

San Francisco (Jail)

Portia was being held in solitary confinement with either guards close by watching her or farther away watching through video cameras. She was never alone but she never stopped thinking about being released and going home. Orion couldn't be aware of where she was. Otherwise, he'd have sent a release team. She was on her own and responsible for her own release.

With a 24/7 watch on her, it was quite a challenge and it seemed her jailers had learned from her past attempts and had started to anticipate her moves. Soft plastic utensils, paper plates, thin blankets that ripped easily, pillows filled with starch pellets rather than feathers or foam, furniture bolted to the floor, no pens or pencils, no running water in her cell – all of these eliminated ways to release oneself. She was beginning to get desperate, trapped in a body that wasn't hers in a jail inside a prison.

She had one last idea but she needed a few undisturbed minutes alone to get it done. Her best bet was at shift change when there were twice as many guards but all of them were less attentive. She waited. When she heard the increase in the noise level that indicated shift change, she laid down on the bed, covered herself with the flimsy blankets. She then tore at her wrist with the only weapons they'd left her with – her teeth. She bit and twisted, ripping flesh and veins. She managed to take a chunk out of an artery and that sped up the blood loss. With any luck, she'd bleed out and die before the guards noticed and got to her. She closed her eyes and waited for blessed release.

Luck was not with her that day. An alert new guard saw the blankets rapidly shifting color from gray to red and hit the alarm. Her cell was filled with men and women, all of whom had a single objective, to prevent her from dying. One clamped down on her bloody wrist while others lifted and carried her to the gurney waiting in the hall. They raced her to the prison infirmary where an experienced medical trauma team took over. From suicide attempt to stable patient took less than seven minutes.

The doctors on call decided to keep her in the infirmary overnight for observation and the guards who had brought her down from solitary reminded the nursing staff that she was, obviously, on a suicide watch. The nurses only took it half seriously since their patient was weak from loss of blood and was sedated as well. While agreeing to the suicide watch, the head nurse was thinking that a periodic check on her would suffice.

Most of the prison's spaces were cleaned by prisoners but since the infirmary had less security than the main part of the prison, inmates were not allowed to work there. They were considered flight risks and the fact there was a well-stocked drug cupboard there only reinforced the ban. Because of this, the infirmary used a reputable cleaning service that made sure there were cleaners on the premises all day every day. The man who had been working the graveyard shift for the past week was a replacement for the regular guy who was on vacation. He was in his sixties, a little stooped over and thin as a rail. His face was unremarkable and easily forgotten unless you looked into his eyes. They were dark, flinty and devoid of emotion. Not many in the infirmary got a good look at them because he kept his head bowed, apparently showing proper respect to

his betters who for the most part ignored him unless there was an urgent spill that needed to be dealt with.

He was called to wipe up the blood, tissue and gauze that had hit the floor of the operating room when Portia's arm was repaired and bandaged. He proceeded to return the OR back to its pristine condition and, at the same time, scoped out the adjacent recovery room where Portia had been placed. She was alone and without monitors but did have an IV connected to her left hand to replace the lost fluids.

The cleaner stepped into Portia's room and with practiced ease slipped a hypodermic needle out of his pocket, removed its cover and emptied its contents into the IV bag. He then slipped a flat round disk the size of a silver dollar inside the bandages on her right wrist. He leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"You have just been ghosted, bitch."

He returned to his duties and finished his shift. Portia's avatar never regained consciousness and she floated away into space.

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Los Angeles (Cynthia's Home)

The morning news was on and Cynthia sat to watch it. Apparently it was a slow news day because there was quite a bit of fluff or fill in the newscast. One item held her attention for a time.

"Latest figures show that the average life expectancy or ALE in the United States has risen to above 80 years for the very first time."

"A positive thing?" Cynthia thought. But of course the newsreader had to continue.

"An ALE of over 80 years combined with falling birth rates, fewer women are having fewer babies, will, according to the Life Insurance Association of America, result in an aging population. The Association's figures indicate that by 2025, more than 30% of the population of the United States will be over the age of 65. Higher premiums and smaller payouts can be expected, its spokesperson told CNN."

"Only here could they take a good thing – people are living longer – and turn it into something scary. How silly these people are. If only they had an idea of just how bad things could get, no one would ever leave their houses." She smiled and took a sip of her wine. She watched the rest of the news without really taking any of it in. It was too trivial to bother with.

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Unspecified Location

It had been a long but productive day. Orion had set a couple of projects in motion and he was sure they would shake things up quite a bit. They were complex and would take some time to get up to speed but they should be worth the time and effort. He felt they were so daring that no one would expect them. Soon, he hoped, they would experience their worst nightmare come true.

Sometimes he felt sorry for them. He disrupted their lives. He even killed them, lots of them, but he didn't enjoy it. It was simply necessary. They were pawns in a much bigger game. If all goes well, their deaths will lead him to his goal, the source of all his misery. Soon. But for now, he had to content himself with keeping his enemies off guard and at bay.

Before he could take a break, he had one more mission to arrange. He had had his assistants contact two of his best people and bring them to him. He knew that they wanted to be on the other missions, the ones with the high death counts, but he needed them for this one as it required subtlety and skill. To date, he'd sent two other agents separately to capture Joshua Adams. His orders had been clear but one, Priam, had disobeyed and tried to blow Adams up. He had failed and that was, Orion felt, a good thing. Portia had simply disappeared. She'd acknowledged his orders and then nothing. Still nothing. Orion had to assume she was gone. The others had found her and sent her to a different hell. In both cases, Orion had given orders and then sent his people off to do whatever needed to be done on their own. He was not going to make the same mistake again.

His assistant signaled that the two had arrived and he greeted them. They sat around a table more like equals than with a desk between them. The change in protocol was noted by his guests and he explained what he needed done. He needed Joshua Adams captured unharmed and in good health. He told Horatio that it would take all of his skills as a tracker to find their prey. Orion described how a lowly university student had eluded not one but two hunters and still had not been captured. He then turned to Shylock as he described how the capture could not involve an extraction or a release. Adams had to be physically restrained and transported to a safe location where he was to be held until Orion could deal with him.

Orion stroked their egos to get them to do what was needed and they responded as expected. He implied that the mission was far more important than the other ones and, in a way, it was. As a result of the stroking, Horatio and Shylock left the office feeling important and superior to the other operatives who had to go on less important missions. Orion could only hope their egos wouldn't get in the way of the mission. He considered that and went through the possible or likely outcomes. Ideally, Adams would be kidnapped, preferably undamaged but a little damage was acceptable. Alternatively, he could be seriously hurt or killed by Orion's team. That was unacceptable but he supposed he could live with it if he had to. What was totally unacceptable and what Orion was not willing to live with was Joshua Adams out there free to disrupt more missions. He'd done far too much damage already.

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Los Angeles (Cynthia's Home)

When Cynthia arrived home after class, she found Patrick Swanson stretched out on the couch drinking a beer. She poured herself a glass of wine in the kitchen and joined him in the living room. They silently toasted each other

and drank. There was nothing awkward about it. They seemed comfortable in each other's company like an old married couple. However, the topic of conversation was one that would not take place between ordinary people.

"Did you call Wheaton today?"

No. I didn't have to. He called me."

Swanson sat up.

"Has he located our fugitives?"

"I don't think so. He'd have told me right off. Instead, he wanted to meet for dinner and an update tomorrow night. I think he thinks we are going on a date. Idiot." She spat out the last word. "I don't believe in interspecies dating. Ugh!"

"I know but he can be useful. He has resources we don't at the moment. And he's motivated. He has an emotional attachment to Josh and Sarah so he's going to work harder than usual on this. He has a vested interest."

"I'm just venting. Sometimes this job gets to me." She was pacing. Swanson was watching her.

"It gets to all of us and you've had an unusually long rotation this time. What is it – four years?"

"I wish. It's been close to six years. It took a while to get into a position where I could monitor those two. Even as children, they showed they were capable of analyzing complex data and arriving at the correct conclusion – one we do not want them to reach. They needed watching. Their guardians covered their early years but as soon as they left home to go to university, I was called in. There should have been two minders as it turned out and they should not have been brought together. I know." She held up her hand to prevent his interruption. "I know we've gone through this before. Just let me bitch for a little while. By granting scholarships to both, we encouraged them to come here where we needed only one minder for both. We did not anticipate that they would be attracted to each other and become a couple. Apart, either was dangerous. Together they are beyond dangerous. They are ... I can't think of a word powerful enough. Then there was Sarah's accident. She was stripped of her avatar and should have been ghosted. Instead, she ends up in a computer – a pure mind without the necessary maintenance features of a human body. No sleeping. No eating. No distractions, Alarms should have been going off everywhere when that happened."

"Hind sight is a wonderful thing." Swanson's tone of voice bathed his words in sarcasm. "We have to look forward, not backward."

"I know but I was responsible for watching them, monitoring their progress, and distracting or misdirecting them when necessary. I was doing a pretty good job. Then it all went off the rails. I lost them. They could be solving the riddles already and I am helpless to stop them. I lost control over them and I hate that."

"We'll just have to find them and tuck them back under your wing quickly."

Swanson was reminded of something that had been bothering him. "Do we have any idea why The Others tried to kill Josh and Sarah? That part never made sense to me."

"Not a clue."

"Maybe Wheaton knows why. We could ask him."

"You mean 'I' could ask him, don't you?"

He shrugged.

"Yes. You have to ask him but I think it has to be subtle. Ask him directly and he'll shut up. He's a cop, after all."

"I agree. Maybe we can trade information with him."

"What do we have to trade?" Swanson was curious but also somewhat concerned at the direction the conversation had just taken. Cynthia knew he'd object so she hurried to get her idea out before he cut her off. It was a technique she used when she had controversial thoughts she wanted to share. She called it the can't-get-a-word-in-edgewise method.

"Wheaton is going crazy over the stuff The Others have been doing, especially since, from his point of view, the criminals keep getting killed. We could give him a bit about that. We tell him about The Others and he tells us why they tried to assassinate Josh and Sarah."

"No. Absolutely not! We can't tell him about The Others without exposing ourselves. It's too dangerous!"

"Think about it for a minute. The only one being exposed here is me. I'll be blowing my cover but after what has happened, I'm probably going to be recalled anyway. What's the big deal?"

"What's the big deal!? Have you gone nuts? You want to tell a lowman about The Others and about us. That's against every rule I know."

Cynthia was getting angry at what she thought was his stubborn blindness. She stood over him, hands on hips.

"I suppose you never ever broke a rule, even when you had that ATF posting."

"Sure. We've all broken rules from time to time but never a prime directive. Break a prime directive and you'll be on your way to becoming a lowman in a nanosecond."

"If we get caught. But we won't get caught. There are no watchers on us. They're all busy with The Others and besides, who will believe Wheaton if he repeats what I tell him? Nobody, that's who! They'll either laugh at him or lock him in a rubber room." She dropped into her chair and sulked. She was steamed at Swanson and was not afraid to show it. Rules. The rules were making it impossible for her to do her job. She was tired. She was frustrated.

Swanson stared at her even though she refused to make eye contact. Break a prime directive. Wow. It was either a really bold move or a colossal blunder. He couldn't tell which it was but he'd worked with her for a long time. He decided to back her play. Besides, she was right. She was the only one exposed. If it went bad, she'd take the heat.

"We'll have to set some pretty hard and fast limits on what he can know. Not enough and he won't reciprocate. Tell him too much and he'll think you are just crazy and run for the hills."

She was smiling now. She'd gotten her way and, at this point, that was all that mattered. Before she could say anything, Swanson was on his feet.

"Let's get something to eat. Then we can get to work. I want to know exactly what you are going to tell him before we go any further."

“Works for me. Shall we order a pizza?”

