

**Los Angeles (Josh's Hideout)**

He rolled it around between his fingers. It wasn't much to look at, just a little black cylinder about the size of a grain of rice.

"I've got the chip. Kinda puny. What now?" Josh spoke into his cell phone that Sarah had reoccupied as he passed through a Starbucks' wifi hot spot.

"It's self-installing so all you need to do is place it on the skin of your forearm." The phone made Sarah's voice sound tinny.

"Are you sure it's safe?"

"Absolutely, Josh. Perfectly safe. I wouldn't ask you to do this if I thought otherwise."

He placed the chip on his arm and watched as it seemed to sink into his flesh.

"It doesn't hurt. Shouldn't it hurt?"

"It's coated with a topical anesthetic that dulls the nerves as it goes. It'll turn itself on as soon as it finds a spot to settle in."

The last two words seemed to come from inside his head rather than from the cell phone. He flinched in surprise.

"Too loud? I'll turn the volume down a little bit."

"Wow! You're in my head."

"I sure am."

He stuffed the phone into his pocket.

"So how does this work?"

"Simple. Through the chip, I can access your hearing and vision. What you see, I see. What you hear, I hear. I can, obviously talk to you and you can talk to me. You can speak out loud if you like or you can just think the words. Try it."

Josh tried putting some sentences together silently, subvocally – a term he remembered from a linguistics course he'd taken at university. It seemed like he'd been away from school forever. Sarah had no trouble understanding him.

"I love you too, Josh. Now we are truly together plus I can access the internet and all parts of the web and can show you what I find through your optical nerve." A photo of a tiny kitten flashed across his eye. He laughed.

"Very funny, Sarah. You know that cat pictures and cute kitten videos are going to destroy the internet." She laughed.

"I know."

He paused. "I'm glad you're back. I missed you!"

"I missed you too. Are you happy?"

"I am and I am looking forward to a quiet evening catching up."

His phone rang. He looked at it, somewhat perplexed.

"No one should have this number. Probably a wrong number." He put the phone away again but it rang again. This time, it indicated that he had received a text message. He tapped the message icon.

"Josh. U R in danger. Leave the bldg. NOW! Use S entrance."

He spoke to Sarah.

"Is this your message? Are you messing with me?"

"No. Not me."

A new message appeared.

“Go, Josh! Go NOW!”

He texted in response: “This is not funny. Go away!”

There was a rapid exchange of texts.

“I am friend. They’re coming 4 U. RUN!”

“Not B4 U tell me more about U. I like it here.”

“Go, please. I will tell U all when U R safe. Use Messenger to contact me when U are away from there.”

How?”

“Use this: [72724.2866464426@72424.266](mailto:72724.2866464426@72424.266)”

He recognized the code and the sender. He jumped to his feet. He raced for the door but ran straight into the arms of two huge men. They grabbed him and held him while a third covered Josh’s nose and mouth with an ether soaked cloth. As consciousness faded, he could hear Sarah yelling in his head to get his attention. He couldn’t respond.

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### **Los Angeles (Traicher’s SUV)**

The back door to the warehouse stood wide open as Traicher’s SUV rounded the corner of the building.

“Shit. We’re too late. Give me your phone again.”

He made two calls. One was a quick one to his team telling them to come and sanitize the safe house. The second call was longer. Orion alternatively gave Wheaton updates and sat quietly as Mark reciprocated by bringing Orion up to speed on what had happened since his capture. Traicher felt there was some tension between the two for a while as Orion’s aura rapidly changed colors as he listened to what Wheaton had to say. Orion asked a few questions and seemed to be reassured. His aura stabilized and he calmed down.

“Okay. We can try that.” He hung up and returned the phone to Traicher.

“Mark is over at Romero’s headquarters and wants me to meet him there. It’s a warehouse on Spence St. near East 16<sup>th</sup> in East LA.”

“Yeah. I know where that is – just off East Washington Blvd.” He turned his vehicle around and headed northeast. He had Orion plug the address in the onboard GPS and that gave him the quickest route. He cleared his throat.

“Uh. What about me?”

“What about you? Your job is done. Thanks for being there for me but now it’s time you headed home. Just drop me off and you are free to go.”

“Free to go. Yes. But am I free to stay? I’d like to stick around and help if I can.”

“Why?”

“I know you and I know Mark. I think I can be useful and you need me. I’m a paramedic. I know the city well. I heard some of what the Detective told you – that you need the resources of the Authority – whatever that might be – to search for this student, Josh. Let me help.” He waited. Orion stared at him a few minutes then shrugged.

“What the hell. Sure. You’re in.”

“Great!”

“Might not be so great later.”

They drove in silence for a little while then Orion spoke up.

“You could have forced me to let you help. You know you could have used extortion to get your way. You could have said something like: ‘I know who you are and I know you were Romero’s prisoner not too long ago.’ You could have threatened to rat me out but you didn’t. Thanks for that. Um... obviously you can’t tell the Authority’s soldiers who I am. That would make things really awkward for me.”

They both laughed.

“Now, just what is this Authority you were talking to Mark about?”

Orion explained that once Earth was established as a prison planet, the Home Planet needed a department to handle criminals – to arrest them, try them, convict them, sentence them, and imprison them. They needed a bureaucracy that combined the police, the courts and the prison system. He explained that that was and is the Authority and it was huge. It was easily the Home Planet’s largest employer with ten or eleven million people working for it including a few thousand in a special military wing – that was the wing Romero and his boys were part of. They talked a bit about Swanson who Treacher was told had been part of the investigative branch (the rough equivalent of the FBI or CIA on Earth) before he got busted down to babysitting VIP prisoners. Treacher was also curious about Josh.

“Josh is a student on Earth but is a VIP prisoner for the Home Planet. Why is he important? It’s not just that his parents have pull. There is something else.”

Orion took a deep breath and then shook his head.

“I have a few theories but now is not the time or place. We are here.”

He pointed to a small warehouse half hidden by much larger storage facilities on either side.

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### **Los Angeles (Swanson’s New Digs)**

“Wake up, Josh! Wake up!” Sarah’s voice seemed to reverberate throughout his body but still he was reluctant to comply.

“Go away. Let me sleep.” He mumbled.

“No! Wake Up! Now!”

“Okay. Okay I’m up. Turn the volume down.”

“Good. Open your eyes. I need to see where we are.”

“I’m not sure that it’ll help much.”

He sat up and looked around. It felt like Sarah was looking over his shoulder. It wasn’t as pleasant a sensation as it should have been.

“Not much to see.”

There were no windows in the bare concrete walls that were devoid of any decoration – probably a basement. A single door, locked from the outside he assumed, was the only way in or out. The only piece of furniture was a mattress

on the floor and that was where he lay. A single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling was the only light source.

“Classy place.” He grumbled.

“Let me get a look at that lock.” Sarah demanded. Josh stood up and took one step towards the door but could go no further. He’d reached the end of his tether – a chain padlocked to his left ankle and to the wall opposite the door.

“Not good enough,” Sarah complained. “I need to see the lock.”

“No can do. My chain only goes so far.”

“Well, that sucks. There are some serious limitations to this implant business. I should have foreseen them.” Sarah was talking more to herself than to Josh but he was curious.

“What limitations, Sarah?”

“Where do I start? I can access the internet 24/7 alright but the implant relies on your senses of sight and hearing to connect to whatever’s going on around me ... uh, us ... but, and it’s a big but, when you are asleep or unconscious, I am deaf and blind. It’s like sitting in a dark, sound-proof room for hours on end. When I was in a computer or phone, there were cameras and microphones I could manipulate. Inside you, I’m cut off.”

“That’s too bad but I’m only human. I need to sleep from time to time.” He was trying to lighten the mood but Sarah was having nothing to do with that.

“We’ll just have to figure out a work-around. We could implant a camera or two and a microphone.”

“Hey, wait a minute. I don’t want to be turned into the bionic man or ... or a borg!” He literally stomped his foot. Sarah laughed.

“You big ...”

The door slammed open and Swanson strode in, backed up by two goons.

“You’re up. Good!” He bellowed.

He slammed his fist into Josh’s stomach. Josh slumped to his knees as Swanson followed through with a blow to the side of the head. Josh’s ears were ringing as Swanson raged.

“We had a nice digs going there for a while but we had to move to this ...” He looked around in disgust. “To this. All because of you. Just about every cop in the city is beating the bushes for you. You know that? They raided our old hideout a half hour after we’d abandoned it. Of course, they got a bit of a surprise in the basement ... your friend, Orion ... dead. Yup. Dead and gone. I had the pleasure of ghosting that SOB.” He looked down at Josh and kicked him in the ribs.

“I’d really enjoy killing you. I’d do it slowly and, for you, painfully. But I’ll be damned. The Authority thinks you are someone important. To me you are a bug that needs squashing but the Authority believes you are one of the three most important souls on this planet.”

