

SLIDERS

The Cry of the Birds

by Diana Jones

***A gripping tale of horror and madness
featuring Quinn, Wade, Rembrandt and Arturo.***

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Excuse me. Do you mind if I share your table? Yeah, the cafe is crowded, isn't it? By the way my name is Wade. What was your name? It's a pleasure to meet you Sarah.

Yeah, I am feeling a little shaky. I've just been through quite an experience, but I won't bore you with the details... Are you sure?... Well, you're probably right.

Maybe if I tell someone what happened it'll help me make some sense of it. And sometimes it's easier talking to a perfect stranger.

But there are a few things you need to understand before I can tell you my story. I just hope you don't think I'm crazy. You need

to understand that reality is so much more complex than you might think. This world you live in is really just one of thousands, maybe even millions. No, I'm not talking about different planets, but rather different realities, different dimensions. They're all existing simultaneously, just on different planes. I'll tell you, most people have no idea how complicated the universe is. They think their reality is the only one. But... they've never been sliding.

What's sliding? Let's see. How can I explain it? It's really something that has to be experienced. Sliding is a way to move from one dimension to the next. Quinn invented a machine that creates wormholes between worlds. Quinn? Oh, he's one of the guys I'm

traveling with. Anyway, this wormhole is like a tear in the fabric of reality. We pass through this tear. We slide through.

The guys and I have been sliding for three years now -- moving from one dimension to the next. There has been so many different worlds, so many different realities. Sliding has definitely changed my life forever. Even if we do eventually get home I'll never be the person I was. So much has happened to us...

What? Oh I'm sorry. I did kinda space out there for a minute. I think I'm a little shell-shocked. It's just that after all this sliding you would think nothing could ever surprise us again. You might think that, but you'd be wrong.

Are you sure you want to hear me out? This may take a while to tell. Well, let's see, it all started less than a week ago. We had just slid into a new world and we knew right away that things weren't quite right...

"Hello!" Wade shouted, poking her head into the store. "Is anyone here?"

Only silence greeted her.

She entered the small pet store and looked around. The air was stale and heavy. A thick layer of dust covered the cash register and the counter top like a soft, gray

blanket. A struggling beam of sunlight fought its way through the dirt-streaked windows and fell across the solitary set of footprints she left behind. Morbid curiosity pulled her further into the store and she hesitantly approached a set of small cages lining the back wall. Dread slowed her steps. Thankfully most of the cages were empty. But in a few, lay the piteously delicate, white bones of abandoned animals, left to die slowly in their isolated wire prisons. Wade tried to swallow the lump that rose up in her throat, then she turned and walked quickly toward the front of the store. She had seen enough.

But suddenly she stopped, the hairs rising

on the back of her neck. What was that sound? Her heart fluttered in her chest as she whirled around... nothing. She told herself that scraping noise wasn't the sound of old, dry bones scratching around in their cages. It had been a mouse or a rat, that's all. She turned back toward the light that shone in through the front windows and suddenly a dark shadow loomed over her. Wade's strangled scream filled the empty store, echoing off the bare walls. The dark figure jumped back.

"Jeeze, Wade!" a familiar voice said. "Don't scare me like that." Of course it was Quinn standing there, a hand reaching for her shoulder.

"Then don't sneak up on me," Wade said angrily, brushing his hand away, her heart racing painfully in her chest. But then she took a deep breath and calmed down. "Look. . . I'm sorry, Quinn. This world has me really spooked."

He smiled at her. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Did you have any luck?"

Quinn shook his head. "No. I haven't seen a soul."

Wade recognized the hard edge in his voice and knew he was as unnerved as she was. "Come on." She took his hand. "Let's get

out of here and catch up with Remmy and the Professor. I think it would be better if we stuck together on this world."

This time Wade ignored the sound of the bones rattling in their cages and gratefully stepped into the bright California sunshine. The warm sun and the safe feeling of Quinn's hand helped chase away the ghosts in her head.

If only it wasn't so quiet. The only sounds came from the birds perched in nearby trees - no TVs, no radios, no cars honking or planes flying overhead - just the birds.

They stood and looked at the long row of retail stores lining the empty street. The

dark, opaque windows stared back silently. In some hung large signs gaily proclaiming 'End of Season' sales, the cardboard edges curling, the once bright colors faded and dull. There should have been people everywhere, laughing and talking, carrying bags and packages . . . but that was all in the past for this world. Now, only small animals ran in and out of the stores through broken windows, and grass grew in the cracks of the sidewalk. Wade hugged herself as a cold chill slid down her spine.

They turned away and headed down the block, passing the cars and buses that clogged the street. They came upon a bad accident at the next intersection. A red Volkswagen lay on its side and a city bus

rested on the squashed hood of a van. It seemed to Wade as if someone had pushed the pause button on a giant VCR. At any second she expected horns to start honking and people to come running. But there wasn't anyone left to hit the play button on this world. There was only the silence.

"They didn't even bother removing the bodies," Quinn said, looking into one of the cars. He looked over at her. "Come on, Wade." He held out his hand, a tight smile on his face. "The Professor said to meet him at the library on the corner." She gratefully took his hand and they quickly walked away.

They found the Professor in the large,

empty library sitting at a table with stacks of newspapers and magazines before him. Wade saw Rembrandt wandering through the book-lined shelves and she waved at him.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said walking over. "You all right? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Very funny, Remmy. I think this whole world is full of ghosts."

He slipped a comforting arm around her shoulders. "It won't be so bad, Wade. We're only going to be here for three days."

Quinn took a seat next to Arturo. He picked up one of the newspapers. "Have you figured out what happened to this world, Professor?"

"Yes, my boy, I believe I have. From what I've been able to piece together from these newspapers," the Professor waved his hand at the untidy piles, "it would seem that every human being on this planet has died from a viral infection."

Wade felt a nervous lump form in her stomach. "What kind of infection?" she asked, pulling a chair over to the table.

"Apparently a common, normally harmless virus underwent a mutation that turned it

into a devastating killer."

Rembrandt pushed aside a pile of papers and perched a hip on the edge of the table.

"But how could this virus infect an entire world?" he asked the Professor.

"Because it was transmitted through the air, Mr. Brown."

"Like the flu?"

"Yes." The Professor leaned back in his chair, stretching his back. "And like the influenza virus, this deadly disease spread from person to person through airborne droplets created when a person coughed or sneezed."

Quinn shook his head, throwing the newspaper he was looking at on the table. "It must have spread like a wildfire."

