

INSTANT KARMA!

ONE

The building was a squat and ugly single-story red brick within the light-industrial district, south-east of the University District. The battered sign out front, printed in a retro *computer* font, said *Qwanten Data*. The front office windows had heavy security wire over them, and the dusty venetian blinds within were closed, giving the building an air of mystery. For all its anonymity and grubbiness, there was something imposing and sinister about the facade. It might have been the headquarters for a small cabal of masterminds conspiring to overthrow the world – or a cheap office for a group of struggling computer nerds selling their IT security and research services to the corporates.

Inside, in the front office amidst a clutter of desks, computers and file cabinets, a young bearded man was talking animatedly on the phone.

“Dammit, Sabrina, why don’t you come to the concert with me? It’ll be a good time!”

“*What, and see that band Earshot?*” said the voice down the line, “*I don’t think so, sweetie – they’re almost country. That’s more your style. You go with your boys. Me and my girls are having a night in.*”

After a moment’s more pleading, Alex Carlisle hung up on his girlfriend and frowned. He was beginning to wonder if she was more trouble than she was worth. He couldn’t understand how anyone could not love Earshot, the latest Alt-Country/Space-Rock hybrid sensations. The band who sounded like the Byrds circa *Notorious Byrd Brothers*. Ah, chicks could be weird...

Alex was way into his music. A weekend rarely went by when he wasn’t out at some venue checking some new band – or an old one. And then when he was at home in Rialto, just outside of San Bernadino, he was listening to his music, or playing it practicing his bass. The only other thing that received his attention – besides Sabrina – was the *Qwanten Data* business he ran with a couple of his friends.

He had always meant to call the business ‘*Quantum*’ *Data*. But when he found that name had already been taken, he had to think of something else. It was that uber-nerd (and business partner) Walter Isaacson who came up with the present name. A fan of the TV show *True Blood*, and the Australian actor Ryan Kwanten who played the character Jason Stackhouse on it, he had come up with the name in what he called “a fit of inspiration” and lobbied hard for its endorsement. “See, ‘Quantum’ and ‘Kwanten’, they’re almost the same,” he had said unnecessarily between sips of a Slurpee he had just bought from the 7-Eleven store conveniently placed around the corner. “We’ll change the spelling to Q so Ryan doesn’t have a problem with it.”

Alex hated the name - it was so...lame. But he was outvoted three to one; so it stayed. The other two votes had come from the other two partners: Alex’s girlfriend Sabrina, and Kaylan Chilwell. Kaylan was also a fan. And Sabrina had enthused of Kwanten, “He’s a sweetie!” - and so the name was in.

Sabrina had helped finance the initial investment (her Daddy was rich, and so was she) as a pledge of her devotion to Alex. But rather than just being an executive partner, she had skills in marketing and promotions, and these were her main responsibilities within the business. The other two partners, Kaylan and Walter, didn’t mind having Sabrina in the business at all. With her wild black hair and hourglass figure, she was “Smokin’ hot!” (though Kaylan did allow that her dark brown eyes

were “a bit too close together”). Both guys were filled with envy and admiration at Alex for being involved with her.

It was something of a hybrid business, catering to both media, online, gaming and IT security people. They had a small department of typists and tech heads providing a transcription and digitization service to the local community radio and television stations. There was also a small team dedicated to website creation and maintenance. Added to this was a games beta testing division, which offered professional assessments of flaws and bugs in upcoming games for developers. Then there was the main department, devoted to IT security, which was headed up by the three male partners. Their services ran the gamut of investigating unauthorized access and systems intrusion, live forensic analysis and collection, and hacking demonstrations to highlight systems vulnerabilities.

In relation to the last service, Sabrina in particular had insisted from the beginning that the business only take on so-called *white hat* work that was not illegal. But this was sometimes covertly passed over by the other three partners. All had done their fair share of illicit hacking, and had good contacts within the underground market. It was lucrative *black ops* work that was strictly paid under the table.

One such client was a man who simply identified himself as ‘Keith’, who had made contact with them through their underground connections. Alex met him only once, at a cafe on Irvington Avenue, near the Tesla Institute campus. He was a small and rather round man of about fifty, who wore a dapper business suit and had an air of easy confidence about him. Alex was suspicious of him straight away. He did not look like a man who would normally go in for this cloak and dagger approach.

