

# SLIDERS

## Reboot

by Nigel G. Mitchell

***A cyberpunk thriller featuring  
Quinn, Wade, Rembrandt, Arturo and Maggie***

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*This story is part of the Infinite Slides project, a series of post-Season 3 stories in which an Arturo double joined Quinn, Wade, Rembrandt and Maggie as a fifth slider.*

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A room painted all in white, as cold and antiseptic as a block of ice. This was where a man sat, dressed in a white jumpsuit, at a small computer terminal. He typed on the keyboard in front of him and clicked the mouse, working furiously as sweat ran down his face. The text and graphics scrolling across the screen were reflected on the lenses of his glasses.

The man glanced over his shoulder and the single door behind him that marked the only exit. Then he whispered, "Okay, Masquerade, I'm in."

The inside of his glasses had an image projected onto it, one of a man's head silhouetted against a bright light which

veiled it in shadow. The man spoke with a voice that was too deep and rich in timbre to be anything but artificially- enhanced.

"Very good," Masquerade said. "Now insert the disk. The program will encrypt itself onto it automatically."

The man in the glasses pulled a disk out of his jumpsuit and slid it into a slot beside the screen. There was a hum and a click and the disk was ejected into his hand again.

The man couldn't hold back a smile as he said, "It's done."

"Good," the shadowy man on his lenses

said. "Now get out."

The man stood and began to walk quickly away from the terminal. The door opened automatically on his approach. The man walked out of it into a white corridor.

The corridor erupted in sirens. Red lights flashed on the ceiling. The man broke into a furious run.

"I thought you were taking care of that!" he yelled as he moved.

"I did," Masquerade said into his ear-piece. "If I hadn't tripped the alarms, the emergency lockdown systems wouldn't have been activated. Don't worry, I'll get

you out. Turn left here."

The man turned down a corridor, skidding on the white tiled floor. As he ran, he found himself approaching a huge metal door that was sliding down into his path.

"I'm not gonna make it!" the man yelled.

Masquerade spoke softly. "Calm down. I told you, it's under control."

The door suddenly jerked to a halt two feet off the ground. The running man dropped to his stomach and slid underneath it. Once he was through, he could hear the footsteps of the guards pounding after him. But the door came alive again to slam

down onto the floor, cutting off the guards who began to pound on it.

The man looked back at the door, gasping for breath as he whispered, "How did you do that?"

"The same way I did this," Masquerade said.

Behind him, a window clicked and swung open into the night. The man ran towards it and began to climb out of the building.

"I control the emergency lockdown systems," Masquerade said in his deep voice. "I'll use them to keep you from getting caught while you make your

escape."

\* \* \*

In a darkened room, the only light came from a wall of screens that flickered and danced with lines of text and graphics. Seated in front of the wall was a large armchair set before a row of keyboards. The sound of fingers clicking on keys filled the air, mingling with the beeps and hums of the computer systems.

One of the screens was showing the perspective of the escaping man. It was a wavering view of the wall, then swung away to show a spacious lawn that began to wobble as the owner of the camera ran.



From within the depths of the chair, a soft voice spoke. "Always remember, Mr. Stanford, that I control the Internet. And in our time, the man who controls the Internet...controls the world..."

\* \* \*

The statue of Abraham Lincoln stood boldly in Golden Gate Park, its left arm raised in a wave. At its base, Rembrandt, Arturo, waited, scanning the lush surroundings with their gaze.

"They're late," Quinn said. "We don't have much time before the slide."

Arturo paced back and forth in front of the statue, his hands clasped behind his back. "I assume that your Miss Welles is usually quite punctual on these slides?"

Rembrandt shaded his eyes with a hand. "Yeah, she's always been Miss Punctuality. Maggie, on the other hand... she can be pretty unpredictable."

"Unpredictable is one way of putting it," Quinn murmured. "Dunno why they needed to have a girls' night out, anyway... oh, wait, here they come."

Wade and Maggie came into view over a hill. They were running at full speed, Maggie struggling to pull on her vest as she

ran.

"What's going on?" Quinn yelled.

"What else?" Wade yelled back as they approached. "Little Miss Bimbo got us in trouble again!"

Maggie staggered to a halt near the statue, wheeled around to face Wade, and jammed a finger into her chest. "Hey, don't put all the blame on me. It wasn't my fault."

Wade leaned against the statue, gasping for breath between words. "Oh, yeah, right. So it wasn't your fault that you started a fling with a married man on this world?"

Quinn glared at Maggie, leaning over slightly. "You were having an affair?"

Maggie folded her arms. "Not an affair. I just flirted with him a little."

"And ended up taking off her shirt by the time I found her," Wade said. "If I hadn't gotten her out of his apartment in time, the guy's wife would've blown her brains out. As it is, she still came after us with a gun. I think we lost her though." Wade looked over her shoulder.

Quinn moved close to Maggie and glared down at her as he whispered, "I thought you were going to stop doing that kinda thing."

Maggie returned his glare with equal intensity as she whispered, "I told you, it wasn't my fault. I couldn't... help it."

Then she raised her voice so the others could hear her as she said, "Look, everyone just back off, okay? I needed to relax after Poison World. Just having fun."

"Well, your fun is gonna get you killed one of these days," Wade snarled. "And I just hope it doesn't take us with you."

There was a beeping in Quinn's pocket. He pulled out the timer and aimed it at an empty space. "Here we go, gang."

He pressed a button on the timer. It lanced out with a semi-transparent cone of energy that pierced empty space. With a roar of imploding air, the circular mouth of a wormhole opened. Blue light poured into its gaping maw as a blast of wind rushed out to strike the Sliders.

Quinn shielded his face with a hand as he yelled, "Let's go!"

"Ladies first," Wade yelled as she backed up and took a running leap at the wormhole. She disappeared into it in a flash of light.

"Musicians second," Rembrandt yelled and dove into the whirling portal.

"Physics professors third," Arturo roared as he plowed into the vortex.

Quinn took a few steps back as he yelled, "Guess that means military officers are fourth..."

A gunshot popped behind them. Quinn and Maggie looked back to see a woman running up from the hill, aiming a pistol at them as she screamed wildly.

"Lemme guess," Quinn said, "that's your fling's wife?"

"Yeah, she found me," Maggie said. "This slide didn't come a moment too soon."

She backed up and ran towards the wormhole. But as she neared it, another gunshot rang out. Maggie gasped and clutched at the back of her leg. Her run became an unsteady stagger. Maggie lost her balance next to the statue of Abraham Lincoln. Maggie fell.

Her head struck against the marble base of the statue. She grunted and collapsed, rolling off onto the grass.

"Maggie!" Quinn yelled and ran to her.

He lifted her into his arms. She only lay there, limp, her arms and legs sprawling. Above her closed eyes, a trickle of blood



began to run from her scalp.

Quinn looked up at the woman running towards them, her gun aimed for another shot. He swept Maggie into his arms and ran for the wormhole. As another bullet whizzed through the air, the two of them vanished with a flash of light.

\* \* \*

The wormhole twisted and writhed through hyperspace, a river of light and colors. Then a new light approached, a light that grew brighter and brighter...

\* \* \*

The wormhole opened with a howl. Wade came flying out, screaming, to land on the soft grass of the park. The minute she landed, she scrambled aside. She was in time to avoid Rembrandt, who landed and rolled on his back. Rembrandt grunted and staggered out of the path of the wormhole as Arturo exploded out of the wormhole to land on his back with a loud thump.

Arturo groaned and sat up, nursing his back. "I swear, I shall never get used to this..."

Wade cupped her hands over her mouth. "Look out, Max, the others are on their way!"

"Oh, blast!" Arturo yelled as he rolled onto his hands and knees and hurried aside.

Quinn came flying out of the wormhole. He turned in midair to land on his back, cushioning Maggie's landing with his own body. He lay there with her on top of him, gasping for breath. The wormhole softly closed above him with a whisper.

Arturo braced a hand on a knee and eased himself into a standing position. "I must thank you for that, Miss Welles. I'm still not used to sliding with more than two people."

Wade got to her feet, hunched over slightly from exhaustion. "Give it time. You'll get

used to it."

Rembrandt looked around himself. "Sure is quiet in this city."

"Yes," Arturo said, then looked up at the Abraham Lincoln statue nearby. "And I shall avoid stating the cliché about it being too quiet. I say...I don't recall the Great Emancipator using a computer."

Rembrandt followed his gaze up to the statue of Lincoln, which was now seated in a chair, his hands hovering over the keyboard of a laptop computer.

Rembrandt chuckled. "Looks like this world decided to rewrite history. What you

make of that, Q..."

He looked down at Quinn, who had Maggie cradled in his lap. He was brushing back her hair. As he did, the huge bleeding gash on her scalp became clearly visible.

Rembrandt's smile disappeared. "What happened to Maggie?"

"That lady caught up with her," Quinn murmured. "Shot her in the leg, she tripped...knocked her head on the Lincoln statue."

Wade shook her head as she folded her arms. "I told her she'd get herself in trouble one of these days."

Quinn shot her a fierce look. "This is serious, Wade. She's out cold, she could be hurt bad. We've gotta get her to a hospital."

Wade blinked. "Hey, Quinn, I didn't mean to be..."

"I know, I know. Sorry." Quinn got up, supporting Maggie's back and legs in his arms. "Come on, let's go find a phone."

He charged off across the park with Maggie while Arturo hurried after him. Wade exchanged a concerned look with Rembrandt, then followed.

\* \* \*

The five of them walked through the San Francisco streets with the same reaction. They looked up one end of the street, then down the other. The road was empty. There weren't even any cars parked along its length. The shops like Moonatic Electronics were boarded up and spray-painted "Closed." The cool winds rippled a piece of grimy paper that danced along the curb.

"What's goin' on around here?" Rembrandt asked. "Looks like the city's been evacuated."

"Yeah," Wade said. "And I don't see any

payphones around."

Arturo looked farther down the road, then gestured. "Well, this city doesn't seem to be deserted after all. Here comes someone."

He began to walk towards a man walking down the sidewalk towards them. The man's thin body was draped with a rumpled T-shirt and faded jeans. But his clothes were covered with machinery. He had a large black box strapped to one thigh, which was connected by wires to the keyboard strapped to one arm. The keyboard, in turn, trailed wires off the machine on his head.



He was walking with a slightly stumbling pace, focused not on his surroundings, but on the lenses of the large black headset covering most of his head. The lenses flickered with colors. One hand tapped furiously on the keyboard strapped to his wrist. The man kept walking as Arturo stepped into his path.

"Excuse me, my good man," Arturo said, giving him a bright smile. "My friends and I are new in town, and one of our group has suffered an injury. We were wondering..."

The man's gaze seemed to be on something past Arturo, but he still managed to turn and walk around the

professor without slowing down. He continued up the street at the same jerky pace.

Arturo's smile collapsed into a frown. "Did you see that? The blistering idiot deliberately ignored me in favor of that...gadget of his."

Wade watched the man walk off down the street, then looked at Arturo. "It looked like one of those wearable computers they were developing back on my world."

"Well, why the devil is he walking down the street with it? And why didn't he take it off and show some courtesy to a stranger? How I long to go to a world with

good manners."

"Okay, we're wasting time," Quinn said. "Let's keep going to the Lamplighter. If it's open, maybe we can find help there."

The Sliders began walking down the lonely street once again. Arturo continued to grumble with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Computers," Arturo murmured. "I have never trusted those infernal machines. Overgrown calculators robbing society of its intelligence, its skills, and its jobs. Not to mention training our children's thumbs instead of their minds."

"Yeah, we know," Rembrandt said. "You prefer slide rules, right?"

Arturo looked at him. "Why, yes, how did...oh, yes, of course. My double."

Wade kept her eyes roaming the tall, seemingly abandoned buildings surrounded them. "Well, don't knock computers, Max. They can do some pretty incredible things. Not to mention that they've saved our bacon more than a few times sliding."

"Say what you like about computers, Miss Welles. I, for one, would rather calculate Kerr's Formula For Superspatial Integrity to the level of three decimal places in my

head than set one finger on the keyboard of one of those machines."

Wade was about to say something to him when Rembrandt held up a hand. He said, "Hey, guys...I hear music."

"This way." Quinn began running faster, Maggie bouncing in his arms.

They came to the Lamplighter Bar and Grill, or at least the place where the Lamplighter had been in their world. But in this world, it bore a large sign that read "Lamplighter.Com: The CyberCafe." Tinny music could be heard from inside.

"Cybercafe?" Arturo asked. "What the

devil is a cybercafe?"

"We're about to find out." Quinn backed through the door and the others followed.

The Lamplighter was a sharp contrast to the desolation of outside. Inside, the place was bustling with activity. Men, women, and even children crowded every inch of the room. But all of them were hunched over the personal computers that were set up on every table. The music they had heard was a tinny repetitive tune that was coming from every monitor in the room.

Rembrandt spoke in a loud voice to be heard over the crowds and music. "Well, at least we know this city ain't deserted."

Quinn made his way through the crowds, trying not to jostle Maggie against anyone. He finally gave up and passed Maggie to Rembrandt, who cradled her in his arms. "You guys get a seat, I'll find a phone."

"I'll come with you." Wade followed him through the Lamplighter.

Arturo scanned the crowded room and nodded. "Excellent. Leave us with the difficult task, did they?"

Rembrandt nodded his chin towards an empty table. "There's a table. Follow me, Professor."

"I've told you to call me Max," Arturo said as he followed.

The table was by the window, giving a view of the desolate street. It also supported a computer just like all the others in Lamplighter.Com. Rembrandt slid Maggie into a seat, trying to keep her upright. Arturo sat down and slipped on his glasses.

"I say," Arturo said, "let's have a look at this thing, shall we, and see what makes it so appealing to these people?"

The computer was displaying a colorful screen with the message "Welcome To Lamplighter.Com, Your Window To The



World" in fancy text. Arturo reached over to click the mouse, and the screen disappeared, replaced by a menu.

"Email," Arturo read aloud, "World Wide Web, Newsgroups, Chat..."

Rembrandt was soaking a napkin in the glass of icewater on the table. He squeezed it out and began wiping blood off Maggie's forehead as he said, "Looks like an Internet connection."

"The Internet?" Arturo asked. "I find it hard to believe this many people would be here just to use a computer. Hello, what's this? Introduction..."

Arturo squinted at a smiley-face icon on the screen, moved the mouse's pointer to it, and clicked on it.

The screen filled with grainy, jerky footage of a man smiling. He began to speak, but his lips weren't quite synchronized with his words.

But his voice was clear as he said, "Welcome to Lamplighter.Com, an exciting new way to use the Internet. Why sit at home alone when you could be out at one of the hottest clubs around, soaking in the atmosphere as you browse the Net with T4 connections and Pentium330 MMX speed? Get hip, get cool, get Lamplighter.Com."

Arturo frowned at Rembrandt, who could only shrug back as he pressed the wet cloth to Maggie's wound.

\* \* \*

Quinn and Wade climbed up the steps to the higher platform of the Lamplighter to approach the crowded bar. It resembled the usual bars on Earth, except that in front of every stool was a laptop computer. Men and women were seated on every seat, typing away.

Wade peeked over the shoulder of a well-dressed brunette. She could see the woman at the laptop was typing in a real-time chat

program. She wrote:

FOXYLADY: Hi, NiceGuy, what do you do for a living?

Wade looked over the shoulder of the man in a slightly ruffled suit who was sitting next to her. He was typing:

NICEGUY: I'm an insurance salesman. How about you, Foxy?

Wade shook her head and looked up at Quinn. He was scanning the area behind the counter. Robotic arms were humming softly as they awkwardly took down bottles and poured drinks into glasses. But there was no human being behind the counter to

be seen.

Quinn raised a hand. "Uh, excuse me, can I get a little help here? Where's the bartender?"

A monitor on one of the shelves behind the counter lit up. It filled with the grinning face of a young black man. The video was jerky and scratchy as he spoke.

"I'm Diggs, your bartender for the evening," Diggs said, "how can I help you?"

"You're the bartender?" Wade asked.  
"Shouldn't you be... tending bar?"

"I am," Diggs said. "Who do you think's controlling these arms?"

Wade and Quinn looked at the robot arms that were shaking up a martini, then pouring it into a waiting glass.

Wade glanced up at Quinn as she said, "Oh, you telecommute."

"Who doesn't?" Diggs said, then leaned closer to the camera. "Now how can I help you?"

"We need an ambulance," Quinn said. "Fast. Where can we find a payphone?"

Diggs blinked, then gave off a quick laugh

that his face matched a few seconds later. "A payphone? Man, I ain't seen one o' those outside of a museum in six years. If it's a real emergency, why don't you just go to 911.Com? Now if you'll excuse me, I got other customers."

The screen went blank, and another screen on the other end of the bar lit up with Diggs' face. He began joking with another customer as he poured beer with his thin metal arms.

"No phones?" Quinn asked.

Wade nodded towards an empty stool with a computer in front of it. "Come on, I think I know what he's talking about."

Wade flicked on the computer and sat down on the stool in front of it. The screen lit up with the Lamplighter.Com homepage. It also brought up a message that had a menu of options listed next to it.

"It says for every five minutes we use the ISP, we need to order a drink," Wade said. "I'll just order us a beer, this shouldn't take long."

She clicked on the choices with her mouse, highlighting the "Beer" option. Quinn watched her work, then Wade stopped. He asked, "What's wrong?"



"We have to put in a credit card number," Wade said. "They don't accept cash. They sure don't make it easy to call for help in this place. Don't suppose you still have your card from home?"

Quinn reached for his wallet as he murmured, "Yeah, let's hope it works in this world."

Quinn fished his Visa card out of his wallet and Wade took it to copy down the number. A new window came up that scrolled with financial information.

