

Los Angeles (Josh's apartment)

"Josh, wake up. Wake up!"

"I'm up. I'm up! What's up?" Josh was groggy and disoriented. It was dark out and a quick glance at his alarm clock told him it was a few minutes after three. He'd only been asleep about four hours and wasn't ready to get up yet.

"What is it, Sarah?"

"I need to call Detective Wheaton right now and we agreed that we'd discuss anything like this first."

"Can't it wait till morning?" He started to lay back down.

"No. I just cracked another echo website and they are planning a big raid. I mean a big raid! Could be as many as twenty attackers. It's hard to tell. I was lurking in their chatroom and it reads like a Council of War."

"It's crazy, Josh. It looks like they are planning to attack the FBI offices. It's not a robbery or anything like that. It's a plain old frontal assault. They're talking in terms like that – frontal assault, diversionary tactics, blitzes. I don't understand half of what they're saying. It's all military jargon."

"Wow! Sounds wild. But what's the rush. We call him at his office in the morning?"

"No! He gave us his home number for emergencies and I think this qualifies. The raid is set for the day after tomorrow. They need to be warned as soon as possible."

"Let's call the FBI then."

"No. They won't believe us. Detective Wheaton will and he can warn them."

"Yeah. I get it. Guess we had better call him."

Sarah was already dialing her internal modem. She rerouted the signal so Josh could hear both sides of the conversation. He was willing to let Sarah deal with the detective. The truth be told, he was still a little afraid of the cop.

"Wheaton here." He answered the phone as if he were fully awake and ready for anything. Sarah told the detective everything she could about the raid. He asked several questions. Then there was a pause.

"Maybe I should take a look at this website myself. Can you send me the address like you did last time?"

"I can do better than that." She remotely triggered the detective's home computer and pushed the URL onto his browser. In less than a minute, he was following the conversation in the chatroom. The whole thing was there for him to see. A small army was going to blitz attack the FBI offices.

"Okay Sarah, I'm going to contact the FBI and see what we can do to stop this thing. We have the advantage. We know they are coming." He paused.

"Sarah, how did you hack into my computer so fast?"

"That was easy. Your firewalls are weak and anyone with basic computer programming skills can walk into your computer anytime they want. It doesn't even need to be turned on."

"Damn, I was afraid of that. When this is over, I'm going to have to beef up the security on my computer."

"I can do that for you right now if you like."

"Okay but I have to call the FBI. Talk to you later."

He hung up. Sarah was quiet. Josh just sat there. He was tired, drained. He was not cut out for this cloak and dagger stuff.

“What now, Sarah?”

“Nothing, my Sweet. I’m going to fix the detective’s computer and keep an eye of the echo website. You should go back to bed. You have class in the morning.”

They said their goodnights and Josh layed down again. It took him a while to get back to sleep.

* * * *

Unspecified Location

“Got ‘em. There were unauthorized visitors from two different locations. We have them both.” Orion’s assistant was pleased. So was Orion.

“Good. Keep the chatter going on that website another twenty-four hours then shut it down. It’ll keep them distracted long enough. Set up another comm link for the real operation. Make sure the firewalls are fully secure. We don’t want anyone stumbling onto it.”

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Los Angeles (FBI and ATF Buildings)

They worked around the clock to fortify the FBI offices. Advance notice and having the element of surprise drove them to a frantic pace. Defensible entrances were reinforced. Doors that couldn’t be defended were sealed shut with steel plates. Glass windows and panels on the ground floor were replaced by bullet proof plastic. Hundreds of sandbags were delivered and used to build firing positions in the main lobby. Tactical teams were positioned in the stairwells and at key corridor junctions. Snipers were placed on the roof and in buildings across the street from their building. All this was done while maintaining a business as usual façade so as not to tip off the enemy.

In all, there were sixty police – FBI, ATF, and LAPD – ready to defend the building but most of the occupants of that building, being FBI agents, were also armed. They could be called upon if needed so the defenders had another four hundred potential warriors available at a moments notice.

Several high ranking FBI supervisors and the Deputy Chief of the LAPD surveyed the result of their preparations and decided that should anyone attack with a small force, they could easily be repelled and defeated. Lower ranking officers, Wheaton included, had doubts but kept them to themselves. They felt that the focus on defense rather than offense weakened them, The senior officers were being reactive rather than proactive here, as usual. The agents waited, fingers crossed.

Tension mounted in the ranks as the alleged deadline approached and passed. The waiting put everyone on edge. Every little sound made them jump. A phone would ring and a dozen weapons would sweep towards the sound and triggers would be squeezed a little. Two hours after the deadline, orders to stand

down came through channels. Agents and officers breathed sighs of relief and holstered their weapons. Snipers dismantled their rifles and heavy gun emplacements were racked and locked. Many speculated that the enemy had gotten wind of the defense preparations and decided to back down. For a few minutes, there was quiet. It was a good quiet but it didn't last. Radio chatter ramped up and phones started ringing.

Across town, two UPS delivery vans pulled up to the front doors of an ordinary looking low-rise office building. Fifteen men stepped out of the vehicles and approached the structure. Each carried a heavy athletic bag and all were smiling. One whistled a lively song. Two of them hurried inside and with silenced weapons took out everyone sitting at the reception/security desk before they even had time to react.

"Lobby secure" was heard in their earbuds and the others quickened their pace. There wasn't any talking. No need for it. They knew what to do and set about doing it. One team set explosives in key locations in the lobby. Other teams stood by in the lobby keeping watch and waiting for orders. The leader checked his timepiece and nodded. He spoke into his microphone: "Teams One and Four. Go."

Six men broke away and headed for the stairs. They took them two at a time, in a hurry to get this party started. The leader watched them go and was pleased. He counted to thirty and then keyed his mic.

"Teams Two and Three, move into position. Teams One and Four, engage!"

Two and Three placed themselves at either side of the main exit doors to create an overlapping field of fire. The leader and his team left the building and formed up along the sidewalk facing away from the structure. Team One, now on the top floor landing, threw open the door and entered what was essentially a cube farm, dozens of cubicles with low cloth-covered barriers separating the individual workstations. They spread out and started firing into and through the cubicles. As anticipated, the majority of the people who until a few seconds ago had been at work panicked and either tried to hide or ran for the other stairs or the elevator. Team One ignored those who were running and concentrated on those who chose to hide. A few armed agents tried to return fire but had no organization or coordination. They and all the other people who stayed on the floor were dispatched in minutes. Meanwhile, Team Four, on the floor below, executed the same tactic with the same degree of success.

Those people fleeing from the second and third floors hit the ground floor and converged in the lobby where they were immediately cut down in the crossfire. None escaped. In less than five minutes, the ATF office building was filled with the dead or dying.

The leader ordered his teams to reconvene in the lobby and to prepare for extraction. He and his teammates strolled back into the building. There was no hurry. The enemy had been vanquished and the cavalry had not yet arrived. He complimented his men on a job well done and then nodded to his second-in-command who held the remote detonator. He in turn ordered the men to form ranks. As one, they marched into a narrow hall adjacent to the elevators just off the lobby.

“Company halt. At ease.” With practiced precision, the squad followed the orders. They stood tall and proud and maintained that posture as the Second triggered the remote. The subsequent explosion blew out windows for blocks around. It also reduced the ATF office building to rubble.

Emergency responders arrived within minutes but were delayed by the devastation. Rubble and body parts covered the street. They wanted to get inside to search for survivors as they were trained to do. However, first they had to clear a safe passage for themselves and the bomb squad who had to check for secondary devices before allowing Search and Rescue to enter what was left of the building.

It was dark before the search teams were allowed to get to work. Their first priority was to search for and extricate if possible anyone left alive. They had to check every corpse for life signs. It was not a pleasant task but it had to be done. After well over seventy corpses so checked, they almost missed the faint pulse at the wrist sticking out of what had been the elevator shaft. The rest of the body was buried under several large chunks of reinforced concrete. One piece of rebar had been driven through the victim’s left bicep, pinning her arm to the floor.

With one team of EMTs working to remove the concrete rubble and another team concentrating on her medical condition, they were able to have her on a gurney and out to a waiting ambulance in minutes. She was alive but barely. She’d lost a lot of blood. As the ambulance screamed toward the nearest hospital, an EMT gave the waiting medical trauma team an update by radio. He noted that there were two GSWs (gun shot wounds), one in the chest and another in the thigh. Ironically, it was the leg wound that should have killed her. The bullet had torn her femoral artery and each heartbeat pushed more blood out of her body. The EMT speculated the reason she survived so far was because she fell into the elevator shaft when the building was destroyed by the blast. She was under several large pieces of concrete, one of which acted as a compress, slowing the flow of blood out of her femoral artery.

He was asked if she had any I.D. on her and he had to admit that they had been too busy to check. He saw that she was wearing an identification card on a lanyard around her neck. He wiped the blood off it as best he could and then read her name over the radio.

“Barber. Joanna Barber.”

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Los Angeles (Apartment in the Projects)

Kevin Treacher was on his knees attending to a young man who had attempted suicide by slashing his wrists while his partner leaned against the doorjam. There was blood everywhere but the attempt had been feeble, a call for attention rather than a real attempt to die. As Kevin applied the dressing and got the boy ready for transport, his patient continued to whine about the idea that no one loved him – he’d recently been dumped by his girlfriend – and he had no reason to live.

“Oh for Christ sake, quit your whining. Your mama called 911, didn’t she? If she didn’t love you, she’d’a let you die.” John, Kevin’s partner for the shift, was a cynic and a burn-out. He’d only been on the job two years or so but had the look of a veteran who’d seen too much. He had demonstrated before how low his tolerance for suicides was. Over drinks after work, he’d waxed eloquent on that subject.

“We are here to help people who are dying and who don’t want to die. Every time we waste time with pukers who want to die but can’t do it right, those who don’t want to die don’t get help fast enough. I say let ‘em die if they want.”

Kevin had tried to argue with him, saying that everyone has a time to die and if a suicide attempt fails, then it wasn’t that person’s time. John, like a true bigot, turned a deaf ear and continued to denigrate those in enough mental pain to want to die.

Kevin shot his partner a look that told him to be quiet and turned back to his patient.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Luis.”

“Okay, Luis. You are going to be okay but we are going to take you to the hospital just to be sure. Just relax and let us do our jobs. I see you’re wearing a cross. You Catholic.”

“Yeah.” Luis stared at the floor.

“Then you realize that suicide is a mortal sin?”

“Yeah, but I deserve to go to Hell. My Carolina is gone cause a how I treated her.”

Treacher pretended to work on the bandage as he stared at the boy. He could see a bright red aura surrounding him. After 15 years on the job, he knew what that meant. The young man who had wanted to die today would get his wish within a week without any effort on his part.

“Maybe you need to change a bit and try to treat her better. Maybe she’ll come back to you.” Treacher didn’t really think that would happen but he wanted to find a way to divert the patient’s attention away from suicidal thoughts, at least for a week. “What do you think?”

“Do ya think she’ll come back, really?”

“Maybe. Why not try for a week or so, see how it goes.”

“Yeah. Thanks, man.”

After they dropped Luis off at the local emergency room for stitches and a formal psych assessment – a requirement for all suicide attempts – they drove back to their homebase. On the way, John vented a bit.

