulled into a spot two rows down from you. They are really bad at this.” Priam laughed.

“That’s why we need to help them, train them, get them ready for when we need them.”

“How long have we got? Any ideas?”

“Couple of days, max. I’ve been arguing for my inclusion on the interrogation team based on my extensive experience. I think I’ve got the Director convinced but now he’s got to convince the regional board.”

“Could be a hard sell given all that’s happened.”

Swanson wanted to reach down the phone and snap Priam’s neck. He unfortunately still needed him so he pretended not to have heard.

“I will be asked to get involved in Orion’s interrogation soon. We’ll have to keep these two interested until then. Right now, I am going shopping and Adams and his cop friend are going to get some basic training in tailing a subject on foot. Call me and let me know if they get lost.”

He ended the call and walked to the nearest entrance. He moved more slowly than he normally would so his trackers would have, should have, no trouble keeping up. He changed directions and stopped at random places. On occasion, he would use the reflections in store windows to check on the progress of his trainees. They were improving. It was getting harder to spot them in the crowd. Of course, if he wanted to lose them, he could do it easily. He was about to call Priam and quit for the day when his cell rang.

“Trouble?” he asked.

“No. Not really but we should probably pack it in. The older one, the cop, he looks like he is about to pass out. He’s been having trouble keeping pace. He keeps rubbing his shoulder too.”

“He hasn’t quite recovered from the bullet I put in him a while back. Lowmen take so long to repair themselves. I’m heading back to the car now. See you at the hotel.”

He terminated the call and strolled back to the parking lot. He waited to make sure Josh and Mark were in their car and ready before he left the mall and headed for the hotel. On the drive, he started thinking that maybe he should rent an apartment or something instead of staying in the hotel. But in the end, he chose to remain where he was. To rent a place would be admitting that he was going to be on Earth for a while. He wanted to go home. He was ready to go home.

Back in his room, his phone rang again. It was Priam telling him that Mark and Josh had headed home. Swanson reminded him he wanted twenty-four hour surveillance on them. Priam started to object again but Swanson hung up. No point in arguing with a lowman, even a clever one like Priam. Besides, Priam was starting to behave as if he were equal to Swanson and needed to be taken down a notch or two.

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### **Los Angeles (The Authority's Regional HQ)**

Romero sat in the waiting room just long enough to establish how far down the totem pole he was. Forty-five minutes said he was a field agent, a pawn, about to meet with someone several steps up the hierarchy. The summons had been a bit of a surprise as most of his contacts with the Authority had been electronic – email, texts, video-conferencing, telephone calls. A face-to-face meeting was rare and usually bad news. Romero had no reason to suspect that this one would be different. It would be bad news.

A lieutenant in fatigues called Romero's name and led him down the hall. He was handed over to another junior officer who knocked on an unmarked door and indicated that Romero should enter. It was a large room but mostly empty. At one end was a desk behind which sat a large man in a suit and tie. Even in civilian attire, one could not mistake the man's military bearing. He was a man used to being in charge. On the desk in front of him was a single sheet of paper. He looked up from it.

"Come in. Come in. Captain Romero. Have a seat."

There was one chair on Romero's side of the desk. He sat in it.

"Sir?"

His host held up his hand for silence and went back to reading the paper on his desk. Romero, having developed the skill of reading upside down early in his career, could see that it was a copy of his report on the early stages of Orion's interrogation.

"Captain Romero, some time ago, you received a communiqué from HQ identifying the top priority with regards to this subject – Orion as he calls himself."

"Yes sir and . . ."

"And you have been interrogating him for four days. I have your latest report here but there is no mention of the location of Orion's jacking devices or the technology that allows him and his cohort to move from body to body."

"No sir but . . ."

"No buts. I called you here to tell you that we need that information and we need it soon."

"It takes time to break down an individual and get him to a state where he'll tell us what we want to know."

"Time, Captain Romero, is what we do not have. And frankly, I do not think you are using your available resources to our best advantage."

"What do you mean, Sir? I don't follow."

"You have Corporal Kreiger listed as lead interrogator. How many prisoners has he interrogated?"

"A few, Sir. He's been with us about three years and has completed all of his training."

"I see. So his experience is limited and yet he is head interrogator when you have at your disposal a man who has interrogated hundreds of prisoners over a long, and I might add, distinguished career with the Authority. I do not even see his name as part of the interrogation team."

"Sir?"

“Commander Patrick Swanson. Why aren’t you using Swanson? He’s had a few minor setbacks recently but haven’t we all. I want Commander Swanson to take over the questioning of this Orion character. We need an experienced hand at the wheel. Kreiger can watch and learn.”

“Bur Sir! I’m not sure Swanson can be trusted. He seems to have his own agenda. Given enough time, Kreiger will get you the information you need.”

“Captain, this is not a democracy. I give you an order and you carry it out. Your opinion is not relevant. If I want to know what you think, I will ask. Did you hear me ask?”

“No sir.”

“Get Swanson up to speed asap. I want him questioning Orion starting tomorrow. Got it?”

“Yes sir!”

“Dismissed.”

Romero’s gut feeling had been right. This face-to-face had brought bad news. Swanson was bad news.

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### **Los Angeles (Kevin Treacher’s Home)**

Treacher had the day off at home but couldn’t seem to break the nightly news habit. He noted that Brennan had been replaced by a male news reader and anchor. No explanation had been offered by CNN as yet. Treacher nodded and sat back to see which story took the lead.

“Good evening and welcome to World Report. The top story comes from the Middle East. Information is sketchy but it appears that ISIS forces have invaded southern Iraq and Kuwait. In a move remarkably similar to that of Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, Isis seems to be focusing on oil rigs and associated facilities, setting them on fire. We go now to Roger Hebert who is on the ground in Basra, one of the cities now under siege. Roger, are you there?”

“Yes, Michael.”

“Can you describe what you are seeing right now?”

“Certainly. As you know, it is nearly dawn here and the sky should be starting to get lighter but the air is filled with thick black smoke. From the roof of the hotel, I can see dozens of fires, dozens of oil wells burning out of control. Below me, there are Iraqi and U.S. troops ready to defend the city of Basra but so far ISIS troops haven’t entered the city itself. Instead, they seem to be concentrating along the coast. I can see several oil tankers burning in the harbor. All night, we heard explosions and now we can see the result. It appears that many huge ships have been sunk, clogging the port.”

“This harbor was one of the largest in this part of the world capable of loading several oil supertankers every day, most of them bound for American markets. Just before talking to you, Michael, I was speaking to Aaron Blumfeld, an oil engineer with Shell Oil. He told me that the vessels sunk in the Basra harbor will effectively close the port to all but the smallest ships.”

“Roger, did Mr. Blumfeld give you an idea how long it might take to get the Basra harbor up and running again once the area is retaken by the Iraqi military?”

“Well, first let me say that all of the reports I am getting are saying that the ISIS forces have already pulled back. The harbor, they tell us, is already back under Iraqi control. However, having said that, Mr. Blumfeld was not optimistic. He’s not sure the harbor can ever be made useful again. At a minimum, he thinks it could take five years or more to get the port partially operational.”

“Thank you, Roger. In the studio, I am joined by Samantha Richards, Chairman of the Omega Group, an energy think tank. Thanks for joining us, Samantha. What are the implications of this attack on the Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil infrastructure?”

“Good to be here, Michael. First, a bit of background. The U.S. produces twenty percent of the oil and gas it needs. It buys forty percent from Canada and Mexico. The remaining forty percent comes from the Middle East with almost all of that supply being funneled through the port of Basra. There are two other ports capable of handling supertankers but neither is connected by pipelines to the main supply. While Basra can fill a supertanker in twelve hours, the other ports could take up to twelve days to fill a single tanker.”

“Can you tell us what this means to the American consumer.”

“Unless alternate sources of oil and gas are found quickly, we can expect shortages fairly quickly. Gas prices will rise to perhaps as much as \$9.00 a gallon. Plus shipping costs for goods will go up accordingly. One could also expect a lot of refineries to run out of product. It may not be possible to buy gasoline at all in certain areas. If the shortages continue, some manufacturing facilities may have to shut down and with winter coming, fuel oil for heating will have to be given a top priority.”