Wade bit her lip, then clicked on the screen. "Okay, in this world, the credit account is registered to some guy named

Jim Reiss. And he's only got five dollars, just barely enough to pay for the beer."

"Well, I hate to steal from anyone," Quinn said, "but we don't have much choice. Charge it."

Wade clicked the "yes" button on the window and it flashed a cheerful message "Your order is being processed."

One of the thin metal arms emerged from the back of the bar to hook onto the handle of a keg. Beer flowed into a mug. The mug was lifted and placed onto the bar.

A clock appeared on the upper-left corner

of the computer screen. Wade nodded and clicked on the "WWW" icon as she said, "Okay, we've got our five minutes."

"Great," Quinn said. "Hurry up, Maggie's still out of it."

"I'm going as fast as I can, Quinn," Wade snapped.

Quinn grit his teeth in frustration and rested his hands on her shoulders. "Sorry, sorry...just a little nervous, that's all."

She clicked on the text window of the browser that came up and typed "911.Com." A new webpage sprang up headed "Welcome to 911.Com." Below it

were the words "Select the Nature of your Emergency" with a list of menu options under various headings like "Breaking and Entering" and "Fire Alert." Wade clicked on the menu for "Medical Emergency" and clicked on "Unconscious Victim." Then she clicked on the "Send Help" button.

"Okay," Wade said. "It's done. Ambulance is on its way."

"Great. About time." Quinn charged away from the bar to the table where the others were seated. Wade closed down the webpage and got off the stool to hurry after him. She stopped and went back to grab the mug of beer.

Arturo was still peering at the computer screen through his glasses while Rembrandt pressed a wet napkin to Maggie's forehead. Maggie herself was still slumped in her chair, her head resting on Rembrandt's shoulder.

Quinn approached the table and sat down in a free chair. His eyes were locked on her. "How is she? Any change?"

Rembrandt shook his head. "Not yet, Q-Ball. She's still out cold. Bleeding's stopped, though."

Arturo pulled off his glasses and turned to look at Wade. "What took you so long?"

Wade was drinking the beer, but lowered the mug to speak. "We couldn't find a phone. Diggs said there are none outside of museums. The only way to call the paramedics was through a webpage."

"Yeah, and Diggs wasn't even here," Quinn said. "He was running the bar from home with a videophone and robotic arms."

Rembrandt dabbed at Maggie's forehead as he said, "No phones, long-distance bartenders, guys runnin' around wearin' computers on their heads...what kinda freaky world is this?"

Arturo pulled off his glasses and folded them carefully. "This fits in with what I've

seen on this world so far. This is just a snap judgment, of course, but this city, perhaps even the world...its culture and technology seems to be dominated entirely by the Internet."

"The information superhighway," Wade blurted.

Arturo looked up at her. "What?"

Wade held out her hands, as if the meaning of her statement was obvious, the beer sloshing slightly in its mug. "That whole wired- up future that Bill Clinton promised a few years back. Where they predicted the Internet would take over, replace the phone and stuff. Hasn't

happened yet in our world, but maybe in this world, it did."

"An interesting hypothesis," Arturo said.  
"One which well may prove correct."

A siren wailed outside the cybercafe. They all looked out the large window at the front of the shop. A red van marked "Paramedics" pulled up in front of Lamplighter.Com. Its tires squealed as it braked.

Quinn pulled up one of Maggie's arms and wrapped it around his neck. "There they are. Let's go. Remmy, gimme a hand."

"Right." Rembrandt took Maggie's other



arm around his neck.

Between them, Quinn and Rembrandt half-carried and half-dragged Maggie unconscious through the Lamplighter. Wade hurried after them, trying to keep up as they weaved through the crowds. Arturo paused to slip one of the matchbooks from the cafe into his vest pocket, then followed.

\* \* \*

The five of them burst out of the door of Lamplighter.Com into the cold and desolate street. The paramedic van's rumbling engine was the only sound in the ever-present silence of the city.

Quinn and Rembrandt ran towards the back of the van, trying not to jostle Maggie between them. Quinn reached the pair of doors in the back and pounded on them with his fist.

"Hey," he yelled, "we need some help out here!"

The doors clicked, then swung open. The interior of the van was lined with equipment. A stretcher lay in the center of the floor. But there was no one inside.

Wade and Arturo ran up to the passenger side. Wade banged on the window with her fist, yelling, "Hey, we need some help out here!"

Then she saw through the opaque glass of the window to the driver's seat. She froze and backed away from it.

She looked at Arturo standing beside her. "There's no one driving."

A screen in the back of the paramedic van lit up with a smiling face. The image was jerky and static as the woman spoke.

"Hi," she said, "and welcome to 911.Com's emergency mobile transport unit. Please place the subject to be transported onto the stretcher, making sure to secure the straps around his or her waist, arms, and ankles. Once the patient is

secured, this vehicle will automatically drive to the nearest medical facility."

"This is nuts," Rembrandt muttered, but nodded at Quinn.

Together, they lifted Maggie higher. Between the two of them, they climbed into the van and lay Maggie flat on the stretcher. They fumbled with the belts hanging off it and snapped them onto Maggie.

Arturo stood at the back of the van, glaring into the cramped interior. "What the devil is this? Don't they have paramedics in this world?"

Wade shrugged and climbed into the back of the van. "I guess Diggs wasn't kidding. Everybody telecommutes in this world."

Rembrandt breathed heavily as he climbed in after her. "Yeah, well, if we get to the hospital and some gal on a screen tells me to put on a mask and a scalpel, I'm outta here."

The four of them settled in, trying not to jostle any of the medical equipment around them. Then the doors hissed closed. The van headed off down the streets, sirens wailing.

\* \* \*

The paramedic van howled down the empty streets and skidded around a corner to pull into the driveway of a massive hospital. It passed a large sign that read "St. Jobs Memorial Hospital. Open 24 Hours."

The van skidded to a halt in the Emergency lane and its doors flew open. Quinn climbed out, then ran to the large glass doors of the hospital.

"Hey," he yelled as he pounded on the doors, "anybody in there? We need help!"

Shadows came towards the doors, then two men came running through them. Both were dressed in white paramedic uniforms,

but also wore keyboards, headsets, and power packs of wearable computers. They charged over to the back of the van where Wade, Rembrandt, and Arturo were climbing out.

One of the paramedics held up his arm to a bar-code on the back of the van. A red light played over the bar-code, and the paramedic lowered his arm to type on it.

He gazed through the lenses of his headset as he said, "Okay, we've got a head-trauma, currently unconscious, possibly comatose. Vital signs fluctuating. We'll need medics in Trauma Room Two."

Then he climbed in and swiftly pulled a

neck brace off a shelf on the interior of the van. He snapped the brace around Maggie's neck to hold her head still.

The second paramedic climbed into the van. Together, the two dragged Maggie out on the stretcher. The wheels of the stretcher unfolded once they left the floor of the van. They clattered as they struck the ground and locked into place. The paramedics rolled the stretcher up to the hospital doors.

When the stretcher reached the doors, they slid open with a gentle hiss. Voices poured out of the inside of the hospital. It was busy with activity as people ran from one place to another. A couple helped a young



girl limp across the room. An elderly man walked with a woman of similar age who had bandages wrapped around her head.

The P.A. system blared above, saying, "Doctor Hamilton, please report to the screens in Emergency Room C on level two. Repeat, Doctor Hamilton, please report to Emergency Room C on level two."

"Finally," Quinn said, "people."

Quinn ran through the open doors into the hospital, following the paramedics who raced the stretcher down a nearby hallway. Nurses came running up to the stretcher and worked on Maggie with medical

equipment. A blood pressure cuff was wrapped around her arm, wires were taped to her chest, and then Maggie disappeared from sight in a flood of personnel. It was just a mass of people that rushed her into one of the rooms marked "Trauma Room Two."

Quinn tried to follow, but as he passed the horseshoe-shaped reception desk, a voice called out to him. Behind the counter, propped up in a chair, was a screen with a woman's face on it. The woman smiled at Quinn as he approached the desk. The image moved in the stilted uneven manner that seemed the standard for video transmissions in this world.

"I'm sorry, sir," the woman said. "Only medical personnel are allowed in the emergency room. If one of you will stay and fill out these forms..."

She pointed in the direction of a computer sitting on the desk. "Then the rest of you can wait and we'll call you when your friend's condition has stabilized."

Wade moved in front of the computer on the desk and began clicking keys. She winced as she said, "Hey, don't suppose any of you know Maggie's date of birth? Never mind, I'll just make something up. I guess we won't be on this world long enough for it to matter."

Arturo looked down the hallway again, a troubled expression on his face. "Yes. I suppose not."

Rembrandt slumped into a couch in the waiting room. "Man, I am beat."

Arturo sat next to him. "Likewise, Mr. Brown. This has been entirely too much excitement for me."

Wade smirked as she kept her eyes focused on the computer screen, then said, "Yup, Maggie Beckett strikes again."

Quinn was leaning against one wall of the waiting room, but raised his head to glare at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on, Quinn," Wade murmured, "you know exactly what I mean."

Rembrandt closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "Oh, boy, here we go..."

Quinn held up his hand and looked down at Rembrandt. "No, Rembrandt...let her talk. Let's go, Wade, out with it. What's your problem?"

Wade stopped typing and spun around to face him. She cocked one leg to stand with her hips slightly shifted to one side. "My problem is Captain Maggie Beckett. She's been nothing but trouble from day one, and I can't believe we're still hauling her

around with us now that Rickman's gone."

"Wade, you just have to give her a chance..."

Wade sneered as she said, "I gave her a chance. Lots of chances. And Maggie's blown it. She's rude, selfish, arrogant, and bossy. She chases guys like dogs chase cars. And despite all her so-called military training, she doesn't act like any soldier I've ever seen. She's just dragging us down, Quinn, and I can't understand why you put up with her." Quinn stared at her, then said, "I put up with her because we're all in this together. She's part of the team."

Wade shook her head and turned back to

the computer. "Not my team, Quinn. And she never will be."

Wade typed a few more letters, then clicked the ENTER key. "There. Paperwork's done. I'm gonna see if I can find the Dominion and get some rest. Who's with me?"

"I could certainly do with a nap." Arturo began easing himself onto his feet.

"Yeah, and somethin' to eat," Rembrandt said as he stood up and stretched.

Quinn looked down the hallway of the emergency rooms. "I'm gonna hang around here, keep an eye on Maggie. I'll

call you if anything happens."

"Suit yourself." Wade walked past him out the door of the hospital.

Arturo and Rembrandt passed Quinn, avoiding his gaze. Rembrandt gave him a pat on the shoulder as he walked by, nothing more.

When all three of them were gone, Quinn sat down in one of the leather chairs in the waiting room. He stared down at the floor as the clatter and conversation of the hospital buzzed around him.

Then Quinn cradled his face in his hands as he whispered, "Not again. Please...not



again."

\* \* \*

Arturo and Rembrandt jogged after Wade as she strode out of the hospital onto the sidewalk.

"Hey, wait up," Rembrandt breathed. "Don't you think you were a little harsh back there?"

Wade spoke without looking back or slowing down. "Nope. I was actually pretty restrained. There's a whole lot more I could say about her. About how sick I am of her put-downs, her attitude, her clothes, the way she and Quinn..."

Wade stopped and looked up and down the street. She threw up her hands. "What's a gal gotta do to get a cab in this place?"

Arturo and Rembrandt slowed to walk up alongside her. They exchanged a look, then Arturo gestured towards one end of the street. On the corner was a small glass-walled booth.

Arturo strode down the empty street towards it. "Perhaps this is the payphone we've been looking for."

Wade followed as she said, "I thought Diggs said there are no payphones left

here."

Arturo slowed as he approached the booth, finally coming to a stop. He glared into the booth's interior. "And he was apparently correct. This is not a telephone, it is another blasted computer."

Wade looked into the booth, where a keyboard and monitor were set up instead of a telephone. An AT&T sign hung above the screen, which was blinking the words "Insert 25 cents per minute of access."

Arturo bowed out of the way of the booth's entrance. "I believe this is your department once again, Miss Welles. I must admit, your familiarity with

computers will serve us well here."

Wade stepped into the booth as she said, "Yeah, I just hope I don't get carpal tunnel before we slide outta here."

Rembrandt fished around in his pocket and handed her a quarter. She slipped it into the slot by the monitor and worked quickly to bring up a city directory on the San Francisco.Com webpage that appeared. She began to operate the mouse and cycle through the menus.

\* \* \*

In their hotel room at the Dominion, Rembrandt walked out of the bathroom in

a robe, briskly drying his hair with a towel. He walked into the living room, where Arturo stood watching Wade typing on a computer set up on a table.

"Yes, \_sir,\_ " Rembrandt said, "nothin' like a hot shower to clear out the ol' brain cells. So how's the history lesson goin', guys?"

Wade kept her eyes on the screen as she said, "Not too bad. The entire Library of Congress is online, so we just browsed a few history books."

"Indeed," Arturo said, "however, since I know little about computers, I will allow Miss Welles to enlighten us."

Wade glanced over her shoulder to grin up at him, then turned back to the screen as she said, "Well, from what I can tell, the big change came in 1987. That's when the World Wide Web caught on and gave the Internet this big, major boost in popularity. But in this world, President Bush not only made that big deal about the information superhighway, he did something about it. The government sunk billions into building up this huge cable Internet infrastructure in America, and other countries followed suit."

"So the Internet's been around for a decade?" Rembrandt said. "I'd have thought the technology would be fancier."

Arturo nodded. "Well, the Internet existed for decades before the general public in our worlds became aware of it, Mr. Brown. But you're actually right, it should be more advanced here, considering the focus the Internet is given. We're not entirely sure why that is not the case.

Wade looked up at him. "The big computer technology firms like IBM and Hirohito began squabbling over standards and hardware patents in court. Their legal battles have stopped a lot of computer hardware research. That's one reason, there might be others."

Wade shook her head as she looked back at the computer. "But it's really incredible.

The Internet's replaced the telephone, movie theaters, TV, radio, everything. You can do practically everything over the Internet. Talk to each other, shop for clothes and groceries, even get married. Most jobs here allow you to telecommute. And you know, they don't fight physical wars in this world anymore? Governments attack each other's computers instead. Information warfare. The Gulf War was fought over Saddam Hussein trying to hack into the computers that controlled Kuwait's oil fields. And since the government can get instant feedback from almost everyone in America, it's now a true democracy. It's fantastic."

"Yes, it's just wonderful," Arturo growled.



"A world full of people who interact with each other through a video screen. I must say, I find this Earth highly deficient in humanity."

Wade swiveled in her chair to glare at Arturo. "Max, just because you're a technophobe, you can't look down on everybody else."

"And why not? You can't seriously believe this world has any lasting benefits. Take a look out the window at the empty streets. The Internet is breeding a race of introverts who see their environment through a glowing screen. Something I saw developing in our own Earth, I might add."

"Well, I think this place has gone a bit overboard, but they have the right idea."

Before Arturo could respond, the computer chimed and brought up a small icon of a telephone ringing on the screen. Wade clicked on it with her mouse pointer. A window popped up showing a black-and-white video image of Quinn.

Quinn's voice emerged from the computer's speakers. "Hi, guys. How's it going?"

Wade smiled. "Great. I've finally got this world's computer interface figured out. We shouldn't have any more trouble with it."

Rembrandt leaned closer to the camera mounted about the monitor. "How's Maggie?"

Quinn's expression sank. "Still no change. Doctor's say she's in a coma. She could come out of it at any time... or never."

Rembrandt closed his eyes. Arturo shook his head and turned away. Only Wade continued staring at the computer, her expression unchanged.

"How long do we have before the slide?" she asked.

"Almost a week," Quinn said. "She may

come out of it before then."

Wade stared at the screen, light flickering delicately over her grim expression. "And if she doesn't?"

Quinn's eyes were locked on the computer camera. "She will. She has to. But guys, we've got another problem. She doesn't even exist in this world, so Maggie has no insurance. And the hospital bills are gonna rack up. We have enough for the hotel room and some change, but not enough to cover Maggie's stay. If she doesn't snap out of this soon, we're gonna have to scrape up some serious cash."

Wade rolled her eyes. "Terrific."

Rembrandt rubbed his chin. "Guess we'll have to get some jobs in this world. I'll get a paper, scout the want ads."

Wade grinned and turned back to the computer. "Hey, remember where we are, Remmy. Hang on, I'll load up Jobsearch.Com."

Wade double-clicked on the Microscape Explorer icon that brought up the web browser. The others watched her type and click until a webpage of job offers scrolled down the screen.

Quinn watched from the small grainy window in a corner. "How's it going?"

Wade bit her lip, then said, "Well, it won't be as easy as I thought. All these jobs require computer skills and experience in K++ programming, which I've never even heard of. Let's see if I can narrow the search a bit...okay, only one job left. Pizza delivery person. Huh, I guess even in this world they know a pizza's not a pizza unless it's delivered to your door by a real person. One position open."

"Okay," Rembrandt said, "I'll take it. I could do with the exercise. Where do we call?"

Wade grinned. "No need. I can sign you up online."

Wade clicked and typed in data on the form that popped up, then finally leaned back. "There you go. Says to report to this address tomorrow morning."

"Okay, great," Quinn said. "I'll call if anything comes up. Later, gang."

His window disappeared.

Rembrandt yawned and headed towards one of the bedrooms. "Guess I better rest up if I'm gonna be ridin' around tomorrow. Night, guys."

"Sleep well, Mr. Brown," Arturo said, then added, "I suppose I should turn in as well."

This world's Internet obsession is grating on my nerves."

Wade grinned up at Arturo. "Oh, come on, professor. We just researched the history of this world and got a job without leaving the room. Computers aren't so bad."

"Yes, I'm sure it's very efficient for some things, but I see nothing that this so-called 'information superhighway' can offer me."

Wade smirked. "Oh, really."