“Why’d you interrupt me when I was putting that a-hole in his place. You had no right.”

“I had every right. You were upsetting the patient. His heart rate was going up and he was ready to try to kill himself all over again. I didn’t want to have to go back to his place again if he slashes up a second time. I was trying to get him out of suicide mode and you were putting him right back in it.”

“So what. Waste of skin, that kid.”

“Okay. Let me put it this way. I have seniority. I’ve been on the job for going on 16 years. You got two in, almost. That means that I am in charge of this bus and we do things my way. You don’t like that, get the supervisor to give you a new partner. My way or the highway.”

“Maybe I’ll do just that. I am sick of riding around with a touchy-feely do-gooder. It’s like working with my mother’s priest all the time.”

“Suit yourself.”

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Los Angeles (Josh’s Apartment)

The phone rang just as Josh came through the door with a takeout bag of Chinese food. Sarah, sensing his presence, refrained from answering it. She left it for him to do.

“Hello.”

“Hey Josh. Mark Wheaton here. Have you been watching the news?”

“Nah, Detective. I was in class then over at the library most of the day. What’s up?”

“Um . . . Is Sarah on the line with you?”

She answered for him.

“Yes. You sound stressed, Detective. Did the thing at the FBI go okay?”

“Yes and no. We got the FBI building fortified and ready to withstand a major assault but they hit the ATF building instead. It was a massacre. They slaughtered everyone then blew the building up. There would have been more casualties but we had a fair number of ATF agents helping us over at the FBI.”

He took a deep breath. Sarah could hear his anger through the phone lines. She let him continue without interruption even though she had lots of questions.

“It was a disaster! I was over at the ATF scene a while ago. It doesn’t look like LA down there. It looks more like Beirut. These guys are starting to piss me off!”

“That’s horrible, Detective. I was so sure the FBI building was the target. How could I have been so wrong?” Sarah was letting information from news reports flow through her as she spoke.

“You weren’t wrong, Sarah. We were set up. Somehow they knew we were getting into their websites and they set us up – a phony website with phony chatter about a decoy operation. We were played.”

“I think you’re right. I just checked and the site is inactive. Nothing for the past six hours. It’s been abandoned. I was so stupid. I assumed it was real . . . never even considered it might be fake.”

“Oh, Sarah, how could you know?” Josh wanted to reassure her. He hated it when she was upset. Wheaton spoke up too.

“It wasn’t your fault. I saw the same thing you did and came to the same conclusion as well. It was their fault.” He practically spat out the last sentence. “When we catch them, they are going to pay. Listen. I have to go. I just wanted to make sure you are up to speed.”

“Thanks for keeping us in the loop – isn’t that how you say it? Now that we know they are aware of us, I’ll have to be more careful.”

The detective hung up. Josh and Sarah were quiet for a few seconds. Josh was the first to break the silence.

“They are horrible people. You have to help catch those bastards. They are doing such awful things.”

“We’ll catch them, my love – you and I together.”

* * * *

Washington, DC

The Assistant Director of Homeland Security sat beside representatives of the CIA and the FBI. They were watching CNN with what would have seemed to an outsider as unusual focus and attention. They hung on every word as the newscaster read his piece.

“According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Ebola Disease initially appeared to respond to the vaccine. However, the disease now seems resistant to it. The President of the United States has declared a state of emergency in four states but sources close to the President say we can expect to hear about more states of emergency in at least three more states by morning.”

“The Ebola epidemic is no longer under control and the number of those affected is climbing rapidly. There are an estimated 65,000 or so infected in the U.S. In Africa, accurate information is no longer available but medical staff with Doctors Without Borders estimate that in West Africa, the area hardest hit so far, a third of the population is now suffering from the disease.”

“Here at home, researchers are baffled. They are working around the clock to determine why the vaccine, so promising in clinical trials, failed to perform as expected in the field.”

The Deputy Director shut off the television and turned to his guests.

“It appears that the media have accepted our explanations and so the public will too. We have dodged the bullet on this one. If the public knew the truth, there would be panic, riots, looting.”

The CIA representative interrupted.

“You called us here to watch the news and then hint that you lied to the press. What the hell is going on here?”

“That’s a fair question, Chuck. Bear with me. I’ll get to it. A few weeks back, some researchers from Johns Hopkins came to us with suspicions that the Ebola outbreak was not a natural phenomenon. They suspected that the Ebola had been weaponized and the epidemic, for all intents and purposes, was a terrorist attack.”

He held up his hand to forestall questions.

“Let me finish. Working with Johns Hopkins and the CDC, we developed a vaccine – THE vaccine – which by the way was effective in stopping Ebola. We made the vaccine available world-wide but we took it one step further. We made the molecular structure and chemical composition of the vaccine available to all of the major hospitals and research institutions as well. We figured that this would

allow other countries to start making their own vaccines and therefore get control of the disease instead of having to rely on us.”

“Within days, we started seeing vaccine resistant strains in the States and in West Africa. Samples of those strains showed clear signs they’d been tampered with, engineered to resist the vaccine. They didn’t take the time to eliminate the evidence of their genetic tampering. Gentlemen, the Ebola epidemic IS a terrorist attack and we must combine forces to find the source and put these terrorists down. We must do this without alerting the media or the public. Are we agreed?”

There were lots of questions. Some the AD could answer but many he could not. In the end they agreed on the common goals and spent some time developing a strategy.

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Los Angeles (Josh’s apartment)

When Josh got back from class, there was a cardboard box sitting on the floor outside his apartment door. It had a UPS delivery sticker on it addressed to him. He picked it up and brought it inside. Setting it on the table, he called out.

“Sarah, do you know what this is? I wasn’t expecting anything.”

“Oh good. It came. Open it up, Josh. It’s a birthday present for you.”

“My birthday’s not for another month.” He protested.

“Oh, Silly. Open it. It’s an early birthday present then.”

He cut the tape on the flap and opened the box. He gasped when he recognized the Apple logo on the inner box. Sarah didn’t wait for him to get past all of the packaging.

“It’s the latest Apple ProBook 5000. Dual processors, one terabyte flash drive plus I had it loaded with all the software you could ever use. Do you like it? Do you?” It was obvious she was excited.

“Wow, Babe. This is too much. I love it. But why?”

“I was kinda feeling guilty using your computer all the time. Now we both have our own computer space.” She giggled. She was thrilled that he was pleased. “I had them throw in a few accessories. There’s a case so you can take the laptop to class if you want. There’s a DVD Superdrive for watching movies or making music CDs. I think there is also a network cable so when you want we can connect both computers and move data back and forth offline.”

Josh rubbed his hand across the laptop’s silver case the way one would pet a cat.

“This must have cost a fortune. How did you . . . ?”

“I ordered it online obviously and I used my PayPal account. I’ve been doing some freelance code writing for a couple of software companies. They pay very well. So, I had the money and I wanted to do something nice for you.

“I love it. Thank you. Sweetie, you know I love you.”

“I know and I love you too.” Sarah was feeling a bit shy and changed the subject. “How was your day?”

“The usual. Professor Ross is pushing everybody on the dark matter stuff but the dolts can’t see past the final grade. Every second question is ‘will this be on the exam?’” He used a whiney Valley Girl accent. Sarah laughed. She responded in the same voice.

“Like I need a C minus to like keep my parents like off my back, you know. What can I do – other than like working – to like get a C in this class.”

They were both laughing. Josh felt good because Sarah had seemed depressed since the FBI/ATF screw up. It was good to hear her laugh so he didn’t tell her that for most of the day, he’d been feeling kind of creeped out. He’d had a really strong feeling that he was being watched or followed. He’d turned around and changed directions a number of times on the way home. He didn’t see anyone suspicious. He guessed maybe he was just being paranoid but the creepy feeling stuck with him.

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Los Angeles (Task Force Office and Hospital)

Becker had been working with the other FBI agents dismantling the fortifications when he got word of the attack on the ATF building. He monitored all of the communications from the emergency teams from that point on. He really wanted to jump in his car and head over to the site of the disaster but he settled for listening in instead. He knew the rescue teams worked better if people stayed out of their way. He stayed out of their way. He wanted them to do their best.

It had been a tremendous relief to hear her name announced when they identified the one and only survivor of the attack. He’d grown to like Joanna Barber and had considered asking her out but they hadn’t gotten there yet. A couple of working lunches had been all they’d managed so far. He’d spent the morning at the hospital waiting for news about her. He finally could bring himself to leave when they rolled her into the ICU recovery room and gave him a cautiously optimistic prognosis.

“She’ll make it but she’ll be in rehab for a long time – maybe six months or more. Her right arm and right leg were pretty badly damaged.”

Feeling better, he headed home to shower and change. He was back at work just before noon. No one cared that he was late. Most of his crew had worked closely with their ATF counterparts, most of whom were now dead. The FBI agents were in a state of shock or angry. They were trying to cope with the loss of friends and coworkers. It would take some time.

Becker watched his people for a while. He tried to work but lacked motivation. He was tired. His head ached. He put his head down on his desk intending to rest a few minutes. As he did, a stabbing pain shot through his brain. Before he could even flinch, the pain was gone and so was he.

“What a rush!” Priam straightened up and stretched the avatar that until a few seconds ago had been occupied by SAC Frank Becker. Taking someone’s body was always a thrill but this was incredible. It was like jacking into your worst enemy.

“So this is the famous FBI? Doesn’t look so dangerous.” He thought: “I could really tear this place up right now.” He really wanted to but his orders were specific. He only had one target and he had to get to her before she woke up. Apparently she’d figured out a key piece of the puzzle just before the raid. She hadn’t had time to write it down or communicate it to anyone outside her office. It was Priam’s job to make sure that never happened. He was in a good mood. The previous Becker had already established a presence at the hospital. The new Becker could just waltz in anytime.

One of his team entered his office to ask a question but Priam cut him off. “Later. I’m going back to the hospital.”

The staff member understood. He’d watched Becker and Barber’s relationship develop. He knew they’d grown close. He nodded and left.

Priam, not sure of the hospital’s location, took a cab. On the way he contemplated method and timing. He smiled. It didn’t matter how he did it. However he chose to kill her, both task forces hunting him and his kind would be in total disarray. The investigation would flounder and die. Priam whistled under his breath.

Barber looked tiny and harmless in her hospital bed. She had IVs and monitors surrounding her. The blankets covered her bandages but Priam knew she’d been badly injured. She hadn’t died in the assault. Priam liked to think she’d saved herself for him. He sat beside her and watched the activity in the ICU. He rested one hand on her bed. Much to his surprise, Barber reached over and took his hand. Her eyes were open. Priam smiled.

They remained like that for several minutes until Priam could see the staff converge on a room down the hall. Ceiling speakers called a code blue and asked for a crash cart. When he was sure most of the ICU staff were occupied with the cardiac arrest, he leaned across Barber and switched off her monitor so the main desk nurse could no longer see her vital signs on her screen. This done, Priam pressed a pillow across Barber’s face and pushed down hard. She struggled for a bit then lay still. He checked for a pulse. Finding none, he smiled and left the ICU.