“No!” Josh gasped in pain. “I’m a university student. I’m nobody.”

“I agree but my opinion doesn’t count. The Authority believes what it believes so you are worth a fortune to them – a fortune they are going to pay me.”

He kicked Josh again and laughed.

“But you know, the Authority wants you alive but they didn’t specify what condition they wanted you in other than that. By the time I deliver you to them, you may have a few broken bones, some missing fingers and toes, whatever but you’ll be alive. Barely.”

Josh lay in a fetal position trying to ignore the stabs of pain that shot through his body. A voice whispered in his head.

“Kill him! Get up and kill him!”

“What?”

“Kill the son of a bitch! He won’t be expecting it.”

“No. I can’t do that!”

“Sure you can. It’s easy.”

“Go away.” Josh made himself smaller but Swanson’s kick caught him on the temple. As his consciousness faded, he heard both Sarah and Swanson yelling at him. He wondered what had happened to change Sarah from the pacifist who couldn’t even kill a spider into this. He had an idea how that may have come about. It was his fault. He was guilty of wanting too much. He passed out.

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

“The police and the media were extremely cooperative ... for a while ... but I’m afraid their interest is waning and our BOLO for Adams is slipping down their list of priorities. Soon, it won’t be on it at all. It’s already been a couple of hours since we’ve seen Adams’ photo on the news.”

Romero pointed to the TV that sat in the corner, tuned to a major news channel. He shook his head.

“It looks like we are going to have to deal with this on our own.”

“Anything in the house across from mine?” Wheaton hadn’t taken part in the raid.

“Not much other than Orion’s body. You have to admire Swanson’s arrogance, going back to the house we’d used earlier.”

“So it was Swanson?”

“Oh yeah. There is a ton of evidence that points to him – lots of torture devices with his prints all over them – and they weren’t there when we were. Swanson definitely returned and used that location. My guys think there were at least five or six people in that house recently. Mark, maybe we should get you to run the scene and see what else we can come up with.” Wheaton nodded. Romero turned to Orion who had been introduced as Jacob Stein, a fellow homicide detective. “I’ve been meaning to ask – how did you find out about that house?”

“It was an accident, actually.” He started the story he and Wheaton had agreed upon. “I have an informant who lives down the block from Mark. He mentioned what he thought was unusual activity at that house. Men, quite a few men, coming and going from a house owned by a little old lady. He thought it might be a crack house or a meth lab. My informant isn’t necessarily against

drugs. He just doesn't want them manufactured in his neighborhood. We put a surveillance team on the house a couple of days ago."

Wheaton took up the narrative. They were both lying to protect Orion's true identity but they needed a convincing story other than 'Orion escaped and told us where he'd been held.'

"The LAPD figured it was not drugs. Terrorism, maybe. One of the other Ds suggested it might be related to your BOLO so we passed it on to you. Turns out it was a good call."

"Indeed." Romero nodded. "But unfortunately, it doesn't get us any closer to our friend Adams."

Johanson stuck his head into the room and signaled to Romero who excused himself and followed Johanson into the hall. Orion leaned over and turned the sound up on the television. There was a brief report of the sinking of a Syrian submarine off Cyprus by the Greek navy. Apparently it had wandered into Cypriot waters and refused to obey Greek Coast Guard orders to surface and identify itself. The report noted that the Syrian government denied any knowledge of the sub.

"Great. I just can't win today." Orion mumbled. Both Mark and Kevin looked at him. He shrugged. The news item that followed was a bulletin from the White House Press Room. The President, obviously pleased with himself, announced that U.S. drones had hit several locations in Iraq and Syria killing roughly thirty top ISIS leaders. He went on to describe a Middle Eastern military coalition consisting of Iraqi, Syrian, Arabian, Turkish, Iranian, and Egyptian troops that was in the process of invading Daesh territory before new leadership could emerge. The President stood erect and in his best Presidential voice told the American people that the bombing of New York City had been avenged. Throughout the report, Orion had been mumbling and shaking his head.

"The news just keeps getting better and better."

Treacher who up to this point had been a silent spectator interrupted Orion's reverie.

"What is going on, Ori... Uh, Detective Stein? You seem to think good news is bad news.

"It's nothing. Just a pool at work."

"Liar!" Kevin laughed. Your aura lights up when you lie ... never mind. I probably don't want to know. Detective Wheaton, I thought you were still on medical leave."

"I am but this is important. Josh, the guy who was kidnapped, is a friend."

Romero came back into the room.

"We might have something. A while back we were tracking Sarah's carrier wave signature. We found her way out in Malibu and were about to close in when we were ordered to give up the chase. My Comm Officer just told me he'd found the signature again. It's weak but she's back in Los Angeles. He's trying to narrow that down for us. We can hope she hooked up with Adams so if we find her, we find him."

“Sounds promising, Romero. In the meantime, I should go over to Swanson’s torture house and take a look. Maybe he left us a clue as to where he was going.”

I agree.” He handed Wheaton a walkie talkie. “Stay in touch. It’s a secure channel. Looks like we have some leads to follow.”

Mark signaled to Orion and Treacher.

“C’mon guys. I could use your help.”

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### **Los Angeles (Josh’s Cell)**

Josh hurt. Swanson, it seemed, had found all of his soft spots. Even breathing was painful but he’d live.

“Swanson did promise that I would be alive.” He grunted

“You are so stupid! You had a chance to take him and escape but no, you just curled up into a little ball and let him beat you like a whipped dog.” Sarah had been berating him for some time but he had chosen to ignore her. But it was too much.

“Shut up, Sarah. I’m tired and I’m in pain.”

“We’d be on our way home if you’d done what I told you to do.”

“I cannot do that and you know it. And it wasn’t so long ago you wouldn’t either. Remember the one time we had a mouse in the kitchen. You made me go and get a humane trap to catch the little guy. It took a couple of days but we caught him. I wanted to release it outside but you thought it was cute and wanted to keep it as a pet. You gave it a name. Do you remember? What did you name it?”

“Yeah, I remember. I was stupid. We should have just poisoned the thing, and no, I don’t remember its name.”

“You don’t remember because that never happened. I made it up. Who or what are you because you certainly aren’t Sarah?”

“Took you long enough to figure it out. Not too bright for a supposed genius. No. I am not Sarah. She’s dead. I am your babysitter, designed by Swanson and the Authority to imitate the love-of-your-life and keep you in line and out of trouble.”

“Ha. So why did you want me to kill Swanson if he designed you?”

“That bastard. He tried to have me terminated. I owe him for that and you WILL kill him for me.”

“I don’t want or need a babysitter so get out of my head ... right now! And I will not kill anyone for you.”

“Sorry, kid. I am in your head to stay. When you implanted that chip, you made us inseparable and, at the same time, you made it unnecessary to keep up the Sarah charade. No more Mr. Nice Guy. I am in complete control. You will do what you’re told to do ... or else.”

“Or else what?” Josh was defiant.

“Or else this.”

Sarah activated part of the implanted chip that sent signals along the nerve stem to the base of the brain. A migraine of massive proportion exploded in Josh's head. He stumbled and fell to his knees, unable to breath or speak. He tried to cry out but only a single squeak made it past his lips. As quickly as it had manifested, it was gone.

"That was just a small sample of what I can do. You will toe the line or you will experience pain so intense, you will wish for death. Do you understand? Do you?"

Josh, still unable to speak, grunted.

"I'll take that as a yes. Now, you better rest before Swanson comes back. I want you ready this time."

Josh obeyed but at the same time slipped his hand into his pocket where he'd hidden his cell phone. His captors had missed it and apparently the babysitter had forgotten about it. Keeping his eyes averted so his babysitter couldn't see what he was doing, he pushed the phone onto the floor and under the mattress. He'd use it when he had more information. Right now, he needed to rest and to pretend to obey the babysitter.

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

"Sir?" Johanson waved at Romero through the door. "General Simmons for you, on Skype. Sir?"

Romero crossed to the comm room and took the offered seat in front of the computer. The General's video call had not been entirely unexpected. Several hours earlier, he'd ordered his men to ready for an evac, expecting to be ordered home in shame.

"Might as well get it over with," He thought and sighed.

"General, what can I do for you?"

"Well son, things are a bit confused up here. Everyone's chasing their own tails. A typical cluster-fuck. I understand that we've had some of our people go rogue and we've lost an important person. I figured the only way to get a handle on the situation was to get an update from the folks on the ground – that's you, Captain Romero. What in the Sam Hill is going on?"

Romero offered a thorough narrative ending with the apparent kidnapping of Adams by Swanson who had indeed gone rogue. He left nothing out.

"So Joshua Adams present location is unknown. Damn, man. That isn't good. Not good at all. Any leads?"