“Thank you for that, Samantha. Well, there you have it. To recap quickly, ISIS forces have attacked and destroyed oil wells, pipelines and port facilities in southern Iraq and Kuwait. Americans can expect gas prices to rise as a result.”

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (Back Streets)**

“Now pay attention boys. This is your last training session. Follow along and learn.” Swanson watched to make sure the other car had no trouble keeping up. He took them down a couple of side streets so they’d believe he was trying to lose any potential tail and that they were good at following him, too good to be fooled by Swanson’s maneuvers. He imagined them basking in their success, the fools.

Today was a big day for another reason. Today he would lead Mark and Josh to the warehouse where Orion was being held. He needed them to have that information. It was crucial to his plan so he parked and waited for them to park as well before he headed into the building.

He used the main entrance and headed straight for the kitchen and the coffee machine. Romero and his team did not want him there. That much was

clear by the glares and the silent treatment but Swanson barely noticed. He sipped his coffee and waited. His cell phone rang once and then went silent.

“Good,” Swanson thought to himself. That was Priam’s signal that Josh and Mark had left their car to check out the building. They’d know Orion was here and, more importantly, Romero would know Josh and Mark knew when he reviewed the tapes from his external cameras. If Swanson was really lucky, the two would start to make plans to bust Orion out but it didn’t really matter if they did or didn’t, they’d be blamed for it anyway. He set his coffee down and turned to Romero.

“Okay. Let’s get to work. The Authority needs what is inside Orion’s head.”

Romero nodded to Kreiger who followed Swanson into the cage. He was smiling. He was an equal opportunity sadist. He enjoyed inflicting pain but he also enjoyed the pain inflicted by others.

\* \* \* \*

### **At Sea (the Mediterranean)**

A few days after a fishing boat overloaded with immigrants from north Africa sank near Italy, yet another trawler, this one carrying an estimated 450 people has gone down off the Greek island of Mykos. Several local fishing vessels as well as two Greek naval ships have been pulling survivors out of the water since before dawn. The Red Cross indicated that roughly 220 survivors have been rescued.

In one news conference, a representative of the Greek Maritime Commission stated that: “The seas were calm and authorities are at a loss to explain why the boat sank. It is unlikely we will ever know why but many of the survivors describe hearing a loud explosion just before the boat capsized and began taking on water.”

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (Orion’s Cage)**

“Looks like Romero’s boy here worked you over pretty good.” Swanson stood over Orion’s cot. Orion jerked awake.

“You!” he squeaked before sagging back onto the bed. Everything hurt including his throat. “I thought you were dead.”

“Your assassin tried but obviously failed. But she did me a favor. I needed to drop off the grid for awhile and she helped me do that. But you know, I forgot to thank her when I saw her in San Francisco. I did return the favor though. I fired her for incompetence on your behalf.”

“You killed her?”

“Yup. Ghosted her just like that phony priest of yours.”

“I should have known.”

Yes, you should have but like all lowmen, you constantly underestimate us real men.”

All the time he was talking, Swanson was laying out and organizing a set of hypodermic needles. Orion watched through bruised and swollen eyelids.

“So you are working for the Authority again. Didn’t they throw you in jail?” Orion could not resist the dig.

“When it suits me. Actually while I was in prison, I learned a great deal. It is amazing what you can do in a society where there are no real civilized rules. You’ll see what I mean in a minute.”

With that, he stuck the first needle into Orion’s neck and depressed the plunger. Orion convulsed and then went still.

“Watch closely, Kreiger. Physical pain works up to a certain point but psychological pain is far more effective when there is information to be gained.” Swanson was enjoying his role as instructor. Kreiger seemed so anxious to learn.

“Or should I say the anticipation of great pain is effective. But you know this already. You draw your arm back to punch your subject and he flinches, anticipating the blow and associated pain. For a brief second, he tries to come up with a way to avoid the pain to come. The greater the anticipation, the more options he is willing to consider to delay or prevent that pain.”

“I’ve injected our boy here with a cocktail of the latest designer drugs. They don’t do anything except heighten the sensitivity of the pain receptors. The effect is similar to the acupuncture needles you told me about earlier – an ingenious method I must admit.”

Kreiger stood a bit taller at the complement and focused all his attention on Swanson. He knew that he was going to learn a great deal.

“And now we wait. The drugs need to saturate his system. He’ll be ready in ten to fifteen minutes. In the meantime, we can, just like him, anticipate the pain.” Swanson smiled as he left the cage to get a cup of coffee. A quick glance at this watch told him he had to stall a bit longer. It was difficult since Kreiger was anxious to get started. Swanson had lied about the drugs. He’d give Orion nothing but a mild sedative to keep him quiet for a while. Priam had better not be late or he’d have some explaining to do to Kreiger and Romero.

His coffee tasted vaguely of garlic. “Good. Priam was here.” He reacted by putting down the coffee and sitting down in the nearest chair. He sat back and took a deep breath. As he faded from consciousness, he noted that the others were on their way out too. Good.

Priam waited a full three minutes before shutting off the gas canister Swanson had given him earlier. He then forced the door open and took a quick look around. His inspection of the building assured him that all of Romero’s team was out cold. Using plastic restraints, he cuffed everyone, just in case one or more of them woke up prematurely.

As he’d been told, Swanson had the key to the cage and Kreiger had the cuff keys. He collected both sets. Freeing Orion, he threw him over his shoulder and took him out to his van before going back into the building to place some clues where Romero and his boys would find them. He drove away singing along with the van’s radio.

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (Outside Orion's Cage)**

It was dark with no lights showing in the warehouse windows but Josh and Mark stood back in the shadows and watched for a few minutes. They knew Orion was being held in there. Josh had seen him through one of the windows earlier in the day. Orion hadn't been alone as there were several others. He hadn't been able to get an accurate count but he figured there was a minimum of four captors. They looked military although they were in civilian clothes. They just moved like military men. They were the reason for the hesitation.

They'd decided to try and get Orion out but hadn't formulated any plan yet. Josh wanted to sneak in right away. Mark argued for a more cautious approach. The debate continued while they stared at the dark building. Mark was considering giving in and doing it Josh's way but the lack of light or activity bothered him.

"I have an idea. Wait here." Mark crossed the street and knocked on the warehouse door. Badge in hand, he waited. He figured if anyone answered, he could claim that there had been some criminal activity in the area. No one responded. He tried the doorknob, amused with himself as he did so. Only in the movies would one expect the door to be unlocked. It was. He stood and stared into the building before motioning Josh forward. Together, they entered the warehouse.

Mark pulled a flashlight from his pocket and quickly scanned the space. The cage was empty. Clearly Orion was gone.

"Shit," Josh mumbled. Mark turned around and in the beam of the flashlight saw Josh standing over a body. "I almost stepped on him. Is he dead?"

Mark checked for a pulse and found a strong one.

"Still alive. Just unconscious."

"What do you think happened?"

"Seems we are too late. Orion is gone. Taken or released, we don't know." As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could make out other bodies.

"We'd better get out of here. If they wake up and catch us, we're toast."

Josh was nervous. He didn't comment. He simply headed for the door with Mark close behind. They moved in silence until they were well away from the building.

"He's been taken." Josh broke the silence.

"What makes you say that?"

"They took his body. If it were an escape or a rescue, they would've simply killed the body so Orion could jack to another body. No. Somebody took him. He's still a prisoner somewhere."

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (Romero's Headquarters)**

Romero was the first to regain consciousness – a function of having been the furthest from the gas canister. His head hurt. His wrists and ankles were

bound. He cursed under his breath. He didn't need to see the empty cage to know that Orion was gone.

"Stupid! Stupid! I should've anticipated something like this. Damn!"

He squirmed around a bit until his hands could reach his calf. There he found that his knife was still in place.

"Cocky bastards. Didn't even bother to check us for weapons."

He slicked through the bindings at his ankles and then his wrists. He rubbed his wrists until the circulation began to return to his extremities. He limped from one to the next of his people, slicing through the plasticuffs as he did. He saw that most of the team, Swanson included, had minor bruises but no real damage to anything except their dignity. However, Vasquez was going to need transport to a hospital. He'd been standing when the gas knocked him out. On his way to the floor, his elbow connected with the edge of a coffee table. Both his radius and ulna were fractured. Romero splinted Vasquez's arm and called an ambulance. He ordered Barker, the next to wake up, to go with Vasquez to the ER and then return asap to help assess the situation.