The Professor nodded. "After the virus invaded the body it produced few symptoms at first, so it was left to spread unchecked and unnoticed for years... until people began dying." He rubbed his tired eyes. "Unfortunately for this world, the scientists figured out too late just how deadly the virus was. By the time they realized, the entire world was infected and the mortality rate was 100%."

"Didn't they develop any medicines to fight it? Quinn asked.

"I'm afraid they didn't have time," the Professor said, searching through the pile of newspapers. He held up a thin edition of the San Francisco Tribune. "This is the last paper I could find. It's dated September 9, 1982. I don't think mankind survived here much longer."

"But what about us?" Wade asked anxiously. "Have we been infected? If we have, we can't carry the virus to the next world."

Arturo shook his head. "No. I believe we're perfectly safe. It's unlikely the virus would still be present in the air after all these years. It should be laying dormant with its

dead hosts." He paused. "But I think, to be on the safe side, we should avoid handling any corpses during our stay on this earth."

Rembrandt chuckled grimly. "I'll try to remember that, Professor."

Kinda makes you stop and think doesn't it, Sarah? You can see how really lucky our worlds are. Billions of people were killed in that dimension. Their killer was so small you need a microscope to see it. It reminds you how fragile life is, when it's so quickly and easily taken away . . .

Oh, sorry. I was just thinking . . . You know

there's more than one kind of killer. A virus may kill, but it does so without malice or intent . . . That's definitely more than you can say for human killers.

Anyway, I hope I haven't bored you . . . You want me to continue? Yeah, I believe it is helping me sort a few things out. I really appreciate your patience. OK, let's see, where was I . . . Oh yes. Well, by then it was beginning to get late and Quinn thought we should find a safe place to spend the night so he suggested . . .

"Let's find my double's house," Quinn said. "It should be just a couple blocks

from here. Maybe we can find something to eat along the way."

They headed in that direction, stopping to pick fruit from trees growing wild in the front lawns. Rembrandt found a small grocery store and he carried out an armful of canned meat.

"SPAM never spoils, you know," Rembrandt joked.

"Perhaps." The Professor took one of the cans Rembrandt was holding and read the list of ingredients on the label. "But I believe I'll let you sample it first, Mr. Brown."

"No guts, no glory, right guys?"

Quinn's house had a sad, neglected look to it. Paint was peeling from around the windows and the lawn was wild and overgrown. Heavy vines climbed up the crumbling walls, straining to engulf the house in its green suffocating heaviness. They stood in silence for a moment then Quinn reached to open the gate. The latch came off in his hand as the hinges screeched in protest. The front door was unlocked and everything inside was covered in a thick layer of gray dust.

They were settling in when Quinn saw something through a window that caught his attention. "Be right back," he said. But

after a few minutes he called for them and they joined him in the backyard.

"There's an old grave here," Quinn said, pointing at a faint, shallow indentation in the sandy ground. He knelt and began pulling tall weeds away from a crude hand-painted grave marker.

Rembrandt shook his head and sighed. "Maybe coming to his double's house wasn't such a good idea."

Quinn wiped dirt off the wooden sign. The white paint was barely visible but Wade could read the words, 'Mom and Dad' and a date, '12/3/83' written in a childish script.

Quinn stood and wiped his hands on his jeans. He crammed his fists in his pockets and stared at the graves. "My double would have been eight years old in 1983. Somehow . . . somehow he managed to bury them before . . ." he turned and squinted at an upstairs window, ". . . before he died."

They found the remains of the little body in a bed upstairs. He was curled in a ball, the covers pulled up to his chin. Wade looked at the stuffed animals and plastic toys laying next to him. The child must have carried them to his bed for company and she had to choke back tears. She couldn't image how lonely the little boy

must have been, knowing The End was near, dying all alone. Quinn reached for a green dinosaur laying beside the body but Rembrandt caught his hand.

"I don't think you should touch anything, Q-ball. Just in case."

Quinn looked around at them, his face pale. "I want to bury him beside his parents," he said, swallowing. "I want them to be together."

Wade found a pair of heavy plastic gloves under the kitchen sink and Quinn carefully wrapped the bones and all the toys in a blanket. Rembrandt dug a small grave beside the other two and Quinn

gently placed the bundle in the ground. They sang a hymn and said a prayer, then they filled in the little hole. Really, it wasn't just a funeral for an eight-year-old child, but for an entire world and their efforts seemed very pitiful and inadequate.

They stood there for a while listening to the silence. A warm breeze blew across Wade's face and she was reminded of similar evenings when she was a little girl. Wade and her sister would stay out late, savoring every precious moment of summer freedom. They would play until the street lights and the stars lit up the darkening sky. Eventually mom would come to the screen door and call out to them. Then they would reluctantly finish

their games, go inside and leave the perfect day behind.

Wade felt the sting of tears in her eyes. On this world, children would never again jump from their beds in the early summer mornings. They would never again rejoice that summer was finally here, stretching endlessly before them, long and hot. She thought about all those empty tomorrows.

The Professor finally stirred. He broke the silence by clearing his throat. Wade wondered where the breeze had carried his thoughts. He reached over and squeezed Quinn's shoulder.

"I'm afraid it's the best we can do for him,

my boy," he said looking down at the fresh grave.

Quinn nodded. "Yeah, I know. I'm glad they're finally together." He looked up at them. "Thanks guys."

Rembrandt sighed. "It was the least we could do, Q-ball. I think the little guy may finally be at peace."

The Professor turned back to the house. "Let's go inside now and get some rest. It's been a very long day."

Wade reached for Quinn's hand and he gave her a sad smile. The silence of that terribly empty world weighed down on her

and she was very grateful they would be sliding soon.

Sleep did not come easily to Wade that night. The darkness and silence of that world intensified her terrible longing for her home and her family. Eventually, frustrated by her insomnia, she kicked the bed sheets off her sweaty legs. Yellow moonlight filtered into the bedroom through an open curtainless window. Wade lay staring up at the ceiling, her eyes restlessly tracing the intricate web-like pattern of cracks in the plaster. The longer she stared, the more the small peaks and crevices began to resemble the terrain on a barren, arid, empty world. She felt the plaster world expand and engulf her,

leaving her adrift in a white, chalky desert.

Hot tears rolled down her cheeks as long buried feelings of loneliness and fear surfaced. She felt utterly alone and lost. She would never see her world again; never hug her mom or dad again. Wade felt doomed to live her life abandoned and isolated from everyone and everything she had ever loved.