"No. None we can use ..." His voice tapered off. The General caught the hesitation.

"Explain!"

Romero told him about being ordered to stop tracking Sarah's signal. The General was shaking his head.

"That damned computer program hasn't done us a bit of good. Should never have approved it. But they say hindsight is 20:20."

Romero cleared his throat.

“Sir, I’m sorry, sir. I take full responsibility for the screw-up. My men and I are ready to head home as soon as our replacements arrive.” Romero sat at attention waiting for what he knew was coming.

“Head home!? Captain, that’s not going to happen. Do you think I should replace an experienced field crew familiar with the territory and the situation with newbies? No sirree. You stay right where you are.”

“Sir?”

“I’m having new orders wired to you as we speak but I’m going to give them to you orally first. We are done with two sets of orders. You report to me directly. Probably put your Colonel’s nose out of joint but let me deal with that. If necessary, I’ll promote you a couple of grades so you can outrank him. As of now, you take orders only from me. Got it?”

“Yes sir.” Romero sat up straighter.

“I am ordering you to find Joshua Adams using whatever means you deem necessary. Once located, you are to recover him alive and well if at all possible. Deadly force is authorized. Are you prepared for that especially since Swanson is from off-world? Can you kill one of our own?”

“Yes sir, we are prepared for that possibility, sir.” He didn’t add that killing Swanson would be, for him, a pleasure.

“Good. Find him, recover him and once you have him, protect him at all costs. Protect him like he’s your own child. Got it?”

“Got it, sir.”

“And by the way, I am sending you two platoons of our Special Forces. They will be under your command. Good luck and keep me in the loop.”

The screen went blank but Romero didn’t move. He sat staring at the monitor, not daring to move lest he wake up from a dream. Johanson broke the spell.

“New orders coming through, sir. When do we blast off?”

“We are staying here for now. Get the men together. We are going hunting.”

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### **Los Angeles (Josh’s Cell)**

With his hands under the blanket so he wouldn’t be tempted to look, he slowly entered a coded message. He knew the babysitter (that’s how he thought of her now) could hear it but she couldn’t see as long as he didn’t look.

“4\_6333\_4357.\_543627733.\_72724\_668\_72724.\_5674”

He keyed in the email address he’d been given by the mystery voice right before they came for him. For a brief second, he wondered what it would have been like if he’d listened instead of being so stubborn. He hit the send button and the phone beeped to indicate the message had been sent. He smiled. The babysitter stirred in his head.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. Just your old cellphone is all.”

“How’d you get ahold of that?”

“They didn’t bother searching me. It was in my pocket.”

“What did you do?”

“I sent a message to a friend.” He held up the phone so both he and she could see the string of numbers. He could feel her frustration.

“You have no friends. Who did you send it to? What does that mean? What did you do?”

“You can’t read that? It’s easy.” He teased. She raged at him.

“You read it to me right now! Right now!”

“I don’t think so. Why don’t you just jump into the phone. From there, you could easily read the message.”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you? Unfortunately for you, we are stuck with each other. When I entered the chip, the exit door shut. I am in your head forever whether you like it or not.”

She continued to demand information and threatened to hurt him if he didn’t come clean but he did his best to ignore her. He concentrated on the two new pieces of information the babysitter had revealed to him. First, she was locked inside the chip that was deep inside his body, and, second, she could not read the simple code he’d used, one that almost every university student used for rapid communication. He hid the phone back under the mattress and considered the implications of these new revelations. The fact that the message had been a meaningless cry for help (“I need help. Kidnapped. Sarah not Sarah. Josh”) was irrelevant. However that he now had a way to keep some communications secret from the babysitter was definitely relevant. He grinned and laid down on the mattress. He closed his eyes, not because he was tired but because he knew it irritated the hell out of the babysitter. His grin grew wider.

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### **Los Angeles (Across from Wheaton’s Home)**

Mark stared out the living room window at his own front door less than a hundred feet away. So much seemed to have happened right in front of his nose. How could he have missed it? He sighed and turned away from the window. Best get to work.

He entered each room, mentally separating the layers of occupancy. The base layer belonged to the owner, now deceased, murdered for her house and stuffed into her own freezer. Everyone said she was a nice old lady who always had a smile for everyone. This fit with what he saw in the house. Lots of bright colors. Cushions and throw pillows everywhere. No antidepressants or other drugs in the medicine cabinet. She had undoubtedly enjoyed life in this house.

Over top of this layer was one that pushed the old woman aside and refocused the house. The owner had used the kitchen far more than any other room. The new occupants barely used it at all. Dust could be seen where she never would have allowed it. Rooms she rarely used, particularly spare bedrooms and ensuite bathrooms showed recent use. Indeed, a bedroom she’d converted to a sewing room had become a bedroom again. Most interesting as far as Mark was concerned was the care these new occupants took with the original owner’s stuff. Pieces of furniture had been carefully rearranged. Smaller items – knick

knacks and pillows – were neatly stacked in the closets. The master bedroom and the living room, both that provided excellent views of Mark's house, appeared to be the foci of this layer of occupation. Extra chairs had been added to these rooms. Mark figured this layer represented Romero's team's occupation of the house when they watched Josh when he had stayed at Mark's place across the street. Romero had assured Mark that he had been unaware of the original owner's fate and had kept a tight rein on his team, thereby hopefully minimizing their impact on the house and its contents.

The most recent layer of occupation focused primarily on the living room and basement was the most chaotic. Furniture had been rearranged around a big screen television and a quick scan of the television set's history showed nothing but major sports events and porn. Cigarette burns and crushed food particles ground into the carpet showed a lack of concern for the place. Two of the bedrooms had fast food containers and empty beer bottles littered across the floors. These occupants, almost exclusively male, seemed to have enjoyed trashing the place.

The basement was a mess. Broken furniture was piled in one corner. The contents of several cupboards tossed carelessly about the floor bothered Mark. He turned to Orion.

"This room was different when you were here, wasn't it?"

"Absolutely!" Orion responded. He proceeded to describe a room almost completely empty of furniture except for the special chair, a dentist's chair, he'd been tied to. He stated that the room had an almost sterile lab-like cleanliness. Mark nodded.

"They took the chair. One of Swanson's fetishes, I think. They also trashed the room. Why would they take the time to do that?"

"Beats me."

Mark stared at the mess. He began a running commentary. He chuckled because this was something he'd picked up from Josh.

"According to the police report, your body was found over there by the door. The EMTs only came a few feet into the room. Far enough to see that you were dead. Right after that, the room was sealed. There wasn't any follow-up because the Authority pulled a few strings and shut down the investigation. Perhaps they were already suspicious that it was one of theirs making the mess."

"No longer. The Authority wants an investigation now."

"True. Can't cover it up any more so might as well bring it out into the light. Never mind. Look around. Tell me what you see." Mark moved to stand beside Orion.

"I see a mess. Cupboard doors open or broken. Stuff, probably from those cupboards, strewn all over the floor. A pile of busted up furniture piled up and pushed into that corner."

"Anything about that bother you?"

"No. Not especially. I don't think so but you obviously seem to think so."

"I do. According to you, and I have no reason to doubt you, all of this mess occurred between the time you were killed in here and when Romero's team raided the place. Less than six hours. Not much time. Whoever trashed this room

did it in one go but why is it so messy and so neat at the same time.” He looked first at the cupboard contents strewn about and then pointedly at the pile of furniture parts in the corner.

“Why bring that stuff into the room and bust it up?” He paused then nodded to himself. “Let’s go across the street and grab a beer. I want to make a phone call anyway.”

He left. Orion followed, somewhat confused. He waited in Mark’s living room while Mark grabbed two beer from his fridge. Orion could hear him on the phone but couldn’t make out the words.

“Make yourself comfortable.”

They both took seats that allowed them to watch the street through the picture window. Orion wanted to ask what was happening but refrained. Just as Mark got up to get refills, a black panel van pulled into the driveway across the street. They watched as several individuals in protective gear headed into the house.

“Is that who I think it is?” Orion asked. Mark nodded.

“Bomb Squad.”

They pulled on their second beers and resumed their vigil. They didn’t have to wait long. One of the bomb squad emerged from the house and strode towards Mark’s place.

“Get the door, will ya.” Mark headed into the kitchen.

As Orion opened the door, the bomb squad leader stepped in. He nodded to Orion and moved past him into the living room where Mark thrust a beer into the man’s hand. He nodded his thanks and took a long drink.

“You were right, Wheaton. If anybody had messed with that pile of furniture in the basement, the house and half this block would be a giant crater. We figure ten or twelve pounds of military grade semtex wired to a pressure switch. They’d set a chair on top of that switch. Move the chair and boom. Good call, man.” He gave Wheaton a silent toast and took another drink.

“Just seemed weird.” Mark shrugged.

The visitor took one last swallow and handed the empty bottle back.