"Do not wait for him. Make sure he gets into the ER and get right back."

"How did this happen?" Swanson stood by the door to the cell that had held Orion. He was squinting, trying to minimize the pounding in his head, a side effect of having been gassed.

"Looks like someone took a page out of our playbook. Knock out gas under the door. Shit!"

"What now?"

"It's clear. We need to figure out what happened and then recover Orion. Johanson will look at the security tapes. We'll soon know who is responsible for this."

Romero recognized that his men needed a focus, something to do to get their minds off the break-in. He gave Johanson the tapes to look at and even asked Swanson to snoop around to see if the perps had left anything behind. Swanson agreed readily. It was perfect. He was in a position to remove any of the evidence Priam might have left behind and to make sure Romero saw the evidence Priam had planted. All of the arrows were going to be pointing in the right direction, that is, the direction he wanted them to point in.

"You're going to want to see this." Johanson shouted from his room. Both Romero and Swanson joined him.

"Check this out." Johanson pointed to the screen and hit play. A camera mounted above the exterior door showed first one and then another shadowy figure approach and pass under the camera. It was dark and when Romero complained, Johanson played with the brightness and contrast controls.

"Sorry, sir. This is a poor quality setup. The cameras are low grade but they were already here when we moved in so we started using them. Remember, I was going to pick up a couple of hi-res cameras tomorrow."

"Can you enhance the images?"

"I can try but we don't really have the gear here for that." He fiddled a bit but couldn't do anything with the first shadow but the second one lightened considerably.

“Hey!” Swanson sat up straight. “Isn’t that the Adams kid?” He couldn’t resist helping them a bit, adding another arrow.

“Sure looks like him.” Johanson agreed. Romero wasn’t sure.

“The picture is still too dark. Could be him or it could be any one of thousands of guys. We need more. Keep at it, Johanson.”

“Yes sir. Oh sir, just so you know...”

“What is it?”

“The security system had a malfunction about a half hour before this footage. We got nothing but static on all of the cameras except this one from that point on and even this one was not working for maybe fifteen minutes.”

“Any idea what caused it?”

“The system is old. Coulda been just age.”

“Sabotage?”

“Don’t see how sir. To shut the system down like that on purpose, the person would have to be already inside the building.”

“Keep at it. Let me know if you get anything.”

Romero returned to his room. Swanson followed.

“Something on your mind, Swanson?” Romero clearly wanted time alone to think.

“You know, in an odd way, it makes sense it was Adams who took Orion.”

“Oh? How so?” Romero didn’t bother to conceal his sarcasm.

“Well,” Swanson ignored Romero’s tone. “We all know that he and Orion were seen together a number of times. Adams seems to be a sympathizer.”

“Not according to the Authority. We had orders to watch him. I got the impression we were a kind of protection detail more than anything else.”

“Sure, and the Authority always tells you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He was on their watch list. That makes him suspect as far as I’m concerned. Ever seen an innocent man on the watch list?”

“You have a point. But I’m not sure Adams could pull something off like this.”

“You are assuming that inside the Adams body is the mind and essence of Adams. What if you are wrong. You underestimate him. He could be Orion’s right hand man for all we know. Not to mention he has that computer freak helping him.”

“Computer freak?”

“Yeah. You know. Sarah the dead girlfriend turned computer super program. More like a computer virus in my mind. As far as I know, she can access and control any piece of computer hardware connected to the web. That’s probably how your video security system got messed up before the attack.”

Romero was shaking his head.

“Why am I hearing about this just now? How long have you known about this program?”

“A long time – weeks. Are you trying to tell me that the Authority never told you about Sarah, the wicked witch of the web?” Swanson started laughing. “Man, Romero. I have to hand it to you. You’ve been operating with one eye shut and both hands tied behind your back. I’m surprised you’ve lasted this long.”

“Never mind that. I’ve got to get my men working on location Orion and Adams. Then you and I are going to sit down and you are going to tell me everything you know about, what’s its name? Sarah?”

He got Johanson to transmit a BOLO (Be on the Lookout) for both Orion and Adams with a do-not-apprehend memo attached. Soon, every on-duty cop in L.A. would have a photo of Josh. Romero was confident he would surface sooner than later. There were no photos of Orion so they had to settle for a description. Romero wasn’t sure how long that description would apply. Could be old news already.

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (Fire Station #86)**

Kevin was emerging from an all-day seminar on new approaches to emergency care when his phone rang. It was not a number he recognized but he answered it anyway.

“Hello, Mr. Treacher. We met once at the site of a train wreck. Remember?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Good. I am in need of a favor.”

“If you need another orange aura, don’t you usually just send a text?”

“Indeed. That is true but this is a rather ...ah ... delicate matter. Not for public broadcast, if you catch my drift.”

“Okay. What do you need?”

“I can’t tell you a great deal at the moment but I can say that we expect to need a new body, or perhaps more than one, sometime in the next few days. We need you to go to a location where there are always huge crowds and wait for our call. Statistically, there are always one or two people in a big crowd ready to meet their fate. Can you do that for us?”

“I guess so but why me?”

“I assure you that you are not alone. We are making this same request of all of our best people.”

“So if I am hearing you right, you’d like me to go to some place like Disneyland and hang out for a few days.”

“In a word, yes. Disneyland would be perfect.”

“Okay. I have some vacation time. I can book off but you need to give me more of a reason than some vague anticipated need.”

The voice on the phone paused and then sighed.

“Orion has been captured by our enemies. According to our procedures, he will try to escape. The only way he can do that is to kill the body he is in. That will allow him to get away. However, once that body dies, Orion will have only a few minutes to find a new body or ...” The voice on the phone paused.

“Or what?”

“Or we lose him. If he does not transfer right away, he will become a ghost. He’ll be gone.”

“I see. I’ll book off right now and head down to Disneyland early tomorrow. I’ll be there when it opens.”

“Good. I’ll text you what we’ll need you to do. And Mr. Treacher.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you!”

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (Romero’s Headquarters)**

Johanson had been monitoring the police frequencies all night without success for several nights. He was reluctant to tell Romero there had not been any sightings yet again of Orion or Adams. He knew Romero already felt bad enough. To lose one was not good. To lose contact with both was catastrophic. When the report reached the Major’s desk, heads were gonna roll. Romero’s would be the first. Unless. Unless there was something positive to report. Then, maybe then, the team would survive.

As he waited for some activity on the police scanners, he toyed with an idea. Romero had briefed the team about a self-aware mobile computer program they called Sarah. Ever since, he’d been theorizing, brainstorming, trying to guess at the structure of that kind of program. He knew the program had to be massive – maybe as much as a hundred terabytes – too big for any single computer. If that were true, then most of the program would have to be stored in the cloud in an online data storage bank. Only the bare bones operating system could be stored on a laptop, even if Swanson had said Sarah was on a laptop that Adams carried with him.

Johanson considered the implications of this, the most obvious of which would be the need for Sarah on the laptop to be in constant communication with the rest of herself in the cloud. This would require a continuously open connection via the internet. So Sarah’s self-conversation had to be one of the 14 million internet connections in the L.A. area counting computers, ipads, smart phones, and televisions. But her signal would be different. The connections Sarah used would have to be very fast with a huge band width. That would mean an unusual carrier wave was necessary and carrier waves gave off their own special signatures much like the way humans gave off a trail of particles that blood hounds could follow.

In the early morning hours, Johanson wondered: What if he could figure out the signature? What if he could follow it? He made a few phone calls and woke a few people up. He started with the internet company that provided Mark Wheaton’s wifi signal. They gave him access to their digital signals.

“Okay. Maybe ‘gave’ was too strong a word,” Johanson thought to himself. He’d actually forced them to provide the access by threatening an IRS audit. It worked only because everyone feared the IRS more than any other government agency including NSA, FBI, CIA, and Homeland Security.

Johanson loaded a program that searched for carrier wave echoes onto the server Sarah had used while at Wheaton’s place and was immediately rewarded with a single echo that met his criteria. It was like a voiceprint or a fingerprint. It wasn’t Sarah but it could be used to identify her. He could set the electronic

hounds on her trail. He'd gotten things started when Romero came in to check on the police activity.