She turned towards the computer and typed rapidly. "Let's see...how about I type 'quantum theory' into the search engine



and see what we get."

Arturo leaned over the table, frowning at her. "Oh, come now, Miss Welles. I don't have time to read the mindless drivel that some lifeless college student puts..."

A webpage came up on the screen. Arturo froze, his eyes scanning the page. Then he whispered, "Good heavens. That is the most startling interpretation of the structure of hyperspace that I have ever seen. What is this?"

"It's an article from an online scientific journal." Wade got up and offered the chair to Arturo. "Wanna take a look around?"

Arturo puffed his chest and glared at the chair, then reluctantly sat down. "Well...perhaps for a moment. Merely to examine this article, and then I shall return to my..."

Arturo frowned and tapped the screen. "I say, this is interesting. I've never seen a mathematical formula like this before. It says here that it is based on the Latecian model. I've never heard of such a thing, I wonder what that is."

Wade leaned over his shoulder as she said, "Well, the word's highlighted. That means it's a hyperlink. Click on it."

Arturo shot her a look, then navigated the mouse to position the pointer on the hyperlink and clicked on it. A new page came up that caused him to take a deep breath. "Extraordinary. In this world, a mathematician named Lucius Latec created a whole new form of mathematics in the early 1900s, one which can only now be applied to computing the structure of the fourth dimension in three-dimensional terms. If I could master this form, it might lead to a resolution of a quantum theory I have been trying to resolve since graduate school."

Wade grinned as she patted him on the shoulder and walked away from him. "Have fun, Max."

Arturo gave her a vague wave, but his eyes were wide and fixed on the glowing screen of the computer in front of him.

\* \* \*

Rickman fired the gun, and the bullet seemed to come out of the barrel in slow-motion. It seemed to take hours for the tiny metal projectile to cross the room, heading towards Arturo's chest. Arturo himself stood in front of Quinn, without a trace of fear, seeming almost proud as he watched death rushing towards him.

Then Arturo turned and looked at Quinn. His eyes were heavy and sad. "Why didn't

you save me, my boy? Why didn't you take the bullet instead of me?"

Quinn looked at the professor, his eyes wide with horror. "It was too fast, I tried to stop you, I really tried..."

"You didn't try hard enough. Not nearly enough. You brought me into this whole sliding mess...and because of you...I'll never see my home again."

Arturo faced the bullet again. It moved slowly into the professor's chest, almost gently. Arturo screamed as he looked down at the bullet penetrating his chest.

\* \* \*

Quinn sat up with a scream of his own. His face glistened with sweat. Then he looked down at the chair he was sitting in. He looked around himself at the empty hospital waiting room, then down at his watch.

He slumped back into his chair with a sigh. Then a voice said, "Mr. Mallory?"

Quinn looked up at a videoscreen on the wall beside him. A man was looking back at him from it. In the background behind him was the interior of a living room and a kitchen.

The small camera lens beside the screen

pointed itself at Quinn with a soft hum.  
"Are you all right, Mr. Mallory?"

Quinn rubbed his cheek. "Yeah...yeah, I'm okay. Just had a nightmare, that's all."

The man nodded. "Well, I'm Doctor Ross Kelley. You're here for a Captain Margaret Beckett, correct?"

Quinn sat up higher. "Yeah. Is something wrong?"

Quinn could hear Dr. Kelley flip through some papers off-camera. "Well...that's what I'd like to talk to you about. You see, Miss Beckett regained consciousness a few minutes ago."

Quinn broke into a smile. "Really? That's great."

Kelley looked up at him. "Yes...but I've been monitoring Miss Beckett from home, and I ordered a few CAT scans while she was unconscious. I discovered something very unusual. Let me show you..."

Kelley turned offscreen. Quinn heard the clicking of keys. Then the doctor's face winked off, replaced by a three-dimensional computer-generated graphic of a human brain. It was spotted and streaked with various shades of red, blue, and green. It turned slowly on an axis.



Kelley's voice returned. "What you're seeing here is a model of Beckett's brain, taken shortly after she arrived. Now, notice the various colors. They show areas of cerebral activity. But notice this dark area here..."

The model turned until the right side of the brain was visible. A large portion of it wasn't colored at all, but was only a midnight black.

"As you can see, a vast area of Miss Beckett's brain was entirely inactive. I can't guess as to how that could happen, but what's even more strange is the results of the other scans I ordered in the course of the next few hours. Watch."

The brain flickered, replaced by another model. This one had the same black area, but it was noticeably smaller. Then the brain flickered again, and the area shrank again, surrounded by reds. Then the brain flickered once more. The black portion was only a few centimeters wide. Then the flicker came once more, and the portion was alive with swirling colors.

Kelley reappeared on the screen, looking gravely at Quinn. "As you can see, the inactive portion of her brain is now fully active."

Quinn stared at Kelley, his eyes narrowed. "How could that happen?"

"Well, if I were to hazard a guess, I would say that the head injury Miss Beckett suffered must have somehow reactivated the dead area of her brain. I've never seen anything like it."

"Any idea what could have caused her head to get like that in the first place?"

Kelley sighed. "Well...no. It might have been a stroke, but to affect such a large area suddenly should have killed her. I suspect it must have been some external factor that caused this sort of damage. I'm actually looking forward to questioning Miss Beckett about this, but thought you would want to talk to her first. I'd also like

an explanation of this..."

Kelley tapped keys, bringing up an X-ray that obviously a side view of a human skull and spine. An arrow appeared and moved to a dark spot on the vertebrae. "This right here...it looks like a puncture wound, like something was inserted into the back of her neck. Most likely a needle of some kind."

Quinn's face collapsed. He stared at the image for a few seconds, then said, "Yeah. Yeah...it looks that way, doesn't it? I'd like to talk to Maggie about it."

"No problem. I'll print you out a copy of the scans. She's in recovery room 324."

Kelley looked at something off-camera and Quinn could hear the clicking of a mouse button. A few seconds later, glossy sheets of paper hummed out of a slot with the brain-scan photos. Quinn pulled them out, nodded thanks, and jogged down the corridor to Maggie's room.

\* \* \*

The lights of the hospital room had been turned off, leaving it shrouded in darkness. A ray of light broke through as Quinn pushed open the door. He slipped his head through the open doorway and peered inside.

There was a soft whispery sound filling the room, barely audible. It was only when Quinn heard a sharp inhalation of breath, followed by the sound again that he realized it was the sound of someone crying.

Following the shadowy contours of the bed, a single shaft of moonlight fell through the window. It landed on a figure sitting hunched-over in the bed, brown hair falling to cover the face. The rounded shoulders trembled as tears fell onto the bed with gentle taps.

Quinn leaned farther into the room, carrying the brain scan pictures in one hand. "Maggie? Is that you?"

Maggie looked up suddenly. Her brown hair fell away to reveal her face in the bluish light. Beneath the bandage wrapped around her head, her eyes were red and swollen. The cheeks below them glistened in the dim light. Her mouth was trembling and curved downwards in an expression of terror.

"Mallory," she choked, "get out of here, don't look at me..."

Quinn stepped further into the room, silhouetted against the door. "Beckett? What's wrong?"

Maggie screamed, her fingers curling until

they resembled claws. "I said get out here! Leave me alone!"

Then she collapsed into heaving sobs. Maggie clutched her face as tears trickled down her fingers. "Oh...oh my g...what's happening to me...I can't stop...can't stop thinking..."

Quinn reached over to a switch and snapped on the lights in the room. Maggie flinched, but settled back into her tearful misery. Quinn approached the bed slowly until he stood at the end, looking down at her.

"What's wrong, Maggie?" he asked. "What can't you stop thinking about?"



Maggie shuddered for a moment, then slowly raised her eyes to look up at Quinn. "I can't stop thinking...about my husband. David. He...he was so brilliant. And good to me...and so kind...even when I ignored him...to concentrate on my career... and he took me back...when I asked him to. And...and how he used to kiss me...right here..."

She touched the side of her neck with a finger. "And...and now...he's de-de-dead...Rickman killed him...in cold blood. For...nothing." She hunched over, sobbing again, her entire body heaving.

Quinn sat on the edge of the bed. "I know,

it's gotta be tough. You're just facing it now..."

Maggie whipped her head up to look at Quinn. She grabbed his arm, clutching it so tightly that Quinn winced in pain.

"But it's not just him," Maggie said. "It's...it's my house. I had a house on my world. Steven and I had a house in San Francisco, we...we spent years paying the mortgage, fixing it up, making it just right. And we'd just installed a nursery...for...anything that might come along. And now it's gone."

Maggie's eyes were fierce, studying Quinn's face with an urgency he had never

seen before. "It's...gone. Along with my barracks...my base...my friends...my family...my country. Other countries, too. England, South America, Switzerland... Paris..."

Her eyes softened, turning distant. "I always wanted to go back to Paris. I was stationed there in '92. The countryside was so beautiful, Quinn...so...beautiful."

Quinn gently tried to peel her fingers off his arm. "It's okay. We can go to Paris on the next world where we have time..."

Maggie gripped his forearm even harder. "But it won't be my Paris, Quinn. It'll have...I dunno...a Hitler statue where the

Eiffel Tower is supposed to be or they'll...speak Esperanto or there'll be a...Burger King where my favorite cafe is supposed to be. Or maybe, just maybe, we'll find a world where Paris is exactly the same as it was in my world."

Maggie shook her head. "But it won't be my Paris. It'll never be my Paris. Because my Paris is gone. My whole planet is gone."

Maggie's eyes softened and sparkled with tears. Her voice cracked. "Everything I ever had is gone...and I'm never getting it back. And one day...you'll get home. But no matter how long I slide, I'll never get home. Because my home is

gone...forever..."

She hunched over and tears flowed down her face again as she gave off choked sobs.

Quinn rested his hand on hers, pressing his palm against it. "Maggie, what happened to you? Why is this all hitting you now?"

Maggie sniffed and looked up at him with wide eyes. "I...I don't know. I mean...I woke up. And I was in this hospital... and the nurse on the screen explained how I hit my head and went into a coma, but...what really hit me was everything I'd lost. And I don't know why it's affecting me so much now...but I also wonder why it never did before."

Maggie blinked and looked around the hospital room. She sniffled and wiped off her cheeks with the backs of her hands. "Where are we, anyway? What kind of world is this?"

"It's run by the Internet. It's all over the place. No phones, no TVs, just computers and modems."

Maggie sniffed again as she sat up straighter. "Great. A world full of nerds. What's the status report? Any snafus?"

Quinn blinked. "Any what?"

"Casualties," Maggie repeated. "Are any

members of our team injured? Have we established a base of operations for this world? What's our ETD? Come on, Mallory, gimme a status report."

Quinn looked down at the papers in his hands. "Uh, well...no injuries except for you. The others are staying at the Dominion, and we slide in a few days, almost a week."

"Terrific. Well, I hope you've set up some sort of defense plan. No telling what we're gonna face on this world." Maggie leaned forward, then winced and clutched her temple. "Ow. It feels like there's a boulder in my brain and it's rolling around my skull."

Maggie blinked and frowned deeper. "That's funny. I... I suddenly...I suddenly remember...training. Yeah...the training I got in the Marines."

"What's so funny about that?"

"That's the thing...I just realized that...I didn't remember it before. It's...it's like there was this wall in my mind I didn't even know I had, and now it's gone, and my memories are just flooding out."

Maggie leaned towards Quinn.

"Mallory...what's happening to me?"

Quinn stared into her eyes and saw the fear and confusion within them. Emotions that



were on his own face as well. "I'm not sure, Maggie. But I think it has something to do with this."

Quinn held up the time-lapsed pictures of Maggie's brain, the multi-colored images glinting with reflected light.

Maggie looked down at the computer-generated images on the sheets of paper Quinn held. "What are those?"

Quinn began to shuffle through them. "CAT scans. The doctor took them while you were out. They show your brain activity since you arrived until now."

Maggie watched Quinn arrange the

pictures on the bed. "I don't get it."

"It's just a theory. Look here." Quinn pointed at one page that showed her brain with a large dark area. "This is how it looked when you came in. The dark area means no brainwave activity. Now..."

Quinn moved his finger to the next, following a path across them. "See how the dark area gets smaller and smaller? The doctor said that's been happening ever since you hit your head. And now...the area is completely active again." Quinn tapped the last image.

Maggie slowly slid a hand up her face and through her hair. "You mean...there was a

part of my brain that wasn't working?"

"Exactly. And now it is. That might be why you're getting memories back."

Maggie rubbed the side of her head as she continued to stare at the pictures. "But...how could that happen?"

Quinn watched Maggie carefully as he laid the last of the pages down on the bed for her to see. "That's...what I hope you can answer. See this?"

It was the X-ray of her spine. He pointed at the small puncture wound. "The doctor said it looks like a needle was inserted into the back of your neck and punctured your

spine. Now, who do we know who stuck needles into the back of people's necks?"

Maggie's eyes rose up slowly from the X-ray until they locked onto Quinn's. Her confusion was burned away, replaced by searing anger as she snarled, "Rickman."

"Exactly. He might have had something to do with this. But... I'm not sure." Quinn rubbed his chin and stared at the floor. "I can't remember a time on this whole slide when he might have had a chance to stick you. Can you?"

Maggie lowered her eyes down to the X-ray again. "No. But...there was a time...before the slide."

Quinn looked up at her. "What?"

Maggie sat up a little higher on the bed, then winced and closed her eyes. After a moment, she took a deep breath, then said, "It was a year after I first joined Rickman's team at the base. We did all sorts of things there, it was one of the largest research and development centers for the government. The sliding machine was just one of hundreds of areas of technology we worked on over the years. So when Rickman started his own project...I didn't think anything of it. Figured it was just one of those things."

Quinn watched her closely as he asked,

"What was the project?"

Maggie opened her eyes and looked at him under her brow. "He never told us, said it was top secret. But he set up shop in the largest lab on the base, called in the biggest names in neurology and botany, and spent all his time in there."

"Neurology and botany," Quinn murmured, then looked up at her again. "Sciences of the brain. And plants."

"Exactly. Now that I think about it, that must have been when Rickman was working on a cure for his brain fungus. He was using the resources of the base to do it."

"So where do you come in?"

Maggie leaned back in the bed and closed her eyes. "Well, I was just a young recruit back then. Just joined the intelligence division, eager to please and make my mark. One day, Rickman put out word that he wanted volunteers to draw samples of spinal fluid for the project. I thought it was a good opportunity to show I had team spirit, so I... volunteered."

Maggie turned her head to look towards the window. And in the panes of glass, light reflected back at them, forming shapes. Shapes that seemed to take on a form. As she spoke, Quinn imagined that

he could see what she described within it.

A younger version of Maggie, smartly-dressed, walking through a laboratory filled with complex equipment. And human brains. Everywhere, bubbling tanks within which floated disembodied, lumpy pink brains. Some had wires trailing out of them. Others glowed softly. And men in white lab coats studied them and instruments connected to them.

"When I arrived at the lab," Maggie said, "I was surprised to see that I was the only volunteer. And a little glad. Figured this way, Rickman would notice me. And he did."



Quinn could see Maggie walking up to a man who turned to show the grim, stony face of Colonel Angus Rickman. Rickman glared at Maggie, his steely eyes roaming her like a lion studying a gazelle.

"I expected one of the scientists to draw the fluid," Maggie continued, "but Rickman did it himself...said he didn't trust the others to handle something that... delicate..."

Quinn imagined Maggie and Rickman walking up to a table loaded with chemical equipment. Rickman picked up a syringe and motioned for Maggie, who spun on her heel so that she was facing away from him.

Maggie's voice cracked as she said, "I felt the injection. It was...painful...more than I expected. I thought he was drawing out fluid and when it was over, I tried to forget it. But...now that I think about it...what if he didn't draw something out?"

Quinn imagined Rickman's face curling into a snarl as he reached for a test tube and slid the needle's tip into it. He drew back the plunger, filling the needle's barrel with a yellowish fluid. When the barrel was full, Rickman held up the syringe and moved towards Maggie with gleaming eyes.

"What if," Maggie whispered, "he put

something in?"

Rickman raised Maggie's hair aside to expose the back of her neck. And jammed the needle into it. Quinn imagined Maggie jerking violently at the impact, gasping loudly, and it was a real gasp as Maggie sat up in her hospital bed.

Maggie clapped a hand onto the back of her neck and looked up at Quinn. Her upper lip quivered for a moment, then she said, "That's it, Quinn. That was the moment when I changed. He must have injected me with something...maybe something he hoped was a cure for his fungus, and needed me to test it on."

Maggie closed her eyes, her entire body beginning to tremble as she said, "But that's when I changed, Quinn. That very evening. That's when I began focusing on my career and almost lost my husband. That's when my monthly performance scores in marksmanship started dropping. And that's...when I started sleeping...with Rickman." She said the last word with an audible growl.

Quinn stared at her as if through new eyes. "Why didn't you ever mention this before?"

Maggie looked at him with a cold menace. "Because I didn't remember it before. It was one of the memories I lost."

"So that's it. When he injected you with that stuff, it must have shut down a portion of your brain. And the brain injury must have re-established connections somehow. I guess it was a good thing, after all."

Maggie looked away and the expression on her face deepened. Quinn could see her breathing growing more intense, quicker, and deeper.

"Maggie," Quinn said, "are you okay?"

Maggie snarled, "Rickman...killed my husband...did nothing to stop the deaths of billions on my world...and now, he's

messed around with my brain...with who I am..."

Maggie swept a hand across her bedside table. She swept off the lamp and bottles of pills there onto the floor with a crash that filled the room.

She screamed. "If he weren't already dead, I'd kill him myself!"

Quinn grabbed her arm, struggling to hold it as she began to fight against him. "Maggie...Maggie, calm down..."

"Don't tell me to calm down, Mallory! He changed my personality. He changed who I am. He \*killed\* me!" Tears began to swell

in his fierce eyes.

