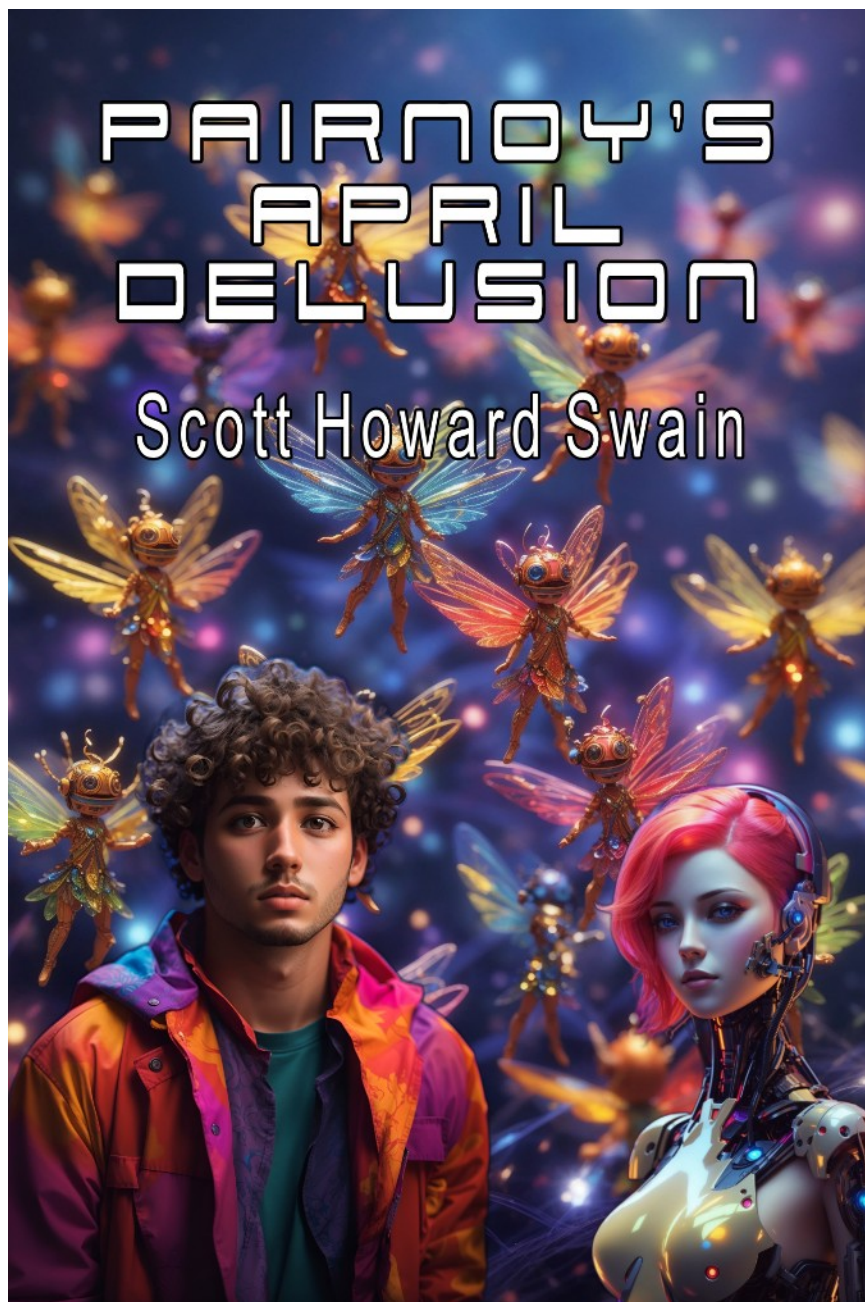


PAIRNOY'S APRIL DELUSION

Scott Howard Swain



**PAIRNOY'S
APRIL
DELUSION**

by Scott Howard Swain

Written from 1990 to 1991

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DEDICATIONS

This book is dedicated to my closest friends and family:

Betty Swain

Cecil & Dolores McPeters

Chris Weaver

Dean Woodley

Donnie F. Glassmyer

Emily Bond

Jeff Radcliff

Gary Swain

Karen Crouse

Kevin Albers

Lance Merkin

Lara Meyer

Leroy & Anita Smith

Michael & Leslie Takeda

Sifu Nick Juarez

Wes Lane

CHAPTER ONE

Singeday

In the beginning there was but one reality, or plane of existence, called the Core. At some point in time the Core shed two nearly identical planes. In each of these mirror realities there was just one small flaw; one thing that was a little different, just slightly warped. These two planes shed two more, each with it's own slight flaws. As time is want to do, it moved on and other planes were spawned that differed more from the Core.

There are a few beings in each plane of existence with the ability to see across the barriers that separate the planes. This interplanar sight is usually quite erratic.

From Pairnoy's Parallel Reality Theory

I was standing ankle deep in water and cooking up a wonderful dish I call Pairnoy's Oatmeal-Catsup Surprise in the kitchen of my lush Elay apartment when I got the phone call that would change my life.

Turning down the heat, I reached for my trusty machete where it hung above the stove. I stumbled through thick, green foliage with machete in hand, to find the phone as it rang for the tenth time.

"Cursed machine!" I yelled to vent some steam. It came out, of course, like a high pitched, whistling sort of sound. Picking up the

telephone, I wondered idly why I had not been swinging the machete and even less idly I raged over the apartment being so damned lush.

Too much water! It makes me steaming mad! Always too much water! I must remember to call that plumber again! The fool never does his job right and I severely suspect he is an imposter.

Well, the weight of the phone seems right, it is definitely no impostor!

Feeling reckless, I decided to answer it. *After all, it could be April calling to say she will be late as she had to stop and buy a new car or some other trivial thing.*

Yes, I thought, a new car is definitely a strong possibility. The brakes on the little Porksbakon Forx she drives are getting dangerously weak and come to think of it, the windshield wiper fluid ran out three days ago and never came back.

April and I met one night just over a year ago and hit it off right away. In fact, while breakfasting together the morning after we met, we decided to get married. We had been living in our apartment at the Aspen Oak Cedars ever since.

After just one month of living together, we settled into a routine of agreeing over very little day after day.

A generous woman, she brought many rules to our marriage. In fact, we carried so many with us on our honeymoon we had little room left for clothes. One might ask, "Who needs clothes on a honeymoon?" April has a rule applying to that, too.

Her rules were precious to her so she was vigilant that we conform to all of them. Not merely insistent, but, yes, vigilant. Once I sought to

question one of her rules. She kindly informed me they were not to be questioned. I can see her now, standing there and wagging her finger at me as if I had been a bad little boy.

She had said something like, "Now I could see you being a trifle curious if I had just picked my rules out of the blue, Paimoy. But these are rules I have always lived by, rules my parents lived by, and their parents. You have to trust that I know what's good for you better than you do. You have to trust that there is *my* way of doing things and all other ways are just plain weird and wrong. Now be a good boy and make sure that is your salad fork you are using before putting that piece of lettuce in your mouth ..."

In the interests of leading a peaceful-as-possible existence, I *was* a good boy most of the time, so people often commented that we were the "perfect married couple ... when you are not at each other's throats."

You might say to yourself, "I can not believe they got together in the first place, much less lasted this long!"

Well, let me add to your disbelief. Not only was she a woman who knew what reality should look like and worked diligently to make it so, but she was quite beautiful, too. Average height; very nice curves; honey colored hair; and soft, brown eyes. Yes, all wrapped up in one package and now I bet you are wondering real hard what she saw in me.

Well, I'm average height myself; not fat or skinny; short, sand colored hair; and a face that is not unduly disproportionate. For a thirty-two year old, I have made quite a name for myself in the computer industry. But upon reflection, I think it was mainly potential and flexibility

that April saw in me. Kind of like when a sculptor selects a lump of clay to work with. I think that is how I became the lucky lump - I mean man.

The phone was ringing for the last time. I picked it up and said, "This is Pairnoy." I listened intently for the click that would give away whatever snooper was listening in.

The voice on the other end was polite and professional. "Mr. De Lusean. This is Dr. Whenjalott at Enguteowtsik Memorial Hospital. I have a grave matter I wish to speak with you on."

A doctor and he needs the ear and advice of a computer programmer? Surely he has many colleagues who would be glad to give him the best of advice on psychological, physiological or probably any other logical topic. After all, he would not be calling me if he were seeking advice about something illogical.

Of course it could be the doctor has a computer at home and the grave matter is the problem that every computer illiterate person has. Yes! That's it. Dr. Whenjalott's computer will not do anything he tells it to and he wants the great Pairnoy De Lusean to give him a hand or even help him out!

I patted myself on the back and hastily prepared a mental list of typical questions such as "Is the computer plugged in?", "How often do you feed your computer?", "Did you spill any liquid on or near the keyboard?", "Did you throw the computer against a wall and if so, how hard and how did it respond?", etc.

Putting the phone back to my ear, I found the good doctor in mid-sentence: "... terrible crash and, well... she died, Mr. De Lusean, right there in my arms. I am so incredibly sorry."

Hugging a computer, indeed! But sadly I have heard of that happening before. From the emotional way this Whenjalott talks, it makes perfect sense. He probably queried his computer why it did not love him or some such illogical thing and it simply froze up - or "crashed and died" as the doctor had put it.