He wanted Alex to penetrate the systems of the nearby Tesla Institute and copy whatever sensitive data they could find about the Institute’s high security Scherff Center operations and pass it on to him. This shadowy client had assured him it was strictly *white hat* work, designed mainly to test the Institute’s security. Alex was skeptical: especially considering the client was willing only to pay in cash, with no pay slips and nothing to connect him to *Qwanten Data*. He didn’t even insist that Alex sign the usual third party confidentiality agreement forms. This was unheard of in legitimate transactions. It was clear to Alex that the guy was trading in industrial or academic espionage, or something similar. Still, he was curious to find out what the guy was up to, and what secrets were held by the Institute, which had a reputation for cutting edge research.

Alex had thought long and hard about the ethics of the darker side of his work. In the end, he had come to the conclusion that it was all absurd, and that someone was always trying to work the angles anyway – usually the government or the corporates. So why shouldn’t the little guys (ie, *Qwanten*) get a piece of the action now and again? At least, that was how he justified it to himself.

Alex, Walter and Kaylan discussed the job in the front office before taking it on.

“This one’s pretty dodgy,” said Walter as he worked his way with a straw through yet another Slurpee. He was sitting in his special ‘large chair’, which supported his 200 pound frame. He was a big boy with an equally big head, large black-framed glasses and a mop of sandy hair. “We don’t even know who he’s working for.”

“No kidding?” said Kaylan sitting next to him. He was, by contrast, a thin youth with a long face and a narrow chin that was covered in spots. He was positively scrofulous. As he spoke he played with a baseball. “That’s never stopped us from doing this kind of work before. Just as long as he pays.”

“The thing that concerns me,” continued Walter, “is Tesla would definitely have its own in-house security to do this kind of thing, if it was legitimate. As it is, they’d be pretty smart operators. Should we be worried about reprisals?”

“What are you worried about?” teased Kaylan. “Getting caught?”

“All right, all right, Walter’s just being cautious, as usual,” interjected Alex. “Which we should be. It’s the nature of the beast. But you all know the drill. Cover your tracks, don’t leave behind any evidence, use burners for phone hacks, and do it all away from the business. When you’re here I want you both strictly working on the legit stuff.”

“Yes sir, boss!” said Kaylan a little too sarcastically for Alex’s taste.

Before they broke up, Walter wondered out loud, “Hey, what do you suppose they’re into, this Tesla outfit? Think they’ll have anything interesting for us to look at?”

“What, you mean like Tesla coils and all that free energy stuff they used to go on about?” said Kaylan scornfully. “I doubt it. I’ll bet it’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

TWO

Walter Isaacson was so big that even his friends (especially Kaylan Chilwell, who was hardly a friend) said he should try out for *The Biggest Loser*. But this didn’t bother him. What did bother him was the need to make the one-hour commute on public transport to the *Qwanten Data* office from his parent’s house in Victorville. So it was nice to be able to work from home, as he was doing now, investigating leads on that Tesla Institute black ops job.

His large basement bedroom was a shrine to all things geeky. There were large movie posters on the walls, including a couple of hot Manga babes. The book shelves and benches were littered with action toys representing a cornucopia of TV and movie franchises, including *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Buffy*, *The Walking Dead* and *Battlestar Galactica*. Some of them were still in their original packaging as ‘collectables’. Added to this, there were his gaming consoles, his 42-inch LED monitor, his games, DVDs, Blurays, comic books and his computers.

Walter had been working on the Institute’s computers for a couple of hours now and not made much progress. Their firewalls were mighty impressive. He’d tried a ‘brute force’ tactic on the Scherff MULTI database, but as expected, it didn’t get anywhere. He figured he would have to try a Trojan Horse or some keystroke logging software to crack it, but that involved paying off someone at the Institute.

So far all he’d cracked were some low level email accounts, featuring the usual boring inter-office memos. But one item had caught his eye. It was a memo that had been encrypted – probably by a PGP encryption program by the look of it. There was no evidence that it would include information about the Scherff Center that Walter was looking for, but the fact that it was encrypted was a promising start.