"Maggie, don't..."

Maggie wrenched her arm free of Quinn and shifted away from him in the bed. "Mallory...I don't want you to see me like this. I'd appreciate it if you left."

Quinn stood up and looked down at her as she turned her face away, shielding it from view with her fingers. "Maggie... I know this is tough."

She spoke between clenched teeth. "I said go. Now."

Quinn slowly turned away from the bed,

keeping his eyes on her until the very last moment. Then he walked out of the room.

The door closed behind him with a click. Maggie continued to sit there on her bed, her hands on her face, immobile. The machines surrounding her bed beeped softly in a steady rhythm.

Her fingers crept up her face to touch the bandages wrapped around her temples.

A video monitor next to Maggie's bed flickered and lit up with a jerky image of Dr. Kelley. He smiled and spoke, his voice not quite matching his lips.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're awake, Miss



Beckett. I was wondering if I could speak to you about some abnormalities we found in your test results."

Maggie pulled her hands off her face. She reached out and grabbed the thin metal stand that supported her IV. She swung it like a bat. It slammed into the doctor's screen, shattering it in an explosion of sparks.

She released the stand and let it clatter onto the floor. She climbed out of bed, her eyes wildly roving the room. With a scream of rage, Maggie overturned her bedside table. She shoved one of the medical devices by her bed and sent it crashing to the floor. She charged over to her window

and ripped down the drapes.

Maggie clutched the drapes to herself as she began to cry. Her eyes closed. She backed up against the wall and slid down it until she was huddled against the wall, hugging the drapes like a teddy bear, as tears rolled down her face in streams.

\* \* \*

Arturo was sitting in the hotel room's living room, alone and in darkness, except for the hazy glow of the computer screen. He was fixated on the text rolling past, so much so that it took a moment before he noticed the front door clicking and swinging open.

Quinn walked in with heavy steps. He looked up, frowned, then flicked the light switch by the door. Light flooded the room, showing Arturo huddled in front of the computer.

"Max?" Quinn asked. "What's going on? Why're you up so late?"

Arturo looked over his shoulder at Quinn, then turned back to the computer. "Oh, Miss Welles has been teaching me how to use this Internet. It's actually quite fascinating. Did you know that this world's physicists have a new form of mathematics that can compute images of fourth-dimensional structures into a three-

dimensional environment? Quite extraordinary, but quite complex. I've been trying to master it, and it is quite difficult. But I have found a number of websites that deal with it, and am asking questions in newsgroups to clarify what I don't understand."

Quinn walked over and looked over the professor's shoulder at the screen. "You mean you've been up all night on the Internet?"

"Well, not all night. I took a break around eleven for dinner. But I'm waiting for an email from an astrophysicist in Australia who promised to send me his articles on how the Latecian model predicts the

interior formation of singularities."

Quinn grinned and turned away. "Seems like maybe the Internet isn't as bad as you thought, eh, professor?"

"Er, perhaps." The professor busied himself clicking the mouse and hyperlinking to more pages.

As Quinn walked out of the room, the professor turned back to him. "Oh, by the way, how is young Miss Beckett?"

Quinn froze. "She's, uh...she's good. She's awake."

"Oh, excellent. Then she is none the worse

for her ordeal? No brain damage or the like?"

Quinn shook his head, his eyes taking on a distant appearance. "Uh, no. In fact...she's better than ever."

Arturo blinked and a frown descended over his face. "Well... good. I suppose we'll see her in the morning then."

"Yeah, well, maybe I should see her first. Make sure she's okay before the rest of you do."

"Very well. Sleep well, Mr. Mallory."

Arturo turned back to the computer screen

as Quinn headed for the bedrooms. Arturo's expression softened as the light played over his face.

\* \* \*

The morning sun shone brightly on Rembrandt as he weaved through the empty streets of San Francisco on his bicycle. He was wearing the red and white uniform of a PizzaHut.Com deliveryman, and a stack of pizzas strapped to the back of his seat.

He looked up at the houses he passed, comparing the numbers with a piece of paper in his hand. When he arrived at one, he skidded to a halt at the curb and

climbed off the bike.

Rembrandt whistled "Tears In My Fro" as he pulled out one of the pizza boxes, double-checked the address, then headed up the steps of the apartment building.

A small panel was by the door. Rembrandt ran his finger down the list until he came to a button with a label marked "Pamela Walker." He pushed it. As he did, he talked into a speaker by the panel.

"PizzaHut.Com," Rembrandt said. "Got a pepperoni supreme here for Pamela Walker."

After a few seconds, the door buzzed.



Rembrandt pushed it open and walked into the lobby of the apartment building. It was cool and clean, and completely deserted. Rembrandt's footsteps echoed in the stairwell as he climbed up to the second floor to the address he had been given.

The corridor was lined with dusty apartment doors that chimed softly with computer-generated music. But the corridor itself was silent except for Rembrandt's own footsteps.

Rembrandt found the door of the apartment he was looking for. It was just like all the others except for a large slot in the upper half. Rembrandt juggled the

pizza into one hand so he could free the other to push the doorbell.

After a moment, a scratchy voice emerged from a speaker. "Yes?"

"PizzaHut.Com," Rembrandt called out. "I got a pepperoni supreme here for Pamela Walker?"

The slot in the door swung down on whining hinges. A tray rattled out with a loose pile of dollar bills and change on it. It was the exact amount for the pizza, including a pretty generous tip.

The speaker crackled with the voice again. "Take the money, put the pizza on the tray,

and slide it in when you're done. Thanks."

The speaker cut off with a click.

"No problem," Rembrandt said, then muttered, "Nice to see you, too. Friendly people on this world."

He scooped up the money and slipped it into his pocket, then shifted the pizza onto the tray. He pushed the tray in and it rolled easily through the door. The slot slammed shut the instant the pizza was inside.

Rembrandt shook his head and moved away from the door. He was stopped by a woman's scream that came from inside the

apartment. He bolted back to the door and pressed his ear against it. The scream came again, following by the crash of breaking glass.

Rembrandt hammered a fist against the door. "Hey, everything okay in there? What's goin' on?"

Another scream resounded from inside the apartment.

Rembrandt grit his teeth, then backed away from the door. He ran towards it and slammed a foot into it. The lock crackled as it broke open and the door swung open wide.

\* \* \*

The inside of the apartment was almost pitch-black. The windows were covered with thick, heavy drapes. But as Rembrandt rushed inside, he could make out vague shapes. The apartment was a shambles. Rembrandt passed bookcases spilling over with toys and tattered books, and chairs draped with shirts and jeans. He navigated a floor stacked with empty PizzaHut.Com boxes, peering into the shadows.

He walked through the living room, following the sound of voices. The scream came again, leading him down a narrow hallway. He found himself walking into a

bedroom. It was the only well-lit area in the whole apartment, and that was only because of a row of computers set up on a table by the bed. Only one was on.

The monitor was glowing in the darkness, showing flickering and uneven video images in a thumbnail-sized window. It was of a horror movie. A woman screaming as windows shattered all around her. The screams that he had heard outside the apartment.

Rembrandt relaxed and shook his head as a grin spread across his face. He took one last look at the computer screen, then turned towards the door.

There was someone huddled in the shadows of a corner of the room. The figure was curled into a ball, pressed deeply against the walls, covering its face with trembling hands.

Rembrandt took a step back. "Oh, man, I'm sorry to barge in like this. I heard the screams and thought somebody might be in trouble in here. I'll pay for any damage on the door..."

He stopped. The small trembling person hadn't moved or relaxed. Rembrandt took a step towards it. He could see it a little more clearly now. It was a young girl, wearing a worn T-shirt several sizes too large and faded jeans. She wore no shoes,

and her toes were curled up tight, as tense as the rest of her as she shivered in the corner.

"Hey, look, I'm sorry if I scared you. I swear, I was just tryin' to help." Rembrandt held up his hands, palms out. "Look, see? I ain't armed or nothin'. I'm just the pizza deliveryman."

At the word "pizza," the girl finally reacted. Her body loosened slightly, almost imperceptibly. One of her hands moved away from her face and a brown eye peered out from between her fingers.

A voice emerged from her, one that was hoarse and unsteady. "P-P-Pizza..."



Rembrandt smiled. "Yeah. Pizza. I just dropped one off for somebody who's supposed to live here, Pamela Walker."

The hands moved further away from the girl's face. Rembrandt could see it more clearly in the flickering white light. Skin a dark brown that still seemed pale, puffy and swollen eyes that looked up at him as if Rembrandt were an alien creature.

"I," the girl started to say, then she paused to swallow. And she spoke again. "I'm...P-Pamela Walker."

"Oh. Well...I just talked to you a few minutes ago. Remember? When I dropped

off the pizza?"

Pamela glared at him and shifted herself a little. She wasn't huddled that closely to the wall anymore. Her hands fell away from her face and wrapped around her arms to hug herself tightly.

"Wasn't me," Pamela said. "Recording. Don't talk to ...strangers."

"Oh. Well...that explains it, guess you weren't rude to me after all." Rembrandt tried to laugh, but Pamela just stared at him until he stopped. He looked around the small apartment, glittering in the light of the movie. "Where's your mom?"

Pamela hugged herself a little tighter, then said, "Dead."

"Oh. Sorry."

Pamela lowered her eyes to the carpeted floor. "Long time ago."

Rembrandt nodded, glancing around the apartment, then shuffled his feet a little in the silence. "So...you live here...all alone?"

Pamela raised her eyes to him and shook her head.

"Oh, great. You live with your dad? Your sister? Boyfriend? Who?"

Pamela shook her head again. "Don't live with anyone. But not alone."

Rembrandt blinked and looked around the apartment. "I, uh...I don't get it."

Pamela stared at him for a tense moment, then raised a hand and pointed at the row of computers on the bedside table behind him. "Internet."

Pamela suddenly uncurled and rose to her feet. She headed for the computer. Rembrandt had to step aside quickly to keep from being knocked down as she walked to the bed and crawled onto it. She sat down crosslegged facing the computers and began to type. Rembrandt peered over

her shoulder as he watched text and images flow across the screen.

For the first time, Rembrandt saw Pamela's expression change. It broke into a wide smile as she gazed at the screen. "I'm not alone. Websites, newsgroups, chat rooms. My friends are there."

Rembrandt watched her. "Lemme take a wild guess. You don't get out much, do you?"

Pamela continued to type as she said, "No, not in real." She was in a chatroom and her smile broadened as she watched the text scroll.

Rembrandt nodded. "When was the last time you left this apartment?"

"Eleven years ago." Then she laughed and shook her head. "Diamond34 is so funny." She typed some more.

"Eleven years," Rembrandt whispered, then said, "When's the last time you saw someone else? Someone...in real life, I mean."

Pamela stopped typing for a moment, her fingers hovering over the keys. "Eleven years and six months. When my mother died."

"You never even go out to shop for

groceries and stuff?"

"Nope," Pamela said. "Get delivery. By mail or from people."

"Where do you get your money from?"

"Computer programming. I telecommute."

Rembrandt watched her sitting in front of the computer, her skin looking pale from the flickering white light. "So you mean to tell me you haven't left this apartment or seen another human being in over a decade? That all you do is go on this Internet?"

Pamela nodded, but kept her eyes locked on the screen.

"But why, girl? Why don't you get outta here? See the world?"

"I am seeing the world."

Rembrandt pointed at the screen. "But this is just a computer. It's not the real thing."

Pamela stopped typing and turned to look at him. Her face settled into a dead expression. "No. It's better. It's quiet. It's safe. It can't hit me or hurt me. It can't judge me because of how I look or talk. It can't shoot me or rape me or steal my money. It can't romance me and then



dump me or saddle me with a husband and lousy kids. It can't hit me with a car or infect me with an incurable disease. It doesn't make me see things that I don't want to see or do things I don't want to do. And it doesn't die and leave me all alone. It's my world. It's what I make it. And I don't need anything else."

Pamela shifted around to face the computer again. Clicking her mouse caused the chatroom window to shut down and a webpage came up. It showed a large image of a sunset in Golden Gate Park. Clicking on an icon, she caused soft classical music to play.

Pamela stared fixated at the image as the

lyrical strains played. "Thank you for the pizza. Please go now."

Rembrandt watched her for a moment, then turned away. He walked out of the bedroom, leaving her alone on the bed. She sat there, hypnotized by the music and the picture on the screen. And as the hazy light played over her face, it glistened on the single tear that formed and ran down her cheek.

\* \* \*

The man walked down the sidewalk, whistling to himself softly. He was no longer wearing the white labcoat he had worn in the military installation. Now he

wore a less conspicuous outfit consisting of torn camouflage pants and a grubby plaid shirt. But he still wore the computer headset and glasses strapped around his eyes.

As he walked, the man whispered, "Okay, I'm in position. Where do I make the drop?"

Masquerade's deep voice filled his earpiece. His stern silhouette was reflected on the man's lenses. "Now, Mr. Stanford, go down one block. There's a garbage can on the corner. Leave the disk inside and..."

Stanford turned a corner. Then his step faltered. Looking across the empty street,

he saw another man leaning against a lamppost. He wore a trenchcoat and was reading a newspaper held up to his face. As Stanford came into view, the man glanced up at him, then looked back at his paper casually.

Stanford hissed in a low whisper, "Masquerade, I've got company."

Masquerade's voice resonated in his earpiece. "I see him."

\* \* \*

>From inside the voluminous chair, hands reached out and punched keys on the keyboards spread in front of it. On the

rows of screens overlooking the chair, one of them showed a view from Standford's lenses. It was an unsteady image of the man reading the newspaper across the street.

A hand took hold of a mouse and clicked as it dragged the mouse across a pad. On the screen, a glowing red square formed around the face of the newspaper man and extended to surround it. When the face was encased in the square, there was a soft beep. Text scrolled across one side of the screen that read "Target Image Captured."

The hands worked quickly to type "Analyze and Identify." On one of the other screens, a graphic from the LawNet

Law Enforcement Database was running through hundreds of photos in a blur. One photo finally stopped and blinked. It was a perfect match to the face of the man Stanford was looking at.

\* \* \*

As Stanford watched the trenchcoated man, Masquerade spoke into his ear. "Well, well, well, it seems our newspaper-loving friend is a field agent of the FBI, Computer Crime Division."

"He's a cop?" Stanford hissed, shifting closer to the wall behind him.

"Yes. And look up."

Stanford looked up at a window in one of the buildings over him. A lone man was strapped to the outside of the building, calmly running a rag over the glass.

"Another agent," Masquerade growled. "And I'm willing to bet this entire block is crawling with more."

"Think this is about the disk?"

"No, Stanford, I'm sure the FBI's Computer Crime Division has nothing better to do than read newspapers and wash windows around you. 'Course it does. They must have been tracking you. I told you not to buy that hot dog, they

probably traced your credit card."

Stanford adjusted his glasses and turned towards the wall so his face was away from the agents. "I was hungry, Masquerade, whadda you want me to do? Well...now what are you gonna do? Can you zap 'em with a security system or something?"

The man reading the newspaper folded it up and glanced up and down the block. Then he looked straight at Stanford and began to whisper into a button on his collar. Above him, the window-washer unhooked a strap on his belt and began to slide down the side of the building.

Masquerade's deep, rumbling voice echoed



in Stanford's ear. "I can't do anything to them directly. The CCD fights hackers like me...although not as good as me, of course... all the time. They use human agents and closed- communications systems, and cut the power to this entire block so I can't use anything against them. You've really screwed things up, Stanford. I need to think."

Stanford glanced up for a moment, then did a double- take. He watched a black man emerge from one of the apartment buildings. The man was headed for the bicycle he had left parked on the corner.

Stanford broke into a grin. "Hey, Masquerade, I got an idea. You did your

thing...now it's time I did mine."

Stanford began to walk briskly towards the bicycle and the man climbing onto it.

\* \* \*

Rembrandt climbed onto the PizzaHut.Com bike. He checked the paper taped to the next pizza on the back of his seat, then lowered it. He looked up at the apartment building he had just left and at one window. There, the drapes were parted slightly and Pamela's small face peered out at him. Then disappeared.

Rembrandt sighed and pulled on his bike helmet. Then he looked up at the man

approaching him on the sidewalk.

"Excuse me," Stanford said, "you got the time?"

"Uh, yeah." Rembrandt looked down at his watch. "It's, uh, eleven-thirty."

As he looked down, Stanford pulled the computer disk out of his coat pocket. Stanford pretended to sneeze to cover the way he threw the disk with a flick of his wrist. It sailed neatly into the pocket of the backpack hanging off the side of Rembrandt's bike-seat.

When Rembrandt looked up again, Stanford sniffled and said, "Thanks." Then

he walked past and continued down the sidewalk. Rembrandt set off on an easy ride to his next delivery address.

\* \* \*

On the lenses of Stanford's glasses, Masquerade's silhouette nodded. "Not bad."

"Yep," Stanford said. "Now if the feds pull me over, they got nothin' on me. All we have to do is wait for the heat to cool off, then get the disk back from that guy."

"Good work, Mr. Stanford. I can take it from here. You've done a good job, but it's time our partnership came to an end."

Stanford glanced back. The trenchcoated agent had the newspaper folded up under his arm and was briskly walking towards him. The window-washer was openly talking into a walkie-talkie. A large sedan turned onto the street and began to roll down towards him.

"What, now?" Stanford whispered.

"Yes. Don't worry, as you said, the CCD won't be able to arrest you without the disk. I promise, you won't go to jail."

Stanford nodded. "Well...okay. When do I get my money?"

"Look in the garbage can on the corner. There's a large paper bag inside. That should take care of you nicely."

Stanford walked to the garbage can on the corner. It was empty except for a small folded paper bag with something lumpy inside. Stanford glanced over his shoulder again. The trenchcoated man was now running towards him. The sedan was speeding up.