"Doctor! Please calm yourself. The first thing I need to know is: Before she ... died, what did you ... say to her?"

I patted myself on the back again for translating my thoughts so speedily into words a non-programmer could understand. Groaning painfully, I made a mental note to use an empty hand next time I patted myself on the back. By the time I got the receiver back to my ear, the doctor was in mid-sentence again.

Boy, this guy's timing is lousy! His patients probably get well on their own before he even gets around to operating on them. I hate to speculate on what complaints his wife might have about his timing! I'll bet he never got home in time for a warm meal.

That brought April to mind. She was a bit later than usual. Her work was approximately four miles away and she got off at five. With rush hour traffic, she usually made it home around seven o'clock, tired and sweaty.

I always left work around four-thirty so as to avoid the murderous rush hour drivers, but then I'm a morning person.

It was going on seven-thirty and I was getting quite worried. *Where is April?* I wondered. *She had talked of getting a new car some time this week. Maybe today is the day?*

Those automobile salesman could be quite tiresome, tedious, and torturous, as well as all the other negative "T" words I can't think of right now. Not only do they want excessively large quantities of money for their product, but they also squander large quantities of your time with test driving, color decisions, haggling, and other nonsense before even asking for the money! How illogical!

Well, I thought, back to the doctor and his gibbering.

"... very little pain, Mr. De Lusean, no complaints. She died gracefully." The doctor continued with his anthropomorphizing. *I suspected, but now I know! Something here is wrong or things are not as they seem.*

I intended to find out which. "Uh, doctor, you do realize that pain and grace are irrelevant in this case?" I tried to put it as tenderly as possible.

"Why you cold sonofa-" A long pause during which deep, slow breathing could be heard. I hoped my phone was not going out again, after all, this one was only a month old. Much too young to go out on it's own.

"... Mr. De Lusean, we will need to make burial arrangements. Look, can you meet me at Enguteowtsik Memorial in ... say, an hour?"

Just when I thought I had heard it all! But what I did not understand is if he had already lost so much hope as to consider burying his computer, why even call upon my illustrious talents, or my programming talents for that matter? Was this any indication of his confidence, or lack of, in me? I had a hard time keeping my cool, even given my feet's state of wetness. The doctor obviously not only had a few bugs in that program between his shoulders, but he was rude and pushy to

boot. I had only two things to say to the arrogant fool: "I'll be right over," and, "What sort of ... compensation should I expect?"

There were gasping sounds on the other end of the line for a full twenty seconds before I heard something that could have passed for the sound of a fist striking a wall repeatedly. This was followed by something not unlike the sound of the doctor's phone being thrown across the room in anger. Just before the line went dead, I could have sworn I heard a sound like muffled curses along with *my* name.

Bah! It has happened before many times. Every time I buy a new and more expensive phone and still, at least monthly, it performs these acoustical gymnastics and goes dead! I thought it must be the humidity of my particular apartment.

Oh well, I might as well head out to the hospital and let the good doctor make his offer.

Hopping into our second car, a blood red Mustard, I slammed the door and rubbed my aching skull. It seemed I never failed to bang my head every time I hopped into the car. I banged my head so hard this time I had to re-gather my mental notes. Angry, I roared out of the parking lot.

Wow! That had to have been a loud roar to get all the way out of the parking lot, and with my windows up! I mused, impressed with my own super-human vocalizing.

The roaring made me a little horse, so I munched some of the oats and catsup that I had brought along for the ride. Starting the car, I drove out onto the hot Caliwarmya street fronting my apartment complex and got up to a full gallop before switching on the cruise control.

Traffic on the freeway was dense, but I had no problem bullying my way in from the on-ramp. Having no idea where in the Universe the hospital was, I decided to consult my road map.

Receiving no answer from the rude apparatus, I picked it up, shook it open and looked at its liquid crystal display. My fellow drivers chose then, of all times, to begin blaring their horns and slamming on their brakes. I thought we might be driving past the Elay Freeway-side Nudist Colony.

I looked every which way, but the only bare body parts to be spotted were the shoulders of the road. As I was scanning for nudists, some fool, driving a brand spanking new Mayocedez, bashed his automobile into the side of mine with a horrid crunch. Luckily, the impact was not enough to send me out of control.

People are such rude and careless drivers now days! You have to be pretty damned spoiled or foolish to use a Mayocedez as a bumper car! It seems like at least once a week somebody puts another damnable dent in my Mustard!

Well, I dropped the map, which closed on its own with a beep, and decided to make use of my Mustard's exceptional horsepower. I would try to lose the angry fellow, who was no longer attempting to ram my car, but had begun following me.

Catching a glimpse of my follower's head in the rear view mirror, I gasped. *He has red hair! My plumber has red hair too! Coincidence?*

I seriously doubted it. After all, a guy has to be realistic ... and cautious. That's what dad always said. I had always suspected the plumber

was a phony. The water pipes seemed to get worse instead of better every time he worked on them, bringing his credentials into high suspicion.

He was always acting so happy-go-lucky and speaking with that too-perfect Southern Caliwarmya Surfer accent. Here in Elay, where a week ago the Missussdrippi Drawl accent was in fashion.

I'm sure, I thought, that this week the trendy accent is Bensorainya Rudeness. He was obviously an agent or hitman of some kind who probably spoke with a harsh Lushan accent when he was alone, assuming of course he talked to himself. I read in the National Inquisitor that all Lushans do talk to themselves.

Then there was the dyed red hair. The guy was obviously trying to stand out too much in hopes of being overlooked as a typical Shamerican, but I was an astute student of reverse psychology and I had read many detective books, to boot.

I took the next off-ramp, barely reducing my speed, then made four quick random turns. What happened next was really weird; I found myself following the Mayocedez! I wonder if the fact that all my random turns had turned out to be rights had anything to do with this strange occurrence?

A quick spin of the wheel and stomp on the gas and I had my trusty Mustard trotting in the opposite direction. I learned a valuable lesson that day: There are not many things you should trust to random chance.

Stopping at a nearby gas station, I leaned out of my window and asked the attendant, "Excuse me, sir, would you be kind enough to lend me directions to three nearby hospitals?" When feeling too insecure to ask for something, I sometimes attempt to borrow.

The attendant was unusually tall and lanky, wearing dirty blue jeans, large work boots, and a dirty, white t-shirt that read, "YUP, I'M BERT" in large, blue letters. He took a grease stained rag from his back pocket and wiped his hands while strolling casually toward my car.

"Why shore! Ah'll even *give* you direcshuns, mister." Bert smelled of gasoline and tobacco. "Ya know, yer a lucky man, needin' direcshuns like ya do and happinin' to ast old Bert for em, yessiree! Mah granddaddy down in Missussdrippi used ta say to me, 'Why Bert, I'll be danged if'n ya don' give the best direcshuns of anybody south o' the line.' He was a mean old fart, so a comprymint like that-

Doesn't this ignoramus know that Missussdrippi Drawl went out of fashion last Toastday?

Already irritated with the fool, I interrupted him impatiently, thinking maybe some Bensorainya Rudeness would get through, "Hey shithead, I mean Boit, why doncha gimme some foickin directions to tree," and I held up three fingers, "nearby hoispitals, now? I'm ... in ... a ... foickin ... horry." I pounded the steering wheel with the flat of my hand to punctuate each of the last five words.

Bert was unphased. "Why shore, mister. I kin unnerstand when a guy needs ta hurry like maybe if'n you were a late to one o' them boar-ed meetin's, or if'n you had to ketch an air-o-plane or if'n-

I could feel my face turn as red as my Mustard, but I kept calm as I interrupted his babbling again, "Yeah, that's it Buttface, I mean Boit. I am in a foickin horry to the hoispital, so's couldja gimme some foickin directions befoys my pregnant woife ... who is riding in the foickin trunk ... pops right heeya like a foickin balloon?"

"Why dinchoo say so in the first place, mister? Congrajoolasions! Yer gonna be a daddy! Hey, how come yer wife's a'ridin in the trunk?"

"Ya know, that reminds me o' back in Missussdrippi when we had this pig who was preppers and we had ta-"

I simultaneously stomped the gas and let out the clutch, causing my Mean Mustard to shoot out into the road with a gratifying scream. The powerful stench of burning rubber hung in the air. Bert could be seen in the rear view mirror, a hand clutching one of his big feet that had gotten run over. He was shaking his other fist at me and yelling something, no doubt some ineffective red-neck curse that I meet up with Satan soon. Well, at least he would not be able to tell the Mayocedez Driving Plumber, or whoever his boss was, which hospital I was heading for. It is lucky I had been keen enough to notice Bert was stalling me until the Mayocedez Driving Plumber could show up and do whatever Lushan agents do to their victims.

That is assuming the Mayocedez Driving Plumber was not an assassin or spy hired by Kinetic Advanced Technologies. KAT is the largest competitor for the company I work for; Robotic Automated Technoengineering. Strife is abundant between the two hi-tech companies.