But, after a few minutes her desolate journey in the white plaster world was interrupted by a sound, a very human sound. Wade pulled herself out of her dark thoughts and listened. Rembrandt's loud snores drifted up the stairs into the bedroom where she lay. Wade wiped away

the lonely tears and smiled into the darkness. She wasn't alone on this strange journey. She had friends; people she loved and who loved her. She rolled over, fluffed the pillow under her head and settled into a light, dreamless sleep.

There was little else to do, so they spent the next morning wandering around the empty city.

"What do you think will happen to this world?" Wade asked the Professor as they walked through a sadly overgrown and neglected Golden Gate Park.

"It's hard to say, Miss Welles. It's possible, that in a few millennium, a new species of intelligent life might evolve here. At any rate, in a few hundred years, mother nature will destroy virtually all evidence that mankind ever existed."

"Nature reclaiming what once belonged to her," Rembrandt said. "Sorta makes you . . ."

Rembrandt continued talking but something else caught Wade's attention. Had she heard something? Something very odd? She could almost swear . . .

"Wade!" Quinn shouted, hobbling around on one foot, pulling his shoe back on.

"You stepped on my heel."

"Shhh . . . " She held her hand up, signaling for silence. Had this world driven her completely insane or had she heard. . .

"Three blind mice, three blind mice" The melody drifted to them on a warm breeze.
"See how they run, see how they run."

They looked at each other in stunned silence and Wade felt her heart begin to race.

"They all ran after the farmer's wife."

"It sounds like a child singing," the Professor whispered.

"She cut off their tails with a carving knife."

Wade had an almost irresistible urge to run away. To grab the others and head in the opposite direction.

"Did you ever see such a sight in your life? As three blind mice."

She heard another sound. . . a chain rattling? . . . No, a swing! Through a thin cover of brush Wade glimpsed a figure flying through the air. They pushed through the tall weeds and stood before a child. But she ignored them. The little girl looked up and through them with no change of expression in the crystal-clear

blue eyes. Wade suddenly felt an irrational thought tug at her mind. Maybe the child didn't really exist. Could she be just a memory from times past?

"Three blind mice, three blind mice."

As the little girl flew through the air, her blond hair floated around her face on the warm, summer breeze. The pink flowered dress she wore matched the ribbons in her hair. Was that blood on her hands, Wade wondered? She took a hesitant step toward the child. Either the girl was a ghost or they were. Wade reached out and touched the child's arm as she swung past . . . solid. At least it had felt like a real arm, the dress's fabric had been soft under her

fingers.

The girl dropped her feet to the ground bringing the swing to an abrupt stop. She looked at Wade and this time the child saw her. Wade reached out and touched her soft, rosy cheek. The little girl's blue eyes flew open and she began to scream.

I'll tell you, Sarah, that scream sent chills down my spine. It was so primal, so terrifying. She turned into a wild animal, all teeth and claws. Yeah, she really went crazy. No. I don't think she was angry, maybe just frightened. I got the feeling we were the first people she had seen in a long time. She

started kicking and scratching me but Rembrandt and the Professor grabbed her. And even with the two of them, she was hard to hold. But when the girl saw Quinn, she went limp in their arms. It was like someone had switched her off. She just stared at him, enthralled. No. I asked, but Quinn said he didn't recognize her from our world. And the kid wasn't any help, she wouldn't say a word.

After the little girl calmed down, we were able to take a better look at her. Her hands and clothes were stained with what looked like old blood. Her dress was dirty and torn and she had on mismatched shoes. She had obviously been on her own for a while. Oh, I figure she was around nine. Yeah, that's a

good question. Where did she come from? I could have sworn there wasn't a person left alive in that world. The last people probably died at least thirteen years ago.

It was a real mystery and the child definitely wasn't helping us with the answers.

"Can you tell us your name, sweetheart?" Quinn asked gently, kneeling beside her. The girl stared at him, then wrapped her arms around his neck. Quinn looked up at Wade and shrugged. He picked her up and said, "Let's take her back to my double's house. Maybe she'll talk to us there."

"Look, how about I stay here and look around some more," Rembrandt suggested. "Maybe we're missing something."

The Professor nodded. "Yes. There has to be an explanation for the child's presence on this world. I'll join you, Mr. Brown. We'll meet back at the house later."

Quinn carried the girl to his double's house. They cleaned her up and tried to make her comfortable. Quinn gave her some fruit and a couple slices of canned meat and she ate ravenously. Wade sat and watched her. The child's eyes never left Quinn. She seemed drawn to him, obsessed by him. He sat beside the little girl and tried to persuade her to talk. But

she remained silent.

The Professor and Rembrandt returned from their search a couple of hours later.

"Nothing," Rembrandt said, shaking his head. He sank wearily into a chair and slipped his shoes off. "We searched that entire park," he said, rubbing his feet. "We found where she's been sleeping, but no sign anyone else has been around."

"And we found this." The Professor held out a knife with a long, slender blade.

Wade felt a strange queasiness in her stomach as she stared at the knife.

"We found it laying on the ground where she's been sleeping," Rembrandt said.

"Oh, poor thing." Wade looked at the blond-headed little girl. "She's probably been so scared, being here all alone. I'm sure she kept the knife with her so she'd feel safer."

"But there's blood on it, Miss Welles." The Professor turned the knife, showing her the dried, brownish stains on the handle. Wade remembered the blood they had cleaned off the child's hands.

Quinn shrugged, unconcerned. "So what. She's obviously been on her own for a while. She's probably gotten pretty good at

catching her dinner."

"The question is," the Professor said, his dark eyes on the child. "What do we do with her? We slide in two days."

"Well, we can't leave her." Wade sat on the sofa, putting an arm around the girl. "She'll die here all alone."

"But what if we're wrong?" the Professor said. "Maybe her people are searching for her this very minute."

"Look, we have no choice." Quinn watched the child watching him. "If we don't find other people by the time we slide, we have to take her with us."

The little girl smiled.

The sun and the singing birds woke Wade the next morning. She looked out the bedroom window. It had rained during the night, but the clouds were gone now and the morning sky was a beautiful shade of blue. She sat up and groaned. Her back was stiff from sleeping on the floor but she couldn't bring herself to sleep on one of the beds. People had died in this house, probably on those beds. The floor was fine with her.

"Professor! Wade, Remmy! Come quick!" Wade jumped up, alarmed by the fear in Quinn's voice. She met the Professor and

Rembrant at the bottom of the stairs and they ran toward the front door. Before they reached it, Quinn stepped back in the house and slammed the door shut.