"Anything?"

"Nothing, sir. Even the usual tip lines are silent but then our guys are probably sleeping somewhere right now. We'll get more hits as the day progresses. I'm sure of it." He lied.

Romero nodded and turned to leave.

"But sir. I think I might have a way to track Adams through this Sarah."

Romero spun back around and motioned Johanson to continue.

"Most people don't realize that when there is a wifi connection, there are two parts to the communication. There is the data package – whatever information is being sent – and the carrier wave – a kind of electronic suitcase that carries the data. The contents changes but the suitcase does not. The suitcase stays the same and each person's computer carrier wave is different from all others. For most, the differences are only slight but this Sarah's wave is distinct. It stands out!"

Johanson went on to explain that he had her carrier wave's signature and had sent out mini-programs to look for it.

"If she is still in the L.A. area, I can find her. When she connects to the web, as she must, my programs will ping her to get a location. It may take a while but we will find her."

"Good work! Write it up for HQ then get some sleep. You may have just saved our butts."

For the first time that day, Romero smiled.

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (Josh's hideout)**

"Orion is missing and people are looking for me. My photo is all over the news." Josh sat and ate even though he wasn't hungry. His stomach was all jittery and every little sound made him jump. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to go out and start looking for Orion but if he left the safe house, someone might recognize him and turn him in for the reward. He snorted. When he was a kid, his parents had taken him to Old Tucson, a wild-west attraction often used as a movie set. As a souvenir, they'd had him dress up in western duds and put the resulting photo on a 'Wanted Dead or Alive' poster. "If they could only see me now!"

As he chewed, he watched the screen on his laptop. Sarah was running some kind of search program and there was a constant stream of data flowing across it, much too fast for him to follow. It was hypnotizing.

With no apparent warning, the rapidly changing patterns stopped. Josh thought maybe the computer had frozen. He reached for the power button.

"A quick reboot will clear it right up." But Sarah stopped him.

"It's okay, Josh. I had to break off the connection."

"Why?"

“Someone just pinged my signal, trying to pinpoint my location. I’ve been afraid that this might happen. They are trying to find you through me.”

“What do we do, Sarah?”

“As far as I can see it, there are three options. Obviously, if I stay offline, they won’t be able to trace my signal.”

“But then it’s like you’re in solitary confinement. You’ll go crazy.”

Sarah laughed.

“You exaggerate slightly. I could handle it for a little while. The second option is for us to separate until the heat dies down. If we aren’t together, they can’t get to you through me.”

“That’s not acceptable! I hate it when we are apart. You said three options?”

“I am reluctant to bring it up. You might find it kinda crazy.”

“Try me.”

“There is a new microchip that some people I know have developed. It’s about the size of a grain of rice but has the computing power of three or four laptops. If I transfer to one of those, I can control my signals in and out. Each would be different and there would be no way to track me, or us, down.”

“Okay! Let’s get one.”

“Let me finish. The way the chip works is that it has to be implanted inside your body, ideally at or near where the skull meets the spinal column. Your body provides the electricity to run the chip and serves as the chip’s eyes and ears. We will share every experience you have. No need for a laptop anymore and no way we can be separated. We’d be together forever. What do you think?”

Josh didn’t like the idea of implanting a device of any kind in his head but Sarah was enthusiastic and would never do anything to hurt him, he thought.

“I don’t know. Sounds dangerous.”

“It isn’t. The chip comes with a small applicator that allows you to implant it yourself. No doctors. No operations.”

“And what if we want to take it out after this is all over?”

“As easy as having stitches taken out. Five minutes and it’s done ... but once we are together, you’ll never want to go back to the old way. Trust me.”

Again, Josh felt she was pushing a bit too hard. It was clear it was something she wanted.

“It’ll take me a few days to get the chip built and shipped to ... maybe Mark’s place. You think about it. Don’t need to decide here and now. In the meantime, I think it’s best if we split up. I need to be online to make the arrangements.”

“Do you have to go?”

“Yes. If I stay, they’ll track my signal and find you. But it isn’t forever. Just a few days.”

“Okay.”

“Good. There’s a Starbucks down the street. Bring the laptop and head there. You don’t need to go inside. Just get close. As soon as I can connect to their wifi, I’ll go. You come back here and lay low. And don’t be sad. We’ll be together again soon and closer than before.”

Disguising himself with an oversized hoodie and adopting a kind of old man shuffle, he did what he was told. When he got back, the laptop was silent. It was just an ordinary computer again.

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (Fire Station #86)**

“Hey Treacher, you missed the news.”

“Yeah. Had work to do.”

“Didn’t miss much, actually. Democrats sniping at Republicans, Republicans sniping at everybody. Same old, same old.”

Teacher was doing his best to ignore his coworker but he seemed equally intent on filling Treacher in on the news of the day.

“The only thing interesting on the news was about that fishing boat that sunk off Sicily the other day.” He paused. Treacher had no choice but to take the hint.

“And...?”

“The Italian Coast Guard think the boat was sunk on purpose; mighta been sabotaged. They say there was an explosion right before she sank. They’re investigating but they think terrorists.”

Treacher was shaking his head.

“They always blame terrorists for this kind of stuff. But if it was terrorists, where’s the press release? Terrorists like to claim responsibility so people get terrified. Anybody done that yet?”

“Naw. At least the news isn’t really telling us if they did.”

“I didn’t think so. Probably some sick bastard wanted to get rid of his wife or whatever and figured the best way was to blow up the boat she was on.”

“Man, that’s cold. Kill hundreds just to eliminate one.”

“I have no idea if it’s true but makes more sense than secret terrorists.”

“I guess. Gotta go. See ya.”

Kevin watched his coworker leave then gathered up his gear and left the building. He’d arranged for his time off and was ready for Disneyland. It’d been easier than he expected. His boss welcomed the opportunity to burn off some of the accumulated vacation time Treacher had on the books and a quick call down to Disney HQ had gotten Kevin an invitation to join the volunteer EMT team that roamed the amusement park helping tourists get over too much sun, too much food, and too much fun. His boss had even let him keep the SUV for the week.

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (Romero’s HQ)**

Johanson watched his computer, willing it to give him another hit. As if in response to his demands, the computer sounded its alarm and a map appeared. Johanson grinned.

“She’s getting careless. That’s the third hit in the past hour.”

Romero leaned forward, examining the map on the screen.

“This puts her up north near Calabasas. What about the other hits?”

“Both were a bit further east in Van Nuys. Looks like she’s heading west but there isn’t much up there.”

“We need to lock her down a bit more. She can continue west to Ventura or Santa Barbara or head south to Malibu or double back into L.A.”

“That’s true, sir. Right now she is on the move but she’s eventually going to have to stop somewhere. Adams is human, needs food, needs sleep. We keep watching and we’ll pin them down.”

“How precise is that map of yours?”

“It’s good but it ain’t perfect. She’s connecting using cell towers and we can triangulate her position from the towers but it’ll only be able to narrow it down to 8 blocks or so.”

“Eight blocks. That’s a big area.”

“Yes and no, sir. We get them bedded down in those eight blocks and we get our butts out there, I got a little toy that’ll sniff her out. We move around in the area and when we hit her signal, this little device will lead us right to her door. Adams will be ours.”

He tapped a black plastic box a bit bigger than a deck of cards. Romero looked at it.

“Doesn’t look like much. You sure it’ll work.”

Yup. She may not be pretty but we get within 100 meters of her signal and this baby will sing.”

“Then I guess we better head up the road so we can be close when they quit moving. Right now, they have a three-hour head start.”

“Right on. I’ll grab my gear.”

\* \* \* \*

### **Anaheim, (Disneyland)**

Treacher had been wrong at least twice about Disneyland. First, he had thought that working with the volunteer EMT squad would keep him from getting bored. Not a chance. All day there seemed to be an endless stream of patients, all apparently unprepared for a day at the happiest place on Earth. He put bandaids on blisters and skinned knees. He handed out bottles of water to cases of dehydration. He put cold compresses on swollen ankles and, through it all, he had to listen to the incessant whining and complaining. It was boring. No. More than that. It was downright annoying. By the end of his first shift, he was ready to administer a beating or two of his own.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get past it. The first day is always the worst.”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Oh yeah. We all reach a point when the bitchin’ gets to us. That’s when we take a break.” Treacher’s coworker, a senior from Ontario, had a big smile on his face.