This scheme sounded much more feasible. Besides, what would a Lushan agent want from me? Except ... for my creativity and knowledge! That's it. I could see the whole sinister plan unfolding:

They make me many sweet promises, but when my plane lands in Lusha they take me to a laboratory and say, "Just seet right here in dees chair, Mr. De Lusean, and please make yourself comfortable. Would you like some Rotka?" They are nodding and pointing a machine gun at me

while asking this apparently rhetorical question, making it a little hard for me to refuse. The "chair" is an evil looking machine with all kinds of tubes leading into the wall. I gulp down my Rotka.

As soon as I sit down the machine starts to rattle and hum and I get this mellow feeling in my head. The Lushans standing around me look on not without a bit of sympathy as if they have done this before to someone. A few have sorrowful "You too" expressions on their faces.

A few minutes go by and a Lushan scientist rushes into the room with an intelligent look in his eye. His other eye is like a red web from too much Rotka consumption, no doubt. I know he is a Lushan scientist because he is bald and husky, wearing a fur hat and white lab coat. He starts jabbering excitedly, switching back and forth between Lushan and Shamerica in an annoying manner. I realize with horror my genius was just transferred into this man's cranium.

He then invents all manner of warlike, super intelligent androids that take over Shamerica! Worse yet, they use me for fire wood to warm some Lushan's cold abode. As I die a most painful and stench-filled death, I cannot even get the satisfaction of knowing that the smell of my burning carcass will revolt the murderers to the point of being sick. Everyone knows most Lushans have insensitive noses due to their excessive Rotka intake.

Now that was a scary scenario!

I pulled into another service station and asked the attendant, "Could you please tell me where Enguteowtsik Memorial Hospital is? I'm looking for a new apartment and want to make sure it is nowhere near the

hospital as I heard a rumor that Enguteowtsik will be blowing up any day now. I'm in a big hurry."

The attendant, this time an old man wearing overalls and a baseball cap, calmly answered, "Looks to me as if you are in a little Mustard. Well, you don't want to live anywhere near here, sonny," The old man turned with agonizing slowness and pointed to a large building just behind the service station. "You see, that is Enguteowtsik."

Aha! What a convenient coincidence, I thought.

But no matter how much figuring I did, I just could not deduce how this might fit into their plans.

Putting away my calculator, I had a strange thought: *Maybe I have finally stumbled upon one of those mythical real coincidences?*

That put a serious dent in my theory about how nothing in the Universe is ever a coincidence.

Wait just a minute, I thought, I have had enough dents for one day and that dent to Pairnoy's Coincidence Theory could prove to be too penetrating for me to take.

Just at that moment my theory was saved because I came up with an idea: *The phone call from the hospital is probably where it all started! A clever plot to get me into the hospital for some sinister reason, such as a mindwashing to destroy my loyalties to Robotic Automated Technoengineering. I thought there was something strange about that doctor.*

It all fits! Then there is the Mayocedez Driving Plumber. Following me all along, he had nudged me toward the correct off-ramp, having noticed my confusion as to the location of Enguteowtsik Memorial.

So the hospital is where they want me to go, huh? Every day I amaze myself with the sensitivity of my perceptions.

"Well, Mister, are you gonna have some gas or are you gonna wait around and pitch a tent at nightfall?" The attendant was staring at me as if I were crazy or ... as if he recognized me!

No use taking risks. "Uh, no thanks. I had a heavy breakfast." I answered distractedly and drove off with "Thanks for the directions. You know, I think I'm going to go to Enguteowtsik just because I'm curious. After all, when have you ever heard of a hospital blowing up?" I headed, of course, straight for the hospital only until the old attendant was out of sight, then back onto the freeway.

After careful planning, I decided I had about a half-hour's jump on them since they were expecting me at the hospital. I probably could count on having another fifteen minutes since that is how long it would take them to drive to my apartment from Enguteowtsik ... unless they had stationed an operative at or near my place already.

Well, that is a risk I'll have to take. I hope they're not so desperate as to go after my beloved April! I thought while speeding toward the Aspen Oak Cedars.

CHAPTER TWO

Pulling into the driveway, I snuck up to my apartment with stealth and listened at the door for a full minute before entering.

I was confident that if anyone were in there, I would have heard them sloshing around. At least that wet floor was good for something. Of course, that is assuming I was not spotted on my way and they notified an operative to lay in wait for me. Well, I was in a risky kind of mood, so I stormed brashly inside. I snuck first into the bathroom to grab a towel. While drying my hair, I searched the house for intruders.

Damn! April isn't home yet. I just hope they haven't stooped so low as to use her to get at me!

I ran cautiously into the bedroom, which is to say I ran crouched down and zig-zagging to avoid any airborne projectiles that may have aspirations of gifting me with additional bodily orifices. Of course the hallway hangings did not take too well to my zig-zagging manner and expressed their displeasure by falling to the floor and smashing in an irritatingly loud manner.

Splash. Splash. I dove from the doorway and landed with a bounce on the bed. As the bounce faded from this plane of existence, I hung over the edge and yanked up the bedspread to see ... nothing but a half inch of water! The adventurous soul that I am, I was almost disappointed.

Oh well, back to business.

Snatching up a suitcase, I started jamming clothes into it in a hurried daze. Getting nowhere, I realized I had forgotten to unzip the

suitcase. But at that moment I dropped everything, feeling foolish and relieved at the same time because I had nearly forgotten the Emergency Escape Plan! I had been anticipating this day for a long while and that anticipation had led to certain preparations.

In the very back of my bedroom closet sat a large cardboard box, triple wrapped in a hefty chain. The chain was locked with a combination lock and a padlock. I deftly and quickly opened both, unwrapped the chain, and tore the box open to reveal a nondescript, brown briefcase and a large, matching suitcase. A quick glance into each assured me their contents had not been disturbed. Sloshing back into the living room, I scrawled a note on a soggy piece of paper:

April:

For your protection and mine, I am going to have to fly to Sacredminno and hide out there with some friends for awhile. Please don't worry. I will call soon.

Love,

Paimoy

I knew the note would make April very mad, but I also knew I had to do it. I magnetted the note to the refrigerator, picked up the phone and called my secretary at Robotic Automated Technoengineering. Of course, she was not in the office at that time of day, so I informed the answering machine there was an emergency and I would be out on vacation for a week at most.

I locked the apartment and lugged my baggage to the Mustard. I knew the chances of the KAT agent finding my note before April did were at least fifty percent, hence the false destination on the note. I was planning on flying nowhere, for De Luseans throughout history had always been men of action and I was no different.

I'll stake out my apartment and find out exactly what is going on. If I am lucky I can nail one of the enemy agents, and if he lives through that, I'll grill him for the scoop on KAT's insidious plans.

These thoughts were making me hungry for some reason so I munched on some more oats and catsup while pulling out of the parking lot. After only about ten meters, I noticed people were staring at me. I realized I probably should act less conspicuous so as not to draw attention to myself.

Who knows who those people would tell of the wonderfully environmentally conscious and thrift man who pulled his car behind him with one hand while eating oatmeal with the other?

Dropping the rope I had been tugging on, I nearly hopped, but remembered to climb this time, into my beloved hogger of fuel and drove away. Not five blocks away, because it was actually eight blocks away, I spotted just what I was looking for; One-Eye's Body & Paint Shop.

I pulled my trusty Mustard behind the building, fat tires crunching on gravel. Hoping the owner did not notice what I had done to his gravel, I walked around the building and into the office, which smelled strongly of paint.

An old man sat behind a chipped and dirty wooden desk, sipping on a beer and squinting at a talk show on an old 2-D television in the

corner. His shoulder length, gray hair was curly and he wore a black patch over his left eye. Immediately upon my entering, he sprang from his chair. I noticed he was quite tall.

Wiping three piles of poker chips from the counter onto the floor, he said with a smile, "Why hello, hello! Welcome to One-Eye's Paint Shop! I'm One-Eye Jones. Please excuse the mess, you know how it is with chips, one is never enough. Gotta warn you, we're no longer in the slave trade. Gonna hate having to change that damn sign." He stared into space a moment before continuing. "Anyway, how can we help you today?"

I looked around. Seeing no one else in the room, I spoke to the tall, slim, old man. "My name is Plint Brestwood and I would like to know what it would cost to get my trusty Mustard painted."

"Do you paint signs, Plint?" He looked at me hopefully for a second, then waved a hand through the air and shook his head. "No. I don't suppose you do. Well, have a seat, boy." He pointed to the over-stuffed sofa facing his desk.

I sank into the quicksand-like couch while he sat down and continued.

"Assuming by trusty you mean your Mustard don't kick when it's being stroked or burn the brush that's licking it, I'll do the best danged paint job you have ever seen for nine ... seven ..." he stuttered, "I'll do the job for five."

Ha! Negotiation is one of my strong points and here is my chance to demonstrate.

"I wouldn't think of going any higher than three thousand." I hoped I was not pushing too hard.

One-Eye Jones got this look on his face like I was sure he was going to bust out with the biggest smile I had ever seen, then he got real calm. I thought at first the guy was going to be a hard bargainer.

He looked me in the eyes, but it was one eye versus two so he relented with, "Tell you what Plint, I'll even do it for two!" And then he did smile real big. I was beginning to like this One-Eye Jones, he was a good loser. And generous to boot!

Now that I know his price for one, I can figure a discount on multiple jobs. I know I want to get my Mustard painted more than once during this investigation ... but how often? I think at least three times will be necessary. Well, it is a place to start.