Stanford reached into the can. He swept up the bag and began walking away at a brisk pace.

The trenchcoated agent whipped out a gun and a billfold. He aimed the gun at

Stanford and flipped the billfold open to expose a badge. "Freeze! Federal agents! Lionel Stanford, you're under arrest!"

Stanford stopped walking. He smirked and raised his hands as he turned to face the agent. The sedan pulled up onto the curb and three more agents jumped out, all carrying guns.

"What's the charge?" Stanford asked.

"Stolen property, breaking and entering of a government facility, espionage, and a whole lot more." The agent nodded. "We'll give you a rundown when we get you to jail."

"You got nothin' on me. I'm clean."

"We'll see about that. What's in that bag you picked up?"

Stanford grinned. "Just some cash."

The agent glared at it. "What's it doing in a garbage can?"

"I have a lousy bank. They have really cheap ATMs."

The agent nodded with his chin. "Very funny. Open it. Let's see it."

"Sure." Stanford plunged a hand into the bag and drew out what's inside.



Masquerade's voice whispered into his ear.  
"Goodbye, Mr. Stanford."

"What?" Stanford looked down at his hand. It held no money. A gun was resting in his palm. A small black box was strapped to the trigger-guard.

The federal agents dropped into a crouch as the lead agent yelled, "Stanford, put the gun down! Don't make it worse for yourself!"

Stanford held up his hands, trembling.  
"Hey, wait a minute, this isn't..."

\* \* \*

>From his chair, Masquerade pushed a key on one of his keyboards. On one of the screens looming over him, a graphic of Stanford's gun flashed red. The trigger on the gun went back and the word "Fire" blinked.

\* \* \*

The black box on Stanford's gun beeped. The trigger went back. The gun jumped in Stanford's hand as it fired with a bang.

One of the agents crumpled with a grunt of pain.

"Fire!" the lead agent yelled.

The agents opened fire. Stanford was thrown back against the wall as the rain of bullets hit him. He slid down the wall and slumped to the ground. The gun fell from his lifeless hand.

\* \* \*

Masquerade reached out and typed more on his keyboard. Above him, one of the monitors read "Initiate Self-destruct."

\* \* \*

Stanford's glasses and ear-piece hissed, then melted down his face into strands of smoking plastic. The black box on the gun

dissolved in the same way. By the time the agents reached Stanford's body, all traces of Masquerade's equipment was gone.

\* \* \*

In his lair, Masquerade tapped his console with a finger a few times. "Well, that's one loose end tied up. Now for another."

He reached for the mouse again. On the screen in front of him, an image from Stanford's glasses appeared. It was of Rembrandt on his bike. Once again, Masquerade used his image-capture box to surround Rembrandt's face.

On the screen next to it, photos scrolled by

as Masquerade accessed the PizzaHut.Com Employment Database. It finally stopped on a photo of Rembrandt Brown. Statistics appeared next to the photo of Rembrandt's weight, age, and other information. Including the address of his apartment at the Dominion Hotel.

"Rembrandt Brown," Masquerade said in a soft, high, and unaltered voice. "You have something I want, Mr. Brown. And I intend to get it."

\* \* \*

Quinn walked down the corridor of the hospital, a large bouquet of flowers cradled in his arms. He approached Maggie's

room, then slowed as he came to the doorway.

It was empty. The bed was neatly made. There was no sign she had ever been there.

He backed out, then stopped a nurse walking past. "Excuse me, where's the woman who was in this room? Margaret Beckett?"

The nurse glanced into the room, then said, "Oh, she left this morning. We tried to stop her, but she insisted on it. The doctor agreed that the worst of it seemed to be over. Aside from tying her to the bed, there was nothing we could do. And quite frankly, after the way she trashed her room

last night, we weren't too sorry to see her go."

Quinn looked at the flowers in his hand, then let them drop to his side. "Well...did she say where she was going?"

"Uh, yes, she said something about needing to do some target practice."

Quinn looked down the corridor as he repeated, "Target practice."

\* \* \*

Quinn walked down the lonely street to a building with a sign over the door that read "Sharpshooter Shooting Gallery." In

the window by the front door, a small sign read, "Non- virtual weapons training. Increase your gaming skills with real-life practice!" Quinn pulled open the door and went inside.

\* \* \*

The shooting gallery boomed with the sound of gunshots. Quinn walked down the aisle, passing men and women who stood in rows of cubicles, firing guns at the targets hanging across the room from them at various distances. They all wore earmufflers against the noise.

In one cubicle, Maggie glared down the sight of a powerful gun, firing shots at a



human paper target across the room. As Quinn approached her, she stopped shooting and popped out the ammo cartridge on the gun.

"Morning, Mallory," she said. "Sleep well?"

Quinn watched her pull a new cartridge out of her belt. "Yeah. You?"

Maggie slapped the cartridge into the handle of the gun. "I've had better."

"The nurses told me you tore up your room last night."

Maggie sighted down the gun again at the target. "Just releasing some aggression."

That's supposed to be healthy, right?"

"It can be." Maggie began firing again and Quinn winced at the loud report. He raised his voice to be heard. "But you gotta stay in control, too."

Maggie stopped and drew her gun to her shoulder, smoke drifting from the barrel. She pushed a button on the wall of the cubicle. The paper target began sliding towards her on a track with a soft hum.

Maggie nodded. "I am in control. I just...seem to be a little more emotional now. I couldn't help it. But I'm feeling better than ever. Before Rickman messed with me, I was an expert marksman. But

remember on Fog World when I couldn't hit Rickman only a few feet away with a submachine gun? Well... that's all changed."

The paper target slid up to the cubicle's window. It was painted with the outline of a human being, riddled with bulletholes. Half of the holes were clustered tightly in the outline of the head. The other half was grouped together in the chest where the heart would be. At the top of the target was written the word "Rickman."

Maggie tore the target off its rack and held it up for Quinn to see. "I've got my shooting skills back. And that's not all."

She laid the target neatly on the shelf of the cubicle. Then she grabbed Quinn's arm. With a twist, Maggie flipped Quinn into the air. He landed on his back with a bone-shaking thump.

Maggie leaned over him with a satisfied smile. "My martial arts training came back, too."

Quinn looked up at her and spoke in a voice that was more like a wheeze. "I'm...happy for you."

Maggie took Quinn's hand and pulled him back onto his feet. She grinned at him. "Sorry about that. I couldn't resist. But you get my point."

She looked down at her hands, eyes wide with wonder. "All my military training is back. I feel whole again. Useful. I'll be a much better asset to the team. Have you told the others yet?"

Quinn rubbed his back, wincing. "Not yet."

"Good. I want to tell them myself." She lowered her hands. "I've..been thinking about the way I've been acting during the slide, Mallory. I'm not proud of it. Especially the way I've treated Wade. And you."

Maggie looked up at Quinn. She pulled off

the ear-mufflers and set them down. "Mallory...Quinn...on Future World, I realized how much I missed my husband. But since I've got my old personality back, his death has hit me even harder. And I realized that the slutty...and that's the way I'd describe it, slutty...way I've been acting with guys like on the last world and Rickman, and even you...it was part of the old Maggie. What Rickman did to me must have shut down my inhibitions. It's not who I am anymore."

Maggie rested a hand on Quinn's shoulder. "I'm going to change. I'm going to go into mourning for my husband. Better late than never. That means no more fooling around. And...I know we settled this on

Future World, but I just had to say it again...it means no more us."

"I gotcha," Quinn said. "And for what it's worth...it's good to have you back."

Maggie smiled. "Thanks. Now, come on, Mallory...I wanna paint this town red. I got a lotta catching up on fun to do."

The two of them headed out of the gallery with Maggie spinning her gun on her finger.

\*\*\*

Rembrandt walked into the hotel room, his backpack over one shoulder. Wade was

sitting curled up on the couch, watching a computer-generated basketball game on the computer set up across the room.

Rembrandt groaned as he staggered into the living room and slumped into a couch next to her. "Man, I got enough exercise to last me for the next three worlds. This job is gonna kill me. Whatcha watching?"

"Basketball game," Wade said. "One-on-one between Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley."

Rembrandt watched the polygon-formed people running around a rendered basketball court. "Looks like a video game."



"It is. They don't play real sports in this world. Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley are the computer basketball champions of the world. They're playing each other over the Internet."

"Man, you know a world is screwed up when they don't appreciate the glory of real hoops." Rembrandt looked around. "Where's Max?"

Wade smirked. "Where else? On the computer in his bedroom."

Rembrandt looked over the couch to the closed bedroom door. "He's still on the Net?"

"Hasn't left it all day." Wade leaned closer and whispered. "Says he's still developing that theory of his, but I also caught him looking at some wine and fishing websites."

Rembrandt gave off his high-pitched laugh. "So much for his claims that computers are worthless."

"Yeah. But..." She lowered her voice and her smile disappeared. "I'm kinda worried about him. I don't think he slept last night, and I haven't seen him come out all day for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. I think he's addicted."

Rembrandt's smile collapsed into a frown.  
"Addicted? To the Internet?"

Wade shrugs. "It does happen. I just never thought it would happen to the Professor."

"Well..." Rembrant said, "Keep in mind girl he may not have all the stubbornness to it ours would..."

The hotel room's door opened and Quinn walked through it. He flashed the room a smile, then stepped back to let Maggie walk in after him.

Maggie still wore bandages wrapped around her head. She was also cradling a stuffed teddy bear under her arm and held

a Diet Coke in her hand. She gave Wade and Rembrandt a finger-wave with her free hand. "Hi, guys."

"Maggie!" Rembrandt jumped out of the couch and hugged her tightly, both of them laughing wildly.

Wade stayed on the couch, glaring up at her.

Quinn jogged past her to Arturo's room and banged on the door. "Hey, Max, get out here! Maggie's okay!"

Arturo's voice emerged from the room. "One moment, Mr. Mallory. Let me just finish this email..."

Rembrandt finally released Maggie and stepped away from her to look up and down. "How're you doing, Beckett?"

Maggie nodded and shot Quinn a nervous glance. "I'm, uh...good. But I need to tell you guys something..."

Arturo's door opened and he strode out, clutching a handful of papers. His face was stubbly with a day's unshaven growth, and his curly hair was wildly sticking out all over his head. He was still wearing his dress shirt and pants, but both were rumpled and he was unbuttoning the collar as he spoke.

"Ah, Mr. Mallory, I must speak with you about these articles I found on the Internet. I've been in a chatroom with the top five quantum physicists in the country for the last hour, and we'll be blasted if we can figure this one irregularity out. We could use your additional brainpower."

Arturo turned to Maggie and smiled. "Ah, Captain Beckett. How good of you to rejoin us. None the worse for your harrowing experience?"

Maggie clutched the teddy bear to her chest and shifted on her feet. "Well...actually...something has changed. I need to talk to you guys."

Rembrandt sat on the arm of the couch, next to Wade, who continued to glare at Maggie under a length of her hair. "What's wrong, Beckett? You came through it okay, right?"

"Yes," Maggie said. "But...there's something I discovered about me. You see...Quinn and I think that Rickman might have injected me with something a few years ago. Something that caused me to lose some memories and altered my personality. That's why I've been so clumsy and rude to all of you during our slide together. And why I was moving in on Quinn...and had the affair with Rickman."

Maggie looked down at each of the others,

smiling. They all looked back at her - Quinn with a smile, Arturo and Rembrandt with confusion, and Wade with a deadpan. "But the knock on the head did something to me. Put me back to the way I was. I'm different now. Better. More human. And you're gonna see some changes from now on, I promise. Especially in the way I treat all of you."

Maggie finally let her gaze settle on Wade. "I'm sorry, Wade. I'm sorry for all the times I put you down for the crime of missing your Professor...and for feeling emotions like fear or loneliness. I was wrong, and you were right... and that's all gonna change. Okay?"



Wade's deadpan expression broke into a humorless smile. "So...let me get this straight. You got injected with something by Rickman that made you act like a self-righteous bimbo, and now that you got a bump on the head, everything's all right and I'm supposed to pretend the last seven months together never happened. Is that it?"

Maggie's smile twisted a little. "Well...I mean...I guess you could look at it that way, but you gotta understand, I wasn't myself..."

Wade's smile collapsed and she fell into a cold stare. "I don't care who you were. You hurt me. A lot. And I can't just wave my

hand and make that all disappear. And I can't just accept the fact that you're suddenly supposed to be this wonderful person now. If you want my trust...and my forgiveness...you're gonna have to earn it."

Wade climbed out of the couch and shoved past Rembrandt to charge to her bedroom.

"Wade, wait!" Maggie began to move towards Wade, but she was too late to stop Wade from disappearing inside the room and slamming the door behind her.

Arturo took Maggie's arm and gently pulled her back. "Captain Beckett...I strongly urge you to let Miss Welles be for the time being. In time, if you are sincere,

she will see that you have changed and she will forgive you. But that time is not now."

Maggie shook off Arturo's hand and looked away. "Right. Well...she'll see. You'll all see. I'm a better person now. My old self. And I'll prove it."

Arturo frowned at Maggie's bandages. "And you're sure you've recovered fully?"

Maggie waved him off. "Oh, sure. Doctor gave me a clean bill of health."

Quinn snapped his fingers. "Doctor...bill...that reminds me, we still have to pay off Maggie's hospital visit."

Rembrandt picked his backpack up off the floor and began rummaging through it. "Oh, yeah, no problem. Got my paycheck right in...hey..."

Rembrandt pulled out a small computer disk from the pocket. He turned it over in his hands. "How'd this get in there?"

Quinn, Maggie, and Arturo gathered around him as he looked at the disk. Arturo took it from him and studied it.

"You have no idea where it came from?" Arturo asked.

"Nope. I just..."

The lights in the hotel room flickered and died. The room was plunged into darkness, except for the pale white glow from the moon outside the windows.

As the others looked around themselves, Wade emerged from the bedroom and stumbled on a table. "Ouch. What's going on?"

Maggie folded her arms. "Must be a blackout."

Arturo clutched the papers in his hand. "Good heavens. I was working on an important email. I hope the computer saved it before it was lost."

"Don't worry about it, Arturo. With computers as common as they are in this world, they're bound to have backup generators all over the place. The power should kick back in..."

The computer monitor on the table glowed softly. It filled with a video image of a man's head silhouetted against flickering static in the background.

The voice that emerged from the monitor was the deep rich timbre of artificial enhancement. "The backup generators are under my control. So is everything in this hotel and your room. And this city. And you."

The Sliders gathered around the monitor to glare at the shimmering image.

Arturo narrowed his eyes. "Who are you? What do you want."

"I'm known as Masquerade," the man said. "And what I want is the disk in Rembrandt Brown's left hand."

Rembrandt looked at the disk in his hand. "Why? How'd I get it in the first place?"

"That's none of your business. You'll insert the disk into the mailslot on the wall on the left-hand side of the front door. You have five seconds."

Rembrandt looked at the slot, then at the disk in his hand, then at Quinn. The two men exchanged a look, then a slight nod. They looked at Wade and Maggie and Arturo, who all gave the same nod.

Rembrandt faced the computer camera and held up the disk between two fingers. "No deal, Masquerade. Not until you tell us what's up."

A moment passed, then Masquerade spoke again. "Idiots. You don't understand what you're dealing with, do you? I guess I'll have to show you. I have access to every computer in the world, including the ones in this hotel. For instance, I control the power and can cut off the supply to



everything in this hotel except the outlet this computer is plugged into. And I can turn on the power... to the door locks."

The hotel room's door clicked sharply. Quinn and Maggie ran over to it. Quinn tried the knob, then flashed the others a grave look.

"It's locked," he said, then rammed into it with his shoulder. The door shook, but remained firm.

Maggie grabbed his shoulder and pulled him out of the way. "Move it, Mallory. Let a pro handle this."

She took a step back, then lashed out with

a foot in a karate kick. Her heel slammed into the door. She spun and gave the door another kick, crying out at the same time. The door shuddered.

Masquerade continued to glare at them from his static prison. "I can take over the climate control..."

Air exploded out of the vents in the room. Arturo was in front of one of them and lurched out of the way, clutching his arm where the blast hit it. "It's freezing cold!"

Wade hugged herself and began to shiver as the vents roared around her. Behind her, Maggie took a step back and kicked the door again, snarling as she did so.

"I'm now lowering the temperature in the room to forty degrees below zero," Masquerade rumbled. "You'll all freeze to death. All I need to turn off the air and open the doors is that disk."

Arturo rubbed his arm briskly, breathing hard and forming clouds of icy smoke from his mouth. "Perhaps we should consider giving this man the disk."

Quinn tucked his hands into his armpits. "No way. If this psycho wants it that bad, it can't be good. You hear me, Masquerade? No deal!"

Maggie spun on one heel and drove her

other foot into the door again. The door gave off a loud crackling snap. "That's right, Masquerade. No surrender."

Masquerade's image flickered on the screen. "Well, I suppose I'll just have to up the stakes a little."

The complimentary coffeemaker on the desk lit up as the heating coils began to glow. Then the pot sizzled. And grew runny as it melted. Sparks flashed all over it, then flames erupted from inside.

Rembrandt ran over to it, then lunged back as the flames swelled. Black smoke poured from the coffeemaker, which licked the wall near it with tongues of fire. Then

the fire began to crawl up the wall itself. Rembrandt ripped the tablecloth off the dining table and tried to beat the flames, but they only grew worse.

Masquerade chuckled. "Fire and ice, all at once. Choose your death...or give me the disk."

Maggie took several steps back, crossing to the other side of the room. She glared at the door, then began to run towards it, screaming at the top of her lungs. Halfway across, she leapt into the air. Her foot lashed out and she formed an arrow, aimed right at the door.

The door was torn out of its hinges on

impact. It collapsed into the hallway outside the room. Maggie landed on her feet, staggered, then yelled, "Come on."