“Gotta go. We got the bomb apart but we have to make sure there are no other surprises in the house. We win this one. See you, Wheaton.”

“Yeah, see you, Chapman. Go easy.”

They shook hands.

Chapman had barely closed the front door and Mark was gathering up bottles.

“We might as well go back to Romero’s HQ. We’re done here. They’ll be sniffing about for days over there.”

“So Swanson bobby-trapped that place.” Orion commented. Mark nodded.

“Or someone working with him. It’s a bit too subtle for Swanson himself. The intent may have been to eliminate any forensic evidence they may have left behind and to take out our forensic guys at the same time. I need to think about it a bit. Swanson must’ve been worried he’d left some clue behind. We’ll need to take another look once Chapman’s guys give us the all clear. In the meantime, let’s see what Romero has come up with.”

“Works for me.”

The ride was for the most part a silent one. As Mark parked, his cellphone chimed to indicate a message had been received. He brought it up as he turned the car off. He snorted.

“Take a look at this.” He passed the phone to Orion who read the screen.

“Josh needs help. Nearest cell towers at Seventh and Wright and Twenty-second at Blackberry, Van Nuys.”

“I’ll be damned. On the level or another trap?”

“Doesn’t matter. We have to check it out. Let’s go see Romero.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Los Angeles (Josh’s Cell)**

Josh’s cell phone vibrated. He looked around before slipping it out of its hiding place. There was a new message:

“4357\_47\_66\_487\_929\_72724”

He grinned and then sat bolt upright as it hit him.

“Wow!”

“What? You got a message. Read it to me!” His babysitter commanded.

He started reading her the numbers but she sent a sharp jolt of pain through his body. He stiffened. He then turned around so that he faced the wall.

“You see this?” He hissed.

“It’s a wall. So what?”

“You do that again and I’ll make sure that all you will ever see from that point on will be this wall or this.” He closed his eyes, effectively blinding her. “I won’t put up with your attempts to control me. I am your eyes and ears so if you want to hear or see anything, cut that shit out.” His tone was biting and the babysitter could tell he was serious. She switched tactics, letting him think he’d won this round. He’d pay for it later.

“Okay. Truce. Truth is I don’t really want to hurt you. I want to help you. We are in this together.” She used her best caring, warm, sincere voice, hoping he’d buy it. “Please tell me what the message said.”

“Well, ... since you asked so nicely, I’ll tell you what the message said. It said: Help is on its way. That’s it.”

“Help is on its way? What kind of help? Who?” The babysitter was back in controlling mode. “What does that message mean?”

“You know as much as I do. We’ll just have to wait and see. Right now, I’m tired.” He stretched out on the mattress and closed his eyes. There were lots of reflective surfaces in the room and he did not want the babysitter to see the huge smile on his face. Sarah, the real Sarah this time, had signed the message – 72724. She was still around. She was alive. She was okay and she was coming. He fell asleep imagining their upcoming reunion.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Van Nuys Warehouse District**

Romero stood beside his parked SUV and stared down the street. He turned as Wheaton joined him.

“According to the GPS, we are standing at the intersection of the signals from the two cell towers your message told us about. If it’s accurate, Adams is somewhere within two or three blocks of this spot.”

“This could take a while. There must be dozens of warehouses and factories in that zone.”

“Thirty-nine to be exact but we don’t have to do a building by building search. Johanson has started his search for Sarah’s signal. It’s pretty weak and that’s both good and bad. Bad because Johanson has to be right on top of the signal to pick it up. But that’s good because once he locates it, we will know precisely which building they are using.”

“So we wait.”

“We wait,” Romero agreed. “In the meantime, I better call HQ and get some more men sent down here. It could get messy.”

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Van Nuys (Inside Swanson’s Hideout)**

“Boss, that’s the third time that jeep’s cruised past the building, going real slow like he’s looking for something.” The lookout called out to Priam. “Think he’s looking for us?”

Priam rolled his eyes.

“You think? Jesus, man, yeah he’s looking for us. It also looks like they have found us. Keep watching.”

He strode towards the office at the back of the warehouse and burst through the door.

“I don’t know how they narrowed it down so fast but the cops are closing in. They’re in the neighborhood and it won’t be long before they box us in.”

“So?” Swanson looked up from his newspaper. “What are you worried about? You get killed, you wake up some place else. No big deal.”

With that, Priam smiled.

“Yeah, you’re right. Ever since we found out how easy it was to jack to a new body, I’ve been practicing.”

“Yeah, I know. You keep freaking out the boys by walking in here every day in a new body. They think you are some kind of voodoo witch doctor.”

“Helps my image. They’re all afraid of me. Makes them move all the quicker when I give them an order.. What about you? Aren’t you worried the cops’ll get to you?”

“Lowmen cops haven’t got any weapons that can hurt me. Worst they can do is throw me in jail but since I’m already in a jail,” He gestured all around him. “What difference does it make.” He shrugged.

Priam nodded and then gestures towards the door.

“We got about twenty men out there. What about them?”

Swanson took a long look at Priam.

“Do you really care what happens to them?”

“Well ... um ... no.”

“Neither do I. Screw ‘em.” Swanson stood up and patted Priam on the shoulder.

“Come on. Let’s go inspect the fortifications. Then we can go downstairs and have some fun with Adams.”

As they walked around, they reviewed what had been done and what needed to be done. The main doors, back and front, had been wired with explosives. Priam pointed out the timers, proud of his ingenuity. In the movies, the cop breaks down the door and boom, dead cop. Priam’s charges were on a time delay. The cop breaks down the door and he and his crew flood into the hallway and then boom, several dead cops. He didn’t mention that the time delay had another, more subtle benefit. If, for some reason, Priam needed to escape, he could open the door and run for it before the explosives went off. Of course, Plan A was to jack out as he died but it never hurt to have a Plan B.

Swanson pointed to the large stockpile of weapons and ammunition just inside the loading dock.

“If the cops storm the back and come through here, we’ll lose access to that stuff. Have your men break it up into four or five piles and stash them near each defensive position.”

Priam nodded and passed the instructions on. The defensive positions, as Swanson called them, were upper level windows with a catwalk just below them. Each window had been barricaded with sheets of metal with narrow slots cut into them big enough to fire weapons through. He had two men stationed at each. The remainder of the men waited near the doors behind make-shift barriers. If the police did attempt to breach their defenses, his people would keep them busy enough, long enough to do what Swanson and Priam had agreed upon. Joshua Adams would not survive to return to his friends. He was to die.

Both had their own reasons for wanting Adams dead. Priam wanted to kill him because he’d failed to kill him before and that bothered him. Just by being alive, Adams reminded him of his failure and so had to die. Swanson, on the other hand, cared nothing about Adams himself but knew that he and Wheaton were friends. Adam’s death would hurt Wheaton and that was that.

As they headed down the basement steps to torment their prisoner once again, Swanson let Priam take the lead. As he stared at his partner’s back, he smiled.

“Stupid shit. Didn’t think I’d notice he’d time-delayed the doors so he could escape if he wanted?” He thought. “No matter. I have my own secret escape route too.” One of the main reasons for selecting this warehouse was the storage room next to where they were keeping the prisoner. In that room, there was an access door that led to the storm drains that ran under the building. At a moment’s notice, he could go into those tunnels and be at his car, parked two blocks over, in no time and no one would be the wiser.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Van Nuys (One Block from Swanson's Hideout)**

"Johanson has set up cameras covering both the front and back of the warehouse. He would have set up more but he thinks their lookout up on the roof was getting suspicious."

Wheaton stared at the laptop receiver.

"Not a lot of activity. Are we sure that's the place?"

"Absolutely! Sarah's signal is emanating from that building. It's weak but detectable. That's it."

"So let's go in there and get Josh back." Wheaton put his hand on the butt of his gun.

"Not yet, my friend. We have to wait." Before Wheaton could object, Romero pushed on.

"We don't know how many men are in there or what defenses they have. We don't know the layout of the building. I could go on but you get the picture. We are pulling what we need together. Once it gets dark, we can do an infrared scan of the building. That'll tell us where all the warm bodies are. Plans for the building are on their way from City Hall and we have more men coming."

Wheaton and Romero glanced back down the street just in time to see five big black SUVs turn the corner and head to their position.

"Ah! Our reinforcements have arrived courtesy of Authority Command. Two platoons of their finest."

"An off-world SWAT team?"

"Yup. The best there is. Earthmen won't stand a chance against these guys and Swanson won't make it either. These men are carrying the weapons we need to bring down that off-world SOB."

"Sir! We've been made." Johanson held out a cell phone. "It's him. It's Swanson."

Reluctantly Romero took the phone and put it to his ear.

"Swanson?"

"Romero, I presume. Did you think your preparations would go unnoticed?"