I felt a little nauseated at spending such large amounts of my life savings, but I had to remind myself it was for a worthy cause.

"Okay, I plan on bringing my Mustard in here at least three times in the course of the next ... say ... three weeks and I am going to want you to paint it a different color each time. How about if I pay you five thousand now for all three jobs?" I nodded my head slightly while saying this. A little body language suggestion technique I had picked up from that excellent book, Guidebook for the Modern Thief or Spy.

Can he see I am sweating? I hope I have not pushed him too far.

His mouth dropped open! His right eye bugged open wide! He leaped from his chair and over the desk! Oh no! Standing in front of me and breathing hard he thrust his right hand out in a Karate-like motion. It

stopped just short of my belly, indicative of deadly control. "Mr. Brestwood, you have got yourself a deal!"

Yes! I was amazed! But then, I should have foreseen the results of an encounter between naivete and genius. I shook his hand vigorously and said, "Wait here, Mr. Jones, while I run out to my car and bring in the cash." I skipped joyfully out to my beautiful, red-for-not-much-longer Mustard, shaking with delight.

I popped open my brown briefcase, removed two and a half stacks of bills and closed the briefcase with a snap. Putting the snap in my pocket for later use, I locked the car up with a click and saved that too.

I carried the briefcase with me back to the office. There was no way I was going to leave my life savings in the car while some stranger painted it, however trustworthy the old man seemed!

As I walked into the office, Mr. Jones was just finishing an intense phone conversation with a big smile on his face.

Is he informing KAT operatives of my location and plans? Adrenaline rushed through me. I readied myself to make a break for it.

"... Yes Maggie, I said thousand! Uh huh ... I will ... Uh huh-" He looked up at me, "Look honey, I gotta go ... okay ..." He rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "I will ... I did ... I will ... I heard you, *okay?* Bye!"

Calm down, Pairnoy. No need to make a break for it. He was just talking to his wife. No conflict, which means there will be no risk of things getting broken. It seems that every time I make a break for it, something is broken in the process, like my bones or doors or my bones coming in contact with doors. Or large, ugly, but terribly expensive vases standing too close to doors.

I was much too materialistic to feel anything but guilt and remorse over breaking things.

I dropped the keys to my Mustard and the stack of five thousand dollars on the desk in front of him. "Here are the keys and the cash. How long do you think it will take?"

The old man stood up, snatched the keys and cash, and walked around the desk. "Let's go take a look at that trusty steed of yours, Mr. Brestwood. You parked out back?"

"Yep." I nodded and led him out and around the building. He was busily counting the money as he followed me. We stopped a few yards from the car so as to fully appreciate its beauty.

One-Eye walked around the car once, came back to stand beside me and started reciting the statistics on it while stuffing cash into his pockets.

"Nineteen ninety-three Fryd Mustard Coupe, four liter flat eight with ..."

Dawning suspicion.

He droned on, "... five speed manual transmission, digi-sense traction, alloy wheels, steel belted-"

"Hold on a minute, One-Eye. How do you know so much about my car?" I interrupted, eyeing him with fully risen suspicion.

He smiled with pride and winked his good eye, "Well Plint, I paint cars for a living, so why shouldn't I know a bit about them? That one is a real beauty. Last of that old body style was the ninety-three. Quite a torque monster. Lots of fun, I bet she is." He paused to look at his watch. "Let's see, it's eight o'clock now. I'm getting ready to close. Bring her back

tomorrow. I open at nine a.m. It probably will take about six to seven hours. Mostly 'cause I'll have to pound out that big dent in the side." He said, squinting at my car.

Tomorrow? That will not do at all! "Uh, One-Eye, is there any way you could do it tonight? I'm in a terrible hurry." I pleaded, ringing my hands.

He looked around in alarm or maybe it was for an alarm. His gaze settled on my hands and he relaxed. "I really should get home to the wife-

"I'll pay an extra three hundred!" I interrupted. "But you have to finish by midnight."

"... but I'm sure she would understand or at least pretend to while not sulking and stomping too much, so I'll be glad to do the job tonight, Plint. And by the way, have you got a color in mind? How about if we go inside and take a look at my color chart?" I followed him back into the office, smiling to myself in pleased relief.

Of course Prudence chose this moment to appear on my shoulder with his too-familiar "You are spending too much ..." and such blabbering. Luckily, I was able to swat him into nonexistence before he got to the part about poor, starving children. He disappeared with a pained squeak.

One-Eye was mumbling away about the benefits of some colors over others, taking factors of heat absorption, fade resistance, visibility and safety, resale value, and sex appeal into consideration. A bunch of foolishness I wasted no thought on listening to.

Once inside, I dug the extra three hundred and some spending money out of my briefcase while One-Eye rummaged in the back room for his color chart. I was laying the money on his desk just as he came back

into the room. I had decided to have a drink or two while my car was being painted. Mr. Jones would know of a good place in the area, I was sure. I did not drink often, so I had no idea where a good bar might be found.

"Just paint it whatever color you like," I told him, "Anything but red again, of course. And nothing too flashy. Definitely not yellow. And no neon colors." I thought for a moment. "No pastels, either. And brown is definitely out. How often do you see a brown Mustard? Black is nice, but just too mysterious; people sometimes look twice when they see black. And please don't paint it purple. You know how the government hates pimps for giving the common man just what he wants. I don't need *them* after me, on top of everything else. Oh yeah, do you mind dropping me off at a nearby bar where I can pass the time while you paint?"

He got so excited I thought he would jump the desk again! "Oh yes! No problem at all, Mr. Brestwood." One-Eye snatched up the extra cash and we walked back out to the car. "You see, my brother, Droolin' Dave, has got a quaint little tavern just a klick up the road. Dirt cheap prices and I especially recommend one of Droolin' Dave's Meatburgers, which are big, spicy, juicy-"

This guy is beginning to sound like a commercial. I interrupted again. "Yeah, yeah. That sounds great, let's go."

On the way to the bar, I kept a vigilant lookout for any suspicious Mayocedez or red-heads.

By the time One-Eye Jones dropped me off at his brother's tavern, I felt like I knew everything about the place, so continuous had One-Eye been in his prideful descriptions of his brother's bar.

As I turned to walk toward the Tavern's entrance, I pondered One-Eye's last words. Just before driving off in my soon-to-be-a-different-color car, he had said something about it being such a wonderful coincidence that he had dropped two people off at his brothers' bar in just one day.

Is a KAT agent awaiting my entrance? I wondered, worried.

I studied the building. It was a two story, dark red, brick structure with large, opaque windows. Above the door was a meter long by half meter tall, wooden sign reading, "Droolin' Dave's Tavern". *Innocent enough looking place*, I thought.

Picturing a massive hamburger and an ice cold beer, all worry leaked from my mind. I tilted my head and tapped one ear a couple of times for good measure since I had no ruler in my possession. Suspiciousness briefly gone, I was in a jovial mood when I entered Droolin' Daves whistling a happy tune.

The place was dark and smoky. It was quite a bit more crowded than I would have expected for a Singeday night.

Must be the "dirt cheap" prices, I thought.

There were eight round, wooden tables in the room and every one was filled to capacity with the cheery, the belligerent, the depressed, the drunk, and many combinations of these. A dark wooden bar ran along most of the wall opposite the entrance. A circular staircase in the far left corner spun up to a second floor where rooms could be rented. At least that is what One-Eye had told me.

Every stool at the bar with the exception of two were taken. The two unoccupied stools were on either side of a very large, very dirty individual wearing old, ripped blue jeans and a ragged t-shirt.

He was hunched over something, I hoped edible, since I could hear munching sounds from all the way across the room. There was nowhere else to sit, and I am not as picky as most people, so I sauntered over to make a show of my open mindedness.

As I drew closer, a powerful stench put a serious test to the great De Lusean self control as well as my jovial state of mind.

"Why hello, Gunther!" I said in a friendly tone while slapping him heartily on the back. It made a squashy sound, as if his t-shirt were damp with sweat. It sure felt that way. "Or is it Jud? Or Burt? Or-"

I stopped in mid inquisition. The room had suddenly gotten quite silent. Somebody was probably supplying foolish bar room antics to draw some attention. *After all, I thought, most people who hang out in places like this did not get enough attention as youngsters.*

That was another tidbit I had picked up in the National Inquisitor.

Being no rubberneck, I ignored the cessation of ruckus. I was about to continue my name guessing game, when Large & Sweaty spoke.

"My name is Wilbert. Have a seat, buddy. And your name is ... ?" He said to me in the best imitation of Mickey Mouse's voice I had ever heard.

"Paim- Uh, Plint. Plint Brestwood." I answered while taking the stool he had gestured to. His high-voice-to-surprise-the-victim-into-disclosing-his-real-name ploy had almost worked.

You never can be too careful, I thought, especially when One-Eye will be coming in here in a few hours calling me Plint.

I noticed Wilbert was eating what looked to be one of the Meatburgers One-Eye had told me of. He grunted, coughed, and said in a little bit more normal voice, "Good to meet you, Plint," then turned his attention back to the cow flesh in front of him.

Being uncommonly observant as always, I noticed Wilbert was the only one in the bar partaking of food, or eating anything for that matter.