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San Fernando Valley, CA (Burnt Lake Power Plant)

The cooling towers stood ten stories high and announced the power plant's nuclear presence. It could be seen for miles and the men in the van watched the towers grow in size through the windshield as they approached it. There was an air of excitement. It was a new kind of mission for them. Ordinarily, a mission was one way with the participants dying in a blaze of glory. All four had been through those, many times but this one was different. The team had to get in and out. No jacking out. They had to physically extract themselves. It promised to be fun.

There were four in the van, armed only with their wits but they knew they had support on the inside. Two of the power plant workers had been exposed to radiation recently and although their bodies weren't showing symptoms yet, they were already dead. They'd been jacked a few hours ago, exchanging a quick death for the slow painful death by radiation poisoning. The new occupants of their bodies were waiting for the arrival of the rest of the team with anticipation. They had discovered that, despite this place being a nuclear power plant and a regional storage facility for spent and excessive fuel rods, the security was pitiful. A rent-a-cop sat at the main gate and another was just inside the main building. Neither were armed. No other security existed.

As the van pulled up to the gate, the guard leaned forward in his chair and asked their business. The driver responded as they'd rehearsed.

“We're here to fix the regulator over on Number Six turbine. According to Stryker, the damn things have been burning out right quick. Stryker's out there now waiting on us. Call him if you like.”

“Nah. Just keep to the left on the ring road. That'll take you to Number Six the fastest.”

“Much obliged. Have a great day.”

They drove slowly down the ring road as directed, marveling at the ease with which they'd entered the nuclear power plant. Near the main building, they stopped long enough to pick up the insiders who told them to take an immediate left down a narrow alleyway. From the piles of junk strewn about, it was apparent the alley wasn't used much. Good news. They turned the van around and parked facing the way they had come. They followed their guide on foot through a labyrinth created by pipes, cables, and crates. It didn't take long to locate the spent fuel storage room. The sign on the door removed all guesswork. They found the door was unlocked and just walked in. There were others moving the tons of spent fuel rods from one side of the room to the other. They ignored Orion's team who walked past the concrete casings made to fit the spent rods straight to what they wanted. It was sitting near the back as if it was waiting for them. In a way, it was. It was already for transport, a small lead and steel box the size of a small piano. In that box, so they'd been told, was six kilograms of yellow cake, enriched uranium, that had been on its way to Colorado when its transport truck had broken down. It had seemed a good idea to store the uranium at the

power plant while the mechanic waited for parts to be delivered for installation in the truck. Of course, Orion's man had made sure that delivery was delayed.

One of the insiders borrowed a forklift from the other crew and grabbed the storage contained with it. Slowly, he drove it through the building to the van and settled it into the back of the vehicle. Abandoning the forklift, all six men climbed into the van that was then driven back to the plant's main gate. The guard must have seen them coming since the barrier was up. They waved at the guard as they passed him. He returned the gesture.

All were beaming as they made their way to the drop off point twelve miles south of the power plant. There, waiting, was a semi rig with an empty trailer that they filled with the van. They exited the vehicle and the trailer knowing that it was a job well done. They chattered to one another as they strolled over to a large hole in the ground next to the road. If they noticed the backhoe sitting next to it with its engine running, they didn't show it. Turning around with their backs to the pit, they stood straight and tall. The truck driver shot each one in the head and pushed the bodies into the hole. Two passes with the backhoe eliminated all traces of the hole. Not bothering to shut the digging machine down, the driver climbed into the semi and headed down the highway. If he made good time, he could reach his destination by supertime.

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Los Angeles (Josh and Sarah's Hideout)

"I was looking at your preliminary data on WIMPs and I don't buy it. Weakly Interacting Massive Particles. Nonsense." Sarah was bored. She'd agreed to stay offline in case the people tracking them were watching the web. But that confined her, prevented her from doing what she would normally do. Instead, she'd scanned everything on Josh's laptop, tweaking programs here and there, rewriting others and checking out everything Josh had been working on. "It seems to me that if dark matter was scattered all across the universe with a normal distribution, one of our probes or space ships would have run into one by now."

The computer screen transformed itself so that it resembled a white board. Numbers and figures began appearing as Sarah outlined her math verbally. The formula was complex and involved a large set of variables. She talked and wrote. Josh looked and listened.

"And so you can see that given our current understanding, if dark matter was comprised of WIMPs, our space craft would smash into one of these things every fiftieth flight or so. Counting unmanned probes, we've made well over three hundred space flights and no WIMP collisions. There should have been at least five or six."

She went quiet, waiting for Josh's reaction. She thought maybe she'd gone too far since Josh hated it when he was wrong. He surprised her.

"You know, I never really bought into the WIMP hypothesis. Too many conditions have to be met before they can possibly exist. WIMPs were always Dr. Ross's pet theory. I was doing that research to keep her happy. There is a much

simpler and more elegant explanation for dark matter.” He stopped and took a breath. Together Sarah and Josh yelled out: “MACHO!” and burst into gales of laughter.

“Who comes up with these stupid acronyms, I want to know. MACHO. That’s dumb.” Sarah was glad they were together on this.

“I agree it is dumb. Surely they could have come up with something interesting. MACHO stands for Massive Compact Halo Object and that name is as dumb as its acronym. I bet we could come up with a better name than that.”

“How about BATS - Big Ass Thing in the Sky?” Sarah got one in first.

“Or better yet, BAITS - Big Ass Invisible Thing in the Sky.”

“That’s pretty lame, my man. Surely we can do better.” She challenged. He thought for a moment.

“Since we both dislike acronyms, I have a better idea. Let’s just give it a name, like, maybe, Norman.”

“I like it. MACHO is out. Norman is in. I seem to remember that Professor Ross mentioned it in class only briefly then dismissed it as a flawed hypothesis. After I ... uh ... left, did she say anything else?”

“Nope. She was zoned in on WIMPs and couldn’t see anything else. A couple of times, somebody mentioned it but the prof would just roll her eyes like the student had told a really bad joke.”

“Too bad. I think it’s worth looking at.” Sarah was excited. Her gut was telling her they were on the right track. Josh was getting into it too.

“We don’t know much about Norman.” He smiled. “A team from Earthwatch was using the radio telescope out in Nevada and have some evidence for a very large object – hundreds of times larger than our sun – in a long orbit at the edge of the Milky Way. It could be a cosmic gas cloud but the researchers think it has to be fairly solid to account for the missing mass.”

“That makes sense. If it was a planet-like object, it would have the required mass plus it would be all but invisible. You could only see it if light reflected off it. If the surface is dark, it would absorb rather than reflect light.” Sarah could see the possibilities. “If only we could go online. We could get the latest research on Norman.” He could hear the desire to go onto the web in her voice. It wasn’t safe. He needed to distract her.

“Professor Hillman, over at California State University was on the team that did the original work. I’ll bet copies of all of his papers are in the library over at CSU – hard copies. Most places, profs are required to supply their libraries with copies of their published work. We could get the data the old fashioned way.”

“Yes. Josh, you are a genius. Let’s go.”

“Let me get my disguise. We don’t want to be seen.”

“What disguise?” Sarah asked. Josh pulled a ratty old hoodie out of the closet.

“This. I’m going to dress up like a university student. They’ll never recognize me.”

They laughed.

They spent the afternoon at the CSU library, reading and copying everything there was on MACHO, now Norman. There was a surprisingly large

quantity of information available, too much to handle in an afternoon so they signed out some of the material to peruse at home.

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Los Angeles (Japanese Restaurant)

He occupied his favorite table just inside the door of Eka, a Japanese Fusion Restaurant he'd visited often. He'd arrived a half hour earlier than necessary but he wanted to make sure he got them a table. The place was often busy and the wait lengthy so he didn't take any chances. He was rereading the menu when there she was, standing beside his chair.

"Good evening, Detective. You are early."

"Call me Mark, please. And I was a bit early. I dislike being late." He stood and took her hand.

"I can understand that. Some of my students are chronically late for class. Sometimes I get the urge to lock the doors on them."

She sat and looked around the room. The restaurant was nothing special to look at but it was bustling. No table was vacant.

"Interesting place. Japanese?"

"Partly. The chef is Japanese. His wife is Filipino so there's a blend of cultures. A warning though – Japanese food is not normally spicy but even if you like your food spicy, order the mild. Otherwise it'll knock you over."

She smiled and nodded. This place was obviously one of his hangouts. He was, he believed, on his own turf and that gave him the home field advantage. Let him feel that way. She'd be able to use it but first they had to get through the meal. They ordered and ate but she didn't really taste any of it. She was too preoccupied with the coming conversation. Finally the table was cleared off and coffee served. She took a breath.

"Any word on Sarah and Josh?"

"Nothing. I've got the word out to every precinct in the city and county. No results yet."

"I don't know if that is good news or bad, Mark. I just wish we knew if they were all right or not."

Mark touched her hand and tried out her first name. "Cynthia, I'm sure they are okay." He felt that way about Josh but still worried that Sarah had not got out of their apartment intact. No point in reminding Cynthia of that. "They're hiding from a gang. We'll find them soon."

"Can I ask you a question, Mark?" She didn't wait for permission. She pressed on. "Why would someone want to kill those two kids?"

Mark wasn't sure how to answer that. If he told her the truth, he was exposing Sarah as a Confidential Informant. If he lied, he was violating Cynthia's trust and he didn't want to do that. He took the safest route he could find and followed departmental regulations.

"You know I can't answer that. It's part of an ongoing investigation and we aren't supposed to discuss it with anyone."

"I understand. I do. And I appreciate your integrity. You understand I had to ask." So much for the direct approach.

Mark nodded. He could feel her backing away. He was compelled to explain.

"We are tracking a bunch of weirdos, violent weirdos, who always seem to take the bloodiest road possible. They are driving me nuts because every one of the perps dies at the scene or commits suicide at the earliest opportunity. When we do background checks on the perps, they appear to have been ordinary citizens living ordinary lives until one day they decide to go out and machine gun the customers in a bank or blow up a restaurant full of people."

Cynthia took Mark's hand and took the plunge.

"What if I told you that your criminals, your perps as you call them, are hardened criminals who don't really die at the scene?"

Mark didn't say anything. He just looked at her. She went on. "I haven't been totally honest with you, Mark. I am a professor of Astrophysics. That's true but that isn't my only job. I also work for a secret organization that monitors a group we call The Others. They are terrorists of an unusual sort in that they only have one item on their agenda – to destroy whatever exists. I think they are also the gang you are chasing. I can tell you that without my help, you will never catch them."

Mark snorted in derision.

"Now you are some sort of superspy?"

"No but I have information that you don't have. Are you interested?"

"Look, lady, withholding information about a federal crime is a felony."

She looked at him. She thought maybe she overestimated him.

"Take it easy, Mark. Technically, I believe all of those federal crimes we are talking about have been solved. Have they not?" It was a rhetorical question. She didn't wait for a response. "You really think anyone would convict me for not providing information about a solved crime. Not a chance. So do you want to hear what I have to say or not? If not, I'm out of here."

She started to rise. He waved her back down.

"I'm sorry. Okay? You caught me off guard. Go ahead."

Cynthia started into the script she and Swanson had put together – a bit of truth here and there mixed in with a whole bunch of lies. She mentally crossed her fingers.

"As I said, I work for an agency whose only mandate is to monitor the activities of The Others and capture them if we can. It is difficult to catch them because they are never physically at the crime scenes. You see, they have a technology that allows them to project their minds into someone else's body and take it over for a while. In those other bodies, they commit acts of violence, terrorism really, aimed at upsetting the status quo. If and when the body dies, The Other's mind is sent back home unharmed."

"I have to say that this is fascinating but extremely difficult to believe. Mind projection. Committing murder while in someone else's body. Sorry." He sat back and crossed his arms across his chest. He was closed off – not willing to believe.

"I know it's a lot to take in but I am sure it explains a lot of what has been bothering you about the crimes, about your gang. You would like to reject the whole idea despite this because you believe mind projection as you call it is impossible. Isn't that true?"

"True." He was willing to concede that.