He knew that soon staff would discover her body. Either they would decide she didn’t survive her surgery or that she’d been murdered by an FBI agent and a good friend. Either way it didn’t matter. The ATF team that had been investigating them was now destroyed. Its FBI counterpart was about to have a major setback as the boss was about to die or disappear. Priam thought it would be a nice touch if Becker simply disappeared without a trace, forever. That would leave a lot of questions unanswered and the FBI investigation would come to an end. He strolled to his car and drove off. Nothing of Becker was ever found.

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New Orleans (Church of the Angels)

Reverend Billy Marshall arrived at this church in a chauffeured limousine as he always did. He could have let himself become accustomed to the finer things but knew that he’d have to give it all up. The trappings were necessary to wow

his audience. Nobody liked or trusted a poor preacher especially in New Orleans. A wealthy one was seen as being in favor with God and believers flocked to him.

“Flocked to him.” He laughed at his own pun. In just a few weeks, he’d seen his congregation grow from a small handful to several hundred. His church was small with seating for about two hundred and fifty. He was preaching three times every Sunday to a packed house and held services week day evenings to accommodate those needing more than that Sunday dose of religion. It was tiring but he had kept at it and it had paid off. It was almost time to close up shop and move on.

Preparations were well under way for his big finale. He’d pulled out all the stops and rented a large hall for next Sunday. The owner had assured him it could hold a thousand. He wanted a standing room only crowd and it looked like he might get it. He’d also booked a small jazz band to help establish the mood. He’d learned from his last go round and so from the beginning, he had gotten this congregation used to sharing a communion drink of wine or water near the end of each service so getting them all to drink together next week was going to be a piece of cake.

Today during each service, he was going to announce a special service next week when all congregations would come together to share something special. He would mention that they were going to hear a big announcement. He would hint that maybe it had something to do with a new home for their church. He would push the celebratory aspect of next week’s special service. Given the gullibility of his flock, he would also suggest that they should all invite their friends and family to this event expecting that they probably would. He smiled to himself. It was so easy to manipulate these people. They were like lambs to the slaughter.

Reverend Billy had already prepared the wine for next week and it was stored in his safe. Between the second and third services today, he planned to meet with his volunteer helpers – church members who wanted to do more than sit in the pews. He would get them to coordinate the efficient delivery of the poisoned wine at the special service. He had reduced the dosage of the wine slightly so that if someone drank before the liquid was delivered to all, he or she wouldn’t die right away and spoil the surprise.

“Can’t have people dying prematurely.” He laughed again.

The first service for this week was going to begin in about an hour. As was his routine, he’d locked himself in his office, asking his assistants to give him some alone time to pray and make any last minute changes to his sermon. He really just wanted a drink and a smoke in private before performing for the masses. He grinned. He was just full of bad puns today.

He sat at his desk and stared out the window at the trees swaying in the breeze. He could hear birds chirping, dogs barking, the hum of the cars on the freeway. He decided it was too nice a day for him to be sitting in his stuffy office. He told an assistant he’d be back in time for the service and headed for the park. Behind him, a tall man in a suit a bit too snug around the waist strolled along keeping some distance between him and the Reverend. The man had been to a number of services and so was a familiar face. No one thought twice about him. He fit in.

From the church to the park two blocks south of the church, Reverend Billy walked without ever looking back. He was focused on his goal, the park, without considering even for a second that someone might be following him. Either he was too naïve to think of that possibility or he was too arrogant to believe someone would dare follow him. Either way, he was an easy mark to follow and his tail had no trouble keeping tabs on him.

Reverend Billy found a quiet spot near a pond and sat on a park bench. He leaned back with his hands behind his head enjoying the warmth of the sun. He was also thinking about finally going home next week. He wanted to be by himself for a while. He'd try to get some time off although he knew Orion would want him out here gathering more souls to free.

He was aware of the man in the ill-fitting suit as he sat down on the other end of the bench. He resented the intrusion and decided to stay quiet and avoid eye contact. He understood that was how you avoided getting involved in conversations with this kind. He sat in uneasy silence for several minutes while he looked at anything and everything except his bench mate. It didn't work. The man did not go away.

"Lovely day, isn't it?" The man turned towards the Reverend as if to challenge him to continue being rude. Reverend Billy gave up. He was not going to get his private quiet time.

"Indeed it is, sir." He turned towards the other and got his first look at the other man. Billy leapt to his feet and turned to leave. The other's words stopped him.

"We've got all of the escape routes blocked, Edmund. You can't escape. Might as well sit back down and relax." Edmund complied but did not relax.

"How did you find me, Swanson?"

"It was easy. Ever since Brother Daniel murdered his congregation, we've been keeping an eye on fundamental cults with charismatic leaders. We put informants in every one including yours. We knew you couldn't resist trying it again. You were arrogant and predictable. We just waited for you to show yourself."

Edmund shrugged: "What now?"

"Up to you. You can help us capture Orion or . . ."

Swanson stopped. Edmund was already shaking his head.

"I take it you want what's behind door number 2." He saw Edmund's confused look. For a second he considered explaining about the television game show where contestants got to choose doors and win what was behind the door they picked. He decided not to bother. Instead, he listed the offences Edmund had committed including the Brother Daniel mass murder and the Bakersfield School massacre. It was his way of letting Edmund know he was finished. Edmund wasn't really listening. He was trying to figure a way to escape. He stalled for time.

"Swanson, you are supposed to have died in a house explosion. Portia shot you and then blew your house up. How'd you escape?"

"The next time you send an assassin to kill somebody, give them all of the information. She didn't know I wasn't one of them. She tried to kill me thinking I

was an avatar. She did shoot me but the kind of bullet she used could kill an avatar but couldn't hurt me. I waited until she left than I got up and headed out the back door. It was easier hunting you when you thought I was dead."

"Too bad she failed."

"And now it appears that you've failed too. Do you know what they do to mass murderers here in Louisiana? Of course you don't. Your kind never bother to find out about the people here – too far beneath you to matter. I'll tell you. They kill mass murderers here."

Edmund was grinning: "So kill me."

"No. I don't think so. I kill the avatar and you jack out only to come back later. Not happening. I have a better idea."

He withdrew a small silvery device from his pocket and clamped it to Edmund's wrist. Edmund jumped as if he'd been stabbed.

"Oh yes. The administration has decreed that you be given several life sentences as a non-corporeal being – aware of what is going on around you but unable to interact with or interfere with the corporeal world around you. Edmund, you have been ghosted."

Swanson walked quickly away from the park. Edmund sat, staring at the countdown timer at his wrist. For the last ten seconds, he tried to tear the device off but it wouldn't budge. It hit zero and sent a jolt of electricity through his body. The avatar's heart stopped and instead of jacking home, Edmund floated above the body for a moment and then drifted off like a balloon in a breeze. He screamed but made no sound. He saw everything and everyone but no one saw him. He screamed again and again.

When Reverend Billy Marshall did not show up for the ten o'clock service, his assistants raced in all directions looking for him. When they did find him, he was slumped over on the park bench. Cardiac arrest the doctors said. His congregation was devastated.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Josh's Apartment)

Sarah filled her free time with her crusade to shut down the dark net. In the beginning, she had been optimistic but the sheer volume of illicit and criminal websites weighted her down. She'd had dozens of sites shut down and was proud of that accomplishment. However, literally thousands of new ones had popped up on the dark web since she'd started her campaign. She calculated that in order to reduce, actually reduce, the number of dark web sites, she'd need to deactivate about one hundred and twenty sites every day. The authorities, so she'd been told in no uncertain terms, could handle ten or twelve cases at a time and the investigation into each criminal website could take between six and nine months. In other words, her initial report to the FBI cybersquad had contained ninety illicit sites and the necessary investigations of just those sites would keep the cybercrime staff busy for optimistically four years. Given that the average lifetime of the criminal sites was under two months, she was wasting her time trying to get the justice system involved in her campaign.

She had talked this over with Josh who hated the dark net even more than she did. His reaction was naïve and predictable.

“Shut them down. I know we are supposed to have the right to free speech and all that but it doesn’t apply to this filth as far as I’m concerned. The websites are harmful and hateful. Shut them down!”

They worked out a set of criteria for sites they wanted destroyed. It was not easy given the web – and hence the dark web – was a worldwide phenomenon. As a result, terms like ‘illegal’ and ‘criminal’ were useless since countries passed laws and some things that were illegal in one country were perfectly legal in another. Instead, they opted for terms like harmful, hateful, and exploitative. They decided that any site calling for or providing the means to hurt people did not deserve to stay online.

With Josh’s help, Sarah had developed a small program, a virtual robot, that travelled the web and scanned all kinds of sites. The program’s protocols required it to report suspect sites to Sarah and request a decision. If Sarah gave a no answer, the robot moved on to the next site in the queue. If Sarah said yes, the robot would bombard the site with ebombs, junk emails, chat bombs and more until the website was overwhelmed and the host server suspended it. ‘Denial of Service’ hacks such as these were the easiest and most efficient ways to render a site useless.

Sarah had released two of the i-bots, as she called them, to test how well they worked. So far, they were performing better than expected. They were not restricted to URLs with short domain names (under one hundred characters). They had no limits and in three days, each i-bot had surveyed and tagged at least one illicit site every hour. So far, Sarah had disagreed with only one i-bot recommendation and gave it a no. All of the others were shut down within minutes of a yes decision.

Not wanting to be overwhelmed like the authorities, Sarah wanted to automate a dozen i-bots, eliminating the need for them to report and request a decision. If her robot vigilantes continued targeting sites the way they had been so far, she could send them and their brothers out on their own within a week.

Josh had pointed out a problem with fully automated i-bots and although Sarah had not thought of it, it now seemed obvious. Alone and free to act on its own, an i-bot could develop a problem that altered its programming and it could begin hacking innocent sites instead of the originally intended criminal sites. It was Josh who also came up with the solution – so simple and elegant. Sarah was proud of him and liked doing things with him. He had suggested a subroutine in the programming that had the i-bot periodically review its own programming and match it to a copy of the original programming being held on Sarah’s computer. If it detected any difference between the two sets of code, the i-bot was instructed to report to Sarah for reprogramming or destruction. The beauty of this was two-fold: First, if an i-bot was deviating from its original task, it could be repaired before it did too much damage and second, if Sarah and Josh wanted to shut them down for any reason, they could change the code on Sarah’s computer and the i-bots, detecting a difference, would all come home.

Had it not been for Josh, Sarah would have already automated the i-bots and she would not have been asked to look at and decide on an .echo site that an i-bot had tracked down. Since the ATF debacle, Sarah spent very little time with echo sites – she couldn't trust their content anymore – but here was one requiring her attention.

At first glance, it was an ordinary website with a heading and a photo at the top and an ENTER button that required a password. She sent her password finding program to the site and it began to backtrack the history of the activity on the site. It could do so since that kind of metadata is usually not password protected. The program worked backwards until it found a signin page with the password entered. Then it was a simple cut-and-paste to the password field and she was in.

She recognized it as the kind of chatroom site that they had used before and the discussion, neatly saved to an accessible archive, involved another blitz-type attack on the LAPD downtown headquarters this time. It covered timing, weaponry, size of raiding party and basic strategy. There were blueprints of the building, engineering drawings of the substructure and photos of the key areas. The package was amazingly complete. The planning sessions, also in the archives, were thoroughly convincing. As far as Sarah could tell, the LAPD headquarters was going to be attacked by a force of about fifty men four days from now. A countdown clock, thoughtfully placed on the chat page, provided the exact time for the assault to begin. Sarah read it all and didn't believe a word of it. She didn't know why but she was convinced the whole thing was bogus – another decoy.