Walter loved a challenge like this, and set to work cracking it. PGP (or *Pretty Good Privacy*) was one of the best and hardest programs to get into. It was used by lots of people in the IT community (including fictional ones like Lisbeth Salander of Stieg Larsson’s *Millenium* series). But there were flaws in it, depending on the user. One of Walter’s favorite ways around it was to check if the user had turned off saving mail drafts to the server. Crazy enough, a lot of people used the encryption program, then promptly forgot that their pre-encrypted drafts could be automatically saved as

clear text by their email clients. It was then simply a question of rummaging around in the target's draft folder for the memo in question.

Sure enough, Walter saw that his target, a guy called Gerard Manning, had left a lovely clear copy of the memo in his drafts folder. Reading through it, Walter saw that the memo mentioned a report about a 'diamond-like' object that had been found out at Joshua Tree. By all accounts, the object had been brought back to the Institute and stored within its high security Scherff Center facility.

It was not much, but it was something to go on.

Before going any further with it, he decided to do a search on the net for any references to the Joshua Tree find. He often found that the online community had already done some of his work for him. It was definitely an important part of the hacking work. But after a few minutes, as far as he could see, there were no leads. Next, he opened his Tor browser and tried the darknet, but it was no use either. While he was there, he decided to log on to the *Beam Me Up Web* message site – a favorite place to hang out and check the latest trending conspiracy and pop culture chatter. He noticed, with some amusement, two of the members, *Bantam Phantom* and *Whoopy Snorp*, were conducting a friendly flame war over the various merits – or not – of the upcoming new *Avengers* movie. It went thusly...

NEW AVENGERS MOVIE SNEAK PEEK THREAD

Bantam Phantom: I don't like what they're doing with Scarlett as the Black Widow. She looks all wrong.

Whoopy Snorp: Are you kidding, knucklehead? She's the best thing in it. She always looks fine.

Bantam Phantom: Generally, I'd agree. But I like my Scarlett with blonde hair, and worn up, as in those Woody Allen movies.

Whoopy Snorp: Dude, you're pathetic...

Grinning at their idiocy, Walter started a new thread, giving it the title STRANGE DIAMOND OBJECT AT TESLA INSTITUTE. Featuring his net handle at this site, it went...

Space Ace: Hey, has anyone heard anything about some 'diamond object' found out at Joshua Tree recently? My source tells me it was taken to the Tesla Institute in San Bernadino and tucked away in their security wing.

He left it at that and played some Spider Solitaire while waiting for a response. Watching the cards flip over as he clicked on them, he wondered what was behind the ones he hadn't yet clicked. Were they all in superpositioned states, waiting for him to interact with them and thus initiate the quantum collapse? The idle thought was stifled when he finally received a response to the thread...

Whoopy Snorp: Hey, Ace, shouldn't that have gone to Hanger 18 out in Nevada? Maybe it's the Holy Grail?

Bantam Phantom: Get a clue, Whoopy...Ace, I read a report straight from the Institute's The Core newsletter about that. I seem to recall it mentioned some geologist fellow, John Hannebury, investigating it. Don't have the paper with me, but there weren't any other reports about it after that.

Walter immediately wrote a response...

Space Ace: That's great, Phantom. You seem pretty in the know about the Institute doings...

Phantom wrote back...

Bantam Phantom: I'm a student at UCLA, but we often get the Core rag smuggled in.

Walter conversed with the *Phantom* and *Whoopy Snorp* for a while, then tried following up the *Phantom's* lead on this John Hannebury. What he discovered surprised him.

"He's dead?"

The obituary item mentioned his death at an 'accident near Joshua Tree', then went on to enumerate many of his outstanding personal qualities.

Walter's interest began to be piqued. He did a search amongst the Tesla Institute memos he had found, looking for any references to Hannebury, and almost immediately found one. It mentioned him as a former member of something called the 'Gate Project' at Scherff. Intrigued, Walter went in search for information about this Gate Project...

Fifty miles south of Walter, in his home in Redlands, Kaylan Chilwell was accessing similar information. But Kaylan had already got further than Walter, and now had in his possession the mobile phone numbers of three members of this so-called Gate Project.

For Kaylan, hacking and trolling the Twitter accounts of hapless users was where it was at. He often did it just for fun, to frack shit up and watch it burn. He was aware that this made him a near-sociopath, a cyber-bully, but he didn't care. At school he used to get dirt on his classmates, and even his teachers, and throw it back in their faces. If he couldn't find anything juicy, he would just make nasty stuff up (especially about teachers he didn't like) and dole the info out as rumor to other students. That way he didn't get caught. The private business of other people was endlessly fascinating to him, and he enjoyed the rush of power he felt when he dug up something outrageous on some poor squid. It was like gaining the keys to the kingdom.