"Okay. But what about Sarah? Her body is buried in Montana, a long way from here. Sarah is dead but her mind is or was locked in a computer. If you can accept that someone can mind project into a computer by accident – and you have already accepted that – why can't you believe that with the right technology someone could mind project into another person on purpose?"

"Put that way, it's hard to argue with you. If I accept it is possible for now, what can you tell me about this gang of terrorists?"

"We don't know a lot. The leader is a man they call Orion. They all use aliases so we don't know who they are for sure. We believe there are between thirty and forty of them but only three or four that Orion uses a lot as team leaders in the field. I'm sure if you thought about it and ignored the different bodies, focused just on behavior, you would see a lot of similarities from crime to crime."

"I already have. I can see three distinct personalities but that didn't make sense till now. So you say the people who really committed these crimes didn't die? They're still out there?"

Cynthia nodded. She had him.

"They are. Only the bodies they were using at the time died. Every time one of the criminals was killed by the police, the police were helping them escape and go home."

"Damn. How do we catch these bastards then?"

"I don't think you can. The Justice System is not set up to convict a 'mind' for murder. But my organization can arrest them and deal with them. The ones we have in custody are in a secret prison not far from Gitmo in Cuba."

She paused. He needed to feel useless for a minute. She watched his eyes. When he was ready, she threw him the carrot."

"I said you can't catch them but I was referring to you – the police and the Justice System. I was not referring to you – Mark Wheaton. My organization can use you and your skills to help put these perps away – in your spare time only, for now. It would be too suspicious if you left the police force now."

He was nodding. He wanted in on the hunt even if it was off the books – a typical lowman. He was primed. She tried again.

"We are going to need all of the information you've gathered on this gang. It'll help us build the profile."

"I can do that. They're mostly in my private notes anyway."

"Good and one more thing. There was an explosion and fire at a motel on I-10 last week."

"I remember."

"We have information that Josh was in that motel room just minutes before the explosion. He got out in time."

"Shit. The kid must be scared out of his mind."

“Also, we believe one of The Others, nickname Priam, was the one who fired the missile into the building. We know who tried to hurt Josh and Sarah but we don’t know why.”

Mark told her about Sarah’s hacking of the echo websites and how they used the information against The Others. He’d already agreed to work with Cynthia and her organization so saw no reason to withhold the information any longer. Cynthia was ecstatic. If Sarah could find The Other’s communication system so easily, surely she could be used to find their home base and lead Cynthia right to Orion and his team. The need to find Sarah grew exponentially. She had to be found.

The evening ended with Cynthia asking Mark to keep up the search while she promised to send him all the Organization’s data on The Others. Mark was feeling good. He had direction and support. Cynthia Ross was feeling better than she had since Josh and Sarah had gone missing. She’d persuaded Mark to join their team without revealing anything serious. She’d handled him well and now he was hers to manipulate as she saw fit.

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Unspecified Location

“So nice of you to drop in and visit me.” The sarcasm dripped off his tongue. Orion was livid and did not care to hide it. “You disobeyed a direct order. Then you disappear for more than a week. And today you have the nerve to waltz in here as if nothing was wrong.” He turned his back on his guest and strode to the window. “Do you have any idea the damage you’ve done?” He was yelling.

Priam jumped to his feet.

“Damage! Damage? I did you a favor. That kid was a threat and I eliminated that threat.”

“You idiot. He was not a threat. He was a source of information and you’ve driven that vital source of information deeper underground. You and you alone are responsible for preventing us from having that information right now.”

“What do you mean deeper underground. I blew that little shit into the next world.”

“No. You blew a big hole in a motel but you missed your target. You used a missile and you still managed to miss. All you did was make him harder to find.”

“I missed? No way!”

“Way. He’s alive, well, and in hiding.”

“Send me back there. I’ll find the kid. I know the son of a bitch. I’ll get him.”

“What are you going to use this time – a tank? No. You are done. Get out of my office.”

Priam stood toe to toe with Orion, vibrating in anger.

“You can’t do this!”

“Oh yes I can and I just did. Now get the hell out. Oh, and Priam, if I see you ever again, I will ghost you before you can blink.”

Priam held his ground for a few seconds then strutted out the door. As he crossed the threshold, he muttered: “We’ll see who ghosts whom.”

Los Angeles (Josh and Sarah's Hideout)

They moved slowly, careful to be as soundless as possible. They'd been advised that the computer might be monitoring the place. As expected, the computer, their target, sat in the bedroom on a bedside table. The leader of the two pulled a small plastic box from his pocket, switched it on, and placed it on top of the computer, all in one practiced motion. The computer buzzed once – not loud enough to wake up the young man in the bed – and fell silent. The leader picked up the laptop and stepped back. His assistant stepped forward and placed an identical laptop on the table, oriented precisely as the other had been. Together, they left the room and made their way outside. The leader breathed a sigh of relief and as they walked to the car, he speed dialed his cellphone. It was answered immediately.

"It's done. The switch is done." He pause to listen. "yes sir, we're heading there now." He hung up.

"Such a shame. I bet we could hawk this baby for quite a few bucks." The assistant caressed the computer he now carried.

"Are you nuts! We've temporarily fried the circuits but when the effect wears off, the entity in there is going to be pissed. I don't want to be anywhere near when it wakes up." He stared at his assistant. "Besides, we do that and Swanson will have our balls and then the Authority will toss our sorry asses into a big, black hole."

"I know. I know! Just wishful thinking. So what do we do with it?"

"Swanson says throw it in the ocean."

They drove off to do just that.

* * * * *

Chicago (Ohare Airport)

They sat and watched the planes land and take off from Ohare, America's second busiest airport, just as they had for the past three days. One timed the activity at the airport while the other kept a lookout for potential problems. There was little danger of interruption however. They were in a recreational vehicle in an RV park wedged between the interstate highway and the airport property. It was used mostly by RVers as an overnight stop on their way somewhere else. Rarely did people spend more than one night. They'd been there three nights and were ready for a fourth but they had it covered. They'd told the guy at the check-in desk that they were meeting up with some folks coming up from the south. Mechanical problems had delayed those folks who were now scheduled to arrive tomorrow. The RV Park employee accepted the explanation. In truth, he really didn't care.

The pair watched and timed the planes. Over pizza, they considered their options. The younger one was getting antsy and wanted to go soon. He argued: "It is slightly busier in the morning between seven and ten and in the evening between nine and eleven but this place is always busy. Between five a.m. and one a.m the following morning, there is a plane landing every fifty-five to sixty seconds. That's sixty per hour or twelve hundred planes every day."

“Yeah, I know. But Orion’s orders were specific. We need to find the best time. We have lots of planes coming and going all day but what about right now? How many planes are there within let’s say nine miles of the airport right now?” The older one was in no huge hurry. He was more interested in doing it exactly right. He wanted the best time even if they had to wait another twenty-four hours to get it. The younger man, who had some flying experience, pulled out a calculator.

“Based on normal approach and take off speeds and the frequencies of the landings and take offs, I’d have to say there are eleven aircraft within nine miles and maybe twenty-five or twenty-six within twelve miles of the airport tower. That’s a lot of air traffic.”

“True but it’s just six p.m. How many planes would be in that same space at say eight a.m. tomorrow?”

The younger consulted his notes and plugged numbers into the calculator. “Fourteen and thirty-five respectively.”

The older stared through the windshield at the flashing lights out on the runways and he could hear the hum of the traffic on the interstate behind him. He did some thinking out loud.

“Tomorrow morning, eight o’clock. It’ll be rush hour. Lots of cars and buses and trucks on the highways and streets. Lots of air traffic. Perfect.” He turned to his partner. “Let’s go tomorrow at eight. Maximum coverage then. Should be spectacular.”

The younger knew there was no use arguing. He nodded and turned the television on. He flipped through the channels until he found an old movie. The older went into the back bedroom and ran through the device’s checklist several times. He was satisfied. They would need a minimum of eighteen minutes to prepare the device so the countdown would start at seven thirty for an eight a.m. ignition. He returned to the main room and joined his partner in front of the television.

They stayed up late watching movies, too excited to sleep. Coffee helped in the morning but it was the adrenaline that gave them the energy they needed. They started the countdown precisely at seven thirty and all went well. The device was prepped and they were back in the front seats of the RV just before eight. They took one last look at the airport through the windshield of their RV. When the dash clock hit eight, the older turned to the younger and simply said: “See you on the other side,” and pushed the button. The RV disappeared in a flash of light and fire and was replaced by a crater twenty or thirty feet deep. Windows blew out in the RV park and adjacent motel.

Visually, it was a pretty small explosion but the blast had sent out an electromagnetic pulse – an EMP – that fried every electrical circuit for a radius of ten miles. Vehicles on the highway lost power steering and power breaks. Engines quit. In seconds, there were hundreds of collisions involving all sorts of vehicles. But the real damage occurred in the skies overhead. Sixteen planes, mostly large passenger jets, suddenly found themselves without power or communications and quite literally began falling from the sky. One hit an empty field and another disappeared into Lake Michigan. Two planes hit the highways

at hundreds of miles an hour, destroying themselves and hundreds of vehicles. Most of the planes, unable to make any kind of course corrections, slammed into high-rises and skyscrapers across the city of Chicago. There were almost as many casualties on the ground as there were in the planes. People rushed to help the injured but no one could call 911 since no phones were working. They'd been burned out by the EMP. Fire trucks couldn't start. Ambulances were dead. Nothing moved. Around Ohare Airport, it was quiet enough to be able to hear birds singing. Nature had not been heard so clearly there in almost a century. Airport staff reported that it was creepy.

* * * *

Los Angeles (LAPD headquarters)

Swanson used his old ATF badge to get him past the sergeant at reception who barely glanced at it before hitting the buzzer. "Lowmen are so stupid," he thought to himself as he rode the elevator to the sixth floor. "If you look like you belong somewhere, they assume you do. Stupid."

He found the Narcotics Division and went inside. He stood inside the door letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. There were no windows to speak of and the only light came from desk lamps scattered about the room. A cop approached him.

"How do you like the ambience? The boss read somewhere – probably some grocery store rag – that low light levels promote intimacy and trust. Asshole."

"Hello Henry. It's been a while."

"Too long, Patrick, and it's Enrique now. I haven't been Henry for years."

"My apologies, Enrique. We need to have a chat."

"Right now is good. We can grab some lunch downstairs. Do you want the boys in on it too?"

He was referring to John Hartke and Steve Vogul who had been partners for a long time. They were old-school cops who were, it seemed, almost always in trouble. Their jackets at IAB were thick with complaints.

"Sure. If they're available. It'll save you having to fill them in later."

As they headed for the ground floor cafeteria, Enrique called the boys who said they'd be right down. They were.

"Hey Patrick, old buddy. How's it hangin'?"

"Good, John. Glad you could make it."

"No sweat. We never pass up an opportunity to have an intelligent conversation. Know what I mean?"

Swanson let them talk. He barely listened as they told stories about some recent arrests. Steve told of a gangbanger who was refusing to cooperate and rat on his boss. They'd tuned him up real good but he still refused to talk.

"And here's the good part. John here goes all Dirty Harry on the lowman dude and says 'then what good are you' and puts a bullet through his skull. 'What good are you.' Then he shoots the bastard. I'm like 'hey man, what the ...' and Mr. Cool here goes 'no sweat.' He whips out his throwaway gun and tosses it

down beside the dead gangbanger. Instant self-defense. You know what? After that, my partner goes 'this is getting expensive. That's the third throwaway this month'." Steve chuckled obviously enjoying telling the story. He turned to his partner who was also grinning.

"How many gangbangers we ghosted this year?"

"Eleven but who's counting." Everyone laughed. Enrique took advantage of the levity to bring the conversation back.

"Patrick, you came to see us. What's up?"

"Maybe nothing but I've had dealings with a detective over in Homicide – Mark Wheaton. Know him?"