The Sliders dashed out of the hotel room, even as flames engulfed the walls.

>From the computer screen, Masquerade loomed forward. His unnaturally deep voice roared. "You can't escape me! I'm everywhere! I'll get that disk, even if I have to kill you all!"

\* \* \*

The corridor was in darkness, the lights still off from Masquerade's control. People were banging and yelling in the other hotel

rooms Quinn, Maggie, Wade, Rembrandt, and Arturo passed. Apparently, Masquerade had locked them inside, too.

Arturo ran to the elevators, but Wade grabbed his arm and pulled him away. "No, Max, the elevators are bound to be under that weirdo's control. We better just use the stairs."

"Good idea, Wade." Maggie ran to the emergency stairs and yanked open the door. She waited until the others ran through, then followed.

\* \* \*

The stairwell echoed with their frenzied

footsteps as they hurried down floor after floor. Other people began to join them in a mad dash to safety. As they reached the last flight of steps, sirens began to wail, growing louder with each passing moment.

\* \* \*

Outside, Quinn burst from the doors, followed closely by Maggie, Wade, Arturo, and Rembrandt. They ran out onto the sidewalk, followed by the crowds of fleeing hotel patrons.

Firetrucks squealed up to the hotel. Firepersons scrambled off the trucks. Some of them rushed into the hotel. Others began hooking up hoses to the hydrant on



the corner.

A firewoman was hunched over a keypad on the hydrant, punching buttons on it frantically. "Hey, the hydrant won't turn on the water. Says there's a computer malfunction."

One of the firetrucks revved its engine. Then it lurched forward. It rumbled towards the hotel, building up speed. It was headed for Wade. She screamed and dove out of the way. The truck kept going to crash into the Dominion.

The crippled truck's siren began to blare out of control and flash its lights. The driver climbed out from behind the wheel

and ran over to where Wade was lying.

"Are you okay?" the driver asked. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I don't know what went wrong. The truck's computers kicked into autopilot. Must have been a malfunction."

Quinn took Wade's hand and helped her to her feet as he glared at the fireman. "Uh, yeah, malfunction. Let's go, guys."

Wade limped, supporting herself on Quinn's arm, as they headed away from the Dominion. Behind them, the hotel burned, flames pouring from the windows as the fire raged out of control.

\* \* \*

Rembrandt walked alongside the others down the lonely sidewalk. The night felt dead with no streetlights. Only the moon above them lit their journey.

Rembrandt's eyes, like those of his friends, were constantly in motion, watching everything around him. "I don't get it, man. Who was that Masquerade guy, anyway?"

Wade looked up at the windows of an apartment building they passed. "A hacker. Someone who knows how to break into secure computer systems."

Rembrandt turned and looked behind

them quickly. "How'd he do all that stuff to us?"

Arturo rubbed his left arm and flexed the fingers, cautiously. "In a world like this, where computers are everywhere and control everything, I would imagine that a hacker would wield considerable power."

Maggie shook her head and made a cutting motion with her hand. "This is not good. We should have established a secure stronghold with weapons to defend ourselves for exactly this contingency."

Wade stared at her. "Weapons? You want us to keep weapons in our hotel room? I knew it. You haven't changed a bit. You

still think of this slide as some sort of military operation."

"So what? I told you I got my military training back. If anything, it's even clearer to me now that this operation needs organization and discipline." She punctuated the last words with chops of her hand in the air. "And I don't see what's wrong with that."

Wade rolled her eyes. "The more things change..."

Arturo folded his hands behind his back and glared at the sidewalk beneath his feet. "I think at this point, our priority should be to get off the street and find out what is

so important about this disk that this fellow Masquerade is willing to kill for it."

Wade folded her arms and looked at the others. "Great. Where we gonna go to do that?"

Rembrandt snapped his fingers and pointed at her. "I got an idea."

\* \* \*

Rembrandt pushed the button labeled "Pamela Walker." After a moment, a thin voice emerged from the speaker. "Hello?"

Rembrandt glanced at the others standing outside the apartment building, then spoke

into the microphone. "It's me, Rembrandt Brown. I...I delivered a pizza to you this morning."

A few seconds passed, then the voice came again. Quieter. "Yes. I remember. So?"

"Well, look...this is kinda awkward, but...me and my friends... we need help."

Pamela's voice was scratchy through the battered speaker. "What help?"

"A place to stay. Access to a computer..."

"No." Pamela's voice grew louder. "No, go away. Leave me alone."

Rembrandt looked back at the others. Wade closed her eyes and turned away to face the street. Arturo shook his head. Maggie folded her arms and glared up at him.

Rembrandt seemed to deflate as he turned back to the speaker. "Look...I know this must be strange to you, but we've really got no place else to go. I got this disk somehow and there's this guy after us named Masquerade or something..."

Pamela's voice burst out of the speaker. "Did you say Masquerade?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I did."



Silence passed. Then the door buzzed. Rembrandt pushed it open and looked back at the others.

"This should be interesting," Arturo murmured as he followed Rembrandt into the building.

\* \* \*

The door to Pamela's apartment opened a crack. Her small eye peered out at Rembrandt, then looked past him to Quinn, Wade, Maggie, and Arturo.

"Friends?" Pamela asked.

Rembrandt nodded and gestured towards

the others. "Yeah, they're in trouble, just like me."

"With Masquerade."

"Yeah."

Pamela looked at each of them in turn. Quinn and the others put on broad, non-threatening smiles. After a few tense seconds, the door closed. Soft clicks followed of the locks being disengaged.

Pamela pulled the door open wide. She was still wearing the oversized T-shirt and worn jeans. Her bare feet shuffled on the carpet, her toes digging into the fibers like fingers curling into fists. She looked up at

Rembrandt with her wide brown eyes.

They walked into the apartment, one by one. Wade looked around the apartment, then down at Pamela, watching her close the door behind them.

"You live here?" Wade asked. "All by yourself?"

Pamela turned the locks, facing away from her, as she nodded.

"Wow." Wade looked at Quinn, who shrugged slightly. "That's awful."

Pamela glared at Wade. "Didn't ask for pity. You ran into a hacker named

Masquerade?"

Maggie folded her arms. "That's right. I assume you've heard of him."

Pamela strode past them all to go down the hallway leading to her bedroom. "Everybody's heard of him. Don't you watch the news?"

The Sliders followed her into the darkened bedroom, glowing with the light of her computers. Three of them were lit up this time, two of them displaying Flying Toasters screensavers.

Arturo's eyes lit up. "I say, I don't suppose I could check my email. I'm expecting a

very important..."

Wade slapped his stomach with the back of her hand and glared up at him. "Max...not now."

Arturo cleared his throat and tried to look more stern. "Uh, yes. Of course. Some other time."

Pamela crawled onto her bed and dropped into a cross-legged seat in front of one of her computers. She moved the mouse to halt the screensaver and brought up her web browser.

Typing as she spoke, Pamela brought up a new webpage. "Masquerade is the most

powerful computer hacker in the world. Nobody knows who he is or where he came from, but he's on the FBI.Com's Ten Most Wanted List. As number one."

The webpage came up as a stark green page with plain lettering that read "The Masquerade Home Page." There was an image of the silhouette they had all seen in their hotel room on the page, as well as a flurry of text. There was also an ad banner at the top of the page for Hanes Underwear.

Pamela looked over her shoulder at the others. "Masquerade has backdoor entry into virtually every major computer database in the world, giving him control

over everything. He's also a terrorist. This is his website."

Wade leaned closer to read the text aloud. "I am Masquerade. I hide behind the mask of technology to show you all the folly of your ways. This world must end. Purity must prevail. I will bring down the Internet and build a stronger society...'  
He's a Luddite?"

Pamela nodded. "He believes the Internet is evil and is trying to destroy it from within."

"Using the Internet." Maggie rolled her eyes. "We got ourselves a real live one here."

Pamela faced her computer again and brought up a large screen of plain green text. She began to type a long string of characters. "I took a special interest in Masquerade. He uses a password decryption program to hack into his targets. I think it's a program I created that he modified. I've been studying his tactics to develop a program he couldn't crack."

Pamela sighed. "Problem is that Masquerade always kept a low profile and I had trouble finding him. Some of his hacks didn't even show up until weeks later when the trail was cold. And some of his will probably never show up."



Pamela finished typing, then leaned away from the computer. "But you say Masquerade is after you. And there must be a reason why if Masquerade is willing to show himself to get you. Which means I can get to him through you. This might be the break I'm looking for."

Pamela turned herself around on the bed to face Rembrandt. "You mentioned a disk?"

Rembrandt nodded and fished around in his jacket pocket until he produced the disk. Pamela took it from his outstretched hand and slipped it into one of her computers.

The screen switched from Flying Toasters to a long flowing stream of text. Then a window came up that said "Encryption Detected. Standby..."

Pamela muttered to herself. "Figures. The contents of the disk are encrypted...wait...Rembrandt, where'd you get this?"

"I dunno," Rembrandt said. "I think somebody must've slipped it in my bag while I was on my route. Why?"

Pamela pushed some buttons. A large symbol of an eagle with its wings spread and a computer clutched in its talons began to flash on the screen. She pointed

at it. "This is a U.S. government encryption key from the National Security Agency. Level Ultra. Whatever is on this disk belongs to the government."

Pamela climbed off the bed and stretched. "I'll have this decrypted in a few minutes. When we know what Masquerade is after, we can plan our next move. Now I need to know exactly what happened to you."

Rembrandt nodded. "Sure, we'll fill you in."

Wade moved closer to the computers. "Uh, could I stay here and take a look at your setup? I'm a hacker myself, and I have a feeling I could learn a few things."

"Sure. The computer on the left." Pamela walked out of the bedroom into the living room.

Rembrandt, Maggie, and Arturo followed her out. Quinn hung back, watching Wade drag a chair over to the unoccupied computer and begin typing.

Quinn glanced over at the others, then walked over to Wade, his hands in his pockets. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

Wade studied the monitor as she said, "Sure. What's up?"

Quinn leaned against the bed next to the

computers. "I just wanted to know what you thought of the new Maggie."

Wade's fingers hovered over the keyboard, then began to type. "She's a little calmer. Not as rude. But she still has an attitude problem."

"Yeah, she does. But maybe now she'll get over it."

"Maybe." Wade typed a little more.

Quinn looked down at the floor as he said, "Wade...me and Maggie had a little talk, too. Not just here, but a couple worlds back when we got separated. We decided...it's over between us."

Wade slowed in her typing. "Really."

"Yeah. We both agreed that it wouldn't work out. It was wrong from the beginning, and Maggie thinks it was just her other personality at work anyway. So we're just friends now, the way it should be."

Wade nodded, keeping her eyes fixed on the computer in front of her. "That's good. I think you two wouldn't have made a good couple, anyway."

Quinn looked up at her, studying the back of her head. "Yeah. And I was just wondering...where that leaves us."

Wade stopped typing. She was frozen, tense, staring at nothing on the screen. Then she turned slowly in her chair to stare at Quinn. Her eyes were wide, but soft. She rested a hand on the back of her chair as she looked deeply into Quinn's eyes. Then she spoke.

"Quinn...I think we..."

The computer next to her chimed and began to flash and speak aloud the message "File decryption complete. Now displaying contents."

The bedroom door flew open and Pamela charged in, followed by Maggie, Arturo,

and Rembrandt.

Pamela crawled onto the bed and typed on the computer. "Let's see what we've got."

Wade quickly got to her feet and moved away from Quinn. Quinn himself looked down at the floor again and hunched his shoulders.

Maggie and Arturo watched Pamela work. Only Rembrandt looked at Wade, then at Quinn. And Rembrandt narrowed his eyes, setting his lips tightly as he studied the two of them.

Pamela's work brought up a window that filled with text and graphics. Her eyes were



constantly in motion, studying it. They widened.

"No," she said. "This can't be right."

Maggie leaned closer to examine the screen. "What is it?"

"A...computer virus."

Wade folded her arms. "So?"

"Computer viruses are illegal. A misdemeanor to even allow one on your computer system. A felony to make one, punishable by life in prison or death."

Maggie blinked. "Death? Isn't that a little

extreme?"

Wade looked at her. "Not really. Remember where we are. With the Internet as widespread as it is here, a simple virus could take down the whole thing. It would be really dangerous."

Pamela nodded. "But this isn't an ordinary virus. Looks like it was made by the government. I'm guessing it was part of some research program into anti-virus tactics. Someone must have stolen a copy from a government lab. Masquerade must have been behind that. No one else could do it."

"So what's so special about it?"

Pamela pointed to the screen, where a graphic of a mailbox opening and closing showed. "This virus can be spread by email."

Wade's jaw dropped a little. "You don't mean...you mean it can be attached to email, right?"

"No, I mean it can be turned into an email message itself. And all it takes to activate it is for someone to read it with a standard email program."

"I don't believe it." Wade turned away, rubbing her face with a hand, as if exhausted.

Maggie spread her hands. "Excuse me, could someone explain to us technological Neanderthals what the big deal is?"

Wade shook her head, then said, "Okay, the big deal is that normally computer viruses can only be spread by attaching them to computer programs. Something that needs to be started by the user, like a game or something. But with email... they could send a copy of this virus to every email address in the world...every person in the world...instantaneously."

Pamela nodded. "And they wouldn't have to do anything but read their messages. This could infect every computer in the

world in a few hours. That's why Masquerade wanted it."

Wade began to pace the room. "This virus could shut down hospitals, power plants, traffic lights, everything. The whole world could grind to a halt."

Rembrandt looked at the others. "So what'll we do now?"

Quinn straightened and said, "I think we should..."

Maggie interrupted, chopping the air with a hand. "We should contact the proper authorities. If this virus-thing was stolen from a government lab, then they're

probably looking for it. They can take over and Masquerade will be out of our hair."

Pamela nodded and moved to her computer to bring up her web browser and access 911.Com. "Good idea."

Maggie looked over at Quinn, who was glaring at her. "What?"

There was a beep. Pamela's fingers flew on the keyboard, then she said, "It's an email from the FBI's Computer Crime Division. They got my message, and they're sending a car down to pick up the disk and take us to headquarters for debriefing."

Wade raised her eyebrows and looked up at

Quinn. "Wow, the feds work fast in this world."

The chirping wail of a siren rang out. Quinn went to the window and drew back the thick curtains to look outside.

A dusty brown sedan was pulling up to the curb in front of the building. A bubblelight flashed blue and red on the top of the car.

Quinn looked at the others. "They're here."

Pamela popped the disk out of the computer and held it out. "Here's the disk. Take it. I can't go outside."

Arturo took the disk from her and headed out of the bedroom. "Excellent. The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can get back to my email."

Wade jogged out of the room after him. "Hey, don't you remember, Max? Your computer burned up in the fire."

Arturo's voice bellowed out from the living room. "Oh, blast! You're right. We'll have to return to Lamplighter.Com after this..."

Quinn walked out of the bedroom, followed by Maggie, who was walking after him with a puzzled frown. She shook her head, then said, "Hey, Quinn, something's



bugging me..."

Rembrandt waited until they were out of the room, then looked at Pamela. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, staring up at him with her large brown eyes.

"You sure you don't wanna come with us?" Rembrandt asked.

Pamela nodded.

Rembrandt looked back at the others, then down at Pamela again. "You know...you don't have to live like this. I know the world is scary sometimes, but this ain't the way to get past that. Everybody needs people. Real people, not ones on a screen."

Pamela lowered her eyes. "I know."

Rembrandt sighed, then said, "Well...look...I gotta go straighten this out. But thanks for all the help. And if you don't mind, I wanna come back and talk to you some more. I'm only here for a few more days, but I have a feelin' you could use a friend."

Pamela tugged idly at one of her toes. "Okay."

Rembrandt nodded, then slowly walked out of the room. Pamela was left alone, surrounded by her computers.

Then one of the computers began to flash an icon shaped like an envelop. A cheerful voice said, "You've got mail."

\* \* \*

Arturo walked briskly out of the apartment building towards the police car idling on the curb. Wade hurried down the steps after him, watching the car closely.

"Hey, slow down, Max," Wade said. "We should wait for the others to catch up."

Arturo charged towards the door of the car. "Miss Welles, I for one am quite eager to have this business resolved as quickly as possible."

"So am I, but we gotta stick together."

"I am well-aware of that, Miss Welles."  
The car door swung open, and Arturo climbed into the backseat. "But we are hardly running a marathon..."

Wade froze as she looked behind the wheel of the car. There was no one there. "Hey...what's going on..."

Quinn and Maggie came running out of the apartment building, yelling and waving their arms.

"Get away!" Maggie screamed. "It's a trick!"

Arturo looked out the open door at her.  
"What?"

The door slammed shut. The tires squealed, pouring smoke, as the police car shot away from the curb. It roared off down the street. Through the back window, Arturo could be seen yelling and pounding the glass with his fists. Then the car screeched around the corner and was gone.

Quinn and Maggie ran up to stand alongside Wade, both gasping for breath. Wade was coughing and waving a hand in the air against the smoke that drifted over her.

Quinn looked down the street, then grunted with frustration. "We lost him."

Wade looked up at him. "What's going on? What happened?"

"We just got an email from the FBI," Quinn said. "The real FBI. They told us to stay inside and not go out...because Masquerade had stolen one of the Bureau's remote vehicles."

Wade stared up at him, then looked around the corner where smoke drifted from the burned strips of pavement on the road. "Then that means...Masquerade has the Professor."

Maggie nodded as she shielded her eyes against the sun with a hand. "Yeah. And the virus."

\* \* \*

Arturo pounded on the back window a few more times with his fist, screaming "Get me out of here! What is the meaning of this?"

Then he turned around to face forward. He stared at the steering wheel of the car, rolling from side to side all by itself to keep the car on course. He was shielded from it by a metal grating over the back of the front seat. Sliding his fingers into the

mesh, Arturo gave it an experimental tug. It held firm.

