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Three Breaths

by

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“Serious!”

“Now what?” I said, looking up from the datapad I’d been studying.

“It’s the sprayer, boss lady,” Tommy replied. “Gotta rethread the damn thing again.”

“Well, can you do it quietly? I’m trying to read this blueprint.”

“Sure thing, boss lady.”

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. I was tired, and this was the third building on a list that was already too long. And it was going to be a bitch. Absolutely.

Standing with my reclamation team at the base of the old warehouse, I gazed up at today’s challenge: six stories of concrete, broken glass, steel girders, and various business artifacts of the late Twentieth Century, left to rot after the Bad Weekend.

As good civil servants of the State of California, it was our job to survey the shattered building floor by floor, room by room if necessary and—before the wrecking crew arrived—secure business records. If we found anything valuable (which happened more often than I liked), we were charged with safeguarding it in preservative nano. Later, after the cleanup crew had dissolved the whole blighted building with recycling nano and vacuumed it up like your basic oil spill, our discoveries could be extracted and studied at leisure.

Right. That was the theory, at least. Sometimes the architectural preservative didn't work, or the disassemblers got a little feisty and ate up half the neighborhood before running out of steam. Macro-scale nanotech was no longer bleeding edge, but it was still fussy.

Our deadlines were hard enough, but this neighborhood—a former industrial park wedged between the eastern part of Oakland and the earthquaked rubble of Berkeley—had more than its share of feral house pets, unmarked toxic wastes, and crazies. A shitty job, even on a good day. In this heat... I derailed that train of thought. No room in my brain for that. Tonight, after a long soak and a pitcher of margaritas, I could carp. Until then, I had to Follow Procedure.

I looked behind me. “Jose? Status?”

“Loaded up, Doctor,” our security expert said, his eyes half-lidded. Jose, a broad-shouldered man who had played pro soccer in Honduras before joining the Urban Reclamation Corps, stood in his usual semi-slouch. Like a cat sleeping in the sun, Jose was kind of warm and fuzzy but ready to lash out with teeth and claws if you approached him wrong.

“We'll move out as soon as Tommy's ready, then,” I said. I looked at my blueprint a final time before rolling up the datapad and jamming it in a pocket of my jumpsuit. Then I walked over to the youngest member of the crew. “We have less than eight hours before Ground Zero, Tommy. How we doing?”

The young man looked up from his equipment, shielding his eyes from the sun. His acne scars stood out amid his sunburn. “I don't know how ‘we’ doing, boss lady, but I'm almost there. Woulda been ready an hour ago if that idiot clerk in supply hadn't given me the wrong hose couplings. Fortunately, I found some metric fittings in my kit.” He gave me his best Everyone's An Idiot But Me stare. “You can't mess around with nano, boss. This is *serious*.”

Tommy's attitude was teflon most of the time. However, nano, football, and computers were *serious*.

“How close is ‘almost there?’”

He scratched at the stubble of his red hair and turned his attention to the acetylene tank he was fitting into his backpack frame. “Five minutes, tops. Why don't you have a smoke while you're waiting?”

“Funny, Tommy. Sidesplitting, in fact. Just get the lead out.” I'd quit smoking gene-mod tobacco months before, and still missed it. I hated giving my lungs to Monsanto, so one morning I had tossed my last pack in the toilet and flushed it twice just to make sure.

I walked a few yards away to gain some privacy, plugged in my private phone and hit *Redial*.

The line rang twice. “You have reached the Department of Missing Persons,” said the automated attendant. If you know your case number, Press 1—”

I punched the 1 key and said, “Open case search.” When the next prompt started, I rattled off the 12-digit number without thinking. For the first two weeks after Alan's disappearance, I'd kept his file number on a scrap of rolling paper in my shirt pocket. I didn't need it any more.

“The last update to this case was Tuesday, August 11th, at approximately 9:15 am. For details, press—” I hung up. It was an old report. Some homeless guy checked into UC medical center with symptoms of meth overdose. It wasn't Alan.

I walked back to Jose.

He looked up. “News?” he said.

“Same old shit...”

“Different day,” he responded. “Hey, it's still early.” He grinned and offered me a piece of candy. Mango something. It was a poor substitute for nicotine, but I ate it anyway.

Slung across Jose's back was a police-style urban assault rifle. It used smart ammunition and took orders from the military computer clipped to his belt. (I had a slightly dumber field chemical analyzer strapped next to my canteen.) The rifle could drop a civilian with a stun charge or punch holes through concrete with equal ease. Fortunately, the system's firmware had demonstrated fewer bugs than the previous version.