Josh was at the library but he had his laptop with him so she sent him a quick email. She wanted his advice. What if she was wrong and the LAPD was attacked. That would be horrible. She waited for a reply. It wasn't a long wait. He replied right away.

"Hey Babe, I'm knee deep in String Theory. Great stuff. I see the quandary you are in but relax. Trust your instincts. I do! Love ya."

Seconds later, her Messages icon bounced on her Mac. Someone had sent her a message. Thinking it was Josh, she keyed open the program. To her surprise, the sender was anonymous but that was something one could not do on Messages. The sender had to be identified and this one wasn't so before reading the message, she started a search for the source of the message. She then took a look at what had been sent.

"Sarah, Josh is right. Trust your instincts."

Figuring the sender was still on line, she replied: "Who are you?"

"A friend. Just a friend. If I were you, I'd go back to that website and dig deeper."

"What?!"

The sender was gone and her tracker came back empty. The message had originated from a place that didn't exist.

"Impossible!" Sarah reinitiated the tracking program. It came back but this time it identified the location of the server as being on the other side of the moon.

“Shit.” She cursed and immediately started rewriting the tracker’s code. Obviously it had gone screwy. At the same time she went back to the website to start over. She brought up the signin page and stared at it. Not much too it. An innocuous header, a pretty photo of a field of wildflowers and the ENTER button with its password field. That’s all there was. She brought the password finder back online and was about to rerun it when she paused. She remembered an article she’d read about passwords. Basically the piece argued that for every additional digit or character in a password, the length of time it took even the fastest password finding program went up exponentially. Some quick figuring in her mind told her that her program should have taken at least two and a half hours to find the code. It had accomplished its task in less than three minutes. That was a statistical anomaly that needed to be explained. It was a one in ten trillion probability that her program hit on the correct sequence so quickly. On a hunch, she typed her name into the password field and hit the ENTER button. It let her in. She repeated the exercise with Josh’s full name, the license plate number of her father’s old Buick, and a whole bunch of other nonsense. In each case it let her in. Only one conclusion was possible. The website asked for a password but didn’t actually require one. As long as you put something in the password field, you were in. So, all of the stuff that had been “hidden” behind the password protected signin page was a ruse, a decoy.

If there was real information on the website, it had to be on the signin page, hidden in the text of the header or in the picture – probably the picture. Otherwise why was it there? For decoration? She downloaded the picture into a firewalled partition on her hard drive. She was being cautious in case it was an ebomb. It wasn’t. It appeared to be an ordinary photo of a field of flowers. However, Sarah knew the practice of hiding data of all kinds in objects such as pictures had been around long enough to have acquired a name – steganography.

She set to work. She manipulated the photo in a number of ways and slowly a coded message emerged. Apparently every 125th pixel was part of the code and the color of each of those pixels probably represented an alphanumeric character. Sarah had seen this kind of code before and began looking for patterns within the code. She saw one color repeated three times consecutively at the beginning of the code and another color repeated ten times in a row near the end followed by five colored pixels.

“Could it really be that simple?” Sarah smiled. It looks like it is a URL, a website address, beginning with ‘www’ and ending with a password separated from the rest of the characters. She figured the separator was a sequence of periods since they were the same color as the fourth character in the coded message immediately following the ‘www’ and, if that were true, there should also be a period near the end of the website address followed by a sequence of between three and seventeen letters. In addition, the color representing the period, in this case black, would not appear anywhere else in the message. That seemed to be the case. The color black only appeared after the www and near the end of the URL. It separated the URL from a 4 letter suffix. Again, her gut told her what to do. She assumed those last four characters were echo. She had the

beginning and end of the URL and started looking for more patterns trying to determine the rest of the message.

“Let’s approach this logically,” was said out loud and then she laughed. She was starting to pick up Josh’s habit of announcing what he was going to do before doing it. As a first step, she determined that there were exactly twenty-seven different colors. The period was black. She knew, or assumed she knew, the colors for five of the letters and she further assumed that the code had to be fairly simple so that the users of the site would not have any trouble cracking it. So, if true, the twenty-six colors plus black meant that all of the letters of the alphabet were used in the URL but no numbers or special characters were used. Otherwise, the code would be unbreakable. She went back to the picture – a field of wild flowers – and looked for some clue or key. Nothing showed itself in the flowers but then she saw a rainbow in the sky – beautiful in itself but rendered nearly invisible by the brightly colored flowers below it. She arranged the colors from the code so they matched the sequence of colors in a rainbow. The letters she had – E-C-H-O-W – fit neatly into the sequence so she started assigned letters to colors. That gave her a website address with 172 letters in it not counting the echo suffix and a five letter password ‘Orion.’ She plugged the URL into her browser and this time it took her to a blank page with only a password field on it. She typed in ‘Orion’ and she was let in.

Inside the website was a detailed plan for an attack on an army base near San Francisco. The goal was to capture the armory and obtain loads of weapons including RPGs (rocket propelled grenades), ground to air missiles, land mines and other assorted weapons of destruction. The plan included tactics, schedules, personnel, the works.

Sarah took screen shots of every part of it before moving off the site. Just to be safe, she erased her browser’s history and deleted all of the cookies in her cache just in case the website used cookies to track its users. She didn’t realize that she was behaving like a paranoid criminal and that behavior validated her visit to the site. A sniffer subroutine built into the website identified her as a legitimate user since she behaved like one so no alarms went off and no red flags were raised.

She debated with herself then did what she knew she had to do. She sent the information from the website to Wheaton by email then called him at his office. He answered almost immediately and they traded pleasantries. She was reluctant to get to the point so she stalled as long as she could. Wheaton put a stop to her social bobbing and weaving.

“Is the stuff in your email legit?”

That simple question released the flood gates and she told him everything. Almost everything. She left out the part about her conversation with anonymous on Messages.

“So, you are convinced this is the real thing.”

“Absolutely. They wanted me to find the plans to hit the LAPD. They definitely did not want me to find the other set of plans.”

“Good enough for me. I’ll talk to the military and Homeland Security. The raiders won’t even make it through the front gate. Thanks for the heads-up.”

Unspecified Location

“Damn it!” Orion was furious. He crumpled and threw the message he’d been reading across the room. He strode to the window and stared out without seeing anything. His mind was racing. He wanted to know how they’d found out. He’d been so careful and yet, according to his LAPD informant, the police were ignoring the threat to their headquarters. The informant also noted that several high-ranking army officers had been in and out of the LAPD Chief’s office over the past day or so. The bits and pieces he’d been able to overhear suggested that some California army base was on high alert and ready for war.

Orion yelled for his assistant and began issuing orders. Priam, who had been in the office when the message had been delivered, stayed quiet and listened. He could hear the suppressed rage in Orion’s voice.

“Macbeth, call Portia. Give her the abort codes. The armory raid is off. We’ve been compromised.” Macbeth left the room and another of the aides took his place. Orion let the aide feel the heat of his anger.

“A while back, you gave me names of the hackers who screwed with our system.”

“Sir, yes sir. Joshua Adams and Mark Wheaton – a UCLA graduate student and a LAPD detective.”

“Are they the same ones who hacked the armory site?”

“We think so. The detective – Wheaton – seems to be involved in the meetings between the LAPD and the Army.”

“Then why is he still alive?!” Orion exploded. He clenched and unclenched his fists as he fought off the urge to beat the crap out of his aide.

“We thought the decoy site was sufficient to distract them. We did try to take out the detective but the attempt failed.” The aide was trying hard to shift the blame away from himself. “You, sir, approved the plans and put the hit on hold.”

“Shut up. Let me think.”

The aide froze, afraid to move. Priam took pity on him and threw out a question.

“What do we know about this student? Joshua Adams, isn’t it?” Both he and Orion looked to the aide for an answer.

“Sir, we know next to nothing about him. He’s a grad student in astrophysics at UCLA. Lives alone. He has a scholarship and no other visible sources of income that we can find. Our guy at the LAPD has heard Wheaton use the name Adams a number of times.”

“So they are working together and they have succeeded in causing us problems. We need to know what they know and how they are getting their intel. Don’t you agree, Orion?” Priam was enjoying his friend’s discomfort.

“True, Priam.” Turning to his aide he ordered an operation to commence immediately. A team was to capture Joshua Adams and to interrogate him, to find out everything he knows.

“Once he is contained, we can turn our attention to Wheaton.” He dismissed the aide who was only too glad to be leaving. Orion sat at his desk and leaned back. Priam sat opposite him.

“Seems to me, we are taking the long way around on this. Why don’t we have someone jack into this Adams guy and the detective. Jack in. Jack out. They’re gone. No more problems. Isn’t that what we did with Becker?”

“That would be simple but I’m afraid it is impossible. The technology we use to jack in is limited by the fact that it must be able to precisely locate the avatar targets. Unfortunately, ordinary, healthy avatars are invisible to us so Adams and Wheaton can’t be seen. Those avatars that are near death or near release – we’re not sure which – have an aura we are able to locate and lock on to. Becker had a brain aneurism ready to burst. If you hadn’t jacked into him, he’d have been dead in a matter of hours anyway.”

“We can scan for those auras of the near dead close to the investigation but sometimes none are available and we have to select an avatar further away. Then the hunter has to find his own way in.”

Priam nodded. “And so, my friend, the long way around it is. How about I take a crack at this university student?”

Orion studied him for a long time. Priam had come a long way from his first jacking disaster. He was now one of Orion’s best field agents. He had a natural talent for the work so Orion seriously considered Priam’s request. He decided.

“Sure. Why not. Report to the staging area. We’ll jack you in as close as we can. Know this, though. I want this done quickly. If you do not have him within forty-eight hours, I’ll be jacking another team in.”

Priam nodded again. He wasn’t worried. A mere student wasn’t going to give him any trouble. He didn’t need forty-eight hours but he kept his mouth shut. He didn’t want to appear too cocky.

* * * *

Los Angeles (LAPD)

Captain Paul LeClerk, head of IAD – Internal Affairs – dropped into Wheaton’s office and took a seat. He kept his back to the windows overlooking the bullpen and kept his voice low.

“His name is Lawrence Caravelli, a D in Major Crimes, temporarily reassigned to Homicide.”

“I know Larry. He came over here about a year ago. He’s got a messed up family situation.” Wheaton matched his guest’s volume so no one could overhear the conversation.

LeClerk added: “And he has a huge gambling problem. That’s why he was moved out of Major Crimes. Some evidence money went missing and they figured it was him. He owes his bookie a fortune. Lost his house and that is one of the reasons his family life is so screwed up.”

“You’re sure he’s the one? He’s the one who has been feeding those tattooed freaks information?”

“Absolutely. We’ve got wiretaps, copies of text messages. Enough to convict him of obstruction and accessory to murder, multiple counts. He’s going down.”

“When are you picking him up?”

“This afternoon, end of watch. We’ll be able to get him to come to us – supposedly for a routine chat – no fuss, no bother.”