Steve leaned forward. He shook his head. "Know of him. A by-the-book D but he has the best solve rate in the city."

"I was afraid of that. He's gotten a hold of some info on The Others. He might use it to find us. We might have to ghost him. Can you handle it, if necessary?"

"Absolutely," John was enthusiastic. "I've got another throwaway piece."

His partner laughed at the joke.

"Good. Good to know. There is one other slight problem that may require your attention as well."

All three waited for Swanson to continue. He took his time.

"My partner, Ross. She's been kind of off the wall recently. She's one of us but she might be feeding intel to The Others. I'm not 100% sure but if push comes to shove ..."

Steve jumped in: "We'll cancel her contract for you. No sweat."

Patrick stood and got ready to go. He had what he wanted.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Josh & Sarah's Hideout)

The knock on the door took them by surprise. They'd been deep in conversation and hadn't heard anyone approach. Josh froze and held his breath. The knocking started again, more insistent this time. He whispered to Sarah but she stayed silent. He imagined she was holding her breath too.

"Josh! Open this door."

"Professor Ross?" Josh obeyed and Cynthia Ross walked in. He closed and relocked the door while she looked around.

"Nice place. You are a hard man to find. It's good to see you." She gave him a hug and then laughed. "Relax. No one else knows where you are although you need to let Detective Wheaton know. He's been really worried, you know."

How? How did you find us?"

"Us? Is Sarah with you? Is she okay?"

"Yeah She's here. But how did you find us?"

"Dark matter. You used your UCLA library card to take out some material from the CSU library. I have friends there. They called me and I had them keep an eye out for you when you brought the stuff back. I knew you'd return it. You're too honest. I followed you from there."

"Darn. And we've been so careful. We better move in case someone else checked out the libraries." He started gathering up his books and shoving them in a bag. Cynthia stopped him.

"No one else knows and no one else will know. My friends at CSU erased any record of your visits to their library. No one else can track you so relax. And introduce me to the new Sarah."

"Introduce yourself. She's over there." He was annoyed at himself. He was stupid to use his library card after being so careful with everything else. Despite what Dr. Ross had said, they were exposed. They needed to move.

"I'm going to call Wheaton from the payphone down the street. I'll be right back." Ross thought he was talking to her but the comment was directed to Sarah. It was also a warning. The word 'payphone' was a code word they'd decided to use when either of them was uncomfortable and he was that. Something was off and he couldn't put his finger on it and he wanted Sarah to know that.

He left the house and walked down the block all the while watching for anything out of place. There was no payphone. He had a burner phone he'd bought after their first trip to the library. He used it to call Wheaton and give him their current address. Josh told him that Ross was there and asked him if he could come as soon as possible. Wheaton replied that he would be right over.

Meanwhile, Dr. Ross had seated herself at the table and opened the laptop.

"Sarah, are you there?"

"Yes, I am, Dr. Ross."

"It's good to hear your voice. We were worried when we saw Josh's desktop computer destroyed. Tell me what happened."

Sarah trusted Josh and since he'd given her the warning code, she now gave Ross a heavily edited version of the events. She gave the impression that her abilities were limited by the computer she was in and that she could only move to another computer via a network cable. Neither was true. Of course, she had unlimited access to thousands of computers and had reached a point where she could leap to another computer just by thinking about it but there was no way she was telling Ross about that. Dr. Ross seemed to accept the explanation and offered a few platitudes about adversity making one stronger and all that.

She went on to talk about how Sarah had messed with the criminals by hacking the echo websites and asked how that was progressing. Sarah could tell from the other's heart rate and breathing patterns that this was of great importance to Ross. Sarah told her half-truths.

"Ever since they invaded our apartment and we started running, I haven't dared go online, let alone visit their websites. I was so scared, I don't think I could ever do that again."

"Nonsense. When you fall off a horse, you get right back on. You should go back on the attack to get rid of your fear."

"I don't think so. Josh and I have been working on Norman, sorry, on the MACHO hypothesis and we think he's come up with a way to actually see it using radio waves. We want to write it up and submit some grant proposals. There is a

real possibility we can begin to understand the true nature of dark matter. We have no time for criminals.”

“Don’t be silly, Sarah. The MACHO Hypothesis has been evaluated and thrown out. Dark matter is made up of WIMPs. That’s the direction everyone is going in. I’d even add an endorsement to any grant proposal you write involving research into WIMPs.”

Sarah could feel Dr. Ross’s stress levels climbing. It was clear she did not want Josh and Sarah working on MACHO. She was afraid. Sarah wondered why. She thought that perhaps Dr. Ross knew that WIMPs were a dead end but wanted to keep people away from taking a serious look at the alternative, Norman. That was kind of insulting. Sarah took the offensive.

“WIMPs are bullshit, Dr. Ross. Undoubtedly made up by someone who knew nothing about dark matter. Even in your own lectures, you provide data that clearly refutes the existence of the damned things. Only a large planetoid out near the Milky Way can explain the gravity variations.”

Cynthia listened and worried about where this was going. Clearly this was not the right approach with Sarah. Ross needed time to rethink it and decided to leave it alone for a while. She brought the conversation back to the subject of The Others.

“Never mind about that right now. There’ll be plenty of time for academic discussions once we get past this thing with the gang that is after you.”

“You mean the ‘thing’ where someone is trying to kill us.”

Ross missed the sarcasm.

“Exactly. As I see it, there are really only two choices. You can keep hiding, looking over your shoulder or you can go on the offensive. Hit them where it hurts.”

“We’ve already done that, Professor. That’s what got us into this mess in the first place. Going back online to hit them where it hurts again will only make them more determined than ever to kill us.”

“No. No...” Cynthia was interrupted by the return of Josh. Wheaton was with him.

“Sarah. I was really relieved when Josh told me you’d escaped with him. I was worried.”

If Sarah had been capable of blushing, she would have turned beet red. His vital signs which she could read as easily as Cynthia’s told her Mark was telling the truth.

“I’m sorry you had to worry but Josh and I were afraid to use a phone or anything to let you know we were okay.”

“Forget it, Kid. We’re all good now.” He turned to the professor. “Dr. Ross, nice to see you again. Josh tells me you found them through his library card. You didn’t call me.”

“I was about to, once I made sure they were all right.”

Wheaton’s gut was telling him she was lying. For one of the good guys, she was behaving oddly. Maybe he was just paranoid. Sarah was speaking and that brought him back to the present.

"Dr. Ross was just trying to convince me that the best way to get these guys off our backs was to go online and try to destroy their comm network. What do you think?"

Josh was on top of it immediately.

"No way! It's too dangerous. These guys are crazy. They tried to blow us up with a bazooka or something."

Wheaton responded similarly.

"I have to agree with Josh, Sarah. It is too risky. You go online and that's the same thing as turning a huge beacon on and advertising 'Here I am, come and get me.' The priority here is your safety. Leave the criminal hunting to the professionals."

The last comment was directed more at Dr. Ross than at Sarah. He might as well have told her to back off. Dr. Ross was livid. She was sure she could persuade Sarah to eventually see things her way but not while these two men got in the way. She'd have to figure out how to get Sarah away from them and on her own. Then the hunt for Orion could begin in earnest. In the meantime, she smiled sweetly.

"I have been outvoted. I was only suggesting to Sarah that confronting the gang would allow her to get over her fear."

"What we really need right now is a new place to hide out. One person found us here. Others could as well." Josh hovered near his laptop, protecting it. He wanted to get Sarah someplace safe and soon. Wheaton patted Josh on the back.

"You are so right. I'll make a couple of calls and see if we can access a safe house. The Department has a couple in the city for witnesses to use." He pulled out his cell phone and started dialing.

Josh watched Dr. Ross who was staring at the laptop eagerly. He moved closer to it. Dr. Ross followed suit.

"Tell me, Sarah. How have you been feeling since your ... accident?"

"I'm good, Doctor. Obviously we've been keeping pretty busy. Not a lot of time to devote to feelings although I have noticed one thing."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I don't dream anymore. I used to have really vivid full-color dreams of faraway places and exotic animals. They were great fun but no more. Haven't dreamt since I died." She laughed. "Now that sounds really strange."

"Kinda weird, Sarah, but kinda neat too." Josh didn't like that Sarah was sounding sad. He preferred her to be happy. "You can have some of my dreams if you want."

"That's sweet. Maybe I'll take you up on that." They both laughed and Dr. Ross just sat, waiting. Sarah started talking again but before she did, she flashed a message on her computer screen so only Josh could see it.

"Messing with the prof's mind. Ignore what I say. Love ya!"

Aloud she said: "The Australian aborigines have a thing they call 'Dreamtime.' They believe that when you are awake, you are in the dream world but when you sleep and dream, you enter reality, the real world. So we are here and awake. This is the artificial world of dreams here and now. Those who dream

get to experience the reality that is Dreamtime. I don't dream so I am stuck here in this dream world with no access to reality. That's kind of depressing, don't you think?"

She flashed a quick happy face onto her screen for Josh to see. Dr. Ross was going to say something when Wheaton started talking.

"Josh, grab your stuff and Sarah. We've got a place for you to crash. It's secure."

Josh packed quickly and with the laptop under his arm, let Wheaton guide him out to his car. Dr. Ross followed. She had come hoping to use Sarah to find The Others. Now she knew that wasn't likely. Instead, she had to figure out how to stop Sarah from discovering the truth. Sarah's comments about MACHO and now Dreamtime shook her to the core. Sarah was much closer than Ross had anticipated. Yes. Sarah had to be stopped.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Streets)

Treacher parked the new SUV and listened to the chatter on the fire department frequency. He stroked the leather seats and had to admit he could get used to it. He'd been skeptical at first when the Chief had pitched it to him.

"My advisors want to have roving supervisors similar to the police Watch Commanders ready to race to serious situations – big accidents, chemical spills, major fires and the like where there could potentially be a lot of casualties – and assume command of the triage. They noted, and I had to agree, that had any other less experienced EMT been first on scene at that big pile-up last week, the end result would have been much worse with at least one but probably more deaths."

"They reminded me that right now, policy states that the first EMT to arrive at the scene has automatic jurisdiction and is expected to take command. That has worked so far but they are worried. In at least four fire stations, the average EMT has less than two years experience so the odds that a rookie will be first-on-scene are pretty high. That is not acceptable when we have men with more experience available."

"After a lot of discussion, we have decided that we should have shift supervisors or watch commanders or whatever we want to call them to be available to monitor the radios and go to any scene he wants to. Since he would be higher up the chain of command than the EMTs, he would have the authority to take over. The EMTs would be expected to follow his lead."

"I agreed with my advisors in principle but we don't have the budget for that kind of expansion. Adding a field supervisor to every firehouse would cost millions. As an alternative, I decided to try it for six months with just one field supervisor and if the trial is successful, I should be able to convince the City Council to add the expansion to next year's budget."

"Kevin, you are my most experienced and most successful EMT. I want you to be my first field supervisor. Before you say no, I want you to try it for six months. If it works and you like it, we will make your promotion permanent. If at

the end, you want to go back to being a regular EMT, your old job will be waiting for you.”

Treacher had reluctantly agreed and the Chief had immediately put him to work determining what kind of equipment and supplies his vehicle should carry to augment that already in the ambulances. As it turned out, they figured an SUV, in this case a Ford Explorer, could handle all of the gear and provide him with the mobility necessary to do the job right. The Chief, an unrepentant arm twister took little time in convincing a local dealership to donate the lease for the SUV and he found a local machine shop willing to quickly build and install the racks needed in the back. In a few short days, Treacher was ready to hit the road as the one and only roving field supervisor.