Tommy had once tried to handle the assault rifle; more to the point, he had made the mistake of reaching for it without asking for permission, earning himself a sprained wrist for his trouble. That was six months ago, when he had just arrived from drug boot camp.

"What do you think about this one, Jose?" I said.

"Going to be hot, Doctor." The way he said it, you could tell I was a Ph.D., not a physician. He meant no disrespect, as far as I could tell.

"Tell me about it," I said. "Nine in the goddamn morning, and I'm already sweating through my vest." I lifted the edge of the heavy garment. "Tempted to lose this."

He shook his head, quickly. "Against regs, Doctor."

"I know."

"Long as everyone's clear 'bout that, we'll do fine." He slipped his helmet on and checked the data cables. "Sooner we get through this, sooner we can go home and have a beer." He inclined his head, made the sign of the Cross, and slipped on his combat glasses. "Hey, Tommy!" he shouted. "Are you through dicking around? We got a schedule to keep."

Tommy was trying to balance a backpack frame built for someone a foot and a half taller than him. "Yeah, yeah. You could help me instead of working on your tan."

"Excuse me," Jose said.

He easily lifted one edge of the frame while Tommy threaded a strap through a stuck buckle. I switched on my radio and called in our status. The dispatcher logged our time and wished us luck.

By the time I finished the call, the others were ready.

I took a deep breath. “Let’s go, then. Freight elevator’s supposed to work.”

“North side, right?” asked Tommy.

“North,” I said.

The elevator car swayed a bit too much for my comfort, shuddering its way to the roof. I took three, long breaths to loosen the knot forming in my stomach. I silently repeated my kid brother’s mantra: *as long as you can take three breaths, you’ll be okay.*

It was the last thing Alan had said before his unit left for Los Angeles. They were the last words he’d said to me at all.

The elevator doors jammed at the top of the shaft. Jose sliced the doors open with a ceramic machete, letting pieces of metal and rotting insulator fall onto the rooftop. Tommy held his cutting torch pointed right at the open doorway, alert for any movement. While it wasn’t precisely a weapon, I suppose it gave him some measure of comfort.

The roof appeared quiet.

Sunlight beat down on us as we stepped cautiously onto a cracked helicopter-landing pad. Jose unslung his rifle and took the point. I kept pretty close. Tommy stayed behind for a moment to disable the elevator controls. Someone had sneaked up on us once that way, before we realized Procedure didn’t always work in the field.

“What’s on the wish list today, boss lady?” Tommy asked when he caught up.

“Not much,” I said. “An intact HEPA filter for the genomics lab.”

“Germs. Great.” Tommy moved over to a rusty AC unit and began unscrewing a panel.

Jose cleared his throat.

I looked in his direction. “What is it?”

“Have a look.” He pointed at a small pile of ashes set in the middle of a circle of broken concrete. “This is pretty recent.”

“How old?” I asked.

“Less than a day,” Jose said. “We might have company.”

“Or they might have moved on to another squat by now.” I knelt down, unhooked a thin wand from my datapad, and thrust it into the ashes. “Social services posted notices but didn’t send beaters this time.” I unrolled the datapad and studied the readout. “No radioactives, but some ugly polycarbons. Probably burning some scrap furniture and cubicle walls to make a cook fire.” I poked around the ashes, found a length of bone. “Squirrel?”

Jose shook his head slightly. “Too big. Maybe a small dog.”

“Well, I don’t see anything to get excited about.” I stood up. Tommy was spraying a thin mist of nano over the exposed guts of the AC. He kept a light hand on the trigger, letting the preservative gunk settle before applying the catalyst. A few seconds later, the distinctive stench of cooking nano—burning bread—hit my nose. I coughed involuntary and backed away. Even after two years, the stuff still bothered me.

“That’s it!” Tommy said. “Gonna be a nice sample for the biotech guys tonight. Where to?”

I consulted my datapad and pointed toward the fire stairs. We moved quickly down one flight of steel stairs to the sixth floor. The door opened easily enough, revealing a shadowy expanse, mostly empty. Scavengers had picked it pretty clean. At least it was cooler. I wiped some sweat from my headset.

Jose paused for a moment near the landing, scanning the shadows. Then, for our benefit, he raised his rifle and fired a flare. A moment later, actinic light filled one corner, casting fantastic shadows on the ceiling. I could see the smoke stains of dozens

of campfires, along with graffiti in Mandarin, Vietnamese, Spanish, and Polish.