“Can I sit in when you question him?”

“That’s actually why I’m here. I’d like you to take the lead in the interrogation. He’s likely to have information on your cases so you get first crack.”

“I appreciate that, Captain. When should we start?”

“Give him time to sweat. We’ll pick him up around 4, so say 7:00 or 7:30.”

“Good. That’ll give me time to review the evidence against him.”

LeClerk left after giving Wheaton a thumb drive containing the material IAD had gathered on Caravelli. They agreed to meet around 6:30 to discuss strategy.

The afternoon went by quickly as Wheaton got himself up to speed and ready for the interview. When they got back together, LeClerk reported that Caravelli’s arrest had gone smoothly. He also mentioned that, on Wheaton’s advice, they had had a black light on when Caravelli was strip searched – no invisible tattoo. That pleased Wheaton. He was dealing with a crooked cop – an ordinary criminal – rather than one of the crazies.

LeClerk was to start the interview with a list of charges and the evidence against Caravelli. Wheaton, since he knew Caravelli, would play good cop and try to get him to cooperate, offering a deal if necessary. Caravelli was the stick. Wheaton was the carrot. They entered the interview room together and sat opposite an obviously shaken Caravelli who immediately tried to deny everything by claiming he had no idea why he was there.

“Save it for the judge, Caravelli. You are going away for the rest of your life which is likely to be short since convicts hate cops.” LeClerk let his prisoner’s imagination take over for a bit and then read out the charges followed by the evidence. Caravelli’s face had lost all color and he slouched in defeat. Time to set the hook and reel him in.

Mark introduced the possibility of a deal in exchange for information. Caravelli snatched at the bait.

“I want full immunity.”

“Not happening.” LeClerk stated flatly. He was getting into his role as bad cop.

“We can drop a number of charges against you and recommend a sentence reduction so that you have a shot at parole in ten years.” Wheaton countered and LeClerk interjected with perfect timing.

“Of course, that depends on whether you have any real information for us, information we can use.”

Caravelli tried to bluster but he was clearly intimidated by the IAD Captain.

“I got intel but you’ve got to protect me. These guys are nuts, not afraid to die. They find out I’ve ratter them out, I’m dead.”

“We can protect you but you have to give us something.”

“Look. I’ll give you everything I got. Okay?”

“So spill.” LeClerk was doing a bad Joe Friday imitation and Wheaton was having trouble keeping a straight face. Caravelli didn’t seem to notice. He started talking.

"I know these guys are hurting for weapons. They are always bugging me for the locations of weapon stashes. All the time. More weapons. More ammo."

"How about names? What's the name of your contact?"

"No idea. Never met the man. We text or email. Some times phone calls. Never face to face."

"Phone numbers, email addresses?"

"He always uses a burn phone, a new number every time. We both use the same email address. It's webmail so I go online, write an email and save it to the drafts file. I never send it. I log off and he logs on, reads my message in drafts, edits it and then resaves in with his reply attached. Then he logs off. The message never goes anywhere so it can't be intercepted by anybody."

"So what's the email address?" Wheaton was getting impatient. Caravelli could see that.

"It's echo1066@hotmail.com. The password is 9&6qbc\$9ßGR. That's got to be worth something!"

"So far you've told us you work for someone you never met and you communicate online or use burn phones. That amounts to nothing. What can you tell us that'll get us closer to your boss?" LeClerk was practically shouting. Caravelli shrank back even further.

"Look. I know I screwed up. I needed money. I needed money and this guy offered me money in exchange for information. Right or wrong, I took his money. The flow was like that. He didn't give me info. I gave it to him. I never asked what he did with it."

They continued to pound him with questions for another hour but got no further. Either he was a terrific liar or he knew next to nothing about the person or persons he was supplying with information. Both interrogators leaned toward the latter. The money he was being paid blinded Caravelli the same way crack blinds a drug addict. All he saw was the next fix. Finally, Wheaton stood and prepared to leave. LeClerk followed suit.

"Caravelli, you have nothing to offer us. We are done here."

"But Mark, I could work for you. I could spy on them for you." He was desperate.

"I don't think so, Larry. You don't even know who they are."

Caravelli watched them leave. He just sat there. His life, up to this point, had been shit but he realized it was about to get a whole lot shittier. He began to cry.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Josh's Apartment)

He sat up. Something had jolted him out of a deep sleep. He had no idea what had done it but he was wide awake. His body was tense. He jumped up and turned to the computer.

"Sarah. Can you scan the security cameras in the lobby? Do you see anything?" Her response was immediate.

"Josh, they are coming for you. Get out of the apartment now!"

Josh just stood there not knowing what to do. Sarah pushed her way into his consciousness.

“You better go. Hurry, please.”

Josh stood tall. “No! I won’t go and leave you behind. I can’t leave you.”

“Please, Josh. I’ll be okay.”

“You can’t say that for sure. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you.”

“Okay. Go pack a bag while I think.”

Josh grabbed his duffel and shoved clothes in at random. He closed it up and went back into the living room.

“Josh, I have an idea. Hook up your laptop with my computer with the network cable.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to transfer myself into your laptop. Then we can go together.”

“Will it work?”

“Sure. I’m positive it will. Now connect the computers.”

Josh did and then watched as files were moved from one to the other computer. He studied the screens. Looking for some sign that the transfer was complete. Nothing. Both computers hummed and buzzed. He waited. He sensed more than heard faint footfalls out in the hallway and at four in the morning, everyone in the building should be asleep. Moving as quietly as he could, he disconnected the network cable and grabbed the laptop and his duffel bag. He edged his way through the apartment and opened the bedroom window. He went down the fire escape pausing occasionally to listen. He reached the street before he heard the sound of breaking glass coming, it seemed to him, from his own apartment. He walked briskly away, making sure he kept out of sight. By dawn, he was several miles away from home.

Upstairs in his apartment, Priam was baffled. He’d watched Adams come home in the late afternoon and as he continued the stake out, he was confident Josh had remained in his apartment all that time. Lights blazed in the apartment until after two in the morning. Priam had waited an additional two hours after lights out to make sure his target was asleep.

He’d been as noiseless as possible coming up the stairs and down the hall but when he’d broken into his target’s home, he found it empty. Adams was gone. Had Priam been seen? Had he blown his cover? Who was this Adams guy? How did he know? These and dozens of other questions flowed unanswered through his mind. This kid was driving him crazy.

Priam searched for clues as to his target’s whereabouts. There was nothing. No clues. In frustration, he began to systematically destroy the apartment and its contents. If it was breakable, he broke it. If it could be torn, he tore it. He cracked anything that could be cracked. He shattered the computer monitor with the butt of his gun and ripped open the CPU, pulling wires and ripping out circuit boards. He threw the electronic components into the sink and filled it with water. When he was done, he surveyed his handiwork. Everywhere he looked, there was devastation. He doubted that Joshua Adams would ever be coming back here but if he ever did, he would not find anything worth salvaging.

Priam left the apartment the way he'd come in. His avatar needed rest so he would rest. In a few hours, he'd resume his search. He was confident. No one, not even this student, could hide from Priam for long.

* * * *

San Francisco (SF Airport)

She was in a big hurry. Orion's orders had been specific. Get to Los Angeles, find, and detain one Joshua Adams. Portia had wanted to jack out having just concluded an assignment. She could then jack into another avatar in LA but Orion had said no. He said she should get her butt to LA as soon as possible and deal with Adams. Portia swore Orion was losing it but he was the boss. So. Here she was at the San Francisco airport waiting for her flight south, due to depart shortly. One last hurdle stood between her and her gate. She had to go through TSA security before boarding her plane and she was carrying ceramic weapons that would not be noticed by the metal detectors. She'd done this many times before and was not concerned in the slightest.

The line moved slowly until finally it was her turn. Portia stepped towards the metal detectors when a TSA official stopped her.

"Excuse me, ma'am. You have been randomly selected to go through our new full body scanner. You do have the option of declining to enter the scanner but then, my associate will have to frisk you. Which would you prefer, ma'am – scanner or pat down?"

Portia was at a loss. A physical search – the pat down – would reveal the weapons. Maybe the scanner wouldn't see them. She really had no choice.

"The scanner please." She smiled as sweetly as she could.

"Right this way, if you would. Put your feet on the marks and hold your hands above your head. When the light goes red, please do not move. As soon as it changes to green, step forward. Thank you for your cooperation."

As she followed his instructions and watched the red light, she wondered how many times a day the TSA guy issued the same instructions. Probably hundreds. The light flashed green. She dropped her hands to her sides and stepped forward. She looked up to see four very large policemen facing her, guns drawn and pointed directly at her.

"Hands over your head. Interlock your fingers. Get down on your knees now!" one of them yelled. She considered going for her gun and have them shoot her. She could then jack home which is what she really wanted to do anyway.

"On your knees NOW!" The order was repeated. She still didn't move. "To hell with it," she thought. "Orion was going to be pissed but so be it."

She spun a quarter turn and started to reach for her weapon. She knew she'd never get it out in time but that really didn't matter. She expected to feel the impact of the bullets as the cops started shooting. The impacts didn't come. Instead, she felt the sting of darts as she was hit with multiple tasers. She dropped like a rock and stayed out for several minutes. In that time, she was moved to a room off the security corridor, restrained, searched, and fingerprinted. The search turned up what the operator had seen on the full body scanner – a

ceramic pistol and a ceramic knife. According to protocol, anyone caught trying to smuggle weapons aboard an aircraft was to be considered a terrorist and Homeland Security was to be notified. The finger printing, using the latest portable electronic fingerprint scanner, produced a surprise. There was a BOLO – Be On the Look Out – for her. Apparently, the person they now had in custody was wanted by the SFPD. A well-known gun control advocate had been assassinated earlier in the day and her fingerprints were all over the scene. The TSA policy regarding these things required that the officers notify the SFPD about her. After a brief discussion, the officers called both the police department and Homeland Security. Both said they were sending people over right away.

One of the officers, a retired cop from Seattle, privately hoped they'd hurry and get to the airport before his shift ended. He wanted to watch the jurisdictional battle that was sure to come. He only got half of his wish. Two detectives from SFPD and a senior supervisory agent from Homeland Security arrived within minutes of each other but there was no wrangling over who had jurisdiction. The SF police officers explained that the woman was wanted for murder and they had a strong case especially since they expected ballistics to match the bullets in the victim with the ceramic weapon airport security had taken from her. The Homeland Security agent agreed that she was more a criminal than a terrorist and turned her over to the police. He did add that should they fail to convict her on the murder charge, they were to notify Homeland who would rearrest her on the weapons smuggling charge. All parties felt they had her coming and going and TSA got a big pat on the back for catching a murderer. Everyone but Portia went home happy.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Traffic Accident on the 101)

Treacher drove the ambulance and kept it close behind the fire truck. Both had lights flashing and sirens blaring, but even then it was hard to get some drivers to yield the right of way. It was a standard joke around the fire station that more L.A. firefighters were injured in collisions with vehicles that refused to give way than were hurt in fires. A few firefighters had jokingly suggested mounting plows on the fronts of their rigs so they could shove reluctant drivers out of the way. Little did they know that City Council had considered just such a move a few years earlier and had decided the bad press the plows would generate outweighed the benefits.