Leaning against the wall, he gulped a lung-full of air. "Jeeze, that really scared the crap out of me." He brushed hair off his forehead with a trembling hand.

"Q-ball are you all right?" Rembrandt asked.

"What is it, my boy?" The Professor reached for Quinn's arm. "Are you hurt?"

"No. . . No, I'm fine." Quinn looked beyond them to the little girl sitting on the

sofa, wiping sleep from her eyes. He continued in a low voice. "Someone has . . . someone has killed some animals; rabbits, I think, and a cat, maybe. They're hanging from the trees in the front lawn."

"What?" Wade gasped. "Who would do that?"

They turned and looked at the child.

"That's crazy," Quinn whispered harshly. "There's no way a little girl could have done this . . ."

He opened the door on a scene from a nightmare. Not only were the animals dead, but their bellies had been cut open.

Loops of bowel hung from the small bodies, blood still dripping on the grass below. Wade felt like gagging on the sweet metallic smell.

"It followed me here."

They spun around. The child stood quietly in the doorway.

Quinn knelt and took her hand. "What followed you, sweetheart?"

"The monster." She looked at him. Her eyes were flat and strangely calm, then she reached out and touched Quinn on the cheek. "We're all going to die."

Quinn lead the child back into the house. She sat on the sofa, drawing her legs up under her.

"The monster followed me through the vortex," she said, her voice soft and detached.

"Then you're from a different world?" Quinn asked, sitting next to her on the sofa.

"Yes. There were lots of people there." The little girl looked around, puzzled. "Why is it so quiet here? Is everyone dead?"

Quinn nodded sadly. "Can you tell us your name, sweetheart?"

"Hannah. My name is Hannah."

Quinn smiled at her. "That's a very pretty name. Hannah, do you know me?"

She looked at him, her face still. "I live next to you. We're friends. No. We were friends, but you're dead now. Are you a ghost?"

"Hannah," Quinn said, taking her hand. "I knew how confusing this must be, but I'm not dead. I'm just a different Quinn than the one you knew, just like this is a different world than the one you lived in."

Does that make any sense?"

"You're from a different dimension?" the child asked.

"Yes. That's right."

"Quinn told me there were lots of different dimensions. He was a slider. Are you a slider too?"

Quinn nodded. "Yes, we all are. Hannah, can you tell us what happened? How did you end up in this world all alone?"

"I was running from the monster. The monster was chasing me and I ran into the blue hole to get away."

Wade knelt beside her. "Hannah, tell us about this monster."

The child closed her eyes and the words started tumbling out, falling across each other, faster and faster.

"I came home from playing and a monster got my mommy. Just like in those scary movies. A knife . . . There was a knife, with blood. I. . . I don't understand. Why is daddy lying so still. Why is there blood on mommy?"

Hannah began crying, her long hair falling across her face.

"The monster came after me so I ran. Quinn will help. He's my friend. He said so." She stopped and looked at Quinn. "You said we were special friends. That I could come visit whenever I wanted. You said I could trust you with my secrets."

Quinn reached out and gently wiped away her tears. "Yes, Hannah. You can trust me. I promise. Please tell us what happened next."

"The monster followed me. The basement . . . you were in the basement. The monster did it! I couldn't stop it," the child cried out. "The monster killed you too." She reached up and traced a line across Quinn's throat. "From here to here.

That's where you were cut. Blood was everywhere."

Wade flinched from the unwelcome image forming in her mind; the flash of a knife, blood running down Quinn's throat.

"Then, it came after me," the child continued. "I knew about the blue hole so I turned it on and jumped in." She looked around at them, her blue eyes clear. "I'm sorry. I didn't know it followed me."

Quinn sat back and rubbed his forehead.

Wade took one of the girl's cold, clammy hands. "Hannah, were you hurt?" The child shook her head. "Did you know the

killer? Was it a man you knew?"

"A man?" The child look puzzled. "No. It wasn't a man. It was a monster. A monster got my mommy."

"Look, she's obviously confused. Mixed-up," Rembrandt said. He walked over to a window and looked out. "This is just great. Trapped on an empty world with a homicidal maniac." He shook his head. "This just hasn't been our slide. He's out there. I can feel him." He turned away from the window. "We're going to have to find some weapons," he said. "Grab some food and water, then barricade ourselves in until the slide."

Wade looked over at the surprisingly silent Arturo. "Professor, what do you think we should do?"

"I agree with Mr. Brown," the Professor said, watching the child. "I definitely think we need to protect ourselves from whomever killed those animals."

Remmy and the Professor went out to gather the supplies. While they were gone, Quinn and Wade boarded up the windows and nailed the back door shut. Soon the house felt like a fortress. The front door was the only way in or out. Wade collapsed on the sofa beside Hannah, exhausted.

"It's going to be all right, sweetie," Wade

said, giving the child a hug. "Soon you'll be leaving this world and the monster behind."

Hannah stared down at her feet and shook her head. "If I run, it just chases me. I can't ever get away."

The banging on the front door brought Wade to her feet. It was Rembrandt and the Professor with their arms full.

"All right," Rembrandt said laying the supplies on the kitchen table. "We've got enough food and water to last us until we slide tomorrow. We also grabbed some more candles and. . . I found this." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a

gun. "Just in case there's trouble."

"A gun?" Wade eyed the weapon. "I can't believe you would bring a gun back, Remmy. What about Hannah? We have a child's safety to consider."

"Girl, why do you think I got it?" Rembrandt slipped the gun back in his pocket. "We have to be able to protect ourselves from the killer."

"Guys, let's not argue." Quinn sighed wearily. "We've got to hang together until the slide."

He sat at the edge of the table and rubbed the back of his neck. He probably hadn't

slept much last night either, Wade realized. Maybe the two of them had listened to the same ghosts. She decided to make peace.

"Sorry, Remmy. Guns . . . guns just upset me. You know?"

Rembrandt smiled. "I promise I'll be careful, sweetheart. We just have to be ready, in case that maniac gets bored killing animals."

Wade sighed and walked over to a window. She knew Rembrandt was right, but she still hated the idea of a gun. She looked out through a crack between the wooden slates. Dark windows stared back at her from the empty houses across the street.

But were they really empty? Maybe he was hiding inside one right now, watching her. Waiting for dark so he can . . . Wade jumped, feeling someone come up beside her. It was just Quinn.

"How you holding up?" he asked, sliding an arm around her shoulders. Wade shrugged, then looked over at Hannah. As usual, she was watching Quinn.