“I worked for the Ontario County Fire Department for almost forty years. You help people and they’re always grateful, glad you could help them. They keep sayin’ thanks over and over again. Oh, a few bitched and complained but

only a few. My first shift here I heard more bellyachin' than in forty years with the F.D. My first shift was almost my last because of that."

"But you're still here. You found a go-around?"

"Naw, not really. I just kept puttin' one foot in front of the other. No secret. You just do what you gotta do. Tune out the yappin'! Focus on the injuries. Been here six years now."

"I don't think I'll last that long."

They both laughed and went their own ways. Treacher headed down Main Street where the crowds were gathering for the daily parade. When he'd agreed to come here, he had expressed his doubts about being able to locate any bright orange auras. Disneyland was not a place where dying people wanted to spend their last hours. He was wrong on that count too. Inside of two blocks, he'd counted no fewer than six orange auras, people who according to Orion would be dead before the end of the day. Knowing this, his years as an EMT had trained him to run over to these people and to try to save them. He fought that reflex hard. He had to resist. He imagined if he had someone come up to him and tell him he had to get to the hospital right now because he was going to die soon. He would not take it seriously because he felt fine. This guy, even in an EMT uniform, would still be considered crazy, scaring Disneyland patrons with such talk. No. Wouldn't go over well. Besides, Orion had emphasized that for these people, it was their time to die and they should be left alone to die when they are destined to. Treacher found that a bit hard to swallow but standing where he was and looking at all of the orange auras around him, he had to admit that he wouldn't know how to proceed. If he saved the father of two over by the candy store, he wouldn't have time to rescue the mother over by the souvenir shop or the popcorn vender.

He considered for a second that maybe he'd been better off when he didn't know what the auras meant. He didn't really believe that. The knowledge Orion had provided allowed Treacher to relax a bit. That the auras had logical, if odd, explanations convinced him he wasn't crazy. Maybe the other stuff had logical explanations too.

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (House Across from Wheaton's)**

"Ironic, isn't it? That here we are back in the house where our partnership began?" Swanson opened his arms wide as if to gather it all in. Priam was not impressed.

"It is convenient although I remind you that we are across the street from that detective's place, the one you tried to kill and then tried to have arrested. Those plans worked so well, how can this one possibly go wrong?" He challenged Swanson with a look but Swanson was in too good a mood to take the bait. He stared at the house across the street.

"We've got a couple of your thugs watching Wheaton. I'll keep adding new evidence that he and Adams were responsible for Orion's disappearance. It's only a matter of time before Romero arrests them."

Swanson looked away from the window and caught Priam's gaze.

"I've been meaning to ask you. ... Orion is in the basement and soon he'll be telling me all about how he and his men jack from one body to the next. But you, my friend, have jacked repeatedly so I thought instead of torturing Orion to find out how it is done, I could just ask you." He paused. Priam shrugged.

"Ask away but I'm not going to be able to help much. I don't know how it happens. It just does."

"What was in the room that you jacked from?"

"Far as I could tell, it was an ordinary bedroom with a bed, dresser, nightstands, that kinda stuff."

"No machinery? Nothing like that?"

"Nope. If I was jacking from my own body and wanted it to come back to, I just lay down on the bed. When I was relaxed and ready to go, Orion would hand me his smart phone. On the phone was a photo of the body I was jacking into. I'd look at the picture and bang, I'm in the new body and good to go."

"Tell me about the smart phone."

"Looked like a regular smart phone, not high end or nothing, nothing special."

"Ok. To get back, you obviously didn't take the phone with you. How does the return trip work?"

"Easy. Kill the body you are in and zap, you are lying back in your old body. That's it."

"Anything else? Anything strike you as strange, out of the ordinary?"

Priam thought for a moment and then nodded.

"Yeah. At HQ, Orion had all kinds of high tech stuff including superfast computers. All tactical info and commands went out on Instant Messenger or via email. Secure, fast, hard to trace. But before anyone jacked, he'd be texting on that phone. That's so old school. Nobody texts anymore."

"Interesting. And you say he has the photo of the target body on that phone as well?"

"Yes."

"Well, I guess I'm going to have to talk to Orion about that phone of his."

Swanson headed for the basement and was pleased to see that Orion was awake.

"Good morning, Sunshine. We have a busy day ahead of us."

"What happened? Where am I?" Orion was still trying to shake off the affects of the tranquilizer and the gas.

"Let's just say I decided we needed to chat somewhere without The Authority's lackeys listening in. It's just you and me now."

With practiced movements. Swanson laid out a set of syringes filled with various liquids. He made sure Orion could see what he was doing, using the anticipation. He kept up a running commentary.

"I've spent a lot of time perfecting my little cocktails here. Each one will take you to a place you've never been before and when you come back, you'll wish you never have to go there ever again. Soon, you'll be telling me stuff I haven't asked for yet just to avoid the next trip."

He glanced at Orion who seemed to notice for the first time that he was strapped into a dentist's chair. He saw Orion shudder involuntarily. He laughed.

"It affects everyone that way. They see the dentist's chair and automatically associate it with pain. A nice psychological touch don't you think?"

Orion ignored him and scanned the room.

"I see you are already looking for a way out. There will be no suicide escapes from here. When you leave here, both body and soul will go together. Either both will be alive or both will be dead. No jacking allowed."

He attached a metal bracelet to Orion's wrist with a flourish.

"We don't know how jacking from one body to another actually works ... yet." He emphasized the 'yet.'

"But the Authority has figured out how to interfere with the process. This little gizmo will insure that if you suicide or you die while I'm torturing you, the avatar dies and you become a ghost, floating away into the ether.

Swanson picked up the first hypodermic needle and plunged it into Orion's arm. He sat, facing his subject, watching the eyes.

"Yes. Yes. Almost there. Okay. We're up. Let's keep it simple. I ask a question. You answer. The truth gets you a pass. A lie gets you a little tap from my silver hammer." He barely touched Orion's knee with the tool. Orion went rigid and white. He screamed uncontrollably.

"The drug messes with your nerve endings. Hit one and it fires. That signals every other nerve ending to fire as well. The brain is overwhelmed by waves of pain seemingly from all parts of the body." Swanson said this mostly for his own benefit. He was quite proud of this particular chemical but Orion was much too busy writhing in pain to process words. Swanson waited and watched. When Orion settled down a bit, he continued.

"Now, we are going to spend some time establishing a baseline so I am going to start by asking questions to which I already have answers. Ready?"

Orion just stared, his hands firmly gripping the arms of the chair he was in.

"You started killing people by arranging violent attacks on civilians. True?"

"Yes," Orion rasped.

"Is it true you actually charged people for the privilege of killing fellow humans?"

Orion nodded, his eyes focused on the small hammer in Swanson's hand.

"Good. Over the past two years, how many spree killings were you responsible for?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe sixty or seventy. None in the past few months."

"See. You are already answering questions I haven't asked yet. Why stop?"

"We were forced to scale back. Law enforcement was catching on to our tactics. The Law of Diminishing Returns kicked in."

"I see. The cost kept going up while the body count went down. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, what have you been up to? You are not one to sit idle. What did you replace the spree killings with?"

"One of my men jacked into the captain of a Syrian submarine and he's been cruising the Mediterranean looking for targets."

"I assume he found them."

"Oh yes. The refugee crisis fit into our plans perfectly. Almost daily, boats overloaded with hundreds of refugees try to make the trip from north Africa and the Middle East to Europe. My captain has been spoiling their plans. He says torpedoing those ships is just like being in a video game."

Swanson nodded.

"Diabolical, my friend. Absolutely diabolical. I love it. You were also behind the ebola epidemic."

"And you were partly responsible for shutting that little project down." Orion looked at Swanson who nodded and shrugged.

"It was too easy. But that was just part of your plan for the Middle East and Africa. Tell me about that."

Orion hesitated. He appeared reluctant so Swanson merely raised the hammer slightly. Orion shrank back.