Arturo looked around the interior of the car. "What is this..."

A screen unfolded from the dashboard of the car above the steering wheel. It lit up with a face silhouetted against snowy-white static.

"Hello, Maximillian Arturo," the face said.

Arturo glared at it. "Hello, Masquerade. And what is the purpose of this little kidnapping you've staged?"

"That disk in your hand."



Arturo looked down at the computer disk. "Ah, yes. Your precious virus. And I suppose you expect me to hand it over to you just like that, eh?"

"You will give it to me," Masquerade said. "I'm the puppetmaster that controls the strings of the world."

Arturo's face darkened as he set it in a firm scowl. "No, you are not. You cannot control me, you blistering idiot. I'm flesh and blood. I'm not a computer. You may be able to take over this car, but you cannot force me to act against my will."

Arturo wiggled the disk in the air. "For

example. You want this virus. And it is simplicity itself for me to deny you possession of it by dropping it on the floor..."

Arturo dropped the disk on the floor and raised his shoe. "And crushing it..."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Arturo let his foot linger in the air. "And how do you propose to stop me?"

Masquerade sighed, then said, "Well, let's see. You're in the back of a speeding car going sixty miles an hour... in fact, let's make it...oh, a hundred..."

Arturo was thrown back as the car picked up speed. His eyes rolled wildly as the city rushed by the windows.

"Now," Masquerade said, "what if I told you that if you crush that disk, I'll aim that car at a brick wall?"

The car skidded around a corner and headed down a blind alley. A brick wall hurtled towards the front windshield.

Masquerade continued in his calm, deep voice. "A brick wall that will collapse on impact into the apartment of a young single mother of three. Named...Laura Hague, according to my records. With her sons Jason and Marcus, and her daughter

Stephanie. The daughter is three months old."

The car screamed towards the wall, every bump in the road sending the vehicle bouncing wildly. Arturo gripped the wire mesh in front of him, his eyes wide.

"All right," he gasped, then yelled, "All right! I won't crush the disk!"

The car's brakes engaged. Arturo was thrown forward into the mesh, crushing his face against it. The entire alley rang with the squeals of the tires on the road. Smoke poured from underneath them. The car tipped forward. It skidded to a piercing halt and came to rest inches away from the

wall.

Arturo pried himself off the mesh divider and stared at the glowing screen.

Masquerade's silhouette nodded. "Very good. Now pick it up."

Arturo looked down at the disk under his heel.

The car's engine revved as Masquerade spoke again in his inhumanly deep voice. "I said, pick it up."

Arturo reached down with a trembling hand and picked up the disk. He held it up in full view of the monitor. "There. See?"

I've done it. The disk is intact."

"Very good, Arturo."

The car lurched as it slowly backed out of the alley. When it was in the street, its wheels turned and the car rolled off again on its journey.

Arturo glared at the flickering monitor as it said, "You see, little puppet? I control the Internet. That's why I control the world...and everyone in it."

The car roared off down the lonely streets of San Francisco as it was filled with the deep booming laughter of Masquerade.

\* \* \*

Smoke was pouring up from a trashcan on the sidewalk that belched flames into the air. Around it, a family huddled, wrapped in blankets. A grubby young man was spooning a thin soup into bowls that he passed down to his children. The young mother was trying to calm a baby nestled in dirty rags in her arms that wouldn't stop crying.

The sedan rolled slowly along the battered concrete of a desolate street. All around it, houses and shops stood crumbled. A sign marked Fresh Seafood hung over the shop's doorway, bent and pocked with bulletholes. A man in rags was huddled

there in the door, shivering slightly.

Arturo leaned close to the window, watching a woman in tattered clothes shuffling along the sidewalk. "Where are we?"

Masquerade flickered on the screen, his somber voice resonating through the interior of the car. "The underpass of the information superhighway. These people are the houses that got bulldozed to pave the way for the so-called technological revolution."

The car rolled past two men yelling and wrestling with each other. Clutched between them, being yanked back and



forth, was a dented can of tomato soup.

"They're those without computers," Masquerade sighed. "Some were too old to learn the new ways, others lacked the technical skill, others just didn't catch up fast enough. But most of them are people from homes where food was what they needed most, not computers. Schools where they couldn't afford glass for the windows, much less T3 connections. So as the Internet took over, they were forced out. And they live here in these ghettos, cut off from the information, the entertainment, and the jobs that the techno-fascist elite take for granted."

Arturo's frown deepened as he watched the

slums roll by. "Quite disturbing."

"That's one way of putting it."

The sedan pulled off the road to the curb of a crumbling apartment building. The building was flanked on both sides by rubble-filled lots. The engine switched off and the door of the car swung open on its own. Arturo looked up at the building, where sheets of plastic ruffled over the shattered windows.

"I take it this is our destination," Arturo murmured.

Masquerade's image flickered. "Yes. Get out and walk in through the front door.

And don't try anything, otherwise I'll have to give you another show of my power."

"I believe I've learned my lesson. For now."  
Arturo climbed out of the sedan. The car door slammed shut behind him. He looked down at it, then headed up to the front door of the building.

\* \* \*

The apartment building was gutted from years of fires and neglect. The floor of the upper levels were mostly torn or burned away. Sunlight shone down in beams through holes that could be seen through all the way from the roof down to the ground floor. The ground floor was the

only one left intact. And it was occupied.

As Arturo pulled open the door, sunlight fell into the room onto piles of machinery. Metal boxes were scattered everywhere, interconnected by a spiderweb of wires and cables. The web's center was a large, battered armchair. Its back was turned to Arturo and the front door. The chair faced a semi-circle of monitors that showed a dizzying variety of images. On one, a 3-D model of the world revolved. On another, images of various cities labeled "Paris" and "Chicago" cycled, one after the other. On yet another, nothing but endless rows of text swept past.

Arturo faced the ragged back of the

armchair with a frown. He gripped the disk in his hand tighter as a soft voice emerged from the chair.

It said, "Glad you could join me, Mr. Arturo. Gimme a second, I'll make us more comfortable."

There was a click, followed by a beep. Behind Arturo, a metal door slammed into place over the wooden one he had walked through. Beside him, metal gratings rattled down over the windows, then locked into place.

Hums over his head drew Arturo's attention upwards. And he saw machine guns being aimed away from him and

towards the ceiling.

"Can't be too careful with security," the person in the armchair said. "I'm the most wanted human being on the planet, you know."

Arturo took a few steps forward. "Masquerade? Is that you?"

"Yes. It's me." The armchair swiveled on its base, turning to face Arturo.

A young boy looked up at Arturo, overwhelmed by the size of the chair he was in. His feet, clad in small but expensive shoes, didn't even touch the floor. In an Italian suit tailored to his size,

the boy looked older than the seven-year-old Arturo guessed him to be. And his eyes held a weariness that normally took decades to acquire.

"I'm Masquerade," the boy said.

Arturo's frown deepened. "A child?"

The boy smiled and leaned back in his chair. "Don't be fooled by appearances, Mr. Arturo. I'm a product of my environment. I was born in the Age of the Internet. Computers were my parents, instead of my real ones who were too busy with their own lives to care about me. I'm not even sure they noticed when I ran away from home to this place."

Masquerade surveyed the hollow interior of the building. His voice echoed slightly off the walls. "I learned to type before I learned to talk. I was browsing the Web before I learned to walk. There was a time when it would have taken a decade for someone to master the art of computer hacking. But with my mind and the resources of the Net, I was hacking into the White House on my third birthday. And once I had that control, I didn't need parents. With a few hacks into a clothing supply store, I got this suit. A few more, I got all this equipment. Computers are my life."

Arturo clasped his hands behind his back



and began to walk around the young boy, slowly. "And so you've decided to destroy them?"

Masquerade followed him with his piercing blue eyes. "I've decided to destroy the impersonal society that computers have created. A society where people don't relate to each other except through a phone line. Not even with their own kids."

"But you've chosen the medium of computers to bring that about. Somewhat ironic." Arturo glared at one of the monitors showing a wireframe model of the White House.

The boy's smile widened. "Isn't it? I'm a

living example of what technology can do. With every hack, I show how weak the infrastructure really is. How much control we've given up to these soulless machines. I'm going to make them sorry they ever heard of a modem. And hurt them so badly that they'll tear down the Internet, and no one will ever touch a keyboard again."

Arturo stopped with a sigh. He settled his gaze onto Masquerade. "My boy, I wish I could say you have good intentions, but even that escapes you. I agree that this world seems to have lost sight of its humanity, but I have also seen first-hand the power of the Internet. The resources it can hold for people like me...and you.

When used wisely. And listening to you, I see that you do not care about people or humanity. You only care about yourself and your narrow world-view."

Masquerade smiled up at him dryly. "Whatever. I'll take that disk now."

Arturo looked at the disk in his hand. "And of course, you can make me give it to you."

Masquerade leaned over the arm of his chair and punched keys on one of his keyboards. The machine guns mounted on the beams of the roof whined as they snapped down to aim at Arturo.

Arturo stared at the guns glinting down at him. And swallowed. "That's what I thought."

\* \* \*

Maggie paced the floor of Pamela's bedroom, her arms folded across her chest. As she walked, Maggie shook her head and muttered, "I dunno about this. We should be doing something, not just sitting around."

Pamela was sitting hunched over the keyboard of one of her computers. Wade was peering over her shoulder, but looked up to glare at Maggie.

"We are doing something," Wade said.  
"We're fighting fire with fire. Masquerade got us with computers. It's time we used computers to fight back."

Pamela stopped typing and pointed at her computer screen. "Okay, I think I got it."

Rembrandt leaned over her other shoulder.  
"Got what?"

"Managed to access the logs of the FBI. Tracked down Masquerade's hack into the system to steal the car. He ran the signal through Germany, Hong Kong, and Paris. And he used an encryption routine to hide his tracks. But I managed to identify the fake ID he used. It's..."

Wade pointed at the screen. "No, wait...look at the time log. If Masquerade was using all those reflectors, there would have been a greater lag. But these response times are too fast. This one must be a smokescreen. Let me see the list of users again."

Pamela glanced up at Wade. Then she turned back to her computer and clicked the mouse pointer through a series of menu. Text scrolled past.

Wade pointed to one. "There. Max Jerod. Check that."

Pamela typed. Then nodded. "That's it."

That's Masquerade."

Rembrandt clapped Wade on the shoulder.  
"Hey, good thinkin', sweetheart."

Wade smiled at him, then nodded at the computer. "Okay, what've you got, Pam?"

"The set of instructions Masquerade sent to the car by remote. And the address the car was driven to." Pamela punched a key.

A computer graphic filled the monitor with an image of the FBI sedan. It overlapped an image of San Francisco, along with a red line that traced itself through the streets. It finally stopped on one location that blinked as a red box. The

box swelled into a three-dimensional cube that rotated on the screen.

"Was an old apartment building," Pamela said. "Records show it was condemned and demolished two years ago."

Wade folded her arms and glared at the screen. "But I'll bet it wasn't. Another one of Masquerade's little tricks. Can you check the U.S. postal service and delivery companies and see if they made any deliveries to this place?"

Pamela nodded and typed quickly. After a moment, the box "Restricted Access" flashed on the screen. Pamela typed some more and the box was replaced by the



words "Access Granted." Then text scrolled by, along with the logo of the U.S. Post Office.

"Good thinking," Pamela murmured. "There have been four hundred deliveries to this location in the last two years...the first a month after the building was supposed to have been demolished."

Pamela nodded as her eyes roamed the screen. "Most of these orders are computer hardware and software. This is definitely Masquerade's work. He's been building a supercomputer."

"How'd he pay for it all?" Rembrandt asked.

Wade shook her head. "He's a hacker, Remmy. He didn't have to pay for it. Probably forged credit accounts and stole everything he wanted."

Pamela highlighted some entries on the list with her mouse's pointer. "But...some of these don't make sense. Infrared sensors, semiautomatic weapons, liquid nitrogen, sheets of titanium, sirens..."

Maggie sat down on the bed behind Pamela to look at the computer's screens. "It makes sense. If you're building a security system to protect that fancy supercomputer. And yourself. This is serious hardware. If I'm reading this right,

he must have that place set up to make Fort Knox look like a piggy bank."

"Guess he didn't wanna take any chances," Rembrandt said.

Quinn looked from Wade to Maggie and back again. "So what's it mean?"

Rembrandt sighed as he said, "It means we ain't getting the professor or that virus back so easy."

"Can't we just call the police and let them handle it?"

Wade dropped onto the bed, causing it to bounce slightly. "We've seen how

Masquerade handles the fire department, the police, and the FBI. He must have every government agency in the country wrapped around his little finger with those computers of his."

Maggie crossed her arms over her lap. "Not to mention the fact that right now we have the advantage of surprise. If we tell anyone we know where Masquerade is, and he finds out about it...there's no telling what he could do."

Quinn ran his fingers through his unkempt brown hair. "So it's up to us."

"Exactly." Maggie sprang off the bed onto her feet and began to pace again. "Okay,

we need to figure out the goals of our mission."

"We have to save the professor," Wade said.

Maggie looked down at her as she walked past. "That's right. But we also have to accept the fact that Arturo...might be dead by now."

Wade followed Maggie with her eyes. "You can accept that, but I can't."

"I know." Maggie looked away from Wade to glare at the computers by Pamela's bed. "That maniac also has the virus. This whole world is at stake. He might already have deployed it by now."

Pamela crossed her legs under herself as she shook her head. "No. I don't think so. I decrypted the virus so quickly because I wrote the government software that encrypted it in the first place. Even with the most advanced equipment like he has, I'd say it would take Masquerade at least two hours."

Rembrandt leaned against the back of a chair. "Two hours. It's been a half-hour already. We ain't got much time."

Maggie stopped pacing. "You're right, Brown. We'll need to work fast. Okay, we'll need some equipment. Pamela, see if you can find us a hardware store or

something nearby on that thing, will you? Brown, take this down. We'll need about thirty feet of rope, some copper wiring and alligator clips..."

Quinn raised his hands as he approached her. "Hey, hey, hey, wait a minute. Since when are you giving the orders around here?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mallory." Maggie tilted her head to one side as she turned to look at him. "I forgot you're the boss in this outfit. What's the matter? I step on your toes?"

"Nobody's the boss here. We're a team. And you didn't 'step on my toes.' I just

don't think you should be bossing us around like you're in charge."

Maggie chopped the air with her hand. "Look, we don't have time for this, okay? I was an intelligence officer. It was my job to infiltrate high-security installations like what Masquerade has set up. And if I miss my guess, he has some pretty lethal systems in that place, not something an amateur should fool around with. So if anybody's gonna go in there and rescue the Professor and get that virus, it'll have to be me. Correct?"

Quinn glanced over his shoulder at Rembrandt and Wade standing behind him. They looked back at him with blank



expressions. Quinn tightened his jaw as he looked back at Maggie, stared at her for a moment, then growled, "Yeah."

"And if it's my butt on the line out there, I need total cooperation to pull this off. So I call the shots. Correct?"

Quinn glanced at Pamela, who had him fixed in a blank stare. Then he said, "Yeah."

Maggie smiled. "Good. Then, as I was saying, I'll need thirty feet of rope, some copper wiring..."

\* \* \*

Maggie rolled through the bare and desolate streets on Rembrandt's bicycle. She was a moving shadow dressed in black pants, shirt, and gloves, wearing a black ski mask pulled over her blond hair. Her riding was thrown slightly off-balance by the large and heavy knapsack slung over one shoulder.

She braked to a halt and glared at the battered apartment building ahead of her. A sedan was parked in front, the same sedan that had kidnapped Arturo.

Maggie reached up and brushed the edge of the ski mask away from her ear. Then she whispered into the cuff of her sleeve. "Okay, I'm at the address. I see the

building. You were right, Wells, it wasn't demolished, after all."

A small earpiece lodged in Maggie's ear whispered back in Wade's voice, "I knew it."

\* \* \*

Wade and Pamela were sitting side-by-side on the bed, each facing one of Pamela's computers. Both of them typed quickly as they watched jerky video clips on their monitors of Maggie's point of view. Standing behind them, Quinn and Rembrandt watched nervously.

Wade touched the headset around her ears

that connected to a microphone in front of her mouth. "Okay, Beckett, you should be at the junction. It's got to be under the pavement around there somewhere."

\* \* \*

Maggie nodded and slung the knapsack off her shoulder. "Got it."

She glanced around, then dug through the pack until she found a crowbar. Maggie climbed off the bike, braced her feet, and jammed the end of the crowbar into a crack in the sidewalk. Prying up a square of concrete exposed a network of wiring and cables.

"Now what?" Maggie whispered.

Pamela's voice filled her ear. "A large grey cable with the serial number GHS-2345. That's what we want."

Maggie knelt by the open pavement as she drew out a length of wires from the knapsack. The wires ended in alligator clips that Maggie took in each hand. After studying the cables running through the hole in the concrete, she clipped the wires onto one of them.

Maggie stepped away from it. "Done."

\* \* \*

Wade's screen blinked with the words "Interface Successful." Then text and colors flowed by. She smiled and began to type as she said, "We're in."

Pamela nodded. "I'm bypassing the first security system now. You're on the second."

"Gotcha."

Rembrandt watched them work. "What's goin' on?"

Wade smiled, but kept her eyes on the screen. "It's time we turned the tables on this guy. Maggie made a direct connection to the line Masquerade is using for his

computer. He hacks other computers, now we're hacking his computer."

"First system down," Pamela snapped.

Wade nodded. "Second system down. Coming to the third security block. It's password-protected. Eighteen-digit code. I'm skipping it, gonna see if I can go around it. Must be an Easter egg in here somewhere."