"I just can't imagine what she's been through," Wade whispered. "Seeing her parents and friend murdered, only to escape and find herself stranded in a city full of dead people."

"Yeah. But don't worry, we'll find her some

help on the next world and a good home."
Quinn smiled at her. "She'll be all right."

Wade smiled back and leaned her head against his shoulder. "I never realized how much I would miss having people around. I don't remember ever feeling this lonely."

Quinn squeezed her shoulder. "Just one more night, Wade, then we're out of here and . . ."

They jumped as a frightful scream ripped through the room. Hannah! She was backing away from a window, hands covering her eyes. "It's the monster! The monster that got my mommy. I saw it looking in at me!"

Rembrandt ran to the window, the gun in his hand and Quinn pulled the child to his side. "It's OK, sweetie," he said. "You're safe with us." She looked up at him with large, trusting eyes. "Do you see anything, Remmy?" Quinn asked.

"No, but there's a lot of thick brush around the window. He could be hiding out there and I wouldn't see him." Rembrandt looked over his shoulder at Hannah. "Don't worry, sweetheart. There's no way he's getting in. I promise."

"It's strange no one else saw this monster," the Professor said.

Quinn knelt beside Hannah and brushed her hair back off her face. "What are you getting at, Professor?" he asked sharply.

"I'm not sure."

"I saw the monster looking in at me," the child cried. "I saw it!"

"Professor!" Quinn picked the little girl up and carried her to the sofa. "I'm sure Hannah saw someone out there. Why would she make it up?"

"I don't know, Mr. Mallory."

Twilight began darkening the room and Wade lit some candles. Hannah stretched

out on the sofa and laid her head in Quinn's lap. She soon fell asleep. Wade settled into a chair and watched the child for a minute. The little girl looked so innocent with her wispy bangs curling on her forehead. Wade looked around at the barricaded windows. She hated the monster that lurked outside. Hated him for causing so much pain.

Wade looked over at the Professor. "Apparently Hannah didn't recognize the person who killed her parents," she said. "Who could kill strangers in cold blood?"

"Sociopaths could, Miss Welles," the Professor answered. He got up and began pacing around the room. "Sociopaths are

more than capable of such wanton acts of violence and murder. They're just monsters in a human form." He picked up a piece of fruit laying on the kitchen table. "Does anyone want something to eat while I'm up?" he asked.

Quinn brushed hair off the child's sweaty face. "No, I'm fine, Professor."

"Mr. Brown?"

Rembrandt was peeking through the front window. "No, thank you, Professor."

"I'll take an orange," Wade said and he handed her one before settling into a chair.

"A sociopath is a person devoid of all normal human emotions," he continued. "They have no emotional connection to the rest of humanity. To them, social rules and the idea of a common good are merely a puzzling and inconvenient abstraction."

Wade shivered from the idea. She rubbed her arms and asked, "What makes them that way, Professor?"

He shrugged. "I suspect they're born that way; missing a conscience and the ability to feel for others."

"Surely they're found out," Rembrandt said, turning his back to the window.

"Not always, Mr. Brown. Psychopaths are usually amazing actors, fooling even those closest to them into believing they're normal. They often get married, have children, apparently living normal lives. But they're masters at using charm, manipulation and violence to control others and satisfy their own selfish needs. And, unfortunately those needs are most often satisfied through killing."

"Maybe they can't help it," a childish voice said. The little girl sat up and brushed her hair back. "Maybe they enjoy killing too much to stop. Does that make them bad?"

"Yes," the Professor said. "It makes them a monster."

Their needs are satisfied through killing. Those words have haunted me, Sarah. I can't seem to get them out of my head. What kind of a tortured, twisted need could be met by taking the life of another person?

So there we were, stranded on a dead planet, barricaded in a house with a psychopathic murderer outside. It doesn't get much worse than that, does it. Why am I smiling? Oh, just something Remmy said one time. 'If you ever think you've sunk to the very bottom, don't look down, you might be disappointed.' And I should have listened to him. I shouldn't have looked down, because things

did get a whole lot worse.

"Hello!" Wade shouted, poking her head into the store. "Is anyone here?" Only silence greeted her.

Wade entered the small pet store and looked around. Morbid curiosity pulled her further into the store and she hesitantly approached a set of small cages lining the back wall. Dread slowed her steps. In a few cages lay the piteously delicate, white bones of abandoned animals. Wade tried to swallow the lump that rose up in her throat, then she turned and walked quickly toward the front of the store. She had seen

enough.

But suddenly she stopped, the hairs rising on the back of her neck. What was that sound . . . that scraping sound? Her heart fluttered in her chest as she whirled around. Her feet began carrying her back to the cages. She didn't want to go but her legs wouldn't listen.

She approached the wire pens and her breath caught in her throat. The bones were shifting around in the bottom of the cages, scrambling about, rearranging themselves! The vertebrae lined up, the leg bones rejoined the pelvis and the small white skulls rose up and looked at her through the wire mesh of the cages.

Wade opened her mouth, wanting to scream, unable to breathe. Why wouldn't her feet move? She had to get away from the creatures before they found a way out. She had to escape! Then she was running . . . running toward the light that shone in through the windows, but a dark shadow suddenly loomed over her . She tried to scream as an icy grip fell on her shoulder. Wade struggled, pulling, finally wrenching herself free. She burst through the door of the pet store and found herself standing alone in the hot, deserted street.

She stood there gasping, waiting for the monster to come after her. But it didn't. Wade was alone . . . very alone. The silence

of the city bore down on her like a weight. She could only hear the beating of her heart and the cry of the birds.

"Run," the birds shrieked. "Run while you can."

So she did. She ran from the monster, from the trapped animals, from the birds. Wade ran until she reached a terrible accident. Cars and buses were laying about like a child's broken toys. She snaked her way around them, scrambling over dented hoods, crunching glass under her feet.

Suddenly, a hand reached out from under a car and latched onto her foot. Wade kicked and pulled against the hand but the white,

bony fingers were like iron. She couldn't get free. She felt the coldness of death seep through her shoe as she frantically struggled against the claw. The rest of the decayed corpse slithered out from under the car and the skull luffed skyward, the empty sockets dark with a terrible knowledge. The bony jaw fell open and obscenely, the voice of a sweet, innocent child drifted out . . .

“Three blind mice, three blind mice. See how they run, see how they run.”