Something moved at the edge of my vision.

“Animal?” I asked.

“Not sure,” Jose replied. “We better do the spiel.”

I touched my throat mike. “ATTENTION,” I called out in amplified tones. “THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED. YOU ARE IN DANGER IF YOU REMAIN HERE. YOU ARE ORDERED TO LEAVE THIS AREA IMMEDIATELY. IF YOU DO NOT LEAVE, YOU ARE SUBJECT TO ARREST, IMPRISONMENT, AND LETHAL FORCE.” I touched the mike off. The Babel unit in my belt repeated my speech in all the approved languages.

When the big raccoon scurried out from behind a pile of broken vertical blinds, I released the breath I’d been holding.

Tommy gave a cheery wave to the departing animal. “Say hi to the wife and kids!”

“Well, that was a pleasant surprise.” I said without irony. We didn’t have time to evict squatters today. I tapped Jose on the shoulder and pointed behind us. He nodded and led the way down another flight of stairs.

On the fifth floor, we did come across a full squat. Tommy found empty liquor bottles (Welfare issue), a torn and greasy Army field jacket with UN Peacekeeping insignia, and some faded paperback books. “Hey, boss lady! Somebody here reading Shakespeare.” He held up a dog-eared copy of *The Merchant of Venice*. “Maybe you went to school with this guy.”

“I doubt it. I studied cultural archeology in Pennsylvania.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tommy said. “Looks like he was a winner of those free UN vacations in the Cameroon.”

We found a lot of those Army veterans in these squats. I tried to imagine Alan living in a place like this and couldn't. He wouldn't let himself get like this. He was too smart, too—

“Whatever,” I said. The squat smelled like homegrown tobacco, and it was making me irritable. I probed some of the debris with a sensor, hit something hard. “What's this?”

“Let me see,” Tommy said. He dug through the dirt and rotted fabric, revealing a personal lockbox. “Jackpot!”

I knelt down for a better look. “I don't know, Tommy. Doesn't look like it belongs with the rest of this stuff.” It was too clean, for one thing.

He was already examining the locking mechanism. “First-generation fingerprint lock. Probably powered by a lithium battery.” He flipped it over to peer at the bottom. “Looks Korean—”

“Careful!!” Jose's voice boomed above us. “You want to spend all winter regrowing your hand?”

“He'll be careful.” I looked Tommy in the eyes. “Right?”

“Right, boss lady,” Tommy grumbled. He the box down with exaggerated care. “I didn't break out of Immigration yesterday, you know.”

“We know,” Jose said. “And *you* know the rules.” He unclipped a probe from his belt and attached it to the box. “We can do it right, or we can do it twice.” His glasses polarized and bounced data off his eyeballs. “Okay, here it comes....” His glasses turned transparent again. “Cute.” He inserted a thin blade into the edge of the lockbox, twisted it, and popped out a circle of plastic that trailed a pair of wires. Jose cut one wire and stepped back. “It's safe now.”

“Open it up,” I told Tommy. “We'll keep an eye peeled.”

“You do that, boss lady.” Tommy flipped down his welding goggles and got to work. While he cut his way into the box, Jose and I walked a slow circuit through the rest of the floor.

I glanced back to make sure we weren't being watched. “Thanks, Jose.”

“For what?”

“For stepping in.”

“Just doing my job, Doctor.”

“Well, I still appreciate it.” I leaned against a concrete column and wiped the sweat from my forehead with an old bandana. “You know, he's not a bad kid.” I drank long swallows from my canteen. I was really thirsty.

“I never said he was, Doctor.”

“Look, he may have some issues with taking orders from a woman. He does his job, though.”

“That's because he knows there are lots of hungry people who want to wear his coveralls and earn the hazard pay,” Jose said.

“Touché.”

He touched his helmet in a mock salute.

“We're in!” Tommy said.

I stood, stretched my shoulders until they popped, and walked back to where Tommy was examining the contents of the lockbox.

“Naughty, naughty.” He pointed to several palm-sized objects. “Definitely not your basic squatter kit: credit chips, and industrial solvent, and this.” He held up a lump of something white and shiny.

“Nano?” I asked.

“Naw. Memory plastic,” Tommy said.

“A thief,” Jose decided.

“More than likely.”

“What are you guys talking about?” I said.

“It’s like this, boss lady,” Tommy said. “Our former classics major and soldier boy is probably contracting himself out as a data thief. He uses the memory plastic to suck binary out of some unencrypted data line, and exchanges that for food, drugs, whatever he needs.”

