Aboriginal

Gossamer threads, silvery lines and intricate patterns were woven together like colorful stitches of a tapestry. A complex web of ones and zeros were constructed to ensnare in invisible lines crisscrossing the air like tripwires. The web was spun by the greatest arachnid of all time, the king of spiders – the watcher.

Each watcher was responsible for knowing at all times the location and activities of the assigned charge. The more prominent figures required better watchers such as Steffan. Steffan was tall with a domineering presence. He had coal-black hair and emerald-green eyes. He activated his computer.

"Good morning, sir. The subject is active. Multiple cameras report Smith's exit from his apartment. Drones A64 and C13 have his location." Steffan smiled watching as a feed of Smith's face appeared on the screen. "Smith's current route follows path A and passes 46 cameras, drones D99 and A72, a car ID scanner and we have phone GPS signal." A city map appeared on the holographic screen. "Subject appears as a blue dot on the screen. Tap a red dot to see a video feed from that camera. Glowing dots indicate subject is in the current frame."

Steffan rolled his eyes. He heard the computer's instruction course every day; he didn't need to hear it again.

"Subject is now at his destination. No recording devices are inside the building; systems will alert you when further activity is detected." The voice went silent leaving the soft hum of machinery to keep Steffan company.

Any other watcher would have moved onto the next charge, but Professor Ethan Smith, noted scientist, was Stefffan's assignment. Smith had created a code, a master key that allowed encryption or decoding of any signal – a brilliant breakthrough that had changed the art of surveillance.

Lately, Smith's behavior had changed; he seemed to question the ethics of his work. Guilt consumed him. Smith tweeted to a friend, "I have put mankind into a fish bowl to be stared at as they spin their lives in circles." Brilliant algorithms ceased. Steffan became nervous.

Steffan filled the empty hours researching Smith's political activity and other things he did that cameras could not see. Findings were the usual. Steffan was ready to move on when a particular article caught his eye. Mixed in with false reports and empty conjecture cluttering the media news feed was a brief that didn't fit the current theme of ideas. One title caught Steffan's eye. *Smith backs out of the NSA contract to create computer invasive nano-drones.* Sometimes scientists decided not to work on a project anymore. Smith had never backed out of a contract.

A soft beep alerted Stefan that Smith had sent an e-mail. It was a simple e-mail sent to everyone on Smith's contact list. It contained one word:

Aboriginal

Steffan had no idea what this meant. He didn't like not knowing. It should have been easy to solve. The search results showed only ancient Indians from many tribes now long dead – their bones crumbled to dust, their lands degraded and their traditions lost. The remains were nothing more than ones and zeros recalled by the banks of archeological computers. Some of the tribes had believed that cameras stole their soul. Ironically, the only records remaining of their existence were the photos taken by the very cameras they thought to be evil. Steffan was puzzled. This was no secret project, no new symbolic theory.

Suddenly, the cameras blacked; all images disappeared. Steffan was used to the constant flow of information, rising and falling with the ebb of the world around him. He was unprepared

for an empty screen staring at him – a gaping black hole in the web of data that had been so carefully spun around Smith to avoid this very calamity. Steffan's pretty had escaped. He had no idea what to do, yet he towered over the computer protectively. An alarm flashed alerting him that his subject had been lost. Lost. With a jolt Steffan realized the significance of the blank screen: a lost subject. "No," Steffan murmured, typing frantically attempting to reboot the cameras.

The walls of the meeting room were covered in large flashing screens. The twelve chairs were occupied by members of the crisis team. Steffan cleared his throat before he began speaking. "Mr. Smith, brilliant scientist and great asset to national security, is gone." Silence filled the air clouding over the room. Steffan turned to the screen nearest him. "Computer, display file photo of Mr. Smith, please."

The computer paused for a moment before responding, "No match found."

"Computer, pull up the footage of Smith leaving his apartment this morning," Steffan said without glancing at his companions.

The computer repeated, "No match found."

"Computer, pull up what Smith e-mailed this evening."

Tense anticipation filled the silent room as all thirteen stared at the screen intently. "No match found," once again.

"Computer, display the e-mail I received at 18:37 tonight." Steffan commanded drumming his fingers. The screen displayed one word:

Aboriginal

That foreboding and meaningless one-word memorandum crashed Steffan's world down around him.

"Steffan," Jones broke the silence, "what does that mean? What is *Aboriginal* anyway?"

Aboriginal refers to native peoples. Some tribes believed that cameras would steal their souls. Beyond that, nothing applies to this scenario. Just before he disappeared, Smith sent this e-mail to everyone on his contact list. Now, they too have this message and disappeared. If they are like Smith, they never left their building, but they aren't inside, either."

"Apparently, we can't catch them on camera so we must search for them in person," Jones concluded.

"Yes," Steffan verified stoically. "I know Smith better than he knows himself. I'll find him." It was a binding pledge, but one Steffan felt confident he could fulfill. He couldn't fail again.

Smith was exactly where Steffan expected him to be, the old family cabin. Steffan couldn't figure out how Smith and his entire family had managed to elude every camera in the entire city.

"Steffan, welcome!" Smith called warmly beckoning Steffan into the cabin.

Steffan started running his fingers through his hair. "What …"

"You must have a lot of questions, yes?"

"Yes."

Smith interrupted, "Let's start at the top, shall we?" He smiled as if playing an amusing game. "Why did I *disappear*?" His tone became more serious. "I worked for the government; National Security was my main focus. I created the code to stop danger before it happened, to spy on possible terrorist attacks. Instead, they gave it to you to read my e-mail, to intercept my phone calls, to see my documents. They used it to spy on my wife, my kids, and millions of

others across the nation, even on you." He laughed slyly. Did you think I wouldn't recognize my own program breaking into my computer files?"

"And *Aboriginal*?" Steffan questioned. "What's the connection?"

"Those natives weren't too far off by believing that cameras stole the soul. They do. What part of my soul is still mine? You have my notes, my messages; my every move belongs to those cameras. Don't we get to a point where my soul no longer belongs to me? Aboriginal, my new creation – I no longer exist in the records of your computers, do I? Your brightest scientists can attempt to decode Aboriginal; maybe they'll crack it in fifty years when I'm dead. I doubt it. Your cameras see me, but they think I'm someone else, a fictitious character, one with no watcher. You took my soul; I needed to take it back."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Steffan said shrugging his shoulders.

"They have yours, too." A quick comment, but in four words Smith cut to the bone revealing a malignancy unknown to Steffan. "Did you ever wonder what you would have done with *your* life if you hadn't spent it watching *mine*? Your every thought, every idea, even your memories belong to me. The cameras stole your life, Steffan, and gave you mine."

Jones watched Steffan enter the cabin. He waited, spending the long and painful seconds watching the doors as minute by minute ticked by. Steffan did not appear. Finally, a new e-mail propped up on the screen. It was from Steffan. Inside was one word:

Aboriginal

Steffan went in; he never came out.