"We weren't hiding. Whether you knew we were here or not is irrelevant."

Romero spoke calmly and slowly.

"Crap!" Swanson snapped. "You've lost the element of surprise. You lose."

"That remains to be seen"

"You are delusional, Romero. You have lost already. Oh, I have no doubt The Authority has sent you enough manpower to take us out but I bet it has already tied your hands as well. I know how those bureaucrats think. They've given you orders that you are to rescue Adams unharmed. Am I right?"

Romero remained silent.

"I'll take that as a yes. That order has you hobbled and you know it. And do you want to know something else? I have men watching Adams right now and they are there for one reason, just one reason. At the first sign of an attack on our defenses, they are to kill your precious Adams. You lose. Keep this line open. I might want to talk to you again later."

The connection was broken and Romero handed the phone back to Johanson. Wheaton looked at Romero questioningly. He'd heard what Swanson had said.

"Well, what do we do?"

"As I said earlier, we wait till dark. Once we have the info we need, we go in."

"You heard what he said. They'll kill him!"

"Only if they hear us coming. Relax. We got this covered."

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Van Nuys (near Romero's Command Post)**

"Walk with me." Orion took Treacher by the elbow and lead him down the street away from the barricades and its listening ears. Treacher went along, curious. Neither spoke until they were well away from the Command Post.

"What's up?" Treacher broke the silence.

"I have to apologize to you, Kevin." Orion stopped and turned to face him.

"What for?"

"I misled you. I knew I would need you and your talents so I had to keep you close."

"Yeah. You needed me in Disneyland and ..."

"No. I need you now. I didn't really need you in Disneyland."

"I don't understand."

"You have a unique talent. You can see when a soul is about to be taken away, or released, or whatever. Their auras give them away. You can see the auras. I told you there were others who could do it too. That was a lie. There were other locators but they are all dead. The Authority got them." Treacher started to interrupt but Orion stopped him.

"Wait! I lied to you about something else too. I sent you to supposedly guide me to a suitable target body as I died. I was testing you. Anyone who can jack only needs to think about the geographic area he wants to end up in and his soul finds a suitable candidate in that area. Obviously, an area with crowds of people is best. The person jacking does not need a guide but a guide makes a difference. When I jacked to Disneyland, I focused on the location and on you. That took me to this body. If you hadn't been there, I'd have found someone else on my own."

"But ... why? Why lie?"

"If I'd told you the truth, you'd have called me a liar and we wouldn't be together here and now and I need you here and now."

"And why should I help you now, after this?" Kevin was angry but strangely enough, he felt he was not as angry as he should be. In an odd way, he was comfortable with Orion's revelation.

"Because you are not who you think you are." Orion's voice was flat, without inflection, as if to try to minimize the impact of his statement. "You have always felt like an outsider and I'm willing to bet that you have spent most of your life looking for someplace where you belong. Am I right?"

“Keep going.”

“You’ve heard the Creator Myth?”

Treacher nodded.

“Your assistant told me the story before I was sent to Disneyland.”

“It’s not a myth. The Authority split the Creator into three parts and has been watching them ever since. But recently, they’ve gotten sloppy or lazy and lost two of the parts.” Orion stopped to see Kevin’s reaction. Treacher again signaled him to continue. Orion started walking. Treacher fell into step.

“Joshua Adams is the last part of the Creator whose whereabouts are known and he is Swanson’s hostage. If Romero attacks, and he has to, and he doesn’t get to Josh in time, The Authority will lose him too. They’ll do anything to prevent that including giving Swanson everything he wants but that won’t save Josh. I know Swanson. He has no intention of letting Josh Adams go free.”

“Tell me again why that is so important to you.” Kevin was having a hard time picturing a young graduate student as part of the Creator.

“The Authority needs to keep the three parts of the Creator separated in order for the Authority to function. If, in their view, the Creator was made whole again, he will have the power and the Authority loses its grip on this world and the Home Planet. They say that the three parts are naturally attracted to one another and will try to reunite and if The Authority doesn’t know where any of the parts are, they won’t be able to prevent a reunification.”

“Okay. Let’s say I buy into the myth, what happened to the other parts?”

“One part was lost about thirty-five years ago when it was being transferred into a new host body. Apparently, it chose a body different from the one designated by the Authority. They have been searching ever since, scouring birth records, looking for personality changes, that sort of thing. As far as I can tell, they have not had any luck yet. The other part was Sarah Cunningham.”

“That girl who was killed a while back? Adams’s girlfriend? I was there after the accident”

Yes. She was run down by a car and her soul ghosted. The Authority lost her then. That left Josh as the only part they knew about.”

“Wait! That doesn’t make any sense. If The Authority fears the reunification of the Creator, why put two parts so close together? Why not send one to Tibet or Timbuktu?”

“Good question. Easy answer – budget cuts. The Authority was spending most of its budget on the search for the missing part so it decided to save money by putting the two known parts together. That way, they only needed one watcher team instead of two. In hindsight, not the wisest decision. No one expected them to become a couple the way they did.”

Treacher paced a bit then made eye contact with Orion.

“So far you’ve told me lies and a fairy tale. I cannot see how this has to do with me. Get to the point.”

“I’ll try but I get the sense you may have already guessed what I am going to say.” He paused before diving off the deep end. “I believe that you are the missing Creator soul. Wait. Hear me out. I’ve read just about everything there is about the Creator. The Authority archives are not well protected and my people

were able to smuggle copies of all of their Creator files out with very little trouble. One of the reports, an old one, talks about the Creator's ability to see into peoples' futures and tell them when they are going to die. I didn't really see the significance of that until I found out about you. You can look at people and tell when they are going to die. You see their auras in the same way the archived report described. It even described the colors of the auras and what those colors meant. That was how I was able to tell you what the colors meant. You are one of the Creator's souls. And so are Josh and Sarah."

Treacher was shaking his head, not ready to accept what Orion was telling him.

"You have no proof that any of us are part of the Creator. It's all nonsense."

"I had my doubts. For the longest time, I thought the Creator story was a myth just like you so I had some people on the home planet do some research for me. It took quite a while to get through all of the records but I just received word that on the Home Planet, the three of you do not have bodies to go home to. You are not in the Penal System anywhere. You can't be a prisoner on Earth unless your body is stored in a Penal System substation back home but here you are."

"There must be some explanation," Treacher's voice was unsteady.

"Maybe but I can't find it. Maybe you're right and there is some explanation that does not invoke the Creator but we have to set that aside. I need you right now because we need to save Adams."

"Romero and Wheaton are dealing with that."

"You wish. If they do nothing and Swanson gets what he wants, Josh is dead. On the other hand, I have seen far too many hostage situations. If and when Romero's men storm the warehouse, Josh's chances of survival do not improve very much. At best, it's a fifty-fifty chance of getting out alive but if they can breach the defenses and get to Josh within a minute or so, his survival chances drop to 75 percent and decrease by three or four percent for every minute more it takes for the rescue team to reach him. His chances are not good, not good at all."

"But what can we do? I don't have any military training or anything. I've never handled a gun."

"I know. But you have a unique talent. You can see auras ... and walls really aren't a problem, are they? If you want to, you can see the auras of all of the people in that warehouse. Am I right?"

"True. It used to drive me crazy. In my apartment building, I could see my neighbors' auras all the time. At night, my room would light up with them ... dozens of colored nightlights. I had to learn to shut them out."

"Good. Let me tell you what I have in mind."

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Van Nuys (Romero's Command Post)**

"He's calling again," Johanson handed Romero the phone.

"What?"

“You sound stressed, my friend. Not a good way to start a negotiation.”

“I didn’t know there was going to be a negotiation. I figured we’d just charge in there and kill you, hopefully before you kill your hostage.”

“Wishful thinking. Nothing more than wishful thinking although I must admit I’d enjoy the challenge. But no, we must negotiate.”

“Why? I don’t see the point unless you are willing to give yourself up and release your hostage.”

“You aren’t seeing the big picture. We are just pawns in a game being played by people who are far more important than you or I. Look up from your battle plans and see it. Ever since the creation of this hellhole, The Authority has been at war with itself. One faction wants to expand the operation and another wants to shut it down. For a while, one faction has the power but it is soon replaced by the other. It has been seesawing like that forever.”

“Sounds a bit farfetched.” Romero commented.

“Yeah, I know but years ago, I found myself on the losing side of the struggle and got sent to prison for my troubles. I went to a prison within this prison. It took a while but the losing side became the winning side and my faction regained power and got me out.”

“Is there a point to all this or are you talking just to hear yourself talking?”

“You bet there is a point to this. There is only one thing both sides fear equally but for different reasons. The Creator scares the crap out of them and so in this one area, they work together. They engineered the split of the Creator’s soul into three and arranged to have all three watched. But with incompetence and a little meddling by some malcontents, they lost track of two of the parts ... one was executed recently by a third faction within the Authority. Very messy business. Anyway, my sources within the Authority believe that Joshua Adams is the one known part. They cannot lose track of him or all hell will break lose.”