The back of my neck prickled. “Leave it.”

“Hey! This is worth—”

“It’s not worth shit to us, Tommy!” I immediately regretted raising my voice; they didn’t need to hear my anxiety right now. “It’s not on the list, and I don’t want to spend all night filling out forms. You got it?” I fought the temptation to look around.

I felt Jose on my right but kept my eyes on Tommy. I breathed into my belly, trying to loosen the knot there.

“Yeah,” he said, dropping his head. “Yeah, I got it.” He stood up and brushed off his gloves. “Now what?”

“Fourth floor.” I turned and led the way.

The fourth floor was all business. Most of the interior walls had survived aftershocks, scavengers, and one determined pyro. I helped Tommy unearth some teraflop computers.

“Remember last year?” Tommy said. “Someone resurrected a couple of old hard drives and found some data about the governor’s big stock kickback. Ended up kicking *his* ass out of office.” He laughed.

“Do we need to open these up?” I asked.

Tommy studied the pile of computers. “Naw, I’ll just cover the whole mess, and let someone else sort out the goodies.” He made an adjustment on his sprayer.

“Maybe one of these days we’ll find something that’ll tell us why the Raiders didn’t win the 2005 SuperBowl. What do think, boss lady?”

“Anything’s possible.”

Privately, I didn't give it much chance. Evidence of a hundred white-collar crimes might be uncovered in these neighborhoods, and too many politicians were happy to erase the evidence along with the urban blight. I couldn't prove anything, but I suspected that our cleanup list wasn't drawn up by safety inspectors, EPA records, or neighborhood petitions. There was no logic in our assignments, and the state assembly used every excuse to cut our budgets while pushing through building permits and tax breaks to use the "reclaimed" property.

Since so many records were lost in the Bad Weekend, it was easy to wipe away the past, burying it under new, clean buildings and shady green parks full of pollution-eating grass.

We waited a few minutes until the nano reaction stabilized, then made our way down another floor.

The work took on its usual hot, hazy rhythm. I finished off my canteen and half of Tommy's, and managed to chew my way through a couple of tasteless energy bars while Jose disarmed what appeared to be an burglar trap he found in the false ceiling of the second floor.

"He's something to watch, isn't he?" Tommy said.

"What do you mean?" I said wearily.

"Come on, boss lady. I ain't talking about his tight pantaloons and his handsome face. I mean his attitude." He popped a handful of peanuts into his mouth and crunched noisily. "Pro...fessional."

"Uh-huh." I thought about that for a second. I'd worked with other security people. They all seemed a little too macho to me, even the women. Jose was different. Grounded. Confident. He said he'd gone to college, although he never said where.

"You weren't living here during the Bad Weekend, were you?"

"No, Tommy. I was in Philadelphia, looking for work. My brother was here, though. In the Army."

“*Serious*. I remember seeing all the military trucks on the streets, trying to keep the looters out. At night, we’d sit on top of the apartment building, watching the fires. Better than the movies.

“So you came out her after that?” he prompted.

“Something like that.” Like most of the world, I had camped out in front of the television for days, and surfed the net, gorging myself on news and images after two days of Richter scale 7 quakes along the Hayward and Calaveras faults flattened whole neighborhoods from Silicon Valley to the Golden Gate Bridge. When the 3rd Infantry had been called in to supplement the National Guard, Alan’s medical squad went along as usual.

But they never came back from patrol. CNN found their ambulance, stripped of supplies, but no bodies.

I shoved half an energy bar into my pocket, my appetite lost. “Let’s get moving. Jose’s probably finished by now.” I quickly policed the food wrappers from the floor around us.

“You don’t have to do that,” Tommy said.

“But it’s okay with you if I do?” Alan used to kid me about my housecleaning when he visited my spotless dormitories and apartments.

“Not at all, boss lady.”

We trooped through several former conference rooms, which showed fewer bird droppings than the floor above. Most of the windows on this floor had cracked and fallen out of their frames, and I could see remains of old nests, plus the telltale smudges of cookfires.

The floor near the main escalators had sagged and fallen apart, making footing treacherous. I paused and dug out my datapad. “I want to circle back to the other set of fire stairs. That would be over that way.” I pointed to my left—

A black wraith, man-shaped, darted through the shadows, side-stepping piles of trash like a running back. One hand brandished a machete, the other, a pistol.

I froze.

“Get down!” someone screamed. I stumbled backward and landed on my butt.