"It helped that the extremists are half crazy to start with. I'd have preferred to have used Christian extremists but they are pretty good at hiding and seem to have a pretty strong independent streak. The Muslim extremists like to get together in large numbers and egg each other on. You have the Taliban in Afghanistan and ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Those guys are nuts and it doesn't take much to get them to act out. We have several of our people jacked into their leadership. They keep the rhetoric flowing."

"And ...?"

"Well, as far as technology goes, they are pretty much in the stone age. We had to help them stand up and be noticed."

"You ... you set off the a-bomb in New York City."

"And made sure ISIS got the credit but, of course, ISIS had no knowledge of or involvement in the terrorist attack on New York. So ISIS immediately sees that the Great Satan is using the bomb as an excuse to destroy ISIS."

Swanson was shaking with laughter. He could barely speak.

"You killed tens of thousands of people so that the U.S. government would notice a ragtag bunch of religious extremists thousands of miles away?"

"Yes. Lots of people died but a lot more are going to be killed once war breaks out again in the Middle East. Much more effective than human hunts or suicide bombs."

"You have been busy and I have to say that you have accomplished a great deal more than I gave you credit for. I salute your audacity." He stood.

"I think we've had enough for today. The drug should wear off soon. We'll start again tomorrow morning and Orion, be prepared to tell me everything. Otherwise ..."

Swanson slammed the hammer against Orion's hand and watched, smiling, as Orion screamed again and again.

\* \* \* \*

### **Calabasas, California (Romero's Mobile Command)**

The operation was well underway. Johanson had isolated Sarah's communication signal and triangulated it which was why Romero and his team were heading northwest out of Los Angeles. According to Johanson, the signal was emanating from the coastal city of Malibu. Romero considered that a tactical blunder on the Sarah program's part. There were only two ways in and out of that resort town since it was sandwiched between the mountains and the Pacific Ocean. But that wasn't all. The shoulder of the road served as the utility corridor so cutting the power to Malibu was as simple as shutting down two transformers, one at each end of the town along the coastal highway. And even better, the internet signals in Malibu were all transmitted through one single cell tower and the mountains prevented any signal from reaching a secondary tower. Shut the one tower down and she would be trapped, isolated from her master program.

That was what they intended to do. With no electricity to recharge batteries to whatever device the Sarah occupied, it would try to communicate with its counterpart in the cloud to try and find a solution – either a way to gain access to electrical power or to determine an escape route out of the affected area. Her signal would act just like a beacon for the device Johanson had built.

Romero glanced at this watch. Estimated time of arrival in Malibu less than half an hour. He could feel the adrenaline begin to flow in anticipation of the upcoming search. Johanson tapped him on the shoulder.

"Sir, HQ calling. A Major Steubing. Wants to speak to you. Urgent."

Romero nodded and pointed to a parking lot. Kreiger, the driver, pulled over and shut the vehicle down. They all knew from experience that using a phone or radio in the hummer on the go was nearly impossible. Too much noise. Romero put on a pair of headphones and adjusted them before nodding to Johanson who made the connection. The rest of the crew vacated the hummer, giving Romero privacy.

"Sir?"

"Romero?"

"Yes sir."

"I've been reading your Class 64/B report. Am I to understand you are able to track the signal emitted by Sarah?"

"Yes sir. We have the signal isolated in Malibu. We'll have the precise location of Sarah within the next few hours."

"I was afraid of that. I am ordering you and your men to stand down, son."

"But sir, if we find Sarah, we reconnect with Adams. I was under the impression HQ wanted that."

"Yes, we do want to locate Joshua Adams but I have very specific orders here. Sarah is not to be tracked, traced, or interfered with in any way. Is that understood?"

"Sir ..."

"Is that understood? Turn around and get back to L.A. Cease and desist in your search for Sarah. Leave her alone. Find another way to locate Adams. Understood?"

"Yes sir. But may I ask why?"

“You may ask, son, but I’m afraid I can’t give you an answer. At this point in time, you do not need to know.” With that, the connection was severed and Romero sat listening to a dead line. He took three deep breaths and turned to wards his men. As they approached, he sighed.

“You are not going to believe this!”

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles – Wheaton’s Place**

Josh kept his head down with his hoodie pulled tight across his face, hoping that no one would recognize him before he could get back to his hidey-hole. It was stupid to venture outside but he had no choice. He was stupid to listen to Sarah but here he was, risking capture to pick up a package that contains an implantable chip he wasn’t sure he wanted to use. He’d waited until just before dawn to make the trip, hoping the darkness would hide him from prying eyes but as he walked along the deserted streets, he realized that being the only person out that late at night made him conspicuous.

“Shit,” he mumbled. “Shoulda waited till there were more people out and about. Blend into the crowd. Nah. Why don’t I go wander about in empty streets, stick out like a sore thumb.”

He kept muttering to himself as he walked. He berated himself for his stupidity and railed against Sarah for pushing him to do this. Finally, he admitted that he missed her and would do almost anything to get her back, including hooking himself up to the chip he was on his way to collect. Her absence created a hole in his life, a hole he needed filled.

He paused at the end of the block and scanned the houses looking for signs of life. There were none. All of the windows, including Wheaton’s, were dark. He launched himself down the block and set a brisk pace. He figured he could reach the house, grab the package, and be on his way in under a minute. As he neared Wheaton’s house, he could see the bright yellow DHL envelope poking out of the mailbox on the veranda. He focused on it to the exclusion of everything else.

Had he been less focused and looked away at that moment, he would have noticed the sudden movement on the porch across the street. But he didn’t. The person who had been sitting in a chair on the porch sleepily watching Wheaton’s house had jerked awake and stood bolt upright in surprise. He almost yelled out but managed to stifle it. He wanted to dash into the house and share the news that Josh had showed up. Unfortunately for him, as he processed that thought, Josh had grabbed the envelope and was heading back the way he had come. The watcher had no choice but to follow.

He was seriously concerned that Priam would be furious when he discovered that he had left his post. Nothing could be done about that. He’d call as soon as he could but for now, he concentrated on keeping Josh in sight while staying in the shadows, invisible to his quarry.

\* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (House Across From Wheaton's)**

Orion was awake. He felt like every muscle in his body had been pushed too hard but his mind was sharp. He knew that if Swanson repeated the chemical torture, he would tell the man everything, absolutely everything, without a doubt. He had to find some way to avoid that because he had a secret that Swanson and the Authority could not find out about. The bracelet they relied upon to prevent prisoners from jacking out didn't really work. That was the secret. Orion knew that the first few people the Authority tried the bracelet on ghosted when they tried to jack away but Orion's people also knew that that had occurred only because the people wearing them were distracted, not properly focused on their target bodies. Distraction equaled death or ghosting, some would argue a fate worse than death. If a person could ignore the presence of the bracelet, he or she could easily escape into a new body.

The Authority relied on the bracelets and was not as careful as a result. They provided suicidal opportunities thinking that the person would remain a prisoner rather than risk ghosting. So far, several of Orion's people had made it back successfully all the while the Authority thought them dead. If the bracelet's ineffectiveness was discovered, opportunities to escape would become rare. Orion needed to find a way to keep that secret.

"Maybe," He thought. "Maybe if I told him all I know first and skip over the bracelet, I can get Swanson to move to new topics during the torture session." He silently hoped he had the strength to do it. "It's worth a try."

One of Priam's thugs came in and dropped a tray with a bottle of water and some dry toast on it. He didn't bother looking at Orion. He just dumped the tray onto the small table and left. Orion guzzled the water and ignored the food. He needed to hydrate before Swanson arrived.

He wasn't kept waiting long. Swanson and a couple of thugs arrived like an invading army. Both of the underlings carried cattle prods at the ready and gestured with them for Orion to climb into the chair. Trying to appear submissive, he didn't offer a fight. He didn't even struggle as they strapped him down.

"Something has changed. Have you lost your fighting spirit?" Swanson was grinning.

"No but I recognize that you have the upper hand for now. I do not enjoy being tortured and would like to avoid it if I can."

"What's the fun in that? I was so looking forward to working on you today. Are you saying that you will answer all of my questions?"

"Yes."

"Okay. We can try it your way for a bit." Swanson pulled up a stool and faced Orion. "Tell me about jacking. How is it done? What equipment do you need? Everything."