Screaming, Wade finally wrenched herself out of the nightmare. But the singing continued. Faintly, the melody drifted over her, surrounding her.

“They all ran after the farmer's wife. She cut off their tails with a carving knife. Have you ever see such a sight in your life? As three blind mice.”

Wade sat up and felt a cool breeze blow across her sweaty skin. She couldn't get the face of that corpse out of her head. The nightmare had seemed so real, so vivid. Wade rubbed her foot before pulling her shoes on. She could still feel the cold, iron grip of that dead hand. She got up and lit a candle. "Remmy! Where are you?" Rembrandt had volunteered to take the first watch that night. She looked around for him. "Remmy. . ." Her breath caught in her throat. The front door was standing

wide open!

She ran toward the door but stumbled over a body sprawled on the floor. "Rembrandt!" Wade dropped to her knees beside him. His eyes were closed and she touched wet blood on his face.

"Professor! Quinn! Wake up! Rembrandt's been hurt!" Again, she heard the singing and Wade ran to the doorway. It was raining again. Lightening streaked across the black sky and she caught a glimpse of the girl. The child was turned away, arms raised high above her head. She sang into the rain.

"Three blind mice, three blind mice."

"Hannah!" Wade shouted. "Come back inside!"

The child looked at her. "It's too late," she said quietly, her voice strangely calm. "It's killing time." Hannah turned and began running down the street, into the black night. Wade looked back and saw Quinn and the Professor kneeling beside Rembrandt.

"I'm going after Hannah," she said. "I have to bring her back before the killer finds her."

"No, Wade!" the Professor cried. "Wait! You don't understand. The deadbolt

was. . ."

But she couldn't wait to hear the rest. Wade was afraid she would lose the child in the rain and the darkness. "Hannah!" she yelled, running after the girl. "Stop!" But the child just ran faster.

Wade followed her through the relentless rain, guided by an occasional glimpse of her white nightgown. Hannah left the street and ran into a wild, overgrown orchard. Sharp thorns tore at Wade's clothes and hair as she fought her way through the heavy brush. She caught another glimpse of the child as she darted around a tree, but Wade tripped before she could catch her.

"Hannah! Hannah, please come back," Wade called out, trying to catch her breath. "We have to get back to the house before the killer finds us!" Through the falling curtain of rain she saw a white figure slowly emerge.

"Oh sweetie!" Wade's voice shook with relief. "Thank goodness you're all right." She reached out and took the child's hand. It was as cold as the dead, bony hand in her dream. "Hannah, you're freezing. Come on. Let's get back to the house."

The child looked beyond Wade and a horrified expression distorted her face. "The monster's here!" she screamed. "The

monster that got my mommy."

Wade spun around, expecting the worse. But she couldn't see through the darkness and the falling rain. "Hannah? What did you see? I don't . . ." There was a bright flashing light in her head and Wade fell face down in a deep puddle. She felt a weight on her back and a hand shoving her face into the mud. Wade struggled against the cold fingers, but she was desperately weak. Rough hands turned her over and she saw the flash of a knife. The blade was long and cruel and Wade knew she was about to die.

"Wade! Where are you?" It was the Professor pushing through the thick brush,

stumbling and cursing.

A bolt of lightning suddenly exploded across the black sky and, in the flash of near daylight brightness, Wade saw her attacker. The head was turned toward the approaching Professor, but Wade saw her long blond hair.

"Professor!" Wade screamed. "Over here! Hurry!"

"No! . . . A voice cried out above Wade, the weight lifted and the attacker ran off into the darkness.

The Professor knelt by Wade's side. "Are you all right, Miss Welles?" He carefully

helped her up out of the mud.

She looked around for Hannah, but the child was gone. Wade held her throbbing head, trying to figure out what had happened but pain slowed her thinking. "Professor, I'm not sure but I think it was Hannah who attacked me."

"I know it's hard to accept, Wade. But evil can take many forms." He took her arm. "Can you walk? We must get back to the others."

She nodded. "Just hold onto me."

They stumbled out of the orchard and back down the street.

"What I was trying to tell you, before you ran off, is that the deadbolt was unlocked from the inside." The Professor looked down at her, rain dripping off his beard. "The attack on Mr. Brown came from within the house."

"Hannah?" Wade asked quietly.

"Who else is there, Miss Welles?"

They walked for a moment in silence. "What about the monster Hannah said followed her through the vortex?" Wade asked, her teeth chattering from nerves and the cold rain.

"Was it a monster who held that knife against your throat, or was it the child?"

Wade remembered the long blond hair.
"It's all been a lie, hasn't it."

She looked up the Professor. "Why didn't I see it before? The knife, the blood on her hands, those poor dead animals, the invisible monster at the window; it seems so obvious now. How could I have been so blind? And now Rembrandt's hurt."

"Don't blame yourself, Wade. I only put it together when I saw the unlocked front door."

The fog in her head was beginning to clear

by the time they reached the house. Wade saw the flickering light of candles through the open doorway and she ran up the front steps into the house.

"Rembrandt, please wake up. Come on, buddy." The sound of Quinn's voice left her weak with relief. She saw Rembrandt lying on the sofa, his eyes closed, blood on his face. Quinn knelt beside him, holding a cloth against the wound.

"Quinn!" Wade cried. "You're not going to believe what just happened." The Professor came in behind her and Quinn turned an anxious face their way.

"Thank God you're both all right!" he said

with relief.

"Quinn," Wade said, "about Hannah . . ."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about Hannah. She managed to find her way back by herself."

Hannah stepped out of the dark shadows into the candle's flickering light. She stopped beside Quinn and rested a hand on his shoulder. The other remained hidden behind her body and Wade remembered the knife with its cruel, curved blade.

Quinn had turned back to Rembrandt. "I'm really getting worried about Remmy."

He hasn't woken up yet."

The Professor took a hesitant step forward. "Quinn . . . Quinn, you must listen to me very carefully. You must move away from the child. . . now."

"What are you talking about, Professor?"

"Quinn," the Professor spoke very slowly and carefully. "Hannah is the killer. She's the one that struck Mr. Brown."

"Professor!" Quinn laughed. "Why would you say something like that? Hannah couldn't hurt anyone. She's just a child."

"Mr. Mallory," the Professor's voice

became hard. "Psychopaths start out as children; sick, cruel, twisted children."

Quinn looked at the little girl. She laid her head on his shoulder and began sobbing.

"Quinn." The Professor tried again. "Hannah very nearly killed Miss Welles, just minutes ago. If I hadn't arrived in time, Wade would be dead now."