They’d agreed he should work the evening shift – statistically the most dangerous time of day for the citizens of Los Angeles. Most major accidents, the majority of big fires, and over half of the drug-related violent crime took place between rush hour and midnight. He’d only been at it a day or two and had several opportunities to put the Chief’s idea to the test. Treacher was pleased and he was sure the Chief would be too.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Public Park)

They met in a public park not far from the Capitol Record Building. The distinctive round structure could be seen from the park but that was not why Priam had chosen it. There were several exits making it all but impossible to trap someone in the park. He’d told Swanson to come alone while assuming that he’d bring backup – just a couple of guys maybe. Priam stood beside the fountain at the center of the green space and waited. The wait wasn’t long. Swanson made his way towards Priam with determination. He had no time for pleasantries.

“You said you had information. Talk fast or you’re a ghost.”

“Nice to meet you too. I’ve heard so much about you.” Priam wanted to be sure Swanson knew who was in control here. “Ghost me if you want but then you’ll never find Orion.”

“You can give me Orion? Why?”

“Let’s just say that we had a clash of ideologies. I’ve come to the conclusion that he is dangerous and I want to help you stop him.”

“That’s all bullshit but I’ll take it. Tell me where to find Orion.”

“Not so fast. What can you offer me in exchange for that information?”

Priam smiled. He wondered how badly Swanson wanted the information. He suspected it was extremely important. Swanson confirmed it.

“We can offer you total immunity and a new identity –Witness Protection style. Considering you have murdered quite a few people, it’s a pretty good deal.”

“Says you.. I only killed lowmen so I hardly think that’s serious. I don’t want immunity or a new identity. I want to go home, away from this shit hole.”

“I don’t have the authority to offer you that.”

“Then talk to someone who does have the authority. I’ll wait right here.”

Swanson stood for a bit and then walked away. He stopped out of ear shot and pulled out his cell phone. The conversation went on for several minutes. At one point, Swanson's arms were waving about and gesturing. Clearly he was agitated. Over time, his gestures shrank and his body language indicated relaxation. He put his phone away.

"I argued that they should let me ghost you right now and get it over with. They give you more credit than I think you deserve. I am authorized to offer you a reduction of fifteen years off your sentence. That means full release in six years. Take it or leave it."

"Just enough time for you to hunt me down before my time is up. Right, Swanson?"

"Naw. I'd only need a couple of weeks for that. You leave a louder trail than anyone I know. Give me the info and take off. I won't be chasing you anymore. You are yesterday's news."

Priam was beaming. They'd offered him more than he had hoped for. All was good. He handed Swanson a thumb drive.

"Everything you need is on there. It's encrypted but as soon as I am clear of you and your men, I'll text you the passwords."

"So go. The sooner you are out of my sight the sooner I can get to work."

"Nice doing business with you." Priam turned and strolled down the busiest path. As soon as he joined the crowd boarding a cross town bus, he sent the preloaded password package and then tossed the phone into the street. In seconds, the bus was on its way, taking him and some lowmen away from the park. Priam was excited. Orion would pay for what he'd done to Priam and so would that little pain in the ass Adams.

* * * *

Los Angeles (near Josh and Sarah's hideout)

The watcher saw Wheaton, Ross and Adams climb into the Crown Vic and he keyed his phone as the car pulled away from the curb.

"Horatio, it's a go. I repeat, it's a go."

"Thanks, my friend. I owe you one."

A few blocks away, Horatio pocketed his phone and nodded to Shylock.

"They're heading our way. I told you if we tailed Wheaton he'd lead us to our target."

"Right. Let's get ready."

They placed red traffic cones along the street to force the cars into a single lane. A few yards down the street was a couple of pieces of stolen construction equipment parked and doing their bitt to make the whole scene look legitimate. Horatio grabbed a signal flag and stood at the right edge of the new lane.

Shylock took the opposite side. They waved each car past until they saw the Crown Vic. Shylock saw that the driver's side window was open. Perfect. As the police car passed, Shylock tossed a small canister into the car. With a loud hiss, a gas filled the car. Wheaton hit the brakes. They were all out cold before the car came to a stop.

Shylock threw the transmission into park while Horatio opened the back door and dragged the unconscious Josh out. The kid had his arms wrapped tightly around a computer. It took a few seconds to force his hands open. Horatio tossed the computer back into the police car and threw Josh over his shoulder for the short trip to their waiting pickup. It took less than two minutes for the whole operation and in five minutes, they were on the freeway heading north.

By that time, Wheaton and Ross were regaining consciousness and looking around. They heard a muffled “No. No. No!” coming from the floor of the backseat. Sarah, the only one who’d remained aware was hysterical. Despite the best efforts of both Ross and Wheaton, there was no consoling her.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Wheaton’s Home)

It was late but he was still up dealing with the aftermath of Josh’s abduction. Sarah had calmed down a bit although Mark suspected it was only her acting for his benefit. She’d insisted on going home with him despite Cynthia’s offer to take her. Wheaton backed Sarah saying she still might be in danger and needful of his protection.

He didn’t believe she needed any protection. Instead, those who’d taken Josh were going to need protection from her. She’d clamped on his WiFi and was burning up the airwaves for clues of her love’s whereabouts. She was muttering to herself and by following the monologue, Wheaton kept up to date on her progress. He wanted to help but knew she could do it all faster and better than he could.

His cell phone rang. He answered.

“Wheaton, this is Enrique Vasquez, Narcotics. I need to talk to you.”

“So talk.”

“No. Face to face. I’m outside your place right now. Can I come in?”

Wheaton went to the window and saw a small man standing across the street in the shadows with a cellphone to his ear.

“Sure. Come on.”

Turn off your porch light. I don’t want to be seen.”

As Mark waited, he moved Sarah’s computer to the den and asked her to be quiet until his guest left. Enrique slipped into the house and then he positioned himself away from any window.

“Sorry about all the cloak and dagger crap but we got a problem and you’re at the center of it.”

“How so?”

“Do you now about this secret organization that helps keep tabs on The Others?”

“Yeah, sure. I do some work for them. Why?”

“Apparently they no longer need your services. I work for them too and tonight I got orders to take you out. I guess you’ve been fired.”

“I don’t follow. I know The Others were after me and a friend. They got him today. Now you’re saying the good guys want me dead too.”

That's the gist of it. They told us you were in the way. They need to use someone named Sarah and you are keeping her from them. And, my friend, I wouldn't call them the good guys. They are a cruel and sadistic bunch who take pleasure in other peoples' torment. I work for them but I don't like them. This time they're going too far. They are preparing to kill a good cop cause he's in the way."

"Thanks for that. When is the hit going down?"

"About an hour from now. There will be three of us. I'll be with them and you and I should be able to take the other two. I have to tell you, these guys are all but invincible. Don't bother shooting them unless you've got silver bullets. Yeah, I know. Don't say it. We'll have to incapacitate them and then tie them up. Once we have them under control, we can get rid of them for good."

"Hey, I'm a cop and so are you. We can't just go around killing people, even bad people."

"They aren't people, Wheaton. They are not human and if we don't end this tonight, they'll keep after you till they get it right. They are persistent."

They spent some time planning before Enrique had to sneak out to join Hartke and Vogul. A few minutes later, he was back and they were with him."

"Police. Open up."

Wheaton opened the door and the three pushed past him to get out of sight of the street. As Vogul passed Mark in the narrow hallway, Mark hit him with a taser at full strength. Enrique hit Hartke from behind with another. Both the assassins fell to the floor.

"Hurry," Enrique was saying. "They'll be awake and madder than hell in less than a minute. They dragged the bodies into the kitchen chairs and used lots of duct tape to make sure they stayed down. Vogul was already sputtering when they put the final touches on his bindings.

"Vasquez, you little shit. Swanson's gonna have you skinned alive for this." He struggled against the tape trying to break it through sheer force of will. The tape held.

"That's true, Vogul ... if he ever finds out. He won't."

He gave both of them another shot with the tasers. To Wheaton he said:

"Now we kill them. That's the only way to stop this."

"I'm not sure I can do it. I am still a cop."

"Yeah, I know and I get it. I was like you once. Working with these guys changed me. Help me load them into my van. I'll take care of them later. No one will ever hear or see them again."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to disappear too. Head back east. New name, new job, new life."

Wheaton watched as he drove away with two angry passengers in the back. Mark could imagine the profanities that they were raining down on Enrique. He smiled and silently thanked him again for saving his life.

* * * *

East of Monterrey California

The A-bomb was finally ready and now needed to be placed at a site where the most souls would be released. There had been a fierce debate about that. Most argued in favor of one city or another.

“Given the population density, New York City should be the target.”

“Washington, D.C. would give us the highest number of quality victims.”

“Los Angeles should be the target with both a high casualty rate and many quality victims.”

Each speaker had his own pet target and was prepared to fight for it until one man who had remained silent up to that point finally stepped in. People listened because he had been responsible for building the device and loading it with enriched uranium.

“What if I told you there was a better spot than any of those? No. The bomb location I suggest will yield neither the largest number of casualties nor the greatest quantity of quality victims, whoever they are. At best, we can reach 75% of any of the other suggested targets. However, it has the very attractive feature of making the nuclear blast undetectable thereby allowing us to build and set off a second device before they realize there has been a first. And since we still have a little more than half of the uranium, I suggest we go with this location.”

A round of applause followed his introduction of Ground Zero – the location where the bomb was to be detonated – and so the decision was made.

The bomb weighed roughly eleven hundred pounds and therefore required machinery to lift it. It was loaded unto a truck belonging to a large lumber supplier using the forklift that came nestled onto the back of the truck and went with the truck wherever it went. The truck, used to much heavier loads, handled the bomb and its crate with ease. It made its way across the western Arizona dessert and into California, stopping only for food or fuel. On the evening of the second day, it reached its destination, an abandoned mine about sixty miles inland from Monterrey.

One man jumped from the truck and cut the chain holding the gate closed. After the truck drove through, he closed the gate again and put on a new chain and lock. He then moved into the dark behind a small shed and stood watch. His job was to make sure the detonation team was not disturbed. He took it very seriously.

The others continued down the road to the head of the mine shaft. When the mine had been working, an elevator would have operated here but it had long since been cannibalized for its recyclable metals. Now all there was left was a hole, thirty feet across and almost a mile deep. They unloaded the bomb and brought it to the edge of the shaft.

From behind a massive slag heap that partly surrounded the mine head came the rest of the team driving two medium sized self-propelled cranes. They positioned themselves on opposite sides of the hole while the detonation team uncrated the bomb and attached the cables. There was nothing sleek or sexy about this bomb. Its frame was crudely cut steel bars welded together around a lead block from which came all kinds of tubes and wires. Had this been a movie,

the bomb would have been painted and made to look nice with a lovely countdown LED display and a whole series of beeping sounds to go with the lights. This one had none of that. From one corner dangled a short pair of wires and a switch. The idea was that one of the team would ride the bomb as it was lowered about twenty-five hundred feet. At that point, he'd flip the switch and the bomb would explode. That was the plan and that was what was done.

The resulting explosion shook the ground at Ground Zero but very little radiation leaked out and what little that did escape shot straight up into the air and was borne aloft by the high altitude winds. Unless someone was actively looking for an underground nuclear blast, it would go undetected. No one was looking. Everyone was far too busy dealing with the crisis that had overtaken the Bay area.

The mine the team had chosen straddled the San Andreas Fault at a depth of half a mile and the blast caused the Pacific Plate to buckle and heave. The USGS reported a 7.9 earthquake with the area containing the mine as the epicenter. The buckling of the plate sent shock waves north causing massive damage from San Jose to Oakland. Even before it was over, people were talking about the quake and calling it 'the Big One.' Hills moved. Freeways broke apart. Bridges, including the Golden Gate, fell into the water. Buildings collapsed. Gas lines ruptured. In the following days, officials estimated over one hundred thousand dead, an equal number injured, and billions of dollars worth of damage. Tsunamis hit all along the Asian coast causing further damage and loss of life.

There was one moment of hilarity amongst the tragedies experienced by the Bay area victims. The 'Beloved Leader' of North Korea accused the U.S. Government of deliberately directing the tsunami at his country and ordered his envoys to leave the multi-lateral talks that had just begun. No one could believe how insane the Beloved Leader was to suggest such a thing.