He looked at the phone numbers he'd gained, and stared out the bedroom window. His bedroom was on the second floor, and the view of the nearby lake was pretty. The first number he tried belonged to a Lina Thigpen, who was an anthropologist and linguist. Kaylan picked her because he liked her name. 'Thigpen' – it reminded him of Pigpen from the *Charlie Brown* comics. Accessing her phone with a simple *spoofing* trick (and of course, using one of his 'burners' so he couldn't be traced), he breathlessly listened in to her voicemail messages.

The first was some crybaby account from some woman pleading for Lina to give her ‘another chance’. Kaylan was cruelly amused by the woman’s grovelling, but he was even more interested in the fact that it revealed something about Lina’s sexuality.

“Ah-hah, so this one’s a carpet muncher!” crowed Kaylan as the message trailed off.

The final message was from a man with a slightly Asian-sounding voice. Kaylan speculated it might be one of the others whose phone number he had, Yang Lee...

Lina, it’s me. I was just checking to see if you’ve got all the details worked out for the experiment next week. Also, I think I should be the one to go through the Gate. I know how anxious you are about that event horizon - atoms scattering and all that (indistinct chuckle). Keep in touch.

This was better. Kaylan was intrigued by the talk of going ‘through the gate’. But what was that about ‘event horizons’ and ‘atoms scattering’? He wondered what it could mean. Were they joking, or speaking in code? Surely they couldn’t be speaking literally? As a bona fide scifi nut, he was well aware that an event horizon was usually a term used in conjunction with a black hole.

He tried Yang Lee’s number to see if there was a corresponding response from Thigpen. But he couldn’t get into it. Yang had put a strong PIN password on the service; and try as he might, Kaylan couldn’t crack it. He moved on to the third number he held. It was for Professor Marsden. The Professor was as careless with his phone security as was Lina, so this time Kaylan was able to get through...

Daddy, look, I still think it’s pointless letting Yang and Lina conduct those experiments next week. You know they won’t get anywhere, and it’ll just be a waste of time. Those alien glyphs, or whatever they are, could be anything...Anyway, you’ll be thrilled to know I’ve got a date tonight with that nice Karl Paxman. I’ll bring him around, if you like. And you better be nice to him...!

Kaylan put down the phone and pondered the message. He played it through a couple more times (of course, he had recorded it), making sure he got the proper gist of it. What was it the girl had said about ‘aileen gliffs’? By the third play-through he realised she had actually said ‘alien glyphs’.

He sat there, puzzled. *What the frack did she mean by that?*

Alex Carlisle looked through the notes he’d compiled from Kaylan and Walter’s investigations. It was good work. In fact, so good he knew they were on to something big, something startling. By the look of it, these Tesla people had hold of something that could revolutionize the scientific world, if not *the* world. He was beginning to see his client’s interest in them now.

He took a sip of his mocha and got down to writing the report on his laptop for his client. He was sitting in his favorite cafe in Rialto, his home town just outside of Berdoo. The place had the trendy, inner-city vibe that made it a typical hipster hangout. Black was a preferred color of many of the customers, and most of the men, including Alex, sported designer beards. They sipped their coffees, worked on their laptops or flicked through their phones, and looked cool. Alex liked doing his black ops work there because it was low profile, and people left him alone. The waitresses were discreet. Also, he saw himself as a bit of a hipster himself – although he never

admitted to it. It would be like saying you were cool. It canceled itself out immediately - it just wasn't done.

As he worked on the report, Alex's mind wandered back to that morning at home, and he smiled. Sabrina had sauntered in with some shopping she'd acquired from the local mall. She was always shopping! But she did have a present for him. It was the *Nuggets* 'Psychedelic Artyfacts' compilation CD box set he'd been wanting for ages. Of course, he already had an illicit copy of all the tracks, and knew them well; but it was awesome getting an official copy. Alex was so pleased. His girlfriend had been so thoughtful – and she knew what he liked. Of course, it was yet another shameless grab for his affections, and it worked a treat.