"It's true," Wade said. "She had a knife and was ready to use it."

The child's sobs grew louder, bitter tears streamed down her round cheeks. "Please, Quinn," she cried. "It was the monster . . . the monster was chasing me. It was the

monster that got my mommy." She looked up at Wade with an innocent face. "I . . . I didn't hurt you, Wade. It was the monster." She looked back at Quinn, a big tear rolled down her cheek. "Please, Quinn. Please don't be mad at me."

"It's all right, sweetheart." Quinn put his arms around her. "It's just a big misunderstanding, that's all."

"The monster that got my mommy is here," she sobbed. "You have to listen to me. You have to stop it."

"Stop blaming everything on some kind of monster!" Wade shouted. "Admit it, Hannah. You killed your mom and dad."

"No! My mommy isn't dead!" she screamed. "The monster got her. The monster must be inside her, just like in those scary movies. The monster made her kill my daddy!"

The front door slammed shut behind them and they spun around. A small, blond-headed woman stood leaning against the door. She had a gun in one hand pointed at them, and by her side was a long bladed knife.

"Hello, everyone," the woman said pleasantly. Then she smiled, and her mask fell away. A malignant, black soul twisted in the depths of her eyes. "Please allow me

to introduce myself. . . I'm the monster."

"Who. . . who are you?" Wade stuttered, her eyes on the familiar looking knife.

"Now I was sure you would remember me." The woman held the knife up and admired the long, sharp edge. "We met just a few minutes ago." Water dripped off The Ends of her long hair and her clothes were wet and muddy. She looked at Wade over the tip of the knife with cold, lifeless eyes. "Don't you remember?"

Wade instinctively reached for her throat.

The woman threw her head back and laughed. "That's right, girlie. I almost had you. But the fat man interrupted our fun."

"Mommy!" Hannah screamed. "Please monster, let my mommy go. Please . . ."

"Oh, Hannah. Stop saying that. There is no monster."

"Madam," the Professor said sternly. "Put your weapons down before someone gets hurt."

The woman laughed again. "Before someone gets hurt! Oh God, that's funny. We certainly wouldn't want someone to get hurt, now would we."

"She's going to kill us," the little girl said, her voice flat and hopeless. "Just like she killed my daddy."

"Hannah, now there you go, spoiling the surprise again." The woman sighed. "I had wanted to take my time with your new friends. Do them one at a time while they slept. But noooo . . . You had to go and wake everyone up with that damn singing." She looked at the girl with her hard eyes. "Come here, Hannah. Come to mommy."

"Hannah, stay away from her!" Quinn took a step toward the child and the gun swung his way.

"Careful there, handsome." The woman said, looking Quinn over. "I've already killed you once. I'd hate to have to do it again." She looked back at the child. "Hannah, come here."

"No. . . no more," the child cried. She sank to her knees, resting her head on the sofa beside Rembrandt, sobs shaking her small body.

"God! I hate that brat." The woman leaned back against the door and crossed her ankles causally. "She's always spoiling my plans. You know, I *had* to get married," she said conversationally. "It's because of her I was married to that fat slob all these years."

Her smile was hard and cold. "But not anymore. I finally took care of business."

Wade watched her swing the knife and it sliced through the air effortlessly. Had it sliced through her husband's flesh as easily, she wondered.

"I would have taken care of the brat too," the woman continued, "but she ran from me and. . ."

"Madam, you really should. . . " The Professor took a hesitant step toward her.

"Shut-up!" She pointed the gun toward Arturo's belly. "Did I say you could speak? If you interrupt me again, I'll kill you. Do.

. . you . . . understand?" She spoke as if to a small child, mocking the Professor.

He stepped back.

"That's a good boy. Anyway, as I was saying, the brat ran from me and I followed her into that big blue hole. She was gone by the time I landed in this god forsaken place. I had almost given up finding her, then I saw you all in the park." The woman smiled, coldly. "Now Hannah and I are reunited at last."

"Were you . . ." Wade's voice caught. "Did you kill those animals?"

"Yep. Just my little way of saying; welcome

to this wonderful world where everything is free for the taking." She looked at the gun in her hand. "I picked this little baby up as soon as I arrived. Do you like it?"

Wade nodded mutely.

The woman looked at Quinn and smiled. "It was a good idea boarding up the windows. You just forgot one little thing, cutie. You didn't search the house first. I've been hiding in the basement, just waiting for the night, so I could come up and play."

Wade felt her skin crawl. The woman had been watching them, listening and waiting for an opportunity to use her knife.

"Why?" Wade stammered. "Why do you kill?"

The woman rested her head back against the wall and gazed at the ceiling. "Why do I kill . . . That's an interesting question, girlie." She tapped the flat of the blade against her cheek. "Killing makes me feel good . . . real good. When the warm blood flows in my hands, I feel alive." She closed her eyes for a moment. "The fear, the look in their eyes as death comes; there's nothing like it."

"You *are* a monster," Wade said.

The woman tilted her head, looking at Wade. "Could be." She pushed herself off

the wall. "Now, who wants to go first?" She looked at the three of them, considering her choices. "You know, I hate to leave a job unfinished." She swung the gun toward Wade. "Come here, girlie."

Quinn reached out and pulled Wade to his side, protectively. "Wait a minute, Mrs. . . ."

The terrible smile crossed the woman's face again. "You might as well call me Katie. There's no need for us to be so formal. After all, I am getting ready to kill you."

Quinn hesitated, then swallowed. "Look, Katie . . . If you don't hurt anyone, I'll make you a deal."

The woman snorted. "What do you have I would want?"

Quinn pulled the timer out of his pocket. "A way off this world."

The woman stared at the timer. "What is that thing?"

"It opens the wormhole that carries us to other worlds," Quinn said. "You could come with us."

"Mr. Mallory." The Professor shook his head. "We can't take this woman to the next world. We would be morally responsible for all the people she would kill

there."

"I told you to shut up!" Katie raged. "I have had it with you, fat man." She pointed the gun at the Professor.

"No!" Quinn moved between Arturo and the gun. "No. Katie, listen to me . . . either we all slide or none of us do. That's the deal. You can't kill anyone."

The woman paused, lowering the gun slightly. "No one? Not even that pompous wind-bag. God, I would love to pop him."

"No one." Quinn looked at the timer in his hand. "We slide out of here in three hours." He watched the woman for a

moment. "That's the deal, Katie. Take it or leave it. If you don't behave yourself, you'll never get off this world."