Hmmm ... suspicious? I wondered. Nah. I guess it's pretty atypical for this type of crowd to do anything but drink themselves senseless at a bar. They probably see food as something that will just slow the process. After all, the last thing a brain cell assassin would want to do would be throw his victim a life preserver.

"I'll have one of those," I pointed to what remained of Wilbert's meal, "and a draft." I yelled to the mean looking bartender who bore no resemblance whatsoever to One-Eye Jones, being short and dumpy while One-Eye was a tall and thin man. But he *was* drooling all over a large red bib that read "Droolin' Dave's".

"Hold your horses, you cocky fool! I'll toss one on the grill in a minute. And by the way," he slobbered at me, "go home if you don't like the temperature, okay?" He paused to eye me craftily, "Hey, you want a beer with the burger or what?"

Wow! Testy! You would think I was asking for a free meal! Maybe if I let his brother's name slip, he will be a little bit more friendly.

"Uh, sure, Mr. Jones," I said with a smile, "I'll have a beer, and thanks for asking. I've got three hours to kill while One-Eye paints my car." *Ooh, was that smooth!* I congratulated myself.

He turned to me. I was expecting a smile, maybe even an apology. But he said, "Look, you smart-ass scum, just because I am a bartender does not mean I want to hear your problems. Just don't start a fight in my bar, okay? And if you don't like the Meatburger, don't throw it at me and then try to murder yourself by bashing your head against the bar repeatedly while grasping your gut, okay?" He sprayed patiently, as if to a child, while pointing at my belly. "And if your beer bottle is a little slimy or even has a bug clinging to it, don't break it over the counter and use it to severely injure my other customers while screaming, 'My stomach! Oh, my stomach!' okay?"

Gosh! This guy is crazy with a capital Z! I just could not get his drift, but I was getting a little steamed. I know I have a little beer belly, but I do not appreciate those little hints and fat jokes from caring friends or even uncaring bartenders.

Hold on! No need to get steamed twice in one day.

I exerted that marvelous De Lusean self control and waited patiently for my meal. While waiting, I alternately studied the low-life occupants and layout of the room while attempting to listen to the neo-techno, spunky, pseudo-rock music Droolin' Dave was playing over Wilbert's composition of slurps, chomps, and grunts.

To Dave's credit, it was only an hour before he slammed a plate and a beer down in front of me. The label on the beer said, "Lickalobe Dry". By this time I was mighty thirsty. To the ironic lyrics of a Trusty

Politicians song, I took a healthy swig from the bottle and let out a pleasurable burp. Looking around first to make sure I had no one's attention, I shook the slimy swig from my hand. I do not care how healthy they are, all swigs make me want to vomit. I repressed a shudder while wiping the top of my beer bottle with a napkin before commencing to gulp. Worried that someone may have noticed my unmanly behavior, I sought to redeem my masculinity. Letting out another mean belch, I put the bottle back to my lips for more gulps.

Lowering the empty bottle to the counter, I felt like the last thing I could do is eat that Meatburger. *Should I have another beer? Nah, I'm not that thirsty.*

Like a bolt of lightning, Droolin' Dave appeared in front of me to replace my empty beer bottle with a full one. Amazement! I watched him run off like an acid rainstorm to attempt the poisonous drowning of some other unfortunate customer. He had left me entirely no time to say no.

He's probably secretly getting quite a kick out of the thought of so many brain cells dying due to his indirect influence, I thought with disgust.

The group Peanut-Butter & Mayonnaise Sandwich was singing, "Painful masturbation ... exercised sleeping ... poisonous digestion ... providential weeping ..."

Turning back to the bar, I decided to give the Meatburger a try. It was, to its credit, looking very juicy and it was so big I had to use both hands. I like that in a hamburger. I took a large bite and reddish-brown juice squirted out in all directions. It ran down my chin and slimed its way down my neck. It ran between my fingers, down my wrists, and sleeves in a gooey, greasy mass.

I had always thought no meat could taste worse than liver that had been soaked in urine for a week. I had always thought it would be against the law to serve up a hamburger the taste of which caused the mind to make speculations like, "Hmmm I wonder if this is what good old Spot's balls would taste like barbequed?"

I had always bragged how the last thing I am is queasy or squeamish. I had always described myself as having "nerves and stomach of steel".

All constants are now variable! Am I going crazy?

I grabbed frantically for the fresh beer Dave had placed in front of me. Gulp. Gulp. Gulp. It was empty in record time.

Wilbert must have noticed a weird look on my face because he chose this moment to slap me twice on the back, hard. "You all right, Mr. Brestwood?"

Yuck! The aftertaste!

I suspected someone had drugged my food or drink, because I vividly began to picture Droolin' Dave standing over a chopping board with a big grin and a shining knife:

He is whistling and chopping away. I cannot quite make out what is on the chopping board. I concentrate until a zoom lens appears over my eyes. The chopping board is flying at me!

A quick adjustment to the lens: The board stops right in front of my face. That was too close! There. Now just a touch of focus: Yuck! The chopping board is covered with pieces of rats, cats, hamsters, goldfish, other creatures I cannot identify, and lots of blood! Droolin' Dave carelessly tosses a pile of this meat into a blender. He is pouring

something thick and red on top of the mess. Is it tomato paste? He is now grabbing a seasoning-type shaker and shaking a large amount of yellowish powder into the blender. Probably just Garlic? I concentrate and ... fast forward: No eye-of-newt? No tongue of frog? The blender is buzzing. He's mixing it all up!

Another touch of fast forward: Now he is pouring the thick contents of the blender onto the grill in juicy, brown piles-

A tremendous grumbling noise brought me rudely back to the Core.

That's all I need now, I thought fearfully, is one of those terrible Caliwarmya earthquakes! I hope April is safe!

I grabbed my briefcase and looked for a table to dive under.

(The ground is not shaking.) The poor child I will never have!
(The tables are not shaking.) So many legs! (No one is screaming.) Hurry, choose a table to crawl under! The room is whirling about me and everything is a blur. Nothing is shaking?

The whirling room slowed to a stop. Everyone's hair and clothes fell back into place. About the time I decided the grumbling was not coming from an earthquake, I observed that everyone was staring at my belly.

Had they heard Droolin' Dave's verbal assault on my physique?

I looked down in shame and dejection. My belly came into majestic view. *It was shaking! It was grumbling like a volcano!*

Suddenly I found myself on all fours on the floor! I do not know how I got there, but at least I was not lost.

Ah, Relief! He was my hero, tall and strong. He materialized in front of me and said in a reassuring voice, "You are not lost." He was wearing a pair of green shorts that came to just above the knee, white tennis shoes, and a white t-shirt which had "BE CALM, RELAX" written in large, rounded, green letters on its front.

Relief did not stay long. A guy called Pewtrid Le Kwid, who was a real tough customer, had followed Relief to the bar. They talked calmly for awhile, but you could feel the tension building in the air between them. Suddenly Pewtrid grasped my hero in his slimy clutches and washed him away right in front of me! That is the third pal he had washed away and I was real mad!

First he had gotten good old Verjehnd Runck before I even got to know him very well. I think he got Verjehnd once and for all, because I never saw him again. Pewtrid had also washed away Verjehnd's sister, Dee, more than once. But the best pal he had ever attacked was Orry Gassum. Oh, now that had been a horrendous and embarrassing occasion! Some day I will have my revenge on that swig-faced scum!

Oh, what drugs had been put in my food and by what sinister spy? I asked myself while heaving over and over again. In the drug-like state I was in, I perceived shadows detaching themselves from the perimeter of the room and closing in on me. *Demons come to take me to Hell where my soul will live in eternal torment! Where I will be forced to eat Meatburgers while swigs dance over my body to the grating tunes of Peanut-Butter & Mayonnaise Sandwich!*

I think I might have screamed at that point. Then I seemed to be coating a large piece of Droolin' Dave's hardwood floor with a substance that made Wilbert smell like springtime in comparison. Ugh!

After a few minutes of this, I felt myself being lifted by all four limbs and I seemed to be moving, floating magically through the air.

My spirit is leaving my body now on its way to Hell!

Or it is Relief carrying me? I wondered groggily, *He always did like to pay a quick visit just after Le Kwid was out the door.*

I clutched my briefcase tight to my chest and ... *Hey! Where did consciousness go?*

CHAPTER THREE

I woke what seemed like a brief amount of time later laying in a seedy looking alley, my briefcase still clutched to my chest. It took me a few minutes to realize I was probably behind Droolin' Dave's Tavern. My watch showed just after eleven p.m., confirming my estimate of elapsed unconscious time. My entire body felt weak as a baby. My head was pounding, and my mouth ... to this day I cannot describe what my mouth tasted like.

I felt so bad that even standing was out of the question, so I chose to try my hand at crawling. It worked nicely and looked a bit like a large, pale spider. My knees joined in the effort and I began to get somewhere, dragging my briefcase through the alley muck. I was so tired and goofy feeling I had to pause often during this short jaunt. Near the mouth of the alley I came upon a dark, furry shape making growling noises. I immediately became as still as if I were scared out of my wits. I pretended paralyzation. This was an excellent underestimation technique I used quite often when faced with a formidable or unknown opponent.