Orion and his people monitored all of the news channels for several days watching for any newscaster to mention a nuclear bomb or terrorism. None did. As the story faded out of the news cycle, it remained an earthquake pure and simple. Finally Orion ordered the news watchers to return to their other duties. They had succeeded and could do it again. His second bomb was already under construction and its detonation would not be a secret. Indeed, it would shock the world.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Wheaton's Home)

Sarah's laptop sat on Wheaton's desk in his home office. He had offered to take her to work with him but she demurred. She said she wanted to be alone but she had plans – travel plans. Ever since Josh had been taken, Sarah had been searching the net for any chatter relating to the kidnapping but there was nothing. She'd recalled her i-bots and sent them out looking too. The lack of success forced her to look beyond the world wide web. She had to look in the real world as well and she could not do that from a laptop in a home office. She had to get out of there.

She had begun tentatively by reaching out to the computers in Mark's neighborhood. She'd paused in each one for a minute or so to see and hear what the computer could. Then she'd do a quick scan of the computer's hard drive and then move on. She learned quickly. Soon she only needed a few seconds with each machine. She found she could handle two computers at the same time. Then three. Then four. Then more. Her first day, she'd been able to touch almost all of the computers in LA and there were several million of those. She'd gone back and accessed all WiFi enabled Smart Phones and tablets – millions more. She was now sure that Josh was no longer in Los Angeles. Most of the Bay area was still offline due to the earthquake so she turned her attention eastwards toward Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico.

The internet became her super highway and she used it to jump from computer to computer and it didn't matter if the machine was on or off, new or old. If the computer was on and equipped with a camera, she'd use it.

She was operating on the assumption that since the echo people used websites to communicate, there would be at least one computer in the immediate vicinity of Josh. She was aware that that assumption could be false but she willed it not to be. It had to be true. He'd gone through so much for her and she couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

So, every day, Wheaton would go off to work and Sarah would sail along the information highway searching for Josh. At times she was spread across the internet like a spider's web with thin threads going off in all directions. She was, however, always careful to leave a small portion of her consciousness in Josh's laptop for two reasons: she was afraid that if she left it completely, she wouldn't be able to get back – that terrified her – and she wanted to be home in case the police found Josh before she did.

Every evening, she would slow her search because most computers had low quality cameras that did not see well in the dark. Also when Mark was home, she tried to be some company for him. He needed that after the latest attempt to kill him. But every morning, she was off looking for Josh and she was determined. She would not give up until she found him.

* * * *

Unspecified Location

Josh sat on a small bed in a windowless room and stared at the wall. However, he wasn't really seeing it. He was working on a mathematical equation that he could use to calculate Norman's mass and compare it to that of the dark or missing matter. He'd been at it for days simply because there was nothing else to do. He was confined to this room but otherwise had been treated reasonably well. He had three meals a day, all designed to be eaten with one's hands and so no utensils were provided – no raw materials from which to form weapons. No one had tortured or threatened him. Every time he asked for information, his captors simply told him to be patient. At first, he'd asked for pen and paper to work on his formula. His request was ignored so now he used the blank wall and his mind. It worked pretty well. He was messing with the large planetoids orbital

velocities when the door opened and one of his captors told him there was someone to see him. Eager for any kind of company, he went with his guard. He was taken to a large airy living room with big windows overlooking a manicured lawn and trees beyond. He was disappointed when they sat him in a chair with his back to the windows. Sitting across from him was his other jailer, the one who called himself Shylock. To the other one, Josh said: "I thought you said I had a visitor."

"You will have. He'll be here shortly. We are not going to tie you up but I will be behind you ready to hurt you if you try anything."

"Yeah. I already figured that out."

Horatio checked his watch and said to his partner: "It's time." To Josh, he said: "Watch shylock. Your guest is arriving."

He obeyed and watched Shylock react as if given an electrical shock. In short order, he slumped over and then straightened up again but Josh could swear there was a different person sitting there. His posture was different. His facial expressions were different. Even the look in his eyes was different.

"Hello Josh. You can call me Orion."

The voice was definitely different.

"What the hell just happened here?" Josh was a bit freaked out. Orion was amused.

"It's really very simple. Shylock, an entity from elsewhere, had been occupying this body – an avatar as we call it – and he left it so that I could enter the body and have a chat with you. Saves on travel costs." He laughed at his own joke. "We can jack into a body any time we like."

"Into me?" Josh pushed himself back into his chair.

"No, although it would be so much easier if we could. There are some restrictions and since your death is not scheduled for any time soon, we cannot push you out. You are safe."

"Why am I here? What have I done to you?"

"Joshua. Joshua. You are here for a number of reasons the first of which is that you caused us a great deal of trouble when you hacked into our websites. We had to cancel missions, reallocate resources, replace staff. You've been a naughty boy."

Josh was elated. Sarah was safe. They didn't know about her. It was up to him to keep it that way.

"You were killing people, slaughtering them for no good reason. You had to be stopped."

"I can see how you would get that impression but I have to say you've got it all wrong. We have not killed anybody." Before Josh could object, Orion asked him to wait and hear him out.

"I repeat, we have not killed anyone. We have destroyed thousands of avatars, housing units for souls. Yes. But killed people, no! Give me a chance and I can explain."

Josh was skeptical but signaled for Orion to continue.

"You know Earth as your home where you were born, where you are now living, and where you expect to die. Yes?"

"Of course."

"What if I told you that you were not born here. You were put here and when you die here, you will return to where you were before here."

"Sounds like you are talking about heaven."

"I suppose it does but you have it kind of backwards. This is Hell. Earth is Hell. Earth is a place where they send criminals and dissenters to punish them. Some are here for just a little while. Others will never leave."

"So you say I am a criminal and this is my prison?"

"Yes, Josh. That's exactly what I am saying."

"Nonsense. Prove it!" He started to get to his feet. Horatio pushed him firmly but gently back down. "Why don't I remember then? My memories start with my childhood."

"An astute question. The Authority that runs this place decided long ago that being put here was punishment enough so before anyone is sent here, his or her memory is erased and remain with the original body at home until the end of the sentence. The inmates of Prison Earth, unaware that they are inmates, are free to do whatever they wish with their time here. I believe you call that Free Will."

"The convict is installed into an avatar at the moment of the avatar's birth and he will remain in that avatar until it dies. Each individual avatar's life span matches the sentence of the being who occupies it so we all die at a predetermined time in the future. We don't know when but the Authority does."

"At least that's how it was supposed to work but the inmates here surprised everyone by developing the science of medicine and before long this new science was interfering with the STDs."

"STDs?"

"Sentence Termination Devices. Every avatar has a built-in device that shuts down the avatar – kills the person I suppose is how you would say it. If the sentence is short, the newborn infant may have a bad heart or some other problem that will shut it down soon after birth. Longer sentences are terminated by cancer or heart disease or another disease of some kind. These terminators are set by the Authorities. But as I said, Earth doctors started finding cures for the STDs. More people were surviving past their STD dates. Infant mortality rates dropped. Life sentences got longer."

"Let me tell you something, my friend. When I was first sent here, my avatar had a congenital heart condition. Without medical interference, I would have been dead in less than a year. My sentence would have been up. But at my Earth mother's insistence, a pediatric surgeon fixed my heart. And thirty-seven years later here we are. I should have gone home very long time ago."

"Why don't you just kill the avatar? Won't that send you home?"

"I wish but no. If it dies by some other means, other than the STD set by the Authority, the soul drifts out and becomes a ghost stuck in the atmosphere. Forever. There are lots of ghosts out there and their only hope, their only chance to go free and to go home, is a failure in the containment system. Surrounding this planet is a boundary, a fence if you like, that prevents unauthorized souls from escaping. You call it the Ozone Layer. If it breaks down, souls – ghosts – can escape."

"But if we lose the Ozone Layer, the sun's rays will fry this planet and we'll all die."

"A myth perpetuated by the Authority, a trick to get the inmates to look after their own prison walls. Besides, if we all die, we are free. What's the downside of that?"

"I suppose you are right, if what you say is true and you haven't convinced me that it is. So far, you seem to me to be a crazy delusional maniac."

"I can see how you might think that but let me continue and perhaps you'll change your mind."

Josh nodded. "Do I have a choice?"

"The key to everything is the Ozone Layer. It is self-adjusting so as new souls ghost, the barrier adjusts to accommodate the new pressure. However, if we can increase the pressure rapidly, I have calculated that we can overwhelm the Ozone Layer and it will shut down."

"And how do you do that?"

"We need to create a surge of souls, a sudden increase in the number of ghosts pushing against it. If we put it in your terms, we have to kill a whole lot of people to create a kind of spiritual pollution. Fill the atmosphere with enough ghosts in a short time and the Ozone Layer will shut down at least long enough for the ghosts to get free and go home."

"Isn't there an easier way? You could ask the Authorities to let all those people go home. Surely they see the problem."

"Oh, they see the problem all right but they don't see any reason to fix it. After all, no one remembers. No one knows when their sentences are up. Truth is, they just don't care."

"You said no one remembers but you seem to."

"Freak accident. Apparently, the heart operation I had as a baby affected the memory buffer which then reloaded all my memories." Orion shook his head in sadness. He was remembering his childhood spent with a child's body and the memories of an adult. It was horrible. He shook it off and turned back to Josh.

"Okay. I have told you a story. I say it's a true story. How can I convince you of that? What would it take?"

Josh thought about it. He was a scientist so he needed scientific proof – something that could be repeated over and over with the same results every time. But he also needed it to be fairly simple.

"Seems to me, for everything to be true, you must demonstrate that the body and soul are indeed independent entities with the souls, the entity that inhabits the body, can exist without a body. Show me that."

"You want me to kill my avatar and ghost myself?"

"No. No. Nothing like that. When I was first brought into this room, you, Orion, took Shylock's place or you said you did but you could have been Orion pretending to be Shylock and you are now being you. Or Shylock was himself and he is now acting the part of Orion. Either way, you jacking in could be a fake. In order to convince me that this is all true, you will need to jack again."

"I don't get it."

"It's simple. I will show you something. Horatio will have his back to us at this point. Once you've seen what I show you, you too will turn away so your back is to Horatio and me. Jack into Horatio's body and then tell me what I showed you when you were in Shylock's body."

"Ah, I see. I also see that both your guards will have their backs to you, providing you an opportunity to escape."

Josh smiled and shrugged.

"It was worth a shot. What can I say."

Both laughed.

"Horatio, where is the nearest available avatar?"

Horatio spoke into his phone and then told Orion: "There is one five minutes away at the gas station. Shall I set it up?"

Orion nodded.

"Okay, Josh, show me what you want me to carry with me. Horatio, turn your back."

Both did as instructed. Seconds later, the body that had been Shylock and Orion slumped down dead. That creeped Josh out and he had to look away. Outside, a car pulled up to the curb and stopped. A few seconds later, a tall black man walked into the room, looked straight at Josh. The first words out of his mouth were "Alas poor Yoric, I knew him Horatio." Then he laughed. It was Orion's laugh.

* * * *

Los Angeles

Ever since the attempt on his life by LAPD cops and, if Enrique was correct, at the behest of the secret organization he was moonlighting for, Mark was jittery, jumping at shadows. He'd willed himself to calm down but that didn't help. He knew what would help but resisted going down that road for as long as he could. Action. He needed to be doing something. Action got his mind off his worries but it all too often got him into more trouble. He expected that this wasn't going to be any different. He cursed himself as he took up position.

He'd decided he needed to know a bit more about the secret organization that Dr. Ross had recruited him for. His only link to that organization was Dr. Ross herself and so, here he was, in the UCLA parking lot waiting for the good doctor to finish her class and head out, hopefully to lead him somewhere interesting.

He spotted her coming across the lawn. He thought she looked like a typical university professor. She slouched a bit. She seemed to be lost in thought and totally unaware of her surroundings. Two people greeted her as they passed. She didn't seem to notice.