For the next hour, Orion did just that. He told Swanson that jacking was a simple procedure and that anyone could do in – no machines or special equipment needed. If you were jacking out of the body you'd been given at birth, you could jack out simply by picturing the intended target body and then mentally stepping in that body's direction. Of course, the only way to get back to your

original body was to have the body you jacked into die. As it died, you relaxed and floated home. If your target body died, you could choose to go into a second target body by focusing on that body rather than relaxing back into your own. He pointed out that the only limit on what target body you could jack into had to do with the length of time the target body had left on Earth. The closer a target body was to death, the easier it was to jack into. Orion's people had discovered that generally it was only possible to jack into a target body if its STD (Scheduled Time of Death) was imminent.

Swanson questioned him about the Authority's interest in it. Orion responded that the Authority saw it as a cost cutting measure. Currently it spent tens of thousands of dollars each time it sent an individual from the Home World to Earth on a space shuttle and an equal amount to send him home at the end of his tour of duty. If they could be transported simply by thinking about it, the savings would be enormous.

Swanson nodded. He knew a massive bureaucracy like the Authority would think in those terms.

"But I was led to believe that there were other reasons for wanting to know about jacking."

"True, Swanson. Think about it. The Authority doesn't want anyone to have something that the Authority itself does not have or control. They want to suppress it. To control it. And when and if they find out how simple it is to do and how anyone and everyone can do it, they are going to move to stamp it out. Anyone who has ever jacked or who even knows about it will be eliminated – both here and on the Home World. You, me, everyone we know will be hunted down and killed."

"You are probably right but no matter ... One last question: We have no photos of you in your original Earth body, the one you arrived here in. Where is your assigned body?"

"I was wondering if you would ask me that. It doesn't exist any more. It's gone. History."

"How so?"

"Ten years ago, I discovered that it was possible to jack out of my body and enter another. I was young and foolish. I jacked without making sure my body was looked after. It was hidden in a cave but I stayed away too long. Scavengers found me and that was that."

Swanson stood and stretched.

"You know, you've given me some very interesting food for thought here but I have to tell you that you, being the devious SOB you are, are only telling me what you have to, to convince me that you are telling me everything. You are leaving stuff out and I think that stuff is much more interesting."

"No! I've given you everything."

"That may very well be the case but I have to be sure. You understand?" It wasn't really a question but it was enough to start Orion struggling against his restraints. Swanson found Orion's futile attempts to be moderately amusing. He whistled while he laid out his syringes and watched his underlings bring in a large tub of water that they placed behind the chair Orion was strapped into. They

handed Swanson some towels and a jug for scooping water and some other items necessary for a proper water-boarding. Using the dentist chair's foot pedal, Swanson lowered Orion backwards until his head was just breaking the surface of the water in the tub. As Orion struggled, he injected him with the pain amplifier drug and began asking questions all over again. When he didn't like the answer or even just felt like it, he covered Orion's face with a towel and poured water over it. Orion felt like he was drowning but Swanson would remove the towel at just the right moment to prevent that. Orion could not believe it but the pain was worse than the day before. He hadn't thought that possible. He told Swanson everything again and was beginning to think if he told Swanson the secret, the torture would stop.

Sometime around midday, Priam called out to Swanson who left the room briefly. Orion enjoyed the break which seemed to last forever but was actually less than an hour. By the time Swanson returned, Orion could feel the effects of the drug weakening but he was cold. The ice water he'd had poured over him added to the coolness of the basement room where he was being held chilled his core. Swanson saw him shiver. He reached over and covered Orion with a coarse blanket.

"Can't have my information source catching cold. My drugs aren't as effective when the subject is stuffed up and congested. Imagine that?"

He moved the stool so he could sit and look into Orion's eyes.

"I think we have chatted enough about jacking. Not that it isn't interesting ... but I have a more interesting subject to discuss – that little shit, Joshua Adams. For a university student, he has certainly gotten involved with all kinds of things he shouldn't have. One day, he's attending astronomy classes, the next he is helping the FBI and ATF stop terrorism. Then, can you believe it, we find him deep in conversation with the world's most wanted terrorist – that's you by the way."

"So who is Joshua Adams, really? Where did he come from? Why is he here? Why is the Authority babysitting him when it would be far easier just to eliminate him? For that matter, that question applies to you too? Why not just kill him and be done with it?"

"Why all of these questions now? Weren't you part of the detail that looked after Josh?"

"I was and I wasn't. I took over supervision of about thirty babysitters a few months ago. Ross was his sitter. I was mostly hands-off."

"Didn't you wonder why the Authority was so interested in him then?"

"Nah. I figured he was just like the rest of the babysat – sons and daughters of rich folks who wanted their children protected while serving out their sentences. Privileged little shits on the home world, privileged little shits here too." Swanson paced a bit. "Okay, I'll admit I might've been a bit more curious back then but I am now. I have been ever since the Authority sent a military team as replacement babysitters. Romero told me they were going to put him in protective custody. That's a new one on me. So what do you know about him?"

"I'll tell you but allow me one last question first."

Swanson was feeling generous. He gestured to Orion to go ahead.

“What about Sarah. I understand she was being looked after too. She was killed on your watch but you kept your job. The Authority does not take kindly to failure.”

“True but I’m made of Teflon. Nothing sticks to me. Ross was going to be replaced but she was still useful to me. I found the guys who ran her down. They claimed they’d been ordered by the Authority to kill either Cunningham or Adams. The killers were eliminated by the Authority.”

“You had her killed. You ordered the hit on Sarah claiming you’d had orders from above.”

“It’s nice to have my work appreciated.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why kill her if you thought she was just some spoiled rich kid doing time for being stupid?”

“Why not? Actually I had a reason. I had developed a character simulation program that could imitate anyone. I figured that the computer program could take over the role of babysitter if we could find the right subject to test it on. The Authority was not willing to let me test it. They were wary but when Sarah died, we had the character to simulate and the perfect subject to test it on – Adams.”

“So what went wrong?”

“Ross, the bitch, screwed it up. She tried to kill the Sarah program thinking it was the real Sarah. Stupid woman. After that, the program went into self-preservation mode and has locked us out. It’s acting all on its own.”

Swanson threw a book across the room and the resulting crash brought one of the underlings rushing in, gun at the ready, and out again just as quickly having ascertained that all was well in the room. He was clearly afraid of his boss. Swanson took two deep breaths and sat back down facing Orion.

“We can do this the easy way – two guys having a chat and sharing info – or we could do it the hard way.” He gestured towards his array of syringes. Orion indicated he’d opt for the easy way.

“I’ve been curious about Josh ever since he came to my attention, when he started messing with my operations. I reached out to some friends in the Authority bureaucracy for information. There was precious little info out there. It turns out that the Timaeus Bureau is the one who ordered the watch on both Josh and Sarah. Needless to say, her death put the Timaeus Bureau into a frenzy of overtime. They’ve been searching for her ever since she was killed. That may be another reason they wanted to learn about jacking. They are thinking, no, hoping she was unable to jack into a new body when she dies. Narrows their search parameters”

Swanson started laughing.

“So when they find out that anyone can jack, they are stuck with a ‘maybe she did or maybe she didn’t’ conclusion. If jacking had required a lot of machinery, they’d be happier because the answer would be that she didn’t jack and they could concentrate their search among the ghosts. Am I right?”

“Most likely. I think so.”

“Losers,” Swanson muttered. “And they’ve seriously upped the protection detail on Adams. Was that the Timaeus Bureau again?”

“That’s what my informants tell me. They seem to believe that Sarah and Josh were two parts of the Creator’s soul with dangerously close STDs. You know what happens if they die at the same time and then reunite?”

“Yeah! Yeah! I’ve heard the old wives’ tales. Should the Creator ever reunite its three parts, there will be revolution, upheaval, destruction and chaos – all those words to keep a gullible citizenry in line. But it can’t happen. One died earlier and is lost in the ghost world. I should get a medal for saving the world then.” He chuckled to himself. “So, just to be sure, the Authority believes that Adams is one of the souls of the Creator.”

“Yes.”

“Do you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve not been able to access his file. I’ve only got my informants’ word for all this and even they can’t get to the files kept inside the Timaeus Bureau. If I had to guess, I’d say Josh is not part of the Creator. He’s just a guy who attracted the wrong kind of attention.”