He had spent the morning happily listening to the tracks and making mental notes about the bands and the songs, and their many influences. In his opinion, the garage rock genre of the Sixties was the greatest flowering of rock music ever. All them bands raving up in their garages, trying to sound like the artists (mostly British invasion bands, like the Beatles and the Stones) they were inspired by. Rough, raw, exciting. The Gants song, I Wonder, was stuck in his head. He was struck by how similar it was to one of his favorite Beatles tunes: In My Life.

Then, out of the blue, he had got a phone call from Jason, the guitarist from the band Earshot. Alex had hung out with him and the other guys from time to time and got friendly with them. They knew him as a big fan and an ardent supporter of *the Cause*. Jason explained they were going on the road and they needed a road manager. Would Alex care to join them? *Would he ever!* But he had the responsibilities of the *Qwanten* business, and his personal commitments to Sabrina. So, regretfully, he had to beg off.

It had been quite a morning. Now he had a job to do, the aforementioned 'responsibilities', and he intended to carry them out as professionally as possible. This first report he'd prepare would be scientifically detailed, complete with footnotes, quotations and source references. He knew 'Keith' would be satisfied with it when it was delivered via a secure dropbox.

In the meantime, the investigations into the Tesla Institute would be continuing, and Alex wondered what else might be uncovered. He had the thought that maybe they should tell someone about what was going down over there. He didn't owe anything to this 'Keith' guy. He hadn't signed any confidentiality agreement. As far as he was concerned, he could do whatever he wanted with the information. Who would know?

THREE

Walter Isaacson had finally broken into the MULTI database by gaining a password from a researcher working at Scherff. It had basically been a 'black bag' operation, whereby Walter had paid off a janitor working at the Institute. The janitor had simply entered the target's office and rummaged around his desk draw, where he found the password unwisely written down on a piece of paper. It was a stroke of dumb luck really, but Walter would take it.

Now, with the cracking of the database, he had a wealth of classified scientific data at his fingertips. It was a gold mine of information. He licked his lips and bit into the delicious hamburger his mother had made him – of course, he was back in his home basement. Then, lovingly stroking the keys of his computer, he dived in to all that wonderful information.

After a while he realized there was too much of it – literally millions of files. He decided to narrow his search to certain familiar reference points, such as the ‘Gate’ that had been discovered out at Joshua Tree, and the various personnel he knew were involved with it. He found a report written by a Kathy Walsh that was titled *The Quantum Dimensional Dynamics of Gate Crystals*. It was full of dense soliton and Painleve equations and impenetrable techno-babble, but Walter could grasp certain passages where Kathy apparently indulged in some idle speculation...

...the unusual symmetries exhibited in the crystals at three dimensions. But activation increases these dimensions exponentially, so that by around seven or eight there are exceptional new structures. And by nine, perhaps... There are many possible structures, perhaps some dimensions that could give rise to, say, time travel.

Do the Gates navigate around these symmetries? Is it possible? Even time travel?

If it is, then perhaps they provide a solution to the usual single timeline paradoxes where the cause and effect of time’s arrow is violated. Multiple quantum dimensions, multiple timelines created through time travel in this way would reset past histories and lead...who knows where? Either way, a theoretical time traveler could return to a present timeline and not be affected by changes made in other past timelines, because the traveler’s own, authentic timeline would not be compromised. There would be no altered future timeline for that traveler, simply the continuity of her own history when she re-entered it. Nor would her consciousness be altered so that she remembered being visited by herself (if she’d had a notion to visit her younger self in that other past). It simply could not happen. The younger self she would meet would belong to some other timeline distinct from her own. Her own past would not have changed in any way.

Of course, entropy is still a problem...

Walter reveled in this speculation. It was clearly what the client ordered.

He searched some more and found a file intriguingly titled *Gate Locations*. He opened it and was confronted with a world map, in topographic format. He noted pinpoint markings, fairly evenly spaced across the map. There were twenty-three in all. Each mark was highlighted with a location. He read some of them: Pyrenees, France...Mt Katherine, Sinai...Andes, Brazil...He looked at the one labeled San Bernadino, USA, and understanding finally dawned on him. There were twenty-three such Gates like the Tesla one placed all around the world!

That was enough for Walter. He feverishly began copying the files directly onto one of his hard drives. He saw by the progress bar that it was going to take a while.