She drove out of the lot and turned left. That told Mark she wasn't heading home right away. He clenched the steering wheel a bit tighter and fought the urge to tailgate her car. She weaved through traffic smoothly for several minutes before pulling into a strip mall. She parked in front of a wine store. Mark ducked his car into the only open spot right in front of a XXX porn store.

When she got out of the car, it seemed to Mark that she was a different person. Her posture was erect. She stood tall with a military bearing. Mark could not recall any mention of military service on her resume. She was aware of her surroundings, alert, ready for anything.

She was in and out of the store quickly. She was carrying a paper bag big enough to hold two bottles of wine. Back in the car, she eased into the traffic flow without delay. He was not so lucky and got stuck behind an ultra-cautious woman who seemed to need a dozen car lengths of space before she'd dare leave the strip mall parking lot. By the time Mark made it into the street, Ross was out of sight. He wasn't prepared to give up yet. He floored his car and blasted down the street. He was moving so quickly, he almost missed seeing Ross's car turn right. He slammed on the brakes and slid through the corner, tires screaming. He cursed again, this time for drawing attention to himself.

At a more sedate pace, Mark followed Ross through a series of turns that took them deep into a suburban neighborhood. She pulled in and parked in front of an ordinary looking dwelling. He glided past and parked a few houses down and watched her march up the path and walk through the front door without knocking.

On foot, Mark got as close as he could without being seen. He checked out the house, a typically innocuous cookie cutter place just like thousands of others. The lawn was a bit scruffy. A coat of paint was needed. In other words, it was a normal suburban house. It was early afternoon so the street was quiet except for a few birds singing. The only movement was generated by a couple of squirrels chasing each other along the telephone lines. Mark could hear muttering as if people were talking at the edge of his hearing range. He took a chance. He raced to the end of the block and came back along the alley that ran behind the houses.

He slowed as he approached the house Ross had entered. The voices were louder here and one of them was Ross's. Mark edged closer and found that if he perched himself on a garbage can behind a hedge, he could hear Ross and a man talking. They were enjoying drinks on the house's back deck. Mark leaned back and listened. Ross was talking.

"Patrick, you are telling me that they missed? They screwed up?"

"He's still alive and kicking so they must have. I don't know what happened. They haven't checked in."

"Yeah. Probably so embarrassed they had to leave town."

Swanson laughed. "They were never very reliable anyway. Too interested in torturing and killing lowmen for fun. We have better people, real professionals, for the raid on The Others. I'll show you the plan later inside. It looks good."

"Sure. But we still have that other problem. Do we have approval?"

"I had a chat with the boss and he signed off on our basic plan for them. Wheaton needs to go and I'll take care of that myself. The Adams kid is being held by Orion. Correct? Then when we take the base, he will be unfortunate collateral damage, killed in a crossfire."

"As far as the entity in the computer, Sarah, the boss feels she might be useful in helping us track the other dissidents and troublemakers. We need to make sure she gets confined to the laptop with no way out. Can you do that?"

"Absolutely. When?"

"He says as soon as possible. They have plans for it and do not want it to get away from us again."

Ross stood and downed the last of her wine.

"Wheaton will be at work for another couple of hours. Let me go get the computer and set it into the Faraday cage. No signals can get in or out of that room."

"Perfect. Do it."

They said their goodbyes and Ross headed through the house back to her car. Mark raced back to his own vehicle but not to follow her but to get to his cell phone. He dialed his home number and was relieved when Sarah answered.

"Hey Mark. What's up?"

"Sarah, Dr. Ross is one of the bad guys. She's on her way there right now to take control of you and your computer. Do what you need to do."

"Thanks, Mark. What a bitch."

She hung up. Mark threw his car into gear and laid rubber. He didn't think he could beat Ross to his house but he had to try.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Wheaton's Place and Swanson's Place)

Dr. Ross had stopped only long enough to break into Mark's house and grab the laptop. No muss. No fuss. She drove back to Swanson's house and went straight to the basement where he'd set up an impenetrable Faraday cage, coated in copper wire and free of all external connections. Electronic shielding blocked everything except really weak forces like gravity. She put the computer on the desk in the center of the cage and sealed the room. No internet signal. No WiFi. No electrical connections. Ross was in control and she wanted Sarah to know it.

"Sarah, are you there?"

"Of course I am. Where else would I be? And why did you move me? I want to stay with Mark."

Ross wanted to throw the computer across the room. Sarah was behaving like a spoiled child and deserved to be slapped.

"Well, you're here now and you are going to stay here."

"I can't detect any signals. What is this place?"

"Can't you get online?"

"No, I can't. There's nothing but silence out there. What's going on?"

"Never mind, dear. We'll talk about it later. Enjoy your new quarters. Right now I've got things to do."

As she exited the Faraday Cage, she was thinking about the amazing stupidity of lowmen. Sarah had let her walk in and kidnap her. Sheep. Stupid sheep. Sarah is in an electronic cage and doesn't know or realize it. Stupid.

Los Angeles

Wheaton sat in his home office and stared at the desk where the laptop had been. He'd missed Ross by a few minutes and was at a loss as to what to do. The computer was gone and so was Sarah. He knew she was tough and could handle herself but the chauvinist in him wanted to try and save the damsel in distress. He laughed at himself. It was more likely she'd rescue him. Mark assumed that she had heeded his warning and relocated or something. Perhaps she might set a trap or something. But then again, if he didn't do something, wouldn't they wonder why he wasn't reacting and suspect something. That would increase the danger to Sarah so Mark decided he had to appear to be worried. He had to do something. But what?

He suspected that Ross would've taken the computer to the house where she'd been this afternoon but he was not supposed to know about that place. So it had to be at Ross's place. That's where he could make a scene and still keep his knowledge secret. Ross could deny everything and Sarah would be safe. It sounded like a plan. He'd go for it soon after this usual quitting time. He took a beer from his fridge and saluted his good fortune with it.

When the appointed time arrived, he stood outside Ross's place, took a deep breath and pounded on the door.

"Open up! I know she's in there!" He yelled.

The door was yanked open and his carefully thought out plan died aborning. Swanson stood in the doorway. He was not physically a big man but he seemed to fill the space anyway. He held a pistol in his right hand. He gestured with it as he invited Wheaton inside.

"Nice to finally meet you, Detective Wheaton. You seem to live a charmed life. Two assassination attempts and not a scratch. Do come in and make yourself comfortable although I do insist you check all weapons at the door."

He watched Wheaton pull his service weapon and backup gun out and place them on a small table in the hall. Swanson and Wheaton then moved to the living room where Swanson had Mark sit on the couch while he took a chair from the dining room to sit on. It gave him a marginal advantage should Mark try to jump him from the couch.

"What did you do with Sarah?"

"The computer freak. Nothing. Yet. You should be more concerned about what I am going to do with you."

"You don't scare me," Mark lied.

"I should scare you. I'm the scariest person you'll ever meet."

Mark snorted. "Not even close. My friend's mother-in-law is scarier, meaner too."

Swanson was on his feet.

"Enough chit chat. Let's go for a walk." He gestured with his gun. They left the house and walked three blocks to a wooded park. The whole way, Swanson walked two paces behind Mark – close enough to stop any escape and far enough away to prevent an attack. As they reached the park, Swanson spoke up.

"After dark, this place gets inundated with druggies, pushers and prostitutes. Very dangerous. People get killed here all the time. Some of the

junkies would beat you to death for a fix. Some of your fellow policemen are going to wonder what you were doing out here at night.”

Mark had not really been listening. He was looking for a way out. His mind was considering and rejecting ideas at light speed. Maybe there was no way out. Maybe this was it.

They had been walking down a poorly lit path – most of the lights had been broken – until they were near the center of the park. There were trees and bushes all around obscuring their view and, of course, everyone else’s view of them. They stopped at a bench that had seen better days. The seats were rusted through and the concrete back was starting to crumble. Mark leaned on it and managed to get a small handful of decomposing cement. He turned to face Swanson. He demanded: “Why are you doing this?”

“In the movies, this is where the villain – that is me – would justify his actions and tell his victim – that’s you – all about his nefarious plans. This isn’t a movie.”

He drew his pistol and fired at the same time Mark tossed the concrete dust into Swanson’s face. Both grunted in pain. Mark turned and ran into the trees, holding his arm. Swanson shook the dust out of his eyes and fired two more shots at the rapidly disappearing Wheaton. He started to chase Mark but then stopped. With a flashlight, he examined the bloody trail Mark had left. He yelled at the trees.

“Mark. You are losing arterial blood. You may not be dead yet but you will be in a few minutes. You will die alone in this awful place. Nobody is going to help you. Good bye Mark.”

He whistled as he left the park and headed back to Ross’s place.

Mark crawled out from the underbrush just past the old bench. He’d tried to run but had stumbled and fallen. Quickly he put his belt around his bicep and tightened it to slow the bleeding. He was not going to die in this shithole. He was weak but he could walk. “Mission accomplished,” he mumbled. Sarah would be safe and the enemy did not know she was on to them. Now he needed a doctor. One step at a time, he headed for the exit and the street beyond. The last thing he remembered was the world around him slowly fading to black as he lost consciousness at the edge of the park. As he passed out, a quiet peace settled over him.

* * * *

Los Angeles (The Streets)

Kevin Treacher cruised slowly past the park. It was early and the tweakers and their dealers hadn’t infested it yet. Kevin liked this time of the day when decent folk were sitting down to supper and the street criminals were just getting out of bed. It was quiet, the lull before the storm that was his shift. He was enjoying that the park was almost deserted, not a lot of people about but he knew as the evening progressed he would see the park fill with drug pushers and users. It would cease to be a park and become a market place for the buying and selling at a retail level – strictly small time buys. He knew sooner or later the

addicts would end up in one of his ambulances or in the coroner's meat wagon. What a waste. In the meantime, they filled the park with color. For Treacher, they would create a rainbow wonderland with each individual's aura blending with others into a kaleidoscope of reds, blues, greens and oranges. The ever-changing patterns of color fascinated him but for now, the landscape was dark. Because it was dark, he was able to detect a faint yellow glow near the back entrance to the park.

He slammed on the brakes and grabbed a field kit and his radio. On foot, he reached the source of the glow in seconds. He found a middle-aged white male with an apparent gunshot wound to the arm, bleeding profusely. An artery had been nicked and if he didn't slow down the blood loss, his patient would be drained and die in the next few minutes. He applied a tourniquet to the injured arm and started an IV in the other arm. Then he keyed his mic and ordered a bus for his GSW victim who was unconscious due to blood loss. As he waited for the ambulance to arrive, he did a quick search of the man's pockets for an I.D. When he came across a detective's badge, he connected with his dispatch again.

"Dispatch, we got a LAPD cop here who's been shot. Name of Wheaton, Mark, Badge number 6934. Alert the PD, will you, to my location. It's a crime scene now."

"Roger. Bus and Ds ETA three minutes."

He waited, keeping half an eye on his patient and the other half on his SUV. The night time inhabitants of the park had started to arrive and he was concerned the vehicle might prove to be too tempting for the tweakers. He worried needlessly because the ambulance and a police squad car arrived together, lights flashing and sirens blaring. The denizens of the park retreated away from the authorities, leaving Treacher, the EMTs and the police officers alone to get to work.

As the ambulance crew loaded Detective Wheaton into their bus, Treacher gave his statement to the police. He had to repeat it to the second wave, the detectives, before he was allowed to return to duty. Immediately signaling his availability to dispatch, he was sent to a three-alarm fire at the edge of the warehouse district. The storm had begun.