"On the fourth system, encryption. Running a decrypter. Better get ready. There must be a warning system in here somewhere."

Wade typed furiously. "I hope not. But if

Masquerade does show up, maybe the two of us together can beat him."

"Maybe," Pamela whispered.

Wade froze as her screen lit up with pleasant colors and text. "That's it. We're in."

Pamela nodded, still typing on her keyboard. "Pull up a schematic of the security system. I'll see if I can stop Masquerade from finishing the decryption."

"Come on," Quinn whispered.

Wade watched a three-dimensional



wireframe model of the apartment building appear on her screen. Red dots blinked on key points on the building. Labels appeared on them marked "cameras" and "sensors." She blinked, then whispered, "Whoa."

\* \* \*

Maggie watched the building from across the street, touching her earpiece with a finger. "Come on, guys, what've you got?"

Wade's voice crackled softly. "Well, we've got iron bars on all the windows, all the way up to the fourth floor. The walls have all been reinforced with sheets of solid titanium. The only door is reinforced with

a second door made of three inches of steel. And the entire building is surrounded by a network of infrared and motion sensors. But that's not the best part. All over the building, Masquerade has machine guns set up to target and fire on any intruder they detect, inside or outside."

"Terrific." Maggie rested her hands on her hips as she glared at the apartment building. Her eyes drifted over to the building next to it, separated by an empty lot choked with weeds. She blinked. "Hey...what about the roof? Any defense there?"

After a moment, Wade said, "Well,

according to this, there's nothing on the roof except a camera and a locked skylight. But the nearest buildings are too far away to reach it."

"Don't bet on that. That's how I'm getting in. Can you guys do something about the camera, guns, and motion sensors?"

"We'll try."

"Good. Go for it." Maggie picked up her knapsack and sprinted across the street to one of the buildings looming alongside Masquerade's.

\* \* \*

Wade glanced over to her side. "How's it coming, Pam?"

Pamela frowned at a screen which showed a dizzying stream of letters and numbers pouring by. "Farther along the decryption than I expected. Managed to put a bug or two into his program to slow him down, but he'll be done in fifteen minutes."

"Then we have to work fast. This whole security system is run by his computers. We have to shut it down for Maggie without drawing Masquerade's attention. We'll have to work together, two against one."

Pamela hunched over her keyboard. "I'll

handle the roof camera. You handle the motion sensors that would be triggered by your friend."

Wade smirked. "Oh, great. Give me the hard job."

\* \* \*

The trapdoor on the roof swung open with a bang. Maggie climbed up through it, squinting against the blowing wind and afternoon sun. She looked across to Masquerade's building in the distance.

As she pulled herself up, Maggie asked, "How's it going?"

"We're working on the camera. Pam's going to set it on a continuous loop so Masquerade won't see you. Once I get the motion sensors down, it should be clear sailing for you."

Maggie hurried across the roof and slung her knapsack off her shoulder. She drew out of it a length of heavy rope that ended in grappling hooks. Standing at the roof's edge, Maggie swung the hook through the air in a wide circle, then let it go. The hook whistled across the vast divide between the two buildings, then landed onto the opposite roof. Maggie pulled on the rope until the hook dug itself in.

Maggie hooked the other end of the rope

onto the open trapdoor in her roof. Then she pulled a pulley device out of the knapsack. Maggie jogged back to the edge of the roof and looked down at the four-story drop that awaited her.

"Okay," she said, "I'm going for it."

She hung the pulley onto the rope stretching across. It had two handles that Maggie took hold of. Leaning over the edge, she took a deep breath, then pushed off.

Maggie rolled down the rope towards Masquerade's rooftop, legs dangling below her. The ground swept below her as the apartment building hurtled closer. As she

did, a siren began to wail.

"What's going on?" Maggie yelled.

\* \* \*

In Pamela's bedroom, her computer were flashing red backgrounds and beeping sirens. Wade and Pamela typed at a frenzied pace, closing down windows that popped up on the screen.

"It's Masquerade," Wade said into her microphone. "We're busted."

\* \* \*

Arturo sat in a wobbly chair with ropes



wound around his chest, along his arms to pin them behind his back, and down to his ankles. He glared at the back of the armchair where Masquerade was sitting. On three of the monitors, animated chessboards were at work. Pieces slid across the board in a smooth ballet.

"Three games at once?" Arturo asked.

Masquerade's voice came out of the chair. "Yup. I'm in a tournament with the top three players in the world. None of them know I'm Masquerade, of course. And I find playing only one game at a time boring."

Arturo raised his head slightly. "I say,

exactly what is the point of all this? Why don't you just send out your little virus, kill me, and let us both get on with our lives?"

"I have to decrypt the virus first. That's number one. Number two, I want someone to be here to watch my triumph. You're going to have a front-row seat to the destruction of the technological empire. You should be proud."

"Trust me, I'm in ecstasy," Arturo snarled. "And afterwards, you will release me?"

"Maybe. I haven't decided yet." The pieces on the chessboards moved in one sweeping gesture, then all four boards began giving

off a trilling music. "Checkmate. Um, I mean, checkmates."

The wall of monitors suddenly flooded with a harsh red light. Then, one by one, they began to flash a message that a feminine voice read aloud. "Intruder Alert. Intruder Alert. Unauthorized User."

"What?" The armchair shifted and tiny hands appeared at the sides to type on the massive bank of keyboards. "Who would hack into my computer? What's this... an anomaly in the security logs. Someone's running a continuous loop on the roof camera."

The clicking of keys followed. Then one of

the screens lit up with a shot of the roof. The camera turned to show Maggie sliding down a rope towards it.

"Well, well, well, the cavalry arrives. But just one person? That's a let-down. I thought the moment when someone finally tracked me down and tried to get through my defenses would be more exciting. Oh, well, I'll take what I can get." Masquerade began to type, humming to himself.

\* \* \*

The pulley hissed as Maggie rushed down it. She was squinting against the air hitting her face at such a high speed. But she was

able to see as rows of small doors opened up on the side of the building. And the barrels of machine guns came out.

"Guys," Maggie yelled.

\* \* \*

Wade and Pamela were huddled over their keyboards, typing as quickly as their hands could move. On the screens in front of them, windows containing the words "Access Denied" exploded, then shrank, only to be replaced by more.

"We're trying," Wade said, "but Masquerade's locking us out of every system manually. The gun control, motion

sensors, targeting..."

\* \* \*

Maggie tightened her grip on the pulley as she said, "Okay, I'll handle it myself."

She let go.

The guns burst into fire. A storm of bullets flashed through the air, punching holes in the apartment building behind her. Maggie herself was carried through the air by the momentum of her slide to the building in front of her.

Maggie slammed into the wall, the air forced out of her lungs on impact. But she

acted quickly to grab hold of the brickwork and hang on. The guns blazed around her for a few more seconds, then fell silent. They began to turn towards her. But came to a halt. Their motors whined as the guns struggled to reach her, but they weren't designed to fire so close to the building where she was..

Maggie took a few deep breaths, then looked up. An open window was a few feet above her. Maggie grit her teeth and began to climb.

\* \* \*

"Back in," Pamela yelled.

Wade glanced at her. "Great. Now that we're in, what do we do?"

"Have to stop those guns. Even if your friend manages to get inside the building, they'll cut her to ribbons if we don't."

Wade typed as she yelled, "Shut down weapons systems. All of them!"

Pamela shook her head. "Can't. Masquerade is locking me out manually. We're losing it."

Wade glared at the menus on her screen that took the form of yellow boxes. One by one, the boxes turned red and flashed "Access Denied." There was only one box



left that read "Target Identification."

A grin spread across Wade's face. "I got an idea."

Wade typed again, bringing up a new screen that showed a glowing outline of Maggie. Wade clicked on an arrow several times. Another outline of Maggie appeared next to the first, then another and another.

Wade touched the microphone held in front of her mouth. "Okay, Beckett, we can't shut down the guns. But we're sending them multiple signals to confuse them. That's the best we can do."

\* \* \*

"It'll do," Maggie grunted.

She reached the windowsill and tore away the plastic sheet covering the window. Then she grabbed hold of the windowsill desperately with one hand. She pulled herself up.

Maggie was on the third floor. The rotted planks of the floor gaped in front of her. And several machine guns mounted in the corners of the room squealed and turned towards her.

Maggie's eyes widened.

Then there was a chirp. The guns wheeled

around towards the center of the room. Then one of them turned towards its partner and fired. The targeted gun and the wall around it shattered into pieces. Then the other guns began to fire, spinning wildly.

Maggie grinned and hauled herself through the window. She ducked as one of the guns swept its chain of fire towards her, then dove for a hole in the floor. Maggie swung down through the hole onto the second floor.

\* \* \*

Masquerade's frown deepened as he watched his screens. One of them showed

a model of the building's interior. Human figures danced and ran all over it.

"This can't be right," Masquerade said. "I'm detecting hundreds of people up there, but I only hear one. Someone must have duped the signal. Now I'm getting mad."

Masquerade typed quickly. "Your friends won't win, Arturo. I'm switching to heat-sensors."

Arturo smiled. "My friends are more resourceful than you might think."

"Maybe. But I have insurance."  
Masquerade turned his chair so Arturo

could watch him drag out an Uzi from a holster under his desk. "If worse comes to worse, I'll do the job myself."

\* \* \*

Maggie let go and dropped onto the second floor. The guns were firing and whirling all around her. The hole leading down to the first floor was across the room.

"He's switching to heat-sensors," Wade said into her ear. "We can't stop him or confuse the signal! You're on your own!"

Maggie did a series of flips that carried her across the building. The guns struggled to

keep pace with her, rushing around in their metal sockets. Bullets whizzed around her. She finally ducked and did a slide that took her to the edge of the hole. She yanked off her ski mask and looked down the hole into the room below. A network of cables spread across the floor like the threading of a spider web.

\* \* \*

Masquerade glared up at the hole in the ceiling in front of him. "So that's how they want to play."

Arturo began to breathe quicker, then called out, "Look out..."

Masquerade swung his gun around to aim at him. The Uzi seemed too big for the boy to even hold up straight. But it was aimed unflinchingly at Arturo's head. "Shut up. Or I'll do you first. Then I'll erase the medical records in a few hospitals for good measure."

Arturo swallowed, looking slightly pale. Masquerade whirled and aimed the gun at the hole again. Above them, the mass of gun had fallen silent. The only sound was the low hum of the computer's fan.

Then something fell from the hole. Masquerade opened fire. Bullets punched into the ski mask, knocking it off- course until it finally fluttered to the ground.

The ceiling above Masquerade crashed down. He threw up his arms against the rain of plaster and wood splinters that rained down on him. The Uzi flew out of his hands. It clattered onto the floor.

Maggie landed behind his chair. She spun it around and brought up one hand which held one of the machine guns from the rooms above, torn from its base. She aimed it into the chair. For a moment, she was frozen as she looked down at the small boy. Then she glanced away at Arturo. Her gun remained on the child.

"Max?" she asked. "Where's Masquerade?"



Arturo jerked his chin forward. "My dear captain, the elusive super-hacker we seek is right before you. That is Masquerade."

Maggie looked down at the boy again. The child glared up at her and idly brushed off his dusty collar. "This little pip-squeak?"

"I'm ten times smarter than you are," Masquerade snarled.

Maggie lowered her gun slightly. "I don't believe this. I've been jumping all over this place, risking my neck, over this little thing."

"Do not underestimate him, Miss Beckett. He is ingenious and ruthless. I've seen it

with my own eyes. This place is more than enough to support his malicious intentions."

"Then I'll put a stop to that." Maggie swung around and aimed her gun at the wall of monitors.

Masquerade jumped to his feet in the chair, his eyes popping open wide. "No!"

Maggie fired. The monitors exploded one by one in a shower of sparks that pattered onto the floor. She swung her rattling gun around to punch holes into the towers, piles of disks, scanners, speakers, and other assorted hardware scattered around the room. It all went up in a blaze of flames

and lightning. When she finally released the trigger, there was nothing left but smoldering piles of twisted metal.

Masquerade stared at it all with his mouth hanging open. He blinked. Then whispered, "What...have you done..."

Maggie glared down at him. "Pulled the plug. And I'm sure by now the police have been called and are on their way here to handle you."

Wade's voice crackled in her ear. "You bet they are."

Maggie strode over to Arturo and began untying the knots. "Although, as far as I'm

concerned, what this kid needs is a good spanking."

Arturo watched the ropes loosen around him until he could stand up. He massaged his wrists as he shot a look at the boy. Masquerade's attention was still locked on the piles of battered equipment.

"No," Arturo sighed. "What this boy needs is a life."

\* \* \*

## EPILOGUE

Arturo and Wade leaned against the statue of Abraham Lincoln in the park. They

watched as Quinn and Maggie walked along the bank of the nearby lake.

"Well," Arturo said, "with that Masquerade business sorted out, this has been a somewhat calmer week."

Wade looked up at a bird sailing overhead. "Yup. I think I'm gonna kinda miss this world. It was so convenient."

Arturo reached into his pocket and drew out the Lamplighter.Com matchbook he had taken. "Well, I for one shall not. After that little bout of Internet addiction, I'm more determined than ever to stay away from those infernal contraptions. There is such a thing as too much access to

information."

"Well, the way I see it, computers are tools. They're not bad or good. Just how you use 'em."

Arturo turned the matchbook over and over in his fingers. "Perhaps. But I hope the next world is more sensible. I say, what are those two talking about?"

Wade shrugged. "I dunno. But I know what they're not talking about."

Arturo frowned at her. "What's that?"

Wade smiled and watched the bird settling in a nearby tree. It was moving towards

another bird sitting in a nest. "Oh, nothing."

\* \* \*

Quinn sat on his heels, watching a swan floating across the water. Behind him, Maggie was sitting on a bench. She sighed.

"Okay," she said, "so are we gonna talk about this now or not?"

Quinn looked over his shoulder at her. "What?"

Maggie leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees. She smiled at Quinn. "You've been giving me the silent

treatment since we freed Arturo and got back the virus days ago."

"You mean since you freed Arturo and got back the virus," Quinn murmured.

A smile spread across Maggie's face. "That's what I thought. I stole your thunder, didn't I, Mallory?"

Quinn looked back at the swan again. The bird fluttered its wings, then paddled farther away, leaving ripples in its wake. "It's not like that. I just didn't appreciate you taking over the group like that. We're a team. Always have been, always will be."

"Right. Everybody's equal. But like Orwell



said, some people are more equal than others."

Quinn watched the ripples as he said, "I don't get your point."

Maggie leaned back against the bench. "Let's face it, Mallory. You're a scientist. I'm a soldier. When it's time to mess with the wormhole or pull a McGyver, you're in charge. But when it comes time to kick some butt, I'm in charge. And since we seem to spend an awful lot of time kicking butt on our slides..."

Quinn pivoted on his heel to look up at Maggie grinning down at him. "So you wanna take over, is that it?"

Maggie shrugged. "The way I see it, every good team has to have a command structure. And I'm the best qualified to be at the top."

"I think Wade's gonna have a problem with that."

Maggie's smile broadened. "I'll deal with that when it comes. You guys have to face facts. I'm not the same gal I used to be. And there are gonna be some changes."

Quinn glared at her. "Maybe. Then again...maybe not."

Wade's voice carried over to them. "Here

they come!"

Quinn rose to his feet to watch as Rembrandt approached the statue. Walking close by his side, almost touching him, was a young girl huddled in black clothes. It was Pamela, looking around herself wildly through the lenses of large sunglasses.

Wade smiled. "I'm really glad you came."

Pamela looked up at her with her head lowered. "Rembrandt made me."

Rembrandt put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a little squeeze. "I can't make you do anything, girl. I just

gave you a little nudge in the right direction."

Pamela folded her arms over her chest tightly. "I just want you all to know that Rembrandt's told me about your whole sliding thing, and I think you're all crazy."

Quinn shoved his hands into his pockets as he smiled down at her. "But you still came to watch us slide."

Pamela looked over the top of her sunglasses at him. "I came to watch what you think you're sliding. I figure it'll be good for a laugh."

Rembrandt took hold of Pamela's

shoulders and faced her squarely. His eyes met hers intensely. "Look...I know I can't make you get out into the world and stop living through your computer. I can't make the pain you've been through disappear. Although I wish I could. But what I can do is show you somethin' you ain't ever gonna see on a computer screen. And somethin' you'd have missed if you hadn't left it."

Rembrandt looked at Quinn and nodded. Quinn drew the timing device out of his pocket and looked at the display, which counted down from five to four to three to two...

Quinn aimed the timer at the edge of the

lake. He pushed the button. It spat a beam of light out to strike the air. The water of the lake ripped in time with the empty space that rippled until it finally buckled into a circular blue hole.

Pamela's mouth fell open as she watched the hole hovering above the lake, light pouring into its interior.

Maggie walked towards the wormhole and gave Pamela a little wave. "Nice meeting you, kid. Hope the whole get-a-life thing works out for ya." Then she jogged forward a few steps and jumped into the vortex. She disappeared in a flash of light.

Arturo ran forward and followed her into

the light, along with Wade, and Quinn. Only Rembrandt was left behind to face Pamela. He stood there for a moment, his clothes flapping in the wind of the wormhole.

"Don't give up, Pam," Rembrandt yelled over the howling wind. "That's all I ask. Just don't give up."

Then he turned and dove into the vortex. It closed behind him with a rushing noise that abruptly became silence.

Pamela stood there for a moment, staring at the lake where the wormhole had formed. Then she looked down at the swan paddling gracefully across the waters. For a

moment, she was frozen, watching it, then she took slow steps towards the park bench.

Pamela reached down and touched the solid wood of the bench. Then she sank slowly down onto it. When she was seated, Pamela took a deep breath. Her eyes closed. She smiled.

When she opened them, her large eyes turned towards the horizon and the sun that was setting over the trees.

THE END