I saw Jose snap off a quick burst, then roll to one side. Answering rounds ricocheted off the walls and struck the carpeting near my knees. I scuttled to one side, looking for cover.

Tommy was wedged behind a moldy cubicle wall, twisting a valve on his sprayer. “Goddammit!” he said. “Don’t have time for this shit now!”

More gunfire exploded above my head: Jose behind me, firing. I crawled in his general direction. Then I keyed my radio. “Tommy!” I hissed. “What are you doing?” He didn’t answer. I popped my head up for a quick look, but he was gone.

Another fast belly crawl brought me up against a freight elevator shaft. Jose crouched behind a torched photocopier. “You okay, Doctor?”

“Okay.” I spit some dust out of my mouth. Damn stuff was probably full of carcinogens, in addition to bird shit. “I can’t find Tommy.”

“Well, that’s not good,” he said. “I wanted to drop a grenade on our friend out there to flush him out.”

“Not until we know where Tommy is.”

“It’s your call, Doctor, but we’re not safe here.” We heard the scrape of furniture somewhere to our left. “He probably knows this building,” Jose continued. “We don’t.” He raised the rifle and slowly scanned the foyer. “I don’t like this,” he said. “He might have something heavier than a handgun.”

“I’m open to suggestions,” I said quietly.

“I got one, Jose,” whispered a voice in my ear.

“Tommy!”

“Shh, boss lady. He’s below me,” Tommy said.

Automatically I looked up at the false ceiling, but of course I didn't see him. I did notice several places where the acoustic tile had fallen out, and Tommy was small enough to squeeze through some of the holes.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Taking care of business,” Tommy replied. “Just need a distraction.”

“Hope you know what you're doing, Tommy,” Jose said. He dropped to the floor and steadied the rifle on his outstretched left arm. “Stay behind me.” He pulled the trigger. Heavy slugs ripped through debris, furniture, and concrete at ankle level.

An answering burst of gunfire scored the wall above, showering us with plaster. Then I heard something moving.

I looked up just in time to see a square of acoustic tile drop from the ceiling, followed by a spray of brown liquid. When it splashed on the floor, it sizzled. The spray narrowed into a tight stream.

A brief scream cut across my ears. The wraith tried to stand, then dropped with wet thud.

“Gotcha!” yelled Tommy as he wriggled out of the ceiling and landed on an upturned coffee table. “That's *serious*.” He waved us over. “Everything's cool.” He patted the nano sprayer. “We took care of him.”

The smell of cooking flesh made me gag. I jammed my bandanna in my mouth and breathed my own sweat. “Jesus Christ, Tommy. What's happening?” I pointed at the bubbling figure on the floor. Blisters formed on the skin of the body, popping and releasing viscous fluid. The heat from the reaction was making my feet warm even through my boots.

“Architectural nano,” he said. “Ain't designed for people.”

I ran to a broken window and vomited up my rations. When the dry heaves finished, I wiped my mouth with the bandanna, then tossed it away.

Footsteps behind me. “Water?” Jose said.

“Thanks,” I said, holding out a hand. He pressed his canteen into it. I took a swallow, spit it out, then drank greedily. I took three deep breaths and returned the empty canteen. God, I wanted a cigarette.

Jose knelt by me. “How you feeling, Doctor?”

I looked up. “Shitty, but I’ll manage.” I heard the shock in my voice. “I can’t believe he did that, Jose. He just killed that man.”

“It happens, sometimes,” Jose replied.

“But we don’t know who it was.”

“Do you think it was Alan?”

“It might have been!” I said.

Jose paused a moment, considering. “Be right back.” His boots crunched on broken acoustic tile.

I took deep breaths, fighting back tears. Jose came back in a minute and pressed something into my hand. “Here.”

I looked down at a sample bag. “What is it?”

“Stuff from that squat we found.” He gestured behind him with his thumb.

“Tommy must have accidentally put it in his pockets. I figured you could check it for prints.”

I squeezed his hand. “Thanks,” I whispered. “It’s just been a day, you know?”

“For everybody.” Jose gave me a moment, then gently pulled away.

“Tommy, you okay?” I asked.

“Doing fine, boss lady.”

“Then let’s do the first floor and go home.” I still felt shaky, but serviceable.

“I’m up for that,” Tommy said and headed for the stairs. I waved Jose after him.

I clenched the sample bag in my hand, feeling the hard edges of a credit chip. Deep down, I doubted I'd find Alan's prints on it. But I might find someone who'd seen him, or his squad. It wasn't much of a lead, but I had to follow it.

I took three breaths and rejoined my team.

THE END