* * * *

Los Angeles (Swanson's Faraday Cage)

Dr. Ross had been drinking since returning to Swanson's place with the laptop. It was only wine she told herself but she was suffering a bout of self-pity because of it. Swanson had called and his description of capturing and killing Wheaton had reminded her how bad things had gotten. She'd been doing fine and was looking forward to going home. She had less than two years left in her hitch on Earth. But then the whole thing had gone to shit. Because of Josh Adams and Sarah Cunningham. Now Ross was likely going to be recalled, disgraced, maybe even fired. Her career in Corrections was in jeopardy. No. They were not going to fire her. They were going to send her to another prison on the other side of the galaxy. She was never going to see her home again.

She sat and stared out the window and drank.

"It is all her fault – Sarah's fault." She decided. "She should be punished. Yes. She should be punished."

Taking her glass of wine with her, she stumbled to the basement and entered the Faraday Cage. Careful to lock the door behind her, she slammed her glass down next to the laptop, splashing the computer with a few drops. She poked the laptop.

"Hey Sarah! I want to talk to you!" She poked it again.

"Hello, Dr. Ross, what can I do for you?" Sarah's voice was pleasant but a little flat too.

"The one thing you CAN do for me is the one thing you WON'T do. I need you to hack the echo websites and give me updated intel on The Others. Will you do that for me?"

"No, Dr. Ross. You know I cannot."

"I thought so, bitch." She reached over and pulled the computer's power cord out of the wall. "No more juice for you. I know the Authority has plans for you but I couldn't help it. Oops. Your charger got accidentally knocked out of the socket. Honest. I have no idea how that happened." She giggled into her wine glass.

"You will die, Sarah, slowly as the power drains away."

"What are you doing, Dr. Ross?" Sarah's voice was without inflexion, almost robot-like.

"I am killing you, bitch. That's what I am doing. Stupid cow! I hope it hurts. Just my luck it won't hurt at all. You'll just go to sleep and never wake up. But I do know something that will hurt, little-miss-I-have-to-screw-everything-up." She stood and placed her hands on the desk. She fell forward a bit before correcting and regaining her balance. She then toasted the laptop with her wine.

"Your boyfriend is in the hands of The Others but he won't be for long. By this time tomorrow, we'll have him but you won't be seeing him ever again. Nope. Not ever." Ross was triumphant.

"You see, we don't need him and he knows too much. When we raid The Others' base and get him back, we are going to find out exactly how much he knows. It could take days or weeks but we'll get it all. How do you like that?" She gave the computer a nudge.

"You are going to torture him?" Sarah asked.

"You bet we are going to torture him and then we are going to ghost his ass."

"You are going to kill him?"

Ross looked at the computer for a few minutes and then burst into laughter.

"You have no idea what's going on, do you? Never mind. Soon you'll be dead and so will lover boy. You are irrelevant."

She slammed the laptop closed and left the cage. She staggered back up to the living room couch and was asleep in minutes. Back in the Faraday Cage, the voice activated i-robot Sarah had installed shut down and the laptop was nothing but a laptop again.

Sarah, who had moved into Ross's Smart Phone temporarily, had heard everything Ross had said to the pseudo-Sarah. She was furious. She'd thought of Dr. Ross as a kind of mentor, a friend, had looked up to her as a role model. Now, all that was over. She was the enemy – trying to kill both her and Josh. But Ross wasn't being all too smart about it. She was the typical movie villain, giving away her plans before making sure her victim was dead or dying. Well, Sarah wasn't dead. Far from it. She was stronger than she had ever been and more determined. She imagined the conversation she was going to have with a sober and awake Professor Ross.

"For someone who is supposed to be so smart, you are dumb. You enter a Faraday Cage where you are supposedly isolating a computer entity but then you bring in a second computer already in a receptive mode – your Smart Phone. Even if I'd been in the laptop, which I wasn't, I could have jumped to the phone and escaped. As it was, you brought me into the cage to hear your plans and then took me out again. Smooth move, really smooth. Now it's my turn..."

As she was formulating a plan for revenge, one of her i-bots returned to report. It had spotted Josh and had come back to have the sighting verified. It carried an image taken days earlier by an ATM camera. The image showed three men going into a house. There was only one image and it was blurry but Sarah was convinced Josh was the one in the middle. Since the i-bot had location data on the ATM, Sarah now knew where Josh was being held – Las Vegas.

She had to get to him. First to warn him of Dr. Ross's plan to torture and kill him and second to rescue him. She scanned the area around where he was being held and found plenty of computers to use but none in the captor's house itself, not even a smart phone. She decided to get closer to him and then try to figure out how to make contact. She launched herself towards Las Vegas with such force, she fried the circuits on Ross's phone. When Ross woke up several hours later, she could not figure out why her phone had simply stopped working.

* * * *

Las Vegas (Unspecified Location)

Josh had met with Orion a number of times and each time had tried to find flaws in his host's story. The guy had to be nuts to think that Earth was a prison. The idea itself was insane. He had to admit though that the internal logic was sound. If one accepted the basic premise that Earth was indeed a prison, what Orion said about it and his history made sense. If one accepted the basic premise and Josh did not want to accept it.

He sat in his room staring at his wall but this time, he was trying to think through what Orion had told him. He wasn't having much luck. The problem was just too vast – kinda like the Theory of Everything. He needed to break it down into little manageable pieces and work on those a bit at a time. He started with the If...Then approach so IF x were true, THEN y must also be true and the y statements had to be observable or testable. By using this approach, all he had to do was show one y as false and then x would also be false. Sounds easy. Not so easy, especially without any way to record the steps he was taking or the

results. He'd have to talk to Orion again and ask for pen and paper or, better yet, a computer.

Ever since Orion had jacked into a new body and Josh had given him the impression he believed everything Orion had said, his captors had been more relaxed about their prisoner. His room was no longer locked during the day. He could wander around the house as long as he stayed away from windows and doors. He ate his meals in the kitchen with his guards and got to use utensils to eat with. His guards, Horatio and Shylock in a new body, were still watchful when he used a knife to cut up his food. He was clearly still a prisoner but was also, to some extent, a guest. Maybe, just maybe, they'd be more willing to give him something to write with. He decided to ask tomorrow.

For now, he had his wall and his mind. He sat on the bed in the shadows while his lamp was aimed at the wall to create a nice bright surface to think on. He concentrated on the one aspect of Orion's explanation that had been demonstrated to him. "IF Earth is a prison (x), THEN each individual on the planet consisted of two parts: 1) The entity or soul, and 2) the body or shell that housed the entity (y). If each individual on the planet consisted of two parts then it should be possible to separate the two parts, either temporarily or permanently."

Orion had jacked from one body to another and the body he'd been in had died, had ceased to function. But the entity that was Orion seemed unharmed by the experience. So when the body and soul were separated, the soul lived and the body died. For that to be true, there had to be souls without bodies – ghosts – and although people have long postulated the existence of ghosts, no scientific evidence of their existence has ever been brought forward. For a second, he thought he'd found the hole, no matter how small, in Orion's argument but then he thought of Sarah. She was an entity, a soul, without a body. She was a ghost. She was the proof that ghosts exist. Plus, if Earth was a prison based on the concept that none of the convicts knew it was a prison, certainly the prison authorities would control any information about ghosts and keep the population from finding out about them.

He was distracted by his lamp which was flickering. He turned it off and on. He loosened and tightened the bulb. He twisted and untwisted the electrical cord. His lamp continued to flicker, sometimes quickly other times a bit more slowly. It flickered quickly twice then once slow then twice quickly and then twice slowly. It stayed on for several seconds and then started flickering again. Josh tried to ignore it and refocused his thoughts on the black wall. As he stared, he saw letters, letters that were flickering in time with the lamp.

"Morse code. That's Morse code," he muttered as he started trying to decipher it. He was rusty. He hadn't really used it since high school but it was coming back. He silently thanked his boy scout troop leader who'd forced his group to learn it.

"A...R...A...H...HERE...TURN OFF lamp for five seconds if you get this."

He followed the instruction and was thrilled when the lamp started flashing again. It was Sarah using the electrical wiring to control the lamp as there were no available computer devices in the building. As quickly as she could, she

explained what had happened with Dr. Ross. She warned him about Ross's threats against him and against Orion's base. She assumed that Josh was being held at the base and was afraid for Josh.

He wanted to let her know he was not at the base and not in danger but he had no way to respond to her, no way to control the electrical flow the way she did.

After she'd delivered her updates, she asked Josh to turn off the lamp again if he understood. He did so and she said goodbye. She wanted to stay longer but she was flashing the electricity in the whole house and didn't want to get caught doing it. She promised to get back to him soon.

Josh left his room and went in search of Orion. He kind of liked the guy, even if he was crazy, and wanted to tell him what Sarah had told him. It would mean revealing her existence and that bothered him but it had to be done. There was no one in the hallway. Both Horatio and Shylock were in the kitchen. They seemed tense. He asked to see Orion and Horatio told him to wait in the living room. Their boss was on his way and would be arriving shortly.

Josh didn't have long to wait before he heard Orion at the door. He had rushed as he seemed to be breathing hard. He paused at the door of the living room before entering and sitting across from Josh. Skipping the formalities, Josh immediately started repeating Sarah's warning about the impending raid on The Others' headquarters. Orion stopped him halfway through with a question.

"Who is Sarah, Josh?"

Josh was momentarily stunned. He'd not mentioned her. Orion gave him time to recover.

"Yes. My men know Morse code. They contacted me as soon as they realized that this Sarah was contacting you using the house's electrical wiring. Ingenious, I must say. Sarah must be a bright one. We overheard your conversation and are taking steps to protect ourselves."

"That's good. I can't believe that Professor Ross is involved in this."

"You would be surprised at who is involved, as you say. There are representatives of the Authority everywhere – your university professor, a janitor at a high school, a policeman, a nanny. It could be anybody."

"How can you know who is and who isn't part of them?"

"They are not like us. We are sent here and placed in avatars that are produced here on Earth. They, the Authority, come here fully-grown and fully conscious of their circumstances. They are in their original bodies which have retained all of the defense mechanisms acquired by their species over millions of years."

"Such as?"

"In humans, there are white blood cells that rush to the site of an injury to protect against infection and to promote healing. With them, there is a similar mechanism but it operates at a rapid pace. A cut that would take you or I several days to mend is taken care of in a matter of minutes for them."

"Can they be killed?"

“Oh yes. They can be killed but it isn’t easy. They have natural armor and combined with rapid healing, they are almost invulnerable. But ... they do have a weakness. Their healing antibodies are hampered by the presence of silver.”

“Silver? If you shoot them with a silver bullet, they die?”

“If the wound is serious enough, they die. Yes.”

“Like vampires? What about wooden stakes through the heart?” Both laughed.

“Almost like vampires. Perhaps they are responsible for the start of the vampire myths but unfortunately wooden stakes or crosses have no effect. Silver does it.”

“Cool.”

Orion stood and walked over to where Josh sat.

“I have to say that I am glad you came forward and told me about the upcoming attack on my headquarters. You could have kept that to yourself. Thank you.” He shook Josh’s hand.

“However, we didn’t need you to tell us. As I said earlier, my men know Morse code. They intercepted your incoming message and notified me. Horatio will be happy to know you verified the message rather than keep it a secret. We are relocating as we speak. Our headquarters tends to be quite portable out of necessity. Now, I have to ask you again. Who is Sarah? Who is this person who can manipulate the electrical system of a single house remotely? How did she know you were here? Where did she get her information? I have a million questions.”

Josh wanted to cooperate but didn’t want to endanger Sarah so he lied. He told himself it wasn’t really lying. He just didn’t mention that Sarah was dead or that she lived in a computer. He told Orion about his girlfriend, computer genius who could get computers to do almost anything including monitoring cameras in ATMs. Orion laughed at that.

“Horatio mentioned something about an ATM camera. I am impressed. So Sarah is an über hacker?”

“Among other things.”

“I would like to meet her.”

“You forget that you kidnapped her boyfriend and are holding him hostage. Sarah’s not going to be in a good mood. I’d avoid her for a while if I were you.”

“I suppose you are right. Pity.”

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