The truck in front slowed and pulled over as it neared the multiple vehicle crash on the 101. Over the radio, the driver informed Treacher that there were no visible fires. Therefore, Treacher was now in charge and the crew on the truck was prepared to follow his lead. He swung the ambulance around the fire truck and stopped as close to the wreckage as he could. Treacher ran towards the vehicles stopping only long enough to check the status of each one's occupants. He shouted orders to his partner who wrote them down and then relayed them to the fire truck and central dispatch.

It was obvious to Treacher that more EMTs and more ambulances were needed. He counted 16 people with injuries of which five were life threatening. There were three dead and two others dying. Their auras were pale yellow which translated to 'dead in a few minutes regardless of what he or any other paramedic could do for them.' He passed them by. He set the firefighters to work getting the most seriously injured out of their vehicles while he and his partner worked at getting them stabilized for transport. The five in grave condition were sent off in the first wave of ambulances while the others were guided over to next to the fire truck where they could receive basic first aid.

Once he'd completed the triage, Treacher surveyed the scene and was pleased with what he saw. The uninjured were all together well away from the accident. They were busy on cell phones contacting loved ones and insurance agents. The wounded had been tended to and those with minor injuries sat on the ground waiting for the next wave of ambulances. The firefighters were rechecking the vehicles and securing the scene for the State Highway patrol investigators – a necessary step whenever there was a death on an interstate highway. He was about to accept a cup of coffee and relax when he saw an aura shift from blue to green heading towards yellow.

"Yellow. Shit." He grabbed his partner and a gurney. "Let's get her on here. She needs to get to a hospital stat."

"She looks fine to me."

"Don't argue. Just do it."

Together they scooped up a confused young lady and raced to their ambulance. As Treacher jumped into the driver's seat, he shouted to his partner to get an IV of saline going and to strap their patient in. "Tell her to move as little as possible." His partner, a relatively new EMT assigned to replace his former partner who had carried out his threat to transfer to a different team, did as he was told. Kevin was glad to see the new guy kept a reassuring hand on the woman's shoulder.

The quick trip to the hospital seemed to take forever with Kevin watching the woman's aura fade through pale green and edge into yellow. It was going to be close. He let his breath out as they pulled into the Emergency Room bay and were met by a team of doctors and nurses. Many hands grabbed the gurney and sped it towards the treatment area. The woman was protesting that she felt fine but the ER team ignored her and looked at Treacher.

"Chest wound." He managed. He was out of breath. He and his partner collapsed at the nurses' station. He radioed Dispatch that they would be at the hospital for a while but were available for call outs. His partner kept looking at Treacher trying to make sense of what had just happened. Finally he got up the nerve to ask.

Treacher responded, carefully avoiding any mention of auras: "I was watching that young lady and she got a sort of hurt and confused look on her face and her posture indicated her chest hurt. I'd seen that a lot of times during the Third Gulf War. Soldiers would get hit by fast moving shrapnel and not feel it hardly at all. It would bury itself in their chests so quickly, there'd be no pain. The entry wound would look like a minor cut – no big deal – but a little while later, the

soldier would simply drop dead. As he moved around, the metal in his chest would slice open tissue and organs, causing internal bleeding. Sometimes it's slice open the heart. Just before dying, the guy would get that look on his face, the one our patient had on her face when I looked over. I figured there must have been a lot of flying shrapnel during the accident. Couldn't take a chance so here we are."

"So we are here because you saw a lady look confused?"

"Seems like it. We better get back to the barn. Our supplies are way down after that run." Treacher rose and started down the hallway when he was stopped by a nurse's voice.

"Hey Kev! Good call!"

"Thanks but . . . ?"

"A piece of chrome stripping about 4 inches long was lodged in her right lung. Couple of more minutes and she'd have been dead. Good call."

"Just a lucky guess. See ya."

He and his partner walked back to the ambulance. Treacher could hear the story his partner was going to tell back at the station house. It was not going to do his rep any good. It'd still be in the spooky zone but at least it won't involve auras – this time.

* * * *

Los Angeles (LAPD and Josh's apartment)

Ever since Wheaton had sent out the VICAP query regarding ultraviolet tattoos and killers dying at the scene, he had been getting three or four notices a week although the tattoos were not coming up as frequently as they had been in the beginning. Most of the bulletins he received were unrelated to the gang he was chasing. They involved stupid criminals using guns in their criminal activities and getting gunned down by police for their efforts. Sometimes he wondered why the "criminal element" hadn't yet gone extinct given the pace at which they were being killed by police.

He was thinking about this again because he'd just received a notification from San Francisco. A female assassin had killed someone and then tried to board a plane bound for LAX with a concealed weapon. At the airport, she'd tried to draw on airport police and was tasered. Although she hadn't died at the scene, her actions fit the suicide-by-cop scenario he was familiar with. She was one of them. Maybe if he could find the time, he'd head up north and have a chat with her.

That reminded him that he'd been promising himself that he was going to connect with Sarah and Josh. Although the attack on the military base had not materialized, mostly because of Sarah's interference with their plans, the warning the military had received and the subsequent preparations had revealed a few potentially significant weaknesses in the army's security at the base. The base commander had been pleased that the deficiencies had been discovered before any damage was done. Mark wanted to pass that on to the kids as he now thought of them. Sarah's information had been valuable and she deserved an

attaboy for it. He grabbed his phone and dialed their number. It rang and rang. No answer. Mark thought that was weird because even if Josh wasn't at home, Sarah should answer. She was always home, for obvious reasons. He dialed Josh's cell phone. It went straight to voice mail. He left a message.

"Josh, Mark Wheaton here. Call me. Sarah is not answering the phone."

"This is not right. Kids these days are always staring at their smart phones even when they aren't supposed to be. Josh should've picked up. Damn. Sarah should've picked up. I don't like this."

He realized he'd been mumbling out loud. He only did that when he was worried. He was worried now. He decided he'd try again near the end of the day. Maybe there was a simple explanation.

Reports and other kinds of paperwork filled his time. "More and more these days. Whatever happened to the old idea that computers were going to make us a paperless society? It seems we are generating more paper than ever." His complaints about the volume of paperwork a detective has to handle in a day had become a daily diatribe. No one listened. No one cared but he felt compelled to bitch about it. It took all afternoon to empty his IN box and to file the results. Satisfied, he tossed his pen aside and called Josh's home and cell phones again with the same results – nothing.

It was bugging him so he elected to go home via Josh's place. It wasn't that far out of the way and he'd feel better. He pictured them at home deep in some discussion of the cosmos. That's what he wanted to see. What he did see was an unlocked door and an apartment that had been trashed thoroughly and methodically. He found Sarah's computer in pieces all over the apartment including in the sink. "The son of a bitch killed Sarah," He thought. Of course, one could not be charged with murdering a computer but they should be charged in this case. There was no sign of Josh so Wheaton took it upon himself to report a burglary and arrange to have the Crime Scene Unit go over the apartment. He justified the use of the CSU by saying the break-in was related to a multiple homicide he was investigating. That was true in a manner of speaking.

He left the specialists to their work and, after arranging to have everything sent to him, headed for home. In the morning, he would issue a BOLO on Josh. He had to find him. It was clear from the chaos in his apartment, Josh was in need of help.

* * * *

New York City

Swanson placed an anonymous call to the NYC crime hotline and warned that a bioterrorist lab had been set up in the city. He used a burn phone to prevent the trace he knew the police would be trying. Ever since 9/11, the word terrorist sent shudders through the NYPD. Swanson had found out about the lab when he was about to ghost one of Orion's henchmen in Chicago. The fool had tried to buy his way out of his punishment with information. Swanson had taken the info and then ghosted the guy anyway. He now knew that the New York lab existed and was getting ready to release another batch of the vaccine resistant

Ebola strain that was running rampant across the United States. That was not going to happen if he had anything to do with it. Hence the call to the police.

The NYPD considered the threat of more Ebola deaths to be credible and called in the Homeland Security hazmat team and had the CDC on speed dial. They didn't waste much time. Less than four hours after the phone call, NYPD's SWAT team in hazmat gear burst into an old warehouse on the lower East Side. They arrested everyone they found there – six men and one woman. They were loaded into squad cars and whisked downtown. Swanson, who had stood watch from across the street, checked out each of the prisoners. All were regular, run of the mill terrorists. Swanson surmised that they had been duped, convinced they were fighting the Great Satan that was America. Since none were from Orion's gang, there was no reason for Swanson to hang around. He walked to the corner and flagged down a cab.

Inside the warehouse, the police found several rooms that had been retrofitted to become state of the art biology labs. In most, they found enough Ebola cultures to cripple the city and the state but one room caused great excitement among the scientists who were there to contain and eventually destroy the pathogen. Apparently, these terrorists were not of the usual suicidal variety. They clearly intended to survive since that room had been used to develop an effective vaccine against the second wave of Ebola infections. Not only was there a significant quantity of the new vaccine stockpiled, no doubt to protect the faithful who fought the infidel, there was a formula for how to produce it. On the lab's computer, they even found a step-by-step how-to video for making the stuff.

The scientists would be in the warehouse for days getting rid of the Ebola virus stored there while others, working with the CDC, prepared to get the vaccine into production for immediate use. In a single raid, they had taken a giant step on the road towards eliminating the Ebola Disease as a threat. The epidemic was over since they'd found both the source of the disease and a cure.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Motel Room)

For three days, Josh had hid out in a cheap motel a block off the I-10, leaving the room only to eat or to think. He'd seen enough cop shows to know to shut off his cell phone and take the battery out and to pay cash for everything. He'd told the clerk at the motel's registration desk that he'd had his VISA card stolen. The clerk didn't seem surprised and was more than willing to accept Josh's money. Of course, he was going to run out soon and would have to go to the bank. Two or three more days and that was it.

The phone call and the frantic escape from his apartment had been disturbing. Knowing someone was after him and not knowing why was distressing. However, those things were rendered unimportant given the fact that Sarah had not said a word since the hurried transfer to the laptop. It kept Josh up nights imaging all kinds of horrible scenarios. He knew it didn't do any good but he played the "what if" game over and over. What if Sarah couldn't transfer and

was back in her computer in his apartment all alone? He knew what lonely was like and didn't want her to feel that way. What if she'd made the transfer but was trapped inside the laptop with no way to communicate? That would be like being buried alive. Horrible. What if Josh had disconnected the network cable too soon and cut Sarah in half like a magician does to his assistant? Did he kill Sarah that way? Was she dead? Has he lost her again?

Josh paced around the room like a caged animal. He tried watching television but even with over 200 channels to choose from, there was nothing that could hold his attention for more than a few seconds. He'd spin through the channels and then jump up and pace some more. He'd taken a chance and gone to a bookstore for something to read. It was a waste of time and money. He couldn't concentrate.

He wanted to go online and see if Sarah had sent him an email. Even when they were in the same room, she'd send him love notes by email or on Facebook. The pull was strong but he had to resist. Going online would let whomever was looking for him know where he was in seconds. There was an app for that and anyone with a smart phone could track the origins of an email or locate an IP address. No. He had to stay off line.