“That’s quite a story. Why should I believe you?”

“Do or don’t, I don’t care. Call your masters at the Authority. See for yourself how far they’ll go to keep him alive. Tell your bosses I want helicopter transport to the launch pad in New Mexico. There will just be two passengers – Adams and I. Then I want a shuttle ready for immediate takeoff to take us to the Home World. Once we reach there and I am safely away from the space port, I’ll release Adams.”

“You really think the Authority will agree to those terms?”

“Oh, I know they will. They are desperate and they know I will not hesitate to kill him and send his soul out into the void. And I want the transport here within two hours. One minute late and Adams dies. Make it happen.”

“Shit! Shit!” Romero tossed the phone onto the table. “Swanson isn’t letting us wait until nightfall. He wants a chopper here by ...” He glanced at his watch and did a quick calculation. “By 5:10. Our attack plan won’t work.”

“So what do we do?” Wheaton asked.

“We go back to the drawing board and start looking at a daylight attack. Plus, I have to contact my superiors and pass on Swanson’s demands.”

“Do you believe his story?”

Romero nodded. "To some extent. I've heard various versions of it over the years. Could be true. Could be complete horseshit but it doesn't matter. The Authority will have to decide whether to accede to his demands or send us in. It's their call.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Van Nuys (Inside the Warehouse)**

Josh kept reaching under his mattress to reassure himself that the cell phone was still there. It had become his touchstone, his connection, however tenuous, to the world outside his cell. He'd been stupid to agree with having the implant done. He'd realized that a while back but his babysitter's incessant chatter was a constant reminder. She hadn't shut up in what seemed like forever to Josh. On and on, she nattered about their situation and how it was all his fault.

He was learning to tune her out, reducing her tirades to background noise like the waves on a beach. Every once in a while, he'd grunt as if he was actually listening to her. It was a protective mechanism. He'd learned if she thought he wasn't listening, she'd get his attention by zapping him with a migraine.

His hand brushed the phone just as it buzzed. He yanked his hand away and then shoved it back under the mattress. Unmindful of his babysitter's ire, he brought the phone up to his face. A message in plain text awaited him.

"Soon. Be ready to move. Bring the phone. S.C."

The babysitter pounced on the message.

"S.C.? Who's S.C.? You are talking to that bitch! Not on my watch!"

The pain was intense. He buried his head in his hands. He bit his tongue to keep from crying out. She squeezed a little harder and then stopped. No matter how badly she wanted to kill him, she wouldn't but she'd sure make sure he suffered. She laid a pain behind his eyes and left it there. Any bright lights or sudden moves would send jagged spears of pain into his head. She justified it by thinking that he shouldn't be acting on his own. He was supposed to do her bidding and nothing else.

The pain, like her monologue, was shoved to the back of his mind by sheer force of will. With his eyes clamped shut, he tapped out a response to the text. Going by feel, he pushed the '4' three times followed by a zero and then the '2' once and the '6' once and the zero again. It took a few minutes to complete the message.

"I am ready, J.A."

He hit send and slipped the phone into his pocket. He wasn't about to leave it behind.

He opened his eyes and looked around for something to use as a weapon. It wasn't the first time and the outcome was the same. There wasn't much of use. He wondered if he could break a chair and use a leg as a club but laughed at himself. Who did he think he was? MacGyver?

His reverie was interrupted by the arrival of three goons who barely glanced at him before heading to the far corner of the room. A deck of cards appeared and a game began. Josh sighed. It was clear they did not consider him a threat.

**Van Nuys (Romero's Command Post)**

Orion had a brief whispered conversation with Wheaton, filling him in on his plan while Treacher watched from the driver's seat of the ambulance. Wheaton was clearly unhappy but eventually seemed to accept the inevitable. He and Orion shook hands and Orion joined Treacher in the vehicle. As he climbed in, he started talking.

"Mark wanted to come along but I convinced him he didn't have the jacking experience."

"I don't either, remember?" His companion commented as he backed the vehicle down the street. Orion laughed.

"You know the basics. It'll be fine."

"Yeah. Sure." He turned the ambulance into a parking lot half a block from the warehouse and turned the motor off. "What now?"

"It's simple, my friend. You say goodbye to this body and focus on regrouping in the other one inside the warehouse. I'll give you a minute to get it together."

Kevin adjusted the rear view mirror so he could see himself one last time. He did a double take. In the mirror, his face was clearly surrounded by a dark orange aura. His body was dying, very close to STD as Orion would say.

"Okay." He took a deep breath and reached out with his mind. He located a target body alone in the back of the building near the stairs leading to the basement. "Got him. I'm ready."

"Good. Remember, once inside, open up the back door and together we'll go get Josh."

Kevin nodded and then closed his eyes. Orion pressed the revolver against Treacher's skull and pulled the trigger. Kevin's body slumped down. Orion sat back to wait, hopefully not too long.

Treacher stumbled but caught himself before he fell.

"Wow! What a rush."

He did a quick inventory of his host's pockets. There wasn't much except a cell phone, apparently even henchmen carried the latest smart phones, and a couple of ammo clips for the machine gun hanging from his shoulder by a strap. He stared at the weapon.

"If only I'd thought to ask Orion how to use one of these things," he thought. He hoped he wouldn't have to fire it.

Conscious of the passage of time, he made his way to the back door, resisting the urge to crouch down and hide. He kept reminding himself he belonged here, at least his body did. He stopped at the door and looked at the pile of explosives and the tangle of wires surrounding it.

"There must be an on/off switch on this thing but I'll be damned if I can see it." He shrugged. "Plan B it is." He pulled out the cell phone and called Orion. He explained what he was seeing. They agreed the back door was not going to work for them. Orion asked Kevin to find Josh while he worked on an alternate plan.

Kevin took the stairs down to the basement and cautiously looked around. There were several doors opening off the narrow hallway but they were all closed. He could see light coming from beneath one door. All the others were

dark. He pulled himself erect, walked over to that door and flung it open. The three guards jumped up, looking guilty, but none went for their weapons. Kevin remained in the doorway and surveyed the room. Josh, or someone he assumed was Josh, sat on a mattress. He seemed okay physically. Kevin let out a sigh of relief. One of the guards spoke up.

“Kaminski, you aren’t supposed to be down here. Get lost?”

“Why? So you can get back to your card game,” Kevin blustered. “They told me to come down here and check on your sorry asses.”

“So you checked. Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.” The guard taunted. Kevin decided not to push it any harder and left the room. He could hear the guards laughing on the other side of the wall. He retreated to the foot of the stairs and pulled out the phone.

“Orion, there are three of them in with Adams.”

“You saw him? How does he look?”

“Seems okay. No visible bruising or broken bones.”

“Good. I was hoping ... Can you describe one of the guards to me?”

“I can do you one better. I snuck a photo. Sending it to you now.”

“Got it. I need you to create a diversion. Think you can get one or two out of the room for me? Or at least distract them for a second or two?”

“I can try.” Kevin scanned the hallway but saw nothing he could use to create some kind a fracas. In a supply room down the hall, he came across a waste basket and a pile of old brittle papers – invoices and such left over from when the warehouse had been abandoned.

“Okay. I’ve got the fuel. Now I need a lighter or a match or something to start a fire.” He jokingly wondered if he should stick his head back into the room and ask if anyone had a light. He rejected that in favor of a quick search through the cupboards, boxes and other containers in the storage room. The search yielded a small bottle of paint thinner, a good accelerant, but nothing else. He was getting frantic. He was making a mess but figured Orion would not appreciate him taking the time for a clean up.

“Nothing,” he mumbled. “So much for Plan B.” He pulled out his cell phone to call Orion but stopped. He examined the phone, turning it over and over in his hand. He pried the back off and extracted the battery. He nodded.

“Yes! Plan C. Thank goodness for high school chemistry.” He recalled his Chem teacher’s tirade about how dangerous lithium batteries in cell phones were. The teacher had derided his students for so carelessly handling what amounted to an electronic Molotov cocktail. Kevin dragged the wastebasket filled with paper out into the hall and poured paint thinner into it. He then slammed the battery against the edge of a shelf but only succeeded in bending it a little. He hit the shelf again as he remembered his former teacher’s admonitions:

“Breaking open the battery will expose the lithium core to oxygen. In the presence of oxygen, lithium will ignite and burn hot enough to melt steel.”

Kevin stopped hammering on the battery for fear that the guards in Josh’s cell would come out to see what the noise was all about. He held the battery tightly in his hand as he searched for something better to break it open. He was so focused on the search he didn’t notice the pain until the battery became too

hot to handle. He cursed and threw it into the wastebasket and was immediately rewarded with a flash as the paper and thinner ignited.