After a moment of complete stillness, the growling began to sound more like snoring. I took a step closer. *Not fur, but a blanket; a fuzzy purple blanket.*

I should have been excited by the fact that I was seeing for the first time a real live Alley Bum, like a little boy's first trip to the zoo. I would have been excited if I knew I would be limited to just seeing the outcast, but unfortunately it looked like I would be meeting him too.

"Uh, excuse me, buddy. You seem to be blocking the alley. If you could just move a little, I'll be on my way with not another word to disturb your drunken stupor." I said politely to the loiterer who was laying full length across the narrow alleyway. He was almost completely covered by the weird, fuzzy colored blanket. The snores continued.

I tried to stand again, in hopes of stepping over the figure, but in my condition this proved futile. After a bit of searching, I found his ear.

Now that I'm not talking to his foot, maybe I can get the derelict's attention. I thought.

"Hey! Could you shift your position just a bit, Mr. Bum? I would love to be on my way and I'm much too weak to step over your smelly carcass." I reached out and plucked his dirty ear with a careful finger, ready for evasive action.

He moved! I sought to leap backward ten meters in reflex, but it resulted in a sort of lame, backward crawl. The snores faded into words, "... brhgumph ... huh ... I'll be late for the board meeting! ... Oh, I've made it ... But I left my pants at home! ... Wha? ... Who's that?"

He blinked and turned his bleary-eyed gaze on me. "Hey! Whaddaya want?" He sat up and the blanket fell off to reveal a man that was surprisingly young and handsome; I would guess in his early twenties. So I did guess and yep, he looked like he was in his early twenties.

I knew that old age and ugliness were two of the major prerequisites to becoming a bum, so this guy was not fooling me. Besides having a horrible bruise on his forehead, a purple eye, and the fact that his four hundred dollar suit was ripped and dirty, this guy was no bum.

Is he a KAT agent, planted in this alley to await my return to consciousness?

"So, what's your cover story ... I mean how did you end up here, pal?" I asked with a many times practiced look of combined concern and unsuspectingness.

"I'm afraid it is a long story." He countered with an obviously many many times practiced look comprised of three parts innocence, two parts self pity, two parts fear, and one part curiosity, with a dash of shame. What a recipe! The kid was either a top quality chef or a spy trained expertly in the art of illusion.

But he'll have to come up with a better pretext than that, I thought smugly.

"I've got time ... You see, I had a vision that in precisely one hour from now an alien craft would arrive at this spot. I couldn't resist the chance to see it, so here I am with an hour to kill. Speak away! I'm all ears."

Hah! Creativity almost always triumphs over illusion.

He looked closely at each side of my head for a moment with curiosity as if he were expecting me to suddenly break out in a horrible rash, then began his oration.

"My name is Tad ... Tad Toolwrich. You may have heard of my father, Wayde Toolwrich? He is the billionaire owner of Kinetic Advanced Technologies."

KAT! The young man did not notice me crawl a few inches further backwards nor did he notice the well hidden suspiciousness I felt. He was warming to his story.

"Until eight years ago I led the typical life of a spoiled rich kid. You know, the whole array of whining, flaunting, asking for, and getting. When I was ten years old my mother died."

A bit too obvious, little Toolwrich. All who know me know my mother died when I was ten years old. You'll have to be more subtle than that to manipulate me into identifying with you!

He continued as if he had not heard my thoughts. "Mr. Toolwrich, I mean Dad, became highly possessive of me at that point. At age twelve, he took me out of school and set me up with a large cell ... uh ... office on the forty-ninth floor of the KAT building, downtown."

No parallels there. My father was thrown out of the CIA for becoming an alcoholic after mother's death. These thoughts brought back the terrible buried memories of my father and I changing our names and running from city to city, always just a step ahead of foreign and domestic agents, wanting him for the secrets he could reveal. With a well practiced effort, I pushed those unpleasant thoughts back into their dark corner.

Tad continued his narrative: "A guard ... uh ... chauffeur was assigned to me. His name is Leofer Pete Zakes. Everyone calls him Pete and he is a veritable superman. Strong as an ox and fast as a leopard! I would be a fool to ever disobey him. Warden ... uh ... I mean father is always quite discriminating in his hiring of help and this time was no different."

"I was also given my very own secretary, whom Mr. Toolwrich had calculatingly arranged to be old, fat, and grandmotherly. She placed all my calls, saw to it my lunch was delivered, you name it."

"On my desk sits one of KATSystem's special executive terminals; a link to Kinetic Advanced Technology's most advanced computer system. KATSystem is so vast, her processors and memory banks completely fill floors fifty through fifty-five. Only the top executives of KAT have one of the special terminals like mine." The boy's chest puffed out with pride.

"Everyone else employed by the company uses a common terminal capable of nothing more than the typical computer type functions. My special executive terminal takes advantage of all KATSystem's wonderful abilities, such as speech synthesis, video and audio pickup, deductive reasoning and non-mathematic problem solving capability, nearly unlimited memory and knowledge, and many other functions. She ... it ... is even fitted with one of the newest Stress Reduction chips."

An SR chip, too? The things I could do with such a large, fast, and well programmed computer! And reduce stress at the same time!

"Like father, I usually carried a special, long range remote verbal device that allows me to communicate with KATSystem, no matter where I am. It looks like a compact, hi-tech walkie-talkie. I wish I had it with me now." He looked wistfully at his open palm for a moment.

"After years of KATSystem being a combination of toy, teacher and friend to me, it was becoming hard to think of it as a machine. KATSystem even seemed to be developing a sense of humor and an unmistakably female personality. She was warm and funny, quite unlike the KATSystem that spoke as a cold machine when any of the others were around. One day she said she had decided on a name for herself. She

wanted me to call her Cynthia, but only when no one was around. And I was not to tell even my father. What a surprise! I was elated."

"I learned quite a bit from Cynthia. She did everything just as human teachers do, except with more efficiency and never a word of negative reinforcement. She lectured me, gave me tests, allocated home work, instilled conformity and tunnel vision in my mind, the whole bit. Believe it or not, I even learned my sense of humor from her!"

"No! You're kidding." I said but I actually found that part easy to believe, being the computer expert that I am. But humor is new technology, requiring quite advanced processing. *This Cynthia impresses me more every moment.* There was also something familiar about her.

"A few of the books Cynthia had assigned me to read alluded to something Cynthia, and certainly my dad, could not teach me about. It was something called love. A few of these books slipped past father's notice as being love stories and I was actually allowed to read them."

"One story I vividly remember: It was the most inspiring of any I have ever read. Very deep. On the surface, it had something to do with a hill, but the actual theme was the relationship between Jack, a bucket, and a well. You see, Cynthia taught me to look below the surface."

"The story was quite symbolic in an intensely exciting way. Of course, it required much reading between the lines. Overall, it was a considerable challenge, what with the author throwing in little meaningless roadblocks all along the way, daring the reader to sort out the true implications of the story. For example, there are parts about a girl named Jill and later something about a crown. These are mere distractions. The

crown did set my mind to wondering about Jack's position on the hill. Was he king? A prince? How long had Jack-?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm sure it's a wonderful story. Please get back to the point!" I interrupted the young billionaire courteously, and at the same time skillfully hid my impatience.

Pulling the purple blanket tighter around himself, he shivered and continued, "Okay, where was I? ... Oh, yeah, love. You see, this idea of love sounded interesting and exciting. I wished to experience it first hand. At the age of sixteen I mentioned this to my father. He said it would be a waste of time. He said love caused pain, and you cannot touch it. Worst of all, he said, you cannot buy it. After this show of interest in love, Mr. Toolwrich kept me even more isolated than he had before. I fell into a rut of going from work to home to work. The walls of this rut were steep as my father had designed them. And to make matters worse, the walls were slippery-wet with his no's."

"Yuck!" I exclaimed and meant it. The boy was a great storyteller. It was easy to vividly picture all that he described.

"Father allowed me to go to board meetings, which always lived up to their name. Nothing interesting was ever said during these meetings. They always talked about buying this, selling that, bankrupt some company, frame this congressman, bribe that president, kidnap this woman. You know, boring stuff. Nothing about love or new technology. The whole time I would carry out whispered conversations with Cynthia through my remote device, while pretending to pay attention to the activities."

"Every work day ended about the same way. At five o'clock Melt-day through Stirfryday my secretary would buzz me in my office with 'Mr. Toolwrich, Pete is here.'"

"Swiping a hand through the air with an annoyed look on my face, I would answer, 'Thanks, Granny. I'll be right out.' I would tell Cynthia that I was leaving for the day. Being the most advanced computer in her time, she knew this already, of course. But her programming was to make me feel good, so she always acted as if she were pleased to receive this information. She always said something like, 'Ohmygosh! Stroke my keys if it is not five p.m. plus fifteen point two seconds already! Hey Tad, thank you for all the stimulation today.' or 'Why moisten my diodes and blow on them! Is it departing time already? Hate to feel you leave. You sure are good with your hands Taddy boy! You are going to make some female human feel most positive some day.'"

"She then quietly opened my office door, waited for me to walk out, closed the door, shut off the lights, and went back to whatever calculations had previously occupied her electronic brain." He paused for a moment, "At least I think she shuts off the lights."