Swanson raised his voice and looked toward the ceiling.

“Did you catch this, my friend?”

A speaker in the wall rattled before allowing the voice to be heard.

“Yes, I got it. What’s the plan?”

“As long as the Authority believes he’s the one, he is an extremely valuable commodity. Have your men pick him up as soon as possible. He could be our ticket out of here.”

“Got it. I’ll get right on it.” The speaker went silent. Swanson hovered over Orion.

“Last night, one of Priam’s guys spotted Adams approaching Wheaton’s house and in a surprising show of initiative, started following him. We’re going to take him. The Authority will pay dearly to get him back, don’t you think?”

Before Orion could answer, Swanson stepped on the chair’s pedal and the chair leaned backwards again. This time, it continued downwards until Orion’s head and face were completely submerged in the tub of water. As he drowned, Swanson said: “I don’t need you any more. Enjoy your trip to the ghost world. If you see Sarah there, say hi for me.”

He laughed as Orion’s body convulsed and then came to rest.

Two of his hired hands rushed in and started to untie Orion’s body.

“Leave him. Leave it all. We are moving to the new location out near the airport. Leave the body. Bring the chair.” He was whistling as he bounded up the stairs and out the door.

\* \* \* \*

### **Washington DC (the White House)**

“Gentlemen. Gentlemen! We are here to deal with an enemy. We are not here to fight amongst ourselves.” President Monroe paced behind his desk and looked at his advisors and the Joint Chiefs one at a time. Each, in turn, looked

away and fell silent. Satisfied he had their attention, he picked up where he'd left off.

"ISIS detonated an atomic bomb in New York City. If it had been placed two hundred miles further south, we'd all be dead now. Be that as it may, thousands of Americans – civilians – died and more will die from the effects of that blast. We have to come up with a response to that terrorist attack on our city and on our country. The Joint Chiefs have proposed we send an expeditionary force back into Iraq and Syria to root out those terrorists."

"And we saw how well that worked the first two times we tried that." The Senior National Security Advisor grumbled.

"Easy Winston. I asked for all possible scenarios and an invasion is one. Personally I agree with you. We cannot afford another long drawn-out conflict in the Middle East. We are still paying for the last one." The President paused to check his notes. "We need something that is quick and decisive. Something the American people will see as appropriate and just."

"So, our goal is really to satisfy our citizens' desire for revenge?" Homeland Security Director, Douglas Gibbons, was being sarcastic but the others in the room were nodding their heads. They were serious. Senator Davies, Republican House Leader, leaned forward and patted Gibbons' knee.

"Damn straight, Doug. It's an election year and if we don't do something or appear to do something in response that is acceptable to our constituents, the President and all of his supporters in Congress and in the Senate will be voted out for being cowardly or ineffective or whatever. We need to act now. Every day that goes by without our response, the polls have our party losing one percent of our voters. If we sit on our hands for a month, the Ku Klux Klan will have a better chance of winning the next election than we will."

"It's not just Americans who are concerned here." Monroe interjected. He knew Davies would go on and on unless his thoughts were somehow derailed. "Governments world-wide are watching. If we overreact, we will become the world's bully. If we underreact, we'll be seen as weak and our enemies will attack us. Homeland Security analysts warn us that either way, there will be a significant increase in terrorist attacks on Americans here and abroad. We must walk the line."

The Homeland Security's head nodded. "How about an eye for an eye?"

"What do you mean?" Davies asked. The President signaled Gibbons to continue. He knew what was coming. The others didn't.

"Well. ISIS hit one of our cities with a nuclear bomb, roughly the size of the one that hit Hiroshima in 1945. ISIS is currently headquartered in the city of Mosul. We drop a fat boy on that city, we wipe out their leadership and we have our proportional response."

"Are you nuts?" Admiral Richardson was on his feet. "Nuke an Iraqi city!?"

"No. Not an Iraqi city, an ISIS city."

"You ARE nuts!" The Admiral was livid. "This is unthinkable! The civilian casualties! What about the civilians?"

"ISIS or ISIL or Daesh or whatever the hell they call themselves didn't think about civilians. Indeed, they targeted them." Gibbons pointed out.

“And that is justification for us stooping to their level. We are not terrorists. We are Americans.”

The President stepped in. Speaking directly to the Admiral, he emphasized:

“Brian, we are looking at every possible scenario, including this one. It is just as toxic as a military invasion. The American people and the world would never forgive us if we nuked a city in the Middle East. Ironically, both Israel and Saudi Arabia have stated they would see it as an act of war.”

“You asked them?” The National Security Advisor seemed surprised.

“Hypothetically. Only hypothetically. We had our ambassadors approach senior officials in several nations for their opinions. None of them would be pleased if we dropped the bomb in their neighborhood.”

“Screw them. We are the world’s only superpower. We can do whatever the hell we want.” Gibbons pushed.

“That’s true but as President and Commander-in-Chief, I deem a nuclear strike to be off the table. Too many negative side effects. Too much political fallout”

“So what does that leave us with?” Senator Davies wanted to know. The President gestured to General Sanchez who had been silent up to this point.

“Our intelligence has produced a list of ten names of the men we believe responsible for the planning and preparation for the attack on New York. We have developed a strike strategy using the new attack drones. We simultaneously hit all of the men on that list. Ten drones, ten targets. There will be very little collateral damage. We’ve used these drones quite effectively in the past.”

Monroe turned to his Chief of Staff.

“Greg?”

“Yes, Mr. President. Our research suggests that if we take out those responsible, the American people will accept it and the world will applaud our restraint.”

“Any questions?” The President surveyed the room. Each group had championed their own approach but now was the time to act together. He could see they were willing to go along.

“No sir.”

“No, Mr. President”

It took a few minutes to wrap it all up and put finishing touches on the plan but finally they filed out of the oval office to return to their respective offices and begin preparations for the attack. The President wanted a launch as soon as possible, within days rather than weeks.

The office was quiet as the President poured drinks for himself and his Chief of Staff.

“Thank you sir. The Authority will be pleased with the minimal casualties. That bomb in New York put a serious strain on the shield. No telling what a second device would do to it.”

“Yes. We did well – for now. Orion and his damn rebels are really screwing things up.”

“True. But I’m told they are close to shutting him down.”

“I hope so. I really hope so.” The President swiveled his chair around so he could see the lawn and the gardens. He needed a break.

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### **Anaheim (Disneyland)**

The children were seated along the curb waiting for the parade to start. Just off the town square, Treacher leaned against his SUV monitoring the crowd. He had come to consider this time of day as the lull before the storm. Inevitably, there would be a rush on the first aid station right after the parade. Sunburns, scraped knees, upset stomachs, all the result of too much fun at the happiest place on Earth.

He also noticed that there were at least four adults with dark orange halos, plus a couple of children but he ignored them. They weren't acceptable candidates for jacking. The closest adult who was reaching the end of his life on Earth was a young man, late twenties to early thirties, who appeared to be in excellent health. Kevin thought of him as a surfer dude type. He was a perfect target candidate especially since the crowd of other surfer dudes who had arrived with him seemed to have abandoned him. He was alone and had set himself a bit apart from the crowd.

As Treacher stared at the young man, a jolt shuddered his entire body and took his breath away. He went rigid for a second and then it was gone. He saw the target body jerk and stumble. Treacher reacted. In seconds, he was at the dude's side, holding him up.

“Get me out of here.” The dude whispered.

Together they walked to the SUV and Treacher helped the other into the passenger seat before driving down a service road to the outer parking lot.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. It's been a rough couple of days but I'll make it.”

“Orion?”

“Right again. Have you got a phone I can use?”

“Sure. Here.” He passed over his iphone and Orion dialed. He told whoever picked up that he was free. He also recited the address of the warehouse that Josh was hiding out in and ordered a protection detail to be dispatched to that location immediately. He paused and listened.

“How long? ... An hour ... Are you crazy? Shit.” He hung up.

“Uh, Orion?” Treacher started tentatively. “That address isn't far from here as the crow flies. We can be there in about twenty minutes.”

Orion looked at Treacher and then nodded.

“Okay. Let's go. Maybe we can prevent a kidnapping.”

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