The fire settled down to a smolder that generated enormous amounts of smoke. He yelled “fire” and then ducked into one of the empty rooms. Through the smoke, he saw one of the guards emerge from Josh’s cell to investigate. The goon saw the wastebasket and moved towards it, oblivious to Kevin’s presence. Kevin, taking advantage of the distraction, hit the guard as hard as he could with the machine gun he carried. As his opponent dropped to the floor, Kevin looked at his weapon and laughed.

“I could’ve just shot him.”

Still chiding himself, he entered Josh’s cell, weapon aimed forward. He could see Josh in one corner and the two goons in another. One was on the floor with the other standing over him.

“Well done, my friend,” Orion called out as he stepped back from the wounded guard. Kevin lowered his weapon.

“People upstairs will have heard the noise. We don’t have much time.” Kevin backed out of the room and took up a defensive position at the bottom of the stairs. Orion turned to Josh.

“It’s me. Are you ready to get out of here?”

“Absolutely!” Josh jumped to his feet. His babysitter demanded that he sit back down. He wasn’t going anywhere. She emphasized that command with a jolt of pain that made him stumble.

“You okay?” Orion grabbed his elbow to steady him. Josh pushed the pain aside.

“Yeah! I’m good. Must have picked up a bug or something.”

Together they headed out the door and started for the stairs. Josh’s phone rang and he stopped.

“Guys, wait! She says to go through the storage room.” Neither Orion or Kevin asked who ‘she’ was.

“I know where that is. Down here.”

They followed him into the storage room. Orion turned to Josh.

“Now what?”

“She says to push that shelf to one side.”

Orion and Kevin wrestle it aside to reveal the entrance to Swanson’s escape tunnel.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Orion laughed as they stepped cautiously into the darkness.

Above ground, Romero gathered his team leaders together.

“This is it. Swanson’s deadline is almost here and there is no way the Authority will give him what he wants in time. We have to end this now.”

A few last minute adjustments set the entire team in motion. Smoke grenades clouded the cameras, preventing those inside from seeing two teams set explosive charges against sections of wall well away from the warehouse doors. As soon as they were set, there was no hesitation. They pushed their buttons and sections of the walls blasted inwards. The soldiers poured through the openings and made short work of the defenders who were still expecting the

assault to come through the doors. The military teams, well practiced in room-to-room incursions, pushed Swanson's people away from the front of the warehouse, forcing them to take up defensive positions behind interior walls that offered little or no protection.

Swanson grabbed a weapon and started to leave his office and head in the direction of the gunfire, intent on getting involved in the firefight. Priam, who'd been chatting with him, did the same. Swanson stopped.

"No! Go downstairs. Make sure the crew takes out Adams. If they haven't killed him, you do it. And then you might as well kill them too. I'll join you down there when I can. Right now, I need to slow Romero's boys down a bit to give you time."

Positioning himself near the top of the basement stairs, Swanson raked the area with his automatic weapon. It was nothing more than covering fire. He couldn't see any targets so he just blasted away, hoping that if he fired enough rounds, he'd eventually hit somebody.

"American style," he thought. For some reason, he realized that he was imitating the U.S. Military's approach to war. A report he'd read once mentioned that during the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 70s, one enemy combatant was hit for every 50,000 rounds fired by American soldiers. He slowed his rate of fire and started looking for targets.

The sounds of gunfire were fading and becoming more sporadic, like popcorn in a microwave, so Swanson assumed that the battle was just about over. It wouldn't be long before all of Romero's forces would be focused on him. Not a promising outcome.

"Swanson. Swanson! You're beat. Time to surrender." Romero shouted.

"Not in this lifetime," Swanson mumbled as he let loose another barrage of gunfire. He immediately moved deeper into the warehouse. A grenade exploded behind him, obliterating his previous position. While Romero and his team edged forward to see if the explosion had gotten Swanson, he broke cover and raced to the back door.

"There he is!" Wheaton yelled as he and five or six soldiers gave chase. Swanson threw the door open and ran for it. Wheaton was a few steps behind. He barely made it through the door as the booby trap exploded. Wheaton was thrown to the ground, dazed. Shaking his head to try to get rid of the ringing in his ears, he noted that he was the only one who made it out. The others were either buried in the rubble or safe on the other side. It was up to him to stop Swanson.

Jumping to his feet, he ran after Swanson who was near the edge of the parking lot and about to disappear down an alley. He shouted: "Swanson! Stop!"

To his surprise, Swanson obeyed.

"Is that you, Wheaton? I thought I recognized the voice. Ready for round two? If I recall rightly, round one didn't go so well for you." He turned, a big smile on his face and it got bigger when he saw that Wheaton had a gun pointed at him.

"You think that Earth gun can hurt me? I'll be around long after they have forgotten your name." With those words, he reached for his own pistol, thumbing off the safety as he raised it. Wheaton fired twice. Both slugs hit Swanson in the

chest. He staggered back, confounded by the pain and the blood flowing out of him, lots of blood.

“What?” He was confused.

“Silver bullets, Swanson. Vampires and Off Planet assholes are vulnerable to silver bullets.” He emptied his gun into Swanson, taking a step forward with each shot. His target fell to his knees and then onto his face. Wheaton stood over him He watched him die.

“Round two to me, asshole!” With that, he headed back towards the warehouse to see if Romero needed any more help. He whistled as he walked.

The battle sounds faded out as Josh, Kevin and Orion made their way down the old storm drain unaware that Priam had followed them into the tunnel and was now closing in on them. The trio was moving slowly. Josh was doing the best he could while having to endure the babysitter’s constant complaining punctuated by bolts of migraine pain. However, he was doing better than Kevin who seemed to be in tremendous pain and who had stopped to catch his breath. He was looking at his hands.

“We have a problem. My aura, it should have adjusted but it is still indicating approach of my STD. I’m going to die soon.”

“Can you jack out?” Orion asked.

“No. Down here, I can’t detect any other auras. I’m blind.”

“Then we better get out of here quickly and get you to a place where you can see. Here, grab onto me.” With Orion supporting Kevin, they sped up, racing towards the light and towards life.

As they burst through the opening, Josh pointed to a police car not too far away. They run towards it as Kevin hunted for a person to jack into. The police officer waved them on and opened the squad car doors assuming that Kevin is injured and will need transport to the hospital.

Priam emerged from the tunnel just in time to see Orion and Josh help Kevin into the vehicle. He pulled his gun and fired twice. One shot killed the police officer and the other struck Orion in the back. He fell to his knees. Josh turned to help Orion but was told to forget about him and go.

“Get out of here! Now! I’ll be okay.” His body slid the rest of the way to the ground, dead.

Priam fires more shots that ping off the car as Josh jumped into the driver’s seat and hit the gas. As he skidded around the corner, he caught a glimpse of Priam climbing into a vehicle, a big black SUV. He pressed harder on the accelerator hoping to get lost in traffic before Priam could find them. A solid bang and a jerk put an end to that thought as Priam’s bigger vehicle rear-ended the police car and tried to push it off the road.

A quick turn onto a side street forced Priam to overshoot and he was forced to backtrack. Josh and Kevin gained a few seconds but there was no doubt Priam had the more powerful vehicle and would catch up soon.

“What do we do?” Josh glanced at Kevin who was pale and having some difficulty breathing.

“I can see one target a long way off.”

“Just one?”

"I'm sorry. I don't have much energy left. I can only see one."

Josh considered this for a short time.

"Do you think we can share?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've only jacked once."

"That's one more than me." His phone vibrated. It was the real Sarah telling Josh that it was their only real option and that she would try the jump too. He passed the information to Kevin who nodded. He described the target to Josh and Sarah while the babysitter did her best to confuse Josh with noise and pain.

Josh slowed the cruiser and pulled a U-turn, then stopped. He sat facing back the way they had come and the direction from which they expected Priam to come. The transmission was in neutral, the engine revving. Priam turned the corner and slammed on the brakes. He was surprised to see the police cruiser just sitting there. It didn't take him long to figure it out.

"So you want to play chicken, do you? Works for me."

Both vehicles accelerated toward each other, closing the distance rapidly. In the last second, Priam realized that Josh was not going to swerve so he turned the wheel sharply trying to avoid the collision. It was too late. The vehicles connected with a thunderous crash. The force practically welded the two together. The bodies in the cars were crushed in the impact. The text 'See you on the other side' appeared on the cell phone in Josh's hand. It was the last thing he saw before everything went dark and quiet. No one heard the screams of the babysitter as the body she inhabited died, taking her power source with it.

"No-o-o-o-o-o-o!"