As the download continued, he thought about what it all meant. He could sense a whole new world opening for him. This was bigger than anything those cyber-leakers Snowden, or even Julian Assange had managed to uncover. He could see instant fame and fortune. Him and his *Qwanten* buddies – ‘The men who uncovered Tesla’s secrets’. He figured maybe he might even get laid!

He was well into these thoughts when he heard a knock on his bedroom door. Quickly turning off his monitor, Walter said, “Enter.”

It was his mother. She came in looking concerned, and a man followed her. He was tall and tanned, and he was dressed in black. There was an air of authority and danger

about him. He looked sternly at Walter. To the hyper imaginative Walter, he looked like a Federal Agent.

Walter's face turned red, and his palms began to sweat.

"Uh, Walter," began his mom almost timidly, "Mr Waterman here is from the Tesla Institute in San Bernadino. He wants to ask you some questions."

Walter mumbled some words, then suddenly felt like throwing up. He was scared and perplexed. How did they find him out already? As far as he could recall he had left nothing to chance. He had cleared all the systems he'd hacked and left no trace of his presence. So, how...?

He realized all his fears of reprisals from Tesla had been well-founded. Their security people were obviously good. *Very good...*

Kaylan Chilwell had a phone in his hand and was staring out of his bedroom window again at the small lake next to the baseball field nearby. He used to play on that ground for the local club. But he never got to play the fielding position he had wanted. The coach had always put him in the outfield – usually rightfield. But, being a Lefty, he had wanted to play first base. That was where he belonged.

He had tried to intimidate the coach with some sly scuttlebutt he'd picked up online about him, but it didn't work. His coach was a hard ass. Kaylan didn't stay in the baseball club for long. Ultimately, computer games and the internet were far more of interest to him.

He listened in to Lina Thigpen's number again, hoping for another one of them groveling messages from that lesbian ex-girlfriend. Instead, it was another message from the Asian professor, Yang Lee...

Lina, it's me. I was just checking to see how you are. Have there been any side effects since our little experiment? You haven't got stuck in some time warp or something, have you? (indistinct chuckle) Keep in touch. Oh, and I hear Professor Marsden may be increasing the security on the Gates soon. There's some strategy session about it tomorrow after our shift. See you then...I think we'll have to tell him about the time glyphs soon.

There it was: more of that strange talk of 'time glyphs' and 'time warps'. He wondered again what it could mean. There was definitely something going on between these two members of that Gate team. He moved on to the careless team Director, Professor Marsden, whose voicemail was still unhampered by a security password. It appeared to be another phone call from his daughter, Alyssa...

Daddy, why don't you ever answer your damn phone?...Look, I still think that was a bad idea letting Yang and Lina conduct those experiments virtually unsupervised. I mean, Lina almost got lost during the teleportation. I hope you're going to bring that up in the strategy session tomorrow. If you don't, I will!...Anyway, Karl and I are having a break from each other. I think he's getting cold feet. And, considering what you said the other night, it's all your fault...!

Kaylan put down the phone and exclaimed, "What?" The woman was talking about 'teleportation' now. What were these Tesla people up to?

He was about to embark on some more searching when he heard some noises downstairs. It was someone at the front door. Curious, he left his room and, leaning

on the balcony rails, listened to his mom talking to the man who had arrived. As he heard more of their conversation, he began to get a bad feeling rising within him. The man had identified himself as some detective – he was a cop! – and mentioned something about the Tesla Institute. And he specifically asked about him, Kaylan Chilwell, by name.

He could see his mom at the door, asking, “What’s this all about?” She then glanced up towards him and his room, but he ducked so that she didn’t see him.

Feeling panic now, Kaylan snuck back inside his room and pondered what to do. Surely his mom wouldn’t invite the cop in and send him up here? He was appalled and frightened by the fact that the cop seemed to be here on behalf of the very Institute he had been covertly investigating. How could they know? Or, was this merely some coincidence? And surely the man wouldn’t have the power to seize his hard drives? But what if he did?

Kaylan could now hear that his mom had indeed brought the man into the house. Their voices were getting closer.

Frantic now, and more than a little paranoid, he performed a quick shutdown then pulled the power cord from the socket to let the computer’s RAM die. Then he grabbed the external hard drives he’d been storing his information on and looked around the room. He almost yelled in fright. There was no point in trying to hide them here.