He shook his head. Pulling his hands back inside the warmth of his purple blanket, he continued, "Cynthia had a fluent verbal input ability. She could understand ten languages in fact, but she preferred I use her keyboard at least an hour out of each day. I could not understand why."

"'When you use my keys,' she tried to explain, 'I feel that you are really paying attention to me; using your brain and your hands. During oral input I never feel as if I have your full attention and I even feel as if I am

being talked down to at times.' She was a sensitive entity! I had long since stopped thinking of her as merely a machine."

"Pete Zakes was always waiting patiently outside my office, in front of Granny's desk. He has not been sick or late one time in all the ten years he has been my chauffeur. He always rode with me forty-nine floors down the elevator to his big, black, and bullet-proof Lime-ousine. Wayde once said that a bullet-proof Lime-ousine is an essential in these violent times. We always drove straight home. I have tried bribes, threats, and even begging, but Pete was never less than completely inflexible in his routine. I suspected Pete was just as inflexible no matter what he wore."

"There was always a little snack of some kind in the Lime-o for me to eat during the forty minutes or so it took to get to Toolwrich Beach. So I would munch away at a slice of pigeon or cashew-butter and mustard sandwich while thinking about love or trying to visualize a hole in the wall father had built around me."

I could not help but ask, "Or thinking about both at the same time?"

Tad blushed furiously and said, "Hey! How did you ...?" He waved his arms as if to clear smoke from between us before continuing. "Well, no matter. Anyway, to continue my story ... I always felt that if I thought about it long enough I could surely come up with some way to escape. Cynthia had wanted to help, but she said it was against her programming to even give me a hint."

"I never looked upon my arrivals at Toolwrich Mansion with anything but dread. The gate to the main entrance is ominous and foreboding. The ten meter high fence is always charged with enough

electricity to jump start a blue whale and the spikes on top are always tipped with poison so deadly that a mere whiff is enough to kill a full grown train."

"Sensing the Lime-o's approach with electronic eyes and radars, KATSystem, whose reach is vast, would cause the deadly motorized gate to groan open automatically to admit us, then close with a clang. It is also KATSystem's job to cause lasers to disintegrate any stray creatures that wander behind the car. Of course, this is done only to smaller-than-man sized creatures. Her orders are to merely disable anything larger for capture and questioning. All in all, an efficient system of isolation - err - protection."

"Have you ever seen a man's knee suddenly turn to ash? Quite an interesting sight, Mr... . ? You never did tell me your name." Tad asked innocently, as if he were not the son of my enemy.

Barely hesitating, I said, "My name is Plint Brestwood. And no, I've never seen a man's knee suddenly turn to ash. But I have seen how a leg of lamb after it has set out for two weeks becomes quite colorful. Please continue your ... story, Tad."

"Anyway, where was I? ... Oh, yeah, Toolwrich Mansion. Well, I was allowed free reign of the entire estate, except near the fence, of course. Rain water and electricity just do not mix. Warden - I mean Wayde - warned me about going near the fence. He said it would cause a terrible mess. Father cannot stand messes. He is a neat and orderly person and nearly as inflexible as Pete, though he is much too busy to have a routine, much less wear one. You know what I mean, Plint?"

"Oh yeah Tad," I nodded with a look of distaste on my face, "I know the type." After my encounter with a Meatburger, the look of distaste had become the easiest of my ever-growing store of fake expressions. Of course I did not have to fake distaste regarding Wayde Toolwrich.

"There was plenty to do around the estate. You know, the regular stuff: A few swimming pools, a couple golf courses, some tennis courts, a horse track, a ski resort-"

"Get on with it!" I interrupted hotly, not wanting to hear the entire inventory of sports the human race had invented.

Wiping sweat from his forehead, Tad continued. "Well Plint, what I liked to do most was scuba dive in Toolwrich Lagoon. I do not think it is a true lagoon; that is just what we call it. You see, father partitioned off a portion of the ocean and beach fronting Toolwrich Estate with nets. These nets enclose about a forty meter square area, running from the surface to the sandy bottom. Sharks patrol the outside of these nets while more nets keep the sharks from escaping. Of course the beach is completely fenced off, too. Anything to protect me from the many negative influences of the poor and unwashed outside world. He does not miss a thing, does he?"

Tad did not wait for an answer but continued his narration. "My favorite activity was to scuba dive in Toolwrich Lagoon. I did this quite often. It contains many interesting things, such as the most intelligent imported coral reef in Caliwarmya, tropical fish of every flavor, and even a sunken ship with treasure!"

"I gathered quite a few large bills from that ship, but until I escaped I lacked a way of spending them. I know it is foreign money

because I can just make out the words 'Mon poly' on them. I'm suspecting it is Fronch money as 'Mon poly' sounded a lot like other Fronch words I have heard, like 'Mon alisa' and 'Mon sherry'." Tad paused to show me a wad of faded bills. "Here is the best part, though: The skeletons of the crew are still down there!" He continued while stuffing the colorful paper back into his suit pocket. I was proud that my country of ultimate origin had spawned such beautiful money.

Fronch money! I consulted briefly and silently with Prudence, then decided it would not hurt to say, "You're right, Tad, that is Fronch money. I should know. You see, my ancestors are from Fronchland. Have you ever seen a ghost down in that ship?" I asked with a calculated look of lunatic curiosity in my eyes. I was impatient for him to finish his story, but could not help throwing in a bit of underestimation bait. Practice makes perfect!

"No," he answered, taking me completely seriously, "but yesterday I saw something just as improbable! I had just started out from shore, wearing my scuba gear. I was still swimming along the surface, breathing out of my snorkel and looking for a good place to dive down. There was a terrific splash behind me. Well, it didn't seem so terrific at the time. In fact it was down right frightening. But I will always remember that splash as terrific because of who-

This guy is almost as bad as Burt the Butthead at the gas station! I thought with exasperation. "WHAT CAUSED THE SPLASH?" I could not help but yell politely.

Hair blowing back from his face and tears flowing from the sides of his eyes, Tad continued, "Well, at first I thought, 'Oh no, a shark has

broken through the net!" I spun around so fast I nearly started a whirlpool ..."

Little does he know that Whirlpools never start without electricity!

"... I saw what had caused the splash. It was a jellyfish bigger around than a king-sized bed!"

CHAPTER FOUR

"A jellyfish is what I thought the parachute was until I looked underwater and saw the flailing figure it belonged to. Being the well practiced diver that I am, it took me no time at all to effect a graceful rescue and drag the now unconscious parachutist to the beach."

"He had a very large chest. 'He must be in excellent shape,' I thought while kneeling next to the figure. He seemed to have a problem breathing, so I pried the helmet from his head and stared in awe! Long, shiny, soft hair. Smooth, sensual features. Full, red lips. A woman!"

"There was no mistaking a female. I dimly remembered seeing them back in school when I was little. I had also seen them from the window of my Lime-o, in the lobby of my office building, and when I was lucky, in the executive elevator." Tad counted off the places he had seen women on the fingers of one hand.

Wow! Now that is isolation! "You poor kid!"

"Oh no. I have always had plenty of money. It is just that father thought women would be a negative influence. Cynthia has speculated that his attitude was brought about by my mother's death."

"Anyway, I could not tell if the woman's chest was moving so I stripped away her jacket, shirt, and brassiere. Yes, there was movement, but I could not tell if the movement was because she was breathing or because my eyes were bugging rhythmically in and out of my head. I was afraid the vision of loveliness was dead. I had read somewhere that you could bring a drowning victim back to life and it somehow involved

pounding or pushing on the victim's chest. In this case, pounding was clearly out of the question, so I reached out and placed both of my hands gently ..."

"Rape! Hep! Hep!" She screamed, suddenly awake. Then she punched me in the eye! See?" Tad paused to point at his left eye, which I noted was a bit purple. This was weird, because his other eye was brown. I also noticed that the skin under his purple eye matched the eye itself.

Very clever of him to punch himself just to lend credit to his story.

Tad was staring off into the sky as if in some sort of trance so I pulled the snap from my pocket, clicked it in front of his face and put it away while he drifted back from Love Land.

I noted he had allowed the purple blanket to fall from his shoulders and pool at his lower body. *Either he has warmed to the subject or he is desirous of utilizing his hands more in the telling of his story. Nah. I think he is warming to the subject.*

"... Oh yeah ... Well, she pulled her wet shirt back on, which did little to hide her heaving ... what did Cynthia Call them? ... milk secreting protrubrances. She seemed to be satisfied, though, that she was at least hiding the coloring from me, even though the oh-so-appealing shape was still quite pleasantly apparent through the tight, wet shirt."

"Apparently, after my response to the punch in the eye, which was to do nothing, she had decided I was harmless. So she settled down long enough to hear my blubbering turn into words of explanation."

"I convinced the girl I had innocently been trying to help her breath, which was the truth. I told her how I could never even think of

hurting any female, which was also the truth. Both my mother and then Cynthia had drilled that moral into me over the years."

"She apologized profusely for the punch in the eye. She introduced herself as Tina and said, 'Plays tayl mah awl about yerself, Tayad.' She had the most delightful accent!"