He wanted to go home and see if Sarah was there. Every time he left his hotel room for whatever reason, he found his feet taking him in the direction of home. Once he'd made it to within two blocks of his building before forcing himself to turn around. He was losing weight. He kept forgetting to eat. He was exhausted. He kept forgetting to sleep. He was lonely, cut off from the one he loved. He needed Sarah but was beginning to think she was gone for good.

That night, the night of the third day, he fell asleep. He fought against it but exhaustion won. The lights and the television were on. His supper, Chinese food from down the street, sat untouched on top of the dresser. He dreamed of Sarah who was being chased by some monster. In the dream, he wanted to rescue her but he couldn't move. He couldn't help her in his dream just as he couldn't help her in real life.

* * * *

Unspecified Location

Orion paced too. Back and forth. Back and forth. He couldn't stand still. His plan was in tatters. Months. It would take months to get back on track, maybe even years. Every report he received brought more bad news. The Ebola epidemic was over. Edmund's cult suicide event had not materialized. Weapons were getting harder to obtain. Personnel were not returning on schedule. He could not believe that a couple of those people were smart enough to outwit him. No. It had to be something else, or someone else, involved. He needed to know. He needed answers.

He'd sent Priam and then Portia to kidnap this Adams kid and find out if he had the answers. So far, neither had succeeded. What was going on there? His informant inside the LAPD had gone silent and there was no one available to be jacked in the Homicide Division. He was blind there for now.

Perhaps part of the problem was his conventional missions. He'd approached his goal using conservative strategy to keep the committee happy. He needed to release as many souls as he could in the coming weeks to get back on track and his usual methods weren't doing that, especially when his target population was somewhat prepared for them. A crime wave was not very effective when your target expects a crime wave and puts up countermeasures. Terrorist attacks were planned for and contingency plans were in place. Disease epidemics lose their destructive power when the equipment and personnel are ready to develop vaccines or cures. These people learned from past experience and strive to prevent history from repeating itself.

So it wasn't poor planning or shoddy execution causing the repeated failures. It was wrong thinking. Orion felt there needed to be a huge shift in perspective. He had to come up with new ways to release souls, new ways that they would not expect. To date, he'd been playing by the rules. No more. Time to bring machine guns to the football game. He needed to ponder this. In the meantime, he'd send a third team after 'that student.' He was a loose end and needed to be tied off – him and that damned detective.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Josh's motel room)

"Josh, Josh! Wake up!" Her voice, barely a whisper, brought him to reality and his motel room.

"Sarah, is that you?"

"Yes. But listen . . ."

"I'm so glad . . ."

"Shut up and listen. We need to get out of here now."

He jumped up, fully dressed and ready to go. He had prepared for an emergency dash ever since he'd moved into the motel. He grabbed his bag and the laptop. Sarah stopped him.

"No! Not that way! Out the back."

Without hesitation, Josh spun around and ducked into the bathroom. He climbed on top of the tub and squeezed himself through the narrow window. It was a tight fit and he had to wriggle a bit but he made it. He looked back and noted that the motel was going to need a new screen for that window. He had not been gentle getting it out of the way. He reached for it, intent on putting it back on the window but a muffled 'hurry' came from the laptop inside its case. Josh ran along the edge of the parking lot and stopped just beyond the reach of the street lights and out of sight of the motel entrance at the edge of the motel property.

As he struggled to catch his breath, he heard a whoosh followed by a loud bang and a ball of fire that rose a hundred feet into the air. He pressed himself against the fence as debris rained down around him, some of it still burning. A quick glance at the motel showed him that where his room had been, there now was a gaping hole surrounded by fire.

Movement caught his eye and he turned in time to see a man carrying what looked like a tube of some kind climb into a car and drive off. He watched the

vehicle until it turned out of sight two blocks away. It soon was replaced by fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars. The parking lot was filling up quickly. It was time to move on.

He should have been afraid or worried because now there was no doubt someone was out to kill him but instead, there was a spring in his step. He felt like skipping. He was happy. Sarah was back!

* * * *

Los Angeles (Freeway)

Priam drove along I-10. The signs said he was heading for Burbank but he didn't care. Finally he'd gotten the little shit. For four days, he'd hunted for Adams and had finally found him in that fleabag motel through hard work and perseverance. He'd called every motel in the phone book asking for Josh Adams. He was into the S column with Sleepy's Inn when the clerk said, "Sure. Let me connect you." Bingo. He'd hung up and headed for Sleepy's. The brilliant student who had been such a pain in the ass, had done so much damage to Orion's plans, had registered under his own name – an amateur's mistake.

"Too bad, Adams. I watched you come back to the motel with Chinese takeout. I waited until you were fast sleep then I blew you to hell. I know. I know Orion wanted you alive but you pissed me off."

He patted the now empty shoulder rocket launcher. He laughed. The rocket was clearly overkill but he'd been tired and it felt good to blow something up. Priam whistled a tune as he pushed down on the gas pedal. His speedometer crept up. Seventy. Eighty. Ninety. As he approached the underpass, it hit one hundred. He grinned.

"Mission accomplished."

He turned the steering wheel and the car slammed into the abutment and burst into flame. His avatar died instantly and Priam was on his way home.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Home of Cynthia Ross)

It was late and Cynthia Ross was tired. It had been a long day dealing with underachieving students and university administration. She felt like she was stuck in the middle being pulled in all directions. But that was okay. She was home now and could relax. A glass of wine and the late night news would do the trick. CNN Late Night was already on when she powered up the television.

"The latest bulletin from the U.S. Weather Service indicates that the hole in the Ozone Layer may be stabilizing. Dr. Andrew Caton of the USWS told CNN that the hole was still growing but the rate of growth had slowed. Dr. Caton, why is that good news?"

"It means that we have more time to get pollution and greenhouse gas emissions under control before the Ozone Layer collapses. We believe that if we can do that, and we now have the time, the hole will eventually close by itself."

“Good news indeed. Thank you, Doctor. In local news, there was a spectacular fire tonight at Sleepy’s Inn off I-10 in Van Nuys.”

With pictures of the blaze and firefighters battling the flames in the background, the newscaster continued.

“It is believed that at least one man was killed and three people injured but the final count won’t be known until the fire is out. Names of the dead and injured have not been released pending notification of next of kin. Arson investigators are standing by. It has not been verified but witnesses have come forward saying a man fired what looked like a rocket or missile into the motel.”

“Oh shit,” Cynthia sighed and set her wine glass down. She stood up and, grabbing her coat on the way out, headed for her car. She drove away.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Italian Restaurant)

“I’m so glad you agreed to meet me, Detective Wheaton. I have been very worried about Josh and Sarah. Do you know where they are? Do you have any information at all?” The words came out in a rush, almost as if Cynthia was afraid he’d stop her. He almost shut her down with the standard line.

“I’m afraid we can’t discuss an ongoing investigation. Wait! What? You know about Sarah?” He had not considered the possibility that others knew about the entity – he didn’t like the word ghost – in Josh’s computer. He felt a little disappointed and more than a little bit jealous.

“Oh yes. Josh told me all about what happened to her. At first I thought he was delusional but then his class work took a giant leap upward. His work went from merely brilliant to absolutely genius. I figured Sarah had to be helping him.”

“So you haven’t met the ... uh ... new Sarah yet?”

“No. Not yet but I hope to soon.”

Wheaton’s jealous and possessiveness eased a fraction. He was still the only one other than Josh to interact with her.

“I take it you have?”

“Yes, on a number of occasions.”

“What’s it like?”

“It was kind of weird at first but if you close your eyes, it’s easy to accept that she’s real. Ends up kind of like talking to someone on the phone.”

He was talking too much. Perhaps, he thought, it’s because he hadn’t been in the presence of a beautiful woman in a long time, at least one who wasn’t a suspect in a homicide. He was intimidated especially since she was smart as well as gorgeous. For a brief moment, he regretted agreeing to meet in a restaurant. She’d used the term ‘neutral ground.’ He should have insisted they meet at the precinct, his home turf. But that didn’t last long. He pretended to himself that he was on a date with Cynthia Ross, Ph.D., Professor of Astronomy and Astrophysics at UCLA.

Before the meeting, he’d done a bit of a background check on her. It was clear she was ambitious having obtained three university degrees in record time, all on full scholarships. Consistently at the top of her class. Youngest professor

ever hired by UCLA. An impressive list of published material – mostly with titles the meanings of which he could only guess at. Dr. Ross was on a tenure track and it looked like she'd get it in the next year or two.

All of this and she had come to him for help, Mark Wheaton, community college alumnus with a solid B average and a cop with twelve years experience on the job. He was pleased she needed him but she was a civilian and department policy required he maintain the confidentiality of the ongoing investigation. Instead, he found himself telling her the truth.

"They've been missing almost a week now. There was a possible sighting of Josh near that motel fire up on I-10 the other night but I've got no way to confirm that. There has been nothing since. I've got BOLOs out and we're watching his bankcards, cell phone and online accounts but nada. They've gone silent and off the grid. I'd like to help you but I can't."

Cynthia was about to say something but the waiter arrived with their food. Mark had gone for the lasagna and was glad she'd also gone for a pasta dish. Most women he went on first dates with went for a salad. Even if this wasn't a date, that was a good sign. She attacked her meal with gusto and they said little while they ate.

As they indulged in some good Italian coffee, Mark asked her about her work but reminded her he knew little about astronomy. She laughed and said she didn't know a lot about the stars in the visible universe.

"I am fascinated by dark matter – the astral material that we can't see. Ninety percent of what is out there is invisible to us."

"And that drives you crazy, doesn't it?" Mark could see her enthusiasm and her determination. Her eyes sparkled.

"You bet your ass it gets to me. How can we know anything about the universe if we can't see most of it or even know what it is." She paused and saw the twinkle in Mark's eye. "You are teasing. You got me started on purpose." As he smiled, she went serious again.

"This is about them – Josh and Sarah – and not about me. How do you plan to find them if they stay, as you say, off the grid?"

His mood followed hers.

"To be perfectly honest, I have no idea. I keep hoping we'll get lucky. But tell me, since when is a university prof concerned enough over one student out of dozens to go to the police?"

"Well, Josh has talked about you a couple of times and I got the sense he considers you a friend so I'm not going to the police. I am going to a friend who happens to be a cop."

"Fair enough. But why the concern?"

"I guess I have two reasons. The first is personal. I like Josh and if he completes his studies, he will go far. A teacher is always looking for those students who will surpass their teachers. Josh is one of those and I'd hate to see him miss too much school."

"The second is professional. Josh and I had been doing some research together and he was supposed to give me some of his data. We have a deadline that is fast approaching. I need that data."

“What were you two working on?”

“WIMPs.”

“Wimps?”

“It’s a new theory to account for missing matter, dark matter. It suggests that the dark matter is in the form of exotic subatomic particles called WIMPs – Weakly Interacting Massive Particles. WIMPs. Josh had some ideas on how to detect and observe them. His preliminary results are what I need.”

“That answers that question. WIMPS!” He chuckled. “I have another question.”

“Are you interrogating me?” She was teasing him a little.

“Don’t think so. This place is too nice for an interrogation. I’m just trying to get things straight in my head. I was just wondering how you knew they were missing. As far as you should know, Josh has missed a couple of classes. That’s all. He could be sick or visiting relatives.”