He now heard his mom and the man coming up the stairs. He looked out the window and cursed himself for having a bedroom on the second floor. There was no way down. He was trapped.

Taking his hard drives he exited his room and sneaked down the hallway just before his mom came into view on the stairs. Instinctively he opened the large walk-in closet in front of his parent’s room and shut the door and huddled inside. It was the place he had almost always run to as a child whenever he was in trouble.

He sat there, amidst the cleaning equipment and the old clothes and boxes. Clutching the hard drives to his chest, he shivered. The fear had taken a complete hold on him now, making him feel like that frightened little boy he used to be.

He could see in the dim light some items of clothing in one of the boxes. He recognized the red and black and yellow costume as his old Batman outfit, which he had loved to wear as a child. He and a friend had used to pretend they were Batman and Robin, fighting crime, saving the world. Super heroes...When he was older he had brought a torch and a porno mag in here once and jerked off. He recalled, inspired by an episode of *South Park*, he had been wearing his Batman costume at the time.

Outside, he could hear the steps getting closer, the voices louder. Grabbing his phone, he began frantically tapping out a text message about his plight. He wished for his own teleportation device, and trembled...

Alex Carlisle was beginning to have a bad feeling about the covert work he and his colleagues were doing for ‘Keith’. The reports about the Scherff Center from Kaylan and Walter were beginning to read like extreme high security stuff - the sort that attracted extreme blowback. He wondered if perhaps they should scale back their operations and go to ground for a while.

This feeling was only confirmed when he received a hurried text message from Kaylan – THE COPS ARE HERE! WE’VE BEEN SPRUNG!

Alex was sitting in his usual spot in his favorite cafe. He looked up at the other patrons to check that someone wasn’t playing some trick on him. They all seemed absorbed in their conversations and their coffee. A pretty girl in the booth opposite

smiled at him as she turned the page of a magazine, but he didn't recognize her. He decided to accept the reality of the text and somehow deal with it.

Well, now it's happened...

He thought hard about what to do. He couldn't go home – the cops were probably already there looking for him. And they were probably all over the *Qwanten Data* building by now. The thought of the cops seizing his company's computers and going through the files gave him a chill.

Then he stared in fright at his phone. It could easily be tracked. He turned it off completely and put it away. He smiled grimly at the irony of the situation – the watcher being watched.

It occurred to him that he might have been followed. He quickly paid his bill and hit the sidewalk. Looking around, he saw no signs of suspicious activity, but that didn't mean anything. He walked a couple of blocks, checking for cars following him, but nothing appeared. He thought maybe he had been lucky, they hadn't been looking out for him yet.

He needed time to think, so he ducked into a nearby cinema. Paying a ticket for the film *Instant Karma!*, he lost himself in the darkness of the theatre.

As the images flickered by on the screen and the soundtrack blasted out at him, he considered the possibility of surrender. Maybe he should just present himself at the office and insist the cops there show him their court order to search and confiscate his business assets? He assumed they would have one. But it wouldn't hurt to make sure. Maybe he could bluff it out? After all, he was a man of standing, a respectable security analyst with a respectable business. He had responsibilities and a gorgeous girlfriend who adored him...

Despite his best efforts to concentrate on his situation, he found himself becoming totally involved with the film. It was a film he'd already seen, but he didn't mind seeing it again. It was the story of the day John Lennon conceived, wrote and recorded the song that was the film's title. It began with John waking up and telling Yoko he'd heard a song in his dreams, and went right through the saga of organizing the musicians and buying and transporting the piano, including the craziness of the climactic studio recording, with that wild man Phil Spector at the helm. It was a cool film. In Alex's opinion it had been a long time in coming.

He couldn't help thinking about John, and that spirit that drove him to spontaneous creation. It was so inspiring. *Life is short: you have to grab it with both hands...* As the film ended, and that song came up on the soundtrack, he heard every word of those famous lyrics as though they were written just for him... *And we all shine on...*

He had gone into the cinema as a guilty Lee Harvey Oswald, but had come out a man with a purpose. He now knew what he was going to do. He found a nearby pay phone and dialed a number.

"Hey Jason," he said into the phone when the man answered. "Is that road manager job still open?"

Alex figured he wouldn't be gone for long. Maybe a couple of months. Sabrina would understand. He hoped...