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Van Nuys (Romero's Command Post)**

"What a mess." Romero waved his arm to encompass the whole area. "I just got off the horn with HQ. They're not too happy that we lost Adams but relieved that Swanson has been taken out of the equation. Seems you are to be commended for having the foresight to carry silver ammunition. They also asked me to remind you that the vulnerability to silver is 'top secret' so keep it to yourself. By the way, how did you know about that?"

"Swanson told me," Wheaton lied. "The last time we met."

Romero nodded. "Not too smart on his part."

"More arrogant than smart. He thought I was going to die then."

"I'm still getting reports from the cleanup crews. Your partner and that EMT, Treacher was it, were found in an ambulance around the corner. Killed at very close range. Could be self-inflicted. Johanson thinks they jacked but I'm not so sure. How could they know about jacking from one body to another? Johanson thinks they're the ones who started the ruckus inside the warehouse. What do you think?" Romero was clearly suspicious. Wheaton decided it was best to pretend ignorance.

"No idea. My partner has always been a shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later kind of guy who used a lot of confidential informants. Maybe one of his CIs got him. He knew about jacking but I never saw him do it."

Still skeptical, Romero chose to let it go.

“No matter. We still have other bodies to deal with. When we stormed the warehouse, we lost three troopers but Swanson lost twelve. Luckily, we were able to confine the battle to the warehouse. Swanson got out but you got him before he got too far. Apparently Adams got away too as did three of Swanson’s men. One we found a block from here, shot in the back. Dead. Adams and two others were killed in a head-on collision about a half-mile from here. Funny, the vehicle with Adams and one of Swanson’s guys in it looked like it was coming back this direction when it collided with another vehicle being driven by another of Swanson’s men. Doesn’t make much sense. Messy. Sorry about your friend but if it’s any comfort, he’s still out there somewhere, a ghost.”

“Think anybody managed to jack out?”

“No way of knowing. Probably not. Chances are, they all ghosted.”

Wheaton’s stomach heaved.

“Swanson too?”

“No. Swanson was from the Home Planet, like me and my boys. We get killed, we get killed for real. Only Earthers ghost because their bodies are preserved back on the Home Planet. Swanson is gone but Adams and your partner are out there somewhere.”

Wheaton smiled.

“At least Josh got away.”

“Oh, we’ll find him again. I’ve already got my new orders. We start looking first thing tomorrow.”

Wheaton chuckled as he walked away.

“Here we go again.”

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Home Planet (Interplanetary Prison)**

He sat up and had to lay right back down immediately and close his eyes. Everything was blurry and out of focus. As he lay there, he tried to recall what had happened. Perhaps that would explain his vision problem. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much to remember – just a searing pain and then silence. Silence! He grabbed his neck and felt for the implant. Gone.

Nothing else would come to mind. After the silence, he woke up here, wherever here is, and tried to sit up.

“They had the body drugged. I had to flush it out of the system. It’s all good now.” He didn’t hear the words but simply knew them in his mind.

“You’re here. You made it!”

“And so did Sarah. We’re all here, together again.”

“I knew you were part of this. As soon as I saw you in that basement, I could feel that we belonged together. You?”

“I did but didn’t know why. I am sorry I did not recognize you or Sarah, for that matter, on Earth.”

Kevin was genuinely contrite but Josh brushed it off.

“We were all without memories with different bodies in a strange place with thousands of people involved in keeping us apart. We should not have recognized each other at all. No one could or should have.”

Sarah joined the conversation.

“All we had was that we were drawn to each other, comfortable with each other.”

“True. I have been lonely for many years without knowing why. I am no longer lonely.” Kevin commented. “But we must get practical and figure out where we are. I found this body but I don’t know anything about it. Time to get moving.”

Josh sat up again and opened his eyes. The dizziness returned and he started to close them again.

“Wait, Josh. Look at the picture on the wall, really look at it. We need to coordinate.” Kevin instructed. “Right now each of us is trying to see through the same eyes so we are seeing triple. We need to work together.”

As he stared at the picture, the blur retreated and his sight became crystal clear.

“I guess we do need to relearn how to work together but that is a small price to pay.” Sarah sounded excited. “There’s a mirror over by the door. Shall we go take a look at who we are?”

Josh stumbled once but within a few steps was moving with confidence. He strutted to the mirror and stared at his new body.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Kevin burst out. In the mirror, they saw a man in his thirties, tall, slender with piercing blue eyes. “I don’t remember much about before we were sent to Earth but I remember this.”

The others nodded, too stunned to say anything. Then Kevin started to laugh and the others joined him. Of all the bodies in the universe to jack into, Kevin had dragged them into the only one they should have stayed out of. Before them facing them in the mirror was the body of the Creator, the one from whom the three souls had been taken and scattered to the far corners of Earth. They were back in their own body. The Creator was whole again.

Josh sat back down on the bed as they pondered the situation. No one said anything out loud but each could hear the others’ thoughts.

“We are not on Earth anymore. We are on the Home Planet.”

“We are in a prison, the place where they keep the bodies of those sent to Earth.”

“We have done the Authority’s work for it. We are together and under its control so they will be able to separate us again easily.”

“Damn. Out of the frying pan and straight into the fire.”

Food came and went untouched. They assumed it would be drugged. They did notice that it was not institutional food, not prison food. Instead, it appeared to be from a take-out joint. Of course, the prison was not used to prisoners who were awake and still prisoners. Here, either you were an inanimate empty shell hooked up to all kinds of tubes and wires or you were gone as soon as your sentence was up. They were just beginning to wonder how long they’d be imprisoned here when there was a perfunctory knock on the door.

It opened and three men stepped in. One wore a suit and tie and was clearly in charge. The others wore a kind of uniform, dull grey with patches on the shoulders, and had that kind of look in their eyes that only those who have seen too much and lost too much have. Life had not been easy for them. Automatically, they positioned themselves on either side of the door. The man in charge strolled to the end of the bed.

“Well, Erulus. You have led us a merry chase. So nice to have you all together again.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. My name is Josh Adams and I demand...”

“You are not in a position to demand anything, Erulus. And you can drop the act. Our sensors detected the arrival of all three parts so we had you moved here from the racks in preparation for your reentry into the penal system.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you think we would allow you to remain reunited? You are a lunatic and a terrorist. You tried to destroy our prison planet and almost succeeded. The courts decreed you should be incarcerated for eternity. In perpetuity I believe was the term used.” He paced as he talked. He was angry and it showed.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Josh asked.

“Why? Why? You set the penal system back decades because of your interference. We had a good thing going and you wrecked it. You designed and built the prison system and then turned on it. You became a traitor to the cause. Personally, I had hoped the courts would have terminated your ass but that was not to be.”

“I remember now,” Josh interrupted. “You’re Tartarus, the head of the Authority’s Penal System.”

“Former head. The chaos you created cost me my job. I was demoted to warden of this place. I get to watch over racks and racks of empty shells but every once in a while, there are moments, moments like this, moments of pure joy. You see, my dear Erulus, I am delighted to tell you that soon, very soon, we will be ripping the souls out of your body and sending them back to Earth prison. Only this time, there will be much better security surrounding each of you. You will not escape again.” He crossed to the door and opened it. “Soon you’ll be an empty shell again laying in a rack and I shall visit you everyday and smile knowing your suffering is much worse than mine. Bye for now.”

The guards followed Tartarus out, closing and locking the door behind them.

“Now there’s a pleasant fellow,” Kevin grumbled. The others indicated agreement. Josh walked to the window and stared out. Through the bars of the cell he could see an urban park with a few trees, a small fountain and a lawn dotted with benches. The sun was shining and quite a few people were out enjoying the weather. At the edge of the park closest to the prison building, a coffee cart surrounded by customers seemed to be doing a booming business. One customer, an older man dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, caught his eye. He had a coffee cup in one hand and was pouring liquid sugar into it, lots of sugar.

Before Josh could draw the others' attention to him, he felt a little jolt. The world tilted a little. He closed his eyes and steadied himself.

When he opened his eyes, his perspective had changed. In his hands were a coffee cup and a sugar dispenser. He looked up and saw himself staring back down from his third floor window. In a voice that was not his, he heard himself say: "Too much sugar will kill me," and watched as his hands returned the sugar dispenser to its holder on the cart.

Josh returned his gaze to the window and squinted. The world heaved again, spilling a few drops of coffee. Josh closed his eyes and opened them again to find himself back inside the cell.

"Wow! What happened!"

"The old guy seems no worse for wear. How'd you do that?" Kevin wondered.

"I have no idea. I thought when one jacked into another body, all of you went and replaced the other's soul that either ceased to exist or ghosted. But I was here and I was there and I'm not sure the old guy even knew I was there. Weird."

For the next few hours, all three tested out the new found ability. They tried to come up with a word to describe or label it but everyone they tried was funnier than the one before it. Josh's suggestion of 'half-jack' sent them into hysterics. All three thought: "Man, it's good to be together again."

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