“Busted. You got me!” She laughed. “Josh is almost always in class. Until last week, he’d never missed more than one class in a row. Last week, he missed three classes and a seminar with me. I got worried so I went over to his apartment building. His door is covered in yellow tape. Is that called crime scene tape? There was only one conclusion I could come to that I would accept. I needed them to be alive so I decided they must be missing.”

Mark nodded. He understood. He had bad news for her and had been avoiding it all evening. He couldn’t put it off any longer.

“Josh is missing. I’m not so sure about Sarah. The computer in Josh’s apartment was destroyed during the break-in. I mean destroyed. It wasn’t just broken by a prowler. It was reduced to bits and pieces. Trash. If Sarah was in that computer, she’s gone.”

“That’s horrible, Detective. What a loss. Josh must be devastated.”

He liked that she thought of Josh’s feelings rather than her own. Gorgeous, smart and empathetic – quite a combo.

They sat in silence and the waiter, in stealth mode, slipped the check onto the table. He hadn’t wanted to disturb the couple. They seemed focused only on each other. “Must be love,” he thought.

Cynthia broke the silence.

“I guess I should be going. Will you keep me informed? I need to know Josh is okay.”

“Sure. I’ll call when I know something.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. And maybe next time, we can try Japanese.”

* * * *

Los Angeles (Cynthia’s Home)

She placed the call a few minutes after getting home. Her phone buzzed and clicked while it switched to a secure line. It rang once before being answered at the other end.

“Go ahead.”

Cynthia recited a brief summary of the information she'd gotten from Wheaton and ended her report with his promise to keep her in the loop.

"Did he mean it or was he just humoring you?" Swanson managed to sound sarcastic and demeaning at the same time. He put Ross on the defensive, the way he always did.

"I think he meant it. I'll touch base with him in a few days if he doesn't call me but I'm pretty sure he will. One thing that came up is quite important. He believes the Sarah entity is dead. If true, that takes the pressure off a bit. Joshua is brilliant but I don't think he is smart enough to figure this out. Together with Sarah, they just might. Josh alone, not a chance."

"Good but we will need proof she's gone. So keep looking as if they are both out there somewhere."

"I will. Anything else?"

"No. Concentrate on finding them."

* * * *

Los Angeles (EMT Headquarters)

"Sorry to pull you in on your day off but it was the only slot available."

Donald Sullivan, Fire Chief, sat behind a big desk that had seen better days. He caught Treacher checking out the surroundings. Sullivan chuckled.

"I know. As you can see, management gets all the perks." He gestured at the ancient filing cabinets and the sagging bookcases filled to overflowing with binders and loose piles of paper. "This here desk was handed down to me by the previous chief who got it from his. Getting decent facilities from the city is a major pain in the ass. Besides, I'd rather see the budget used to pay for supplies and equipment for you guys on the front line."

If Treacher hadn't known his Chief the way he did, he'd have heard a political speech in the making but he knew better. This Chief did care about the front line and did everything he could to make the job easier. He was a political animal but one of the rare kind – an honest one.

"But I didn't call you to come in to listen to me bitch and moan. The Review Board has been meeting for the past couple of days. Today is their last day – the day intended for interviews for possible promotions. I was going over the list and didn't see your name on it. I put your name on that list. You are expected in room 137, upstairs in a half hour. When you're done there, come back here. It's important."

"But Chief..."

"No buts, Kevin. You've got more experience in the field than two thirds of the force. The way you handled that multiple vehicle crash a while back impressed a great many people, including me. Go get ready for the interview. I'll see you in two hours. That's an order, Treacher." The Chief was smiling as Treacher made his exit. He was not smiling. He was happy as a shift EMT. He didn't want to move up the ladder because each rung took you further from the front line. Unwillingly, he made his way into the designated interview room.

The interview started off easy enough with the Committee Chairman reviewing Treacher's work history.

"It says in your file that you have been with the LAFD for almost 15 years as an EMT. Before that you were in the military?"

"Yes. The Marines."

"And you served 5 years and did three tours overseas – Afghanistan and then the Third Gulf War in Iraq. Is that accurate?"

"Yes sir."

"I am curious, Mr. Treacher. You qualified for the G.I. Bill education program but chose to get EMT training and then joined us instead. You could have become a doctor with Uncle Sam picking up the tab. Why the EMT route?"

It was a good question and a fair one as far as Kevin was concerned and he answered it as honestly as he could.

"There are really two reasons, sir. I have never been good in school and I'm not sure I could have stayed focused on the book learning long enough to become a doctor. There's that but also when I was in Iraq, a lot of my buddies were wounded. Some died but a lot were saved by the quick work of the medics over there. They did a fabulous job under rotten circumstances. I was impressed by them and wanted to become one of them. I couldn't do that while in the Marines. I guess they figured they had too much invested in me as a grunt so when my hitch was up, I came home and signed up for the EMT training course."

"Weren't you yourself injured over there? Earned a Purple Heart?"

"Yes, I was but considering what the other guys went through, mine was more of a scratch."

From the kinds of questions they were asking him, he knew the Review Committee's interview was a rubber stamp. They formalized what the Chief wanted. So Treacher relaxed and answered the questions they put to him while trying to come up with some way to turn down any promotion without alienating the Chief. Deep in thought, he thought he had misheard one of the questions. He asked the interviewer to repeat it.

"Mr. Treacher, several of your colleagues have reported that you see auras of various colors around your patients. They regard that as odd. They think you are a bit odd. What do you have to say to that?"

Kevin really looked at his questioner for the first time and saw the strange kind of aura he'd seen at the bank robbery site. This man, according to his aura, was not ready to die but was also already dead. A quick look at the other interviewers told Kevin that the question was unexpected even by the committee and some were considering having it withdrawn. He was torn. If he answered honestly, there would be no promotion and that was okay but he might also lose his job and that was definitely not okay. He sat up and took a deep breath.

"Well, sir, when I am on duty, I am on duty. I am there to work. Some of my coworkers consider that odd because they choose to coast when we have down time. When we are at the station, they might be in the break room playing cards or watching television while I will be in the pen making sure we have all the inventory we need and keeping all of our gear clean and in good repair. I do not socialize at work and if that makes me odd, so be it."

“What about the auras, the colors?”

Kevin smiled and offered an explanation he'd prepared for just such a moment.

“My coworkers do not know me or my methods very well. I do not see auras. That's new age hocus pocus but I do use colors as a way to organize patients when necessary. For example, at that multiple car crash a week ago, we had to do triage and assess nearly 40 people, some with injuries of varying degrees of severity and some fatalities. I assign each person a color depending on their need – black is dead, beyond hope, blue is uninjured. Both of these we EMTs do not have to do anything with. Red is the color for minor injuries treatable at the scene. Green is needing hospital treatment – stitches, broken bones, that sort of thing and yellow is life-threatening, urgent transport needed.”

“It is a system I use to maximize the effectiveness of our processes and make sure that people are helped when they really need it. Occasionally my coworkers will hear me mumbling about colors. Usually I am running priorities in my head and sometimes I say things out loud. It works for me. If I have two yellows, a red and a green, I know we are going to need four ambulances but only two Code Three or we could make do with two ambulances, each making two trips.”

“I see. Thanks for that.” His questioner sat back but continued to stare at Treacher who was careful to avoid eye contact. The man made him nervous.

“Well, if no one else has any more questions. I think we are done here.” The Committee Chairman made a show of closing his file folder and placing his hands, fingers entwined, on top of it. “Mr. Treacher, I believe you have a meeting now with the Chief. He wanted me to remind you of that. No sneaking out and claiming later that you forgot.”

Treacher nodded. Leaving the room quickly, he headed straight for the vending machines. He needed a drink of water before facing his boss. He stood, bottle in his hand, watching the committee members leave the interview room and head for the stairs. The already-but-not-yet-dead one was the last to leave and the only one to look around at his surroundings before leaving. He gave Kevin a nod and a smile before disappearing down the steps. Had Treacher followed him, he would have seen him pull out a cell phone as he left the building. He might even have heard one side of the conversation.

“Boss, it's confirmed. Treacher is a locator. He almost fell off his chair when he saw me. I thought he was going to faint...”

“Yes. I asked the question and he gave me some bullshit about using colors to prioritize the injured. He used the same colors as those described by other locators ... exactly the same colors as the others see in peoples' auras.”

“Okay, Orion. I'll arrange for some surveillance and then get back to HQ. I think Kevin Treacher is going to be very useful to us.”

* * * *

Los Angeles (Sarah's friend's place)

Sarah had directed Josh to a small house near the UCLA campus saying that a friend used to live there but went home and was trying to sublet it. No luck for him. Lucky for Josh and Sarah. Before her death, she'd been checking on the place periodically for her friend. She knew the place was empty and knew where the key was hidden.

"We can hole up here for a while. No one will bother us. We'll be okay."

Sarah was trying to reassure Josh although he clearly did not need reassurance.

"I'm sure this will work." He tested out the sofa and placed his laptop on the coffee table. "Nice digs but honestly Babe, I have ta tell you. I'd be happy hiding under a bridge as long as you are there too. You gave me quite a scare."

"I know I am sorry. At first, I was disoriented. Couldn't navigate for what seemed like forever. That was no fun at all."

"It's a good thing you are not claustrophobic then."

"But I wasn't really in a small space. It was like I was in the laptop and outside it at the same time. That was what was disorienting. Hard to get a grip if you are in two places at once."

"How do you mean outside the computer?" Josh wanted to keep Sarah talking. He loved the sound of her voice and had not heard it for too long a time.

"It was kind of like floating – like they say a soul floats above its body during a near death experience. Like that only my body is a little silver colored laptop computer. Now that sounds really weird."

"I floated looking down and I was watching you. I tried to talk to you but couldn't get my act together enough to work the computer speaker. You looked so sad and I wanted to tell you I was okay but I couldn't. I tried and I tried."

"You got through in the nick of time!"

"When I saw that guy in the parking lot pointing what looked like a bazooka at our room, it was like all of a sudden I could get through. You heard me and here we are, safe and sound – for the moment."

They both laughed and only part of Sarah was with Josh while another part of her sat in the dark pondering the unthinkable. For her entire life, her parents, both teachers and die-hard atheists, had taught her that everything could be explained by science and that religion was a way the ignorant people explained what they didn't understand. However, the last few weeks had shaken the very foundations of her belief in science. She was a ghost. She had started thinking of herself that way. She was a ghost. Science could not explain ghosts, couldn't even recognize their existence while religion not only accepted ghosts as real, it could explain them. Most religions accepted that a human consisted of two parts – a body and a soul. If you separate the two, you have death. The body dies. The soul lives on. Being a ghost was one way for a soul to survive without a body.

She tried to apply logical reasoning to the situation she found herself in. If ghosts exist, then a person must be made of the two parts – body and soul. If that was the case, the scientific community can explain only half of the human – the physical body that is subject to natural laws – but cannot begin to explain the soul – a non-physical entity that is not subject to or ruled by those laws. Since she herself was a ghost, ghosts do exist and everything she learned since she

was old enough to think was, at best, a partial truth if not an outright lie. She took it one step further and wondered what if everything we know is a lie. Is reality real? How can reality be unreal? These were questions she had to consider. She started her super computer network off on a search for the truth.

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