Katie shrugged her shoulders and smiled her slow, dreadful smile. She slid down the wall and sat on the floor. Winking at them, she said. "I guess I can wait three hours. But I'm warning you, Quinn. If you cross me, you'll get to hear your girlfriend scream." She held the knife up and the blade gleamed in the candlelight.

Quinn took Wade's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze and they settled in for the wait.

"Take it easy, Remmy," Wade said, moving toward the sofa. Rembrandt was sitting up moaning, holding his head.

"That's far enough, girlie," Katie said. "Sit back down."

Wade looked at the gun pointed her way and slowly slid back down to the floor.

"What. . . what happened?" Rembrandt groaned. "I remember looking out the window and then . . ." He looked up and noticed the three of them sitting on the floor, their backs against the wall. Then Rembrandt saw the woman sitting across the room, the gun in her hand. "Who's

she?"

"This is Katie, Hannah's mother," Quinn answered. "She followed Hannah through the vortex. She's the monster."

"Hi there! It's a pleasure to meet you," the woman said, waving the gun in Rembrandt's direction.

Rembrandt rubbed the back of his head. "Are you the one who hit me?"

"Yep, meant to finish the job too, but I got interrupted."

Rembrandt paused, then leaned back against the cushion. "Jeez, this just hasn't

been our slide." He noticed the child lying at the other end of the sofa. "Hannah," he called out. "Sweetheart, are you all right?"

The little girl didn't move.

"Oh, now don't worry about her," Katie said. "Hannah's just having a little quiet time."

"Guys, what's going on here?" Rembrandt asked, looking away from the woman.

"She was going to kill us, Remmy," Quinn explained. "But I made a deal with her. In return for not hurting anyone, I agreed to let her slide with us." His jaw tightened. "I made a deal with the devil."

Katie raised an eyebrow. "The devil? Why thank you, cutie. You're such a sweet talker."

Quinn looked at the timer in his hand. "All right, it's almost time. Let's get ready."

"Oh goodie!" Katie jumped to her feet. "I'm going to have so much fun on the next world. I can hardly wait."

Quinn gave her a sour look. "I have a feeling I'm going to regret this," he said, pointing the timer. The blue vortex opened before them and blue swirling light filled the room.

"Oh yeah, I'm going to have so much fun." The woman stared into the vortex and its wind swirled her long hair across her face. She turned away from the mesmerizing blue hole and looked at them with her cold, empty gaze. "It's just a real shame you won't be joining me." She pointed the gun at them and shook her head. "You didn't really think I was going to let you leave this world. Now did you?"

"Look Katie. The vortex is only open for one minute," Quinn said, nudging Wade toward the wormhole. "You don't have time to kill us. You have to slide now!"

"I only have a minute? Then I guess I better get busy." She smiled and aimed the

gun at Quinn. "Don't worry," Katie said, "You won't feel a thing."

"Professor, Rembrandt get down!" Quinn shouted.

He shoved Wade toward vortex as the deafening blast of a gunshot filled the room. Wade spun around, her heart beating painfully in her chest. But to her surprise, it wasn't Quinn who fell to the floor.

"You bitch!" the woman screamed. She clutched her leg and bright red blood oozed around her fingers. Katie scrambled for her fallen gun, reaching with a bloody hand, but the Professor kicked it out of her

reach. She rolled over and glared up at her daughter. A fire burned in her eyes. "I can't believe you would shoot me. . . your own mother!"

Wade looked over her shoulder and saw Hannah standing by the sofa, a gun in her small hand. She stared at it, her eyes shiny with unshed tears. The little girl shook her head slowly.

"No more killing, Mommy," she said and the tears spilled from her eyes. "Please. . . no more."

"That gun!" Rembrandt searched his pockets. "That's the gun I found yesterday," he said. "Hannah must have

taken it while I was knocked out!"

"Professor!" Quinn shouted. "Grab Rembrandt and slide. . . now!" He turned to Wade. "Quick, grab Hannah. We're running out of time!"

Wade pulled the gun out of the child's shaking hand as the Professor helped Rembrandt off the sofa. Wade watched them run into the wormhole and disappear.

"Mommy!" Hannah cried, her arms reaching out. "Mommy! "

"I'm sorry, sweetie," Wade said, picking the child up. "But it's time to leave."

"No! I want to stay here with mommy," the child screamed.

Wade ignored the child's cries. She turned and threw Hannah into the vortex. Then she looked back at the fallen woman.

"Quinn. . ." Katie reached for him. "Please help me, Quinn. Please. . ." She began dragged herself toward the wormhole, leaving behind a trail of bright red blood. "Please! I. . . I was just kidding. I wasn't going to hurt anyone. Please help me. . . "

Quinn instinctively moved toward her. But then he paused . . . then he turned away. Wade met his eyes and the terrible decision

was made. She took him by the hand and together they jumped into the vortex.

The woman's scream followed them into the next world.

Please, just give me a minute. . . Sorry about that. I'm really surprised I got so upset just then. I hadn't realized before how deeply everything has affected me. Look, Sarah, thanks so much for hearing me out. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your time and patience. Yeah, I do feel much better. . . it's like a weight's been lifted. You were right. Finding someone to listen has really helped.

It's just that I've been feeling so guilty about the way I treated Hannah; for accusing her of being the killer. How could I have thought that of her? It just seemed so obvious at the time. The Professor feels just as bad as I do. In fact, he's the one who thought of looking up Quinn's double.

You see, we spent the first couple days on this world trying to figure out what to do with Hannah, the poor kid. All she wanted to do was cling to Quinn and cry for her mom. We only had a week in this world and hated the idea of abandoning her with strangers. So we went and introduced ourselves to Quinn's double.

It turns out the Quinn and Wade of this

world are married and they used to be sliders themselves. Our doubles gave up sliding after they were nearly killed on the last world they visited. We explained about Hannah and told them what had happened. Our doubles felt sorry for the little girl and said they would be happy to look out for her. I think she'll be happy with them. I just hope familiar faces will be a comfort to her and that time will help Hannah get over what happened. I hope I can get over it too.

You see, just as we jumped in the vortex, I took a last look at Katie. I'll never forget what I saw. You know, even monsters can know fear. As she watched Quinn and I disappear, Katie knew she was going to spend the rest of her life alone. . . alone and

abandoned. I almost felt sorry for her, but she really left us no choice. How many innocent people would have died on this world because of her? No, we did the right thing, the only thing. We left Katie where fate had stranded her; on a world as cold and empty as she was.

The End