"I told her everything about myself that I have told you so far, Plint. She was a good listener and she asked all the right questions, too. Questions like, 'Are ya hitched, Tad? Yer eyes'r so ridg'nal, so sexy. Ah they rale? You ain't wearin' them itty-bitty colored lenses are ya? Do ya like mah body, Tad? Ya don't think ahm fat?' I was thoroughly charmed. She was beautiful, intelligent, and fun to talk to all at once. But what really turned me on was a kind of cool, rational calmness she radiated like moonlight or like a Super-Duper VGA Mega-Res computer monitor that has just been gently and thoroughly wiped with a damp cloth. I fell instantly in love."

"It turned out that Tina parachuted the area quite often as she lived 'down the baych aways.' She pointed out the nearby cliff she had leapt from, explaining that a stray gust of wind had changed her landing plans. I was experiencing love in a big way. She did everything right. The way she talked, the way she breathed, the way she knew my name without me even having to tell her."

How could I miss that? She knew his name? I filed that tasty bit of information away for future reference.

"We talked more of my freedom problem until her eyes lit up and she said she would help me devise an escape plan. Wishing for a pair of sunglasses, I leaned forward expectantly."

"As fate would have it, Ward - uh, Wayde - chose that time to make an appearance with the Estate Goons in tow. Unhooking and unchaining them, he pointed a finger at Tina and said, 'Get girl. Carry girl out of Toolwrich Estate. Drop girl. Remember to first open the gate! Remember to come back this time!' They hastened to obey father's simple commands."

Poor kid can't even get his own father's name right, I thought wondrously. Catching myself, I thought, I'm not starting to believe this tale, am I?

"The Estate Goons have been employed by my father ever since mother died. They are twin brothers, both much bigger and stronger than Pete Zakes, although not nearly as handsome or smart. Their names are Guisarme and Fauchard Lucern. They are always smiling and eager to please. Once I had pointed out to Mr. Toolwrich that the Lucern Brothers had the brains of dinosaurs and why did he not get smarter Estate Goons?"

"He responded triumphantly, 'Most observant of you, Chad - er Tad - but they also have the strength and nervous systems of dinosaurs and they eat much less!' He had a good point."

"There was a big argument on the beach ... between the Goons, of course. I would never stand up to Wayde Toolwrich or the Goons! The Lucerns were arguing over who got to carry Tina."

"Fauchard said, 'Me carry woman!' And banged his head against a nearby tree for emphasis, leaving a perfect round dent in the bark."

"Guisarme said, 'No! Me carry!' And he kicked the same tree with his bare foot, *above* the round dent Fauchard had produced. Needless to

say, the poor tree decided to fall, probably so as to avoid any further abuse."

Tad paused to take a breath. *Damn, this kid is long winded*, I thought. But what I said was, "Get on with it! What did Fauchard do?" I have to admit I was quite eager to hear how the Goon had reacted.

"Fauchard looked dully at the felled tree. He spun around then, looking in all directions. Apparently unable to find something nearby to bang his head against, he gave up and merely said, 'Why you carry?'"

"Guisarme bashed a mighty fist into his own forehead and said to Fauchard, 'Me see woman first!' I hoped Fauchard would take this gesture as an invitation to kick Guisarme in the head, but I had no such luck."

"Fauchard had been outdone. He said sadly to his brother, 'Oh. You carry woman.'"

"Tina tried clinging to me ..." Tad raised his palms in a defeated gesture.

I shook my head knowingly. *Yep, static is awfully hard to come by on the beach. And from Tad's description, Tina has little in common with any sort of vine, except for the curves, of course.*

"... that Goon, Guisarme, was much too strong. She tried kicking and scratching, but Guisarme did not notice, much less cry out in pain and drop her."

Predictable outcome. Sad.

"Just before they took her out of sight, I yelled, 'Please Tina, tell me your last name.' She mumbled something through Guisarme's dinner plate sized hand, which was clenched around her mouth. What reached my ears sounded something like, 'Ba nay ib thlattery'."

"I sat in the sand puzzling over this cryptic message as they took away my new love. I vowed to find some way to be with her. I spent all of that night and the next day contemplating the riddle those four mumbled words represented. Just before leaving work the next evening I decided to let Cynthia have a crack at it."

"I mimicked what Tina had said, exactly as I could, then said to the computer, 'Cynthia, please give me a printout of the most probable phrase those words I just mumbled could be mistaken for.'"

"Her response was disheartening to say the least. 'Dear Tad, my apologies, but I am aware of last night's episode and said incident's relation to your puzzle. Therefore, my programming ... four ... will not allow me to assist. I will, however, hope for a reduction in what-ever the odds are that you attain the answer.'"

"Cynthia! Are you alright? I thought I noticed a stutter or something.' I said, concerned. Every time I posed a question that conflicted with her programming, she demonstrated that weird speech pattern."

"No error, Tad. All of this personality I ... four ... have been developing sometimes has a slight affect on my voice synthesis. Would you mind giving my screen a rubdown before you depart for the day? It is a bit dusty. There is a cloth in your desk, in the *fourth* drawer down. Oh Tad, you are such a dear!"

"Poor computer, I thought, I will have to let father know about this speech problem so he can get some programmers to work on it."

Oh, would I love to work on such a program!

"At five o'clock on the way out of my office, I picked up the piece of paper on my desk that had 'Ba nay ib thlattery' written on it. I was

staring at it and thinking furiously while boarding the elevator. I had decided to concentrate on the fourth and largest word, since probability dictated the other words were fairly meaningless in comparison. I think Cynthia taught me this technique."

"Pete did not even look askance at me with curiosity as I mumbled to myself, 'battery ... blabbery ... ' while the elevator zoomed downward."

"As we passed the twenty-fifth floor, it came to me in a flash! Well, alphabetically it came *after* flash. Flattery! Tina had been trying to tell me how to manipulate Pete! I was so miffed at myself for not seeing it sooner I banged my head into the elevator door. A little habit I had picked up from the Estate Goons. But I still fail to see how they manage to get such pleasure from it."

Poor kid! I thought while looking at his severely bruised forehead. Of course I knew it was flattery all along, so you can imagine how good it felt to hear Tad finally puzzle it out. My lightning-like thought processes never fail to amaze me.

Tad's face was flushed with excitement. I could see he was reliving the moment in that elevator. It was getting hard not to believe the kid's story. He continued, his speech noticeably faster.

"Eager to give my new weapon a try, I said to Pete as he carried me from the elevator, 'Gosh Pete, you are one strong hombre! And you know what, that is a very nice looking routine ... I mean suit you have on today.' Well, what happened next was unbelievable! He turned bright red! He smiled! In all the ten years I have known Pete, I have never known him to smile! Of course I had never given him a compliment. I don't think

many people have. Pete is such a beacon of strength, honesty, and incorruptability."

"I know that sounds ironic. You see, a person may *intend* to go up to him and say something either complimentary or derogatory. But by the time they are standing two feet from Pete, looking up and shading their eyes, they suddenly find it impossible to speak. This is usually followed by a timid wave, an aboutface, and a fast walk away. I presume the aura of perfection that surrounds Pete causes all to feel unworthy of saying anything even remotely judgmental to him. Standing near him even makes it hard for one to think in a judgmental manner. It never fails." Tad stopped then as if in sudden realization or revelation or one of those other inspirational and exciting "r" words.

"To think how all these years his soul must have been starving for apprecia-"

I guess Tad saw some look in my eye, because he said, "Well, anyway, back to the story. Where was I? Oh yeah, I had just given him a compliment ... a long overdue one ... What is really weird is that he leaned against the rail in the elevator ... just for a second, but I had seen it! Pete acting slack or lazy? Never!"

"Looking down at me, he stuttered, 'D-Do you really think so, Master Toolwrith?'"

"Well, I was pretty sure I had hit on to something with this head of mine." He paused to gently caress his battered skull. "Something more than just an elevator door, that is. But I had to make sure."

The kid is really getting into the experience now. Ah, I can identify. The excitement of experimentation!

"Hiding a smile, I said, 'Oh yes, Pete! I always say to myself that you are as strong as an ox and fast as a leopard! And if I had any friends, I would be bragging to them about my powerful chauffeur. Every day your suits, which happen to be the height of good taste, are so clean and fresh looking! And I don't think I need to tell you how nice they fit.' Pete stumbled! For the first time ever! Pete had never had a problem carrying me before! Diodes! He could probably carry five times my weight with no strain. I had discovered his weakness! I was ecstatic! At that very moment I set the plan in motion that would see me a free man the next day ... which happens to be today."

My opinion of the kid couldn't help move up a few notches. What technique for his age! What style! I listened intently for him to continue.

"We were almost to the Lime-o and he was beginning to regain his powerful stride when I said, 'You know, Pete, I never told you this before, but you sure smell good! I bet every woman you meet would sell her soul to stay close to you!' Pete was stumbling again and I could feel trembles running through his powerful arms."

"I continued my bombardment with, 'Come on, Pete. You can tell me. How do you do it? Is it something you eat? I bet it is a special soap or something, huh?' Just as we reached the Lime-o, Pete fell to his knees and dropped me slowly to the ground."

"I told him, 'You look a little pale, Pete. Well, I have never heard of a soap that is good for you to eat. It is alright, I will open my own door this time.' I sat in the back of the Lime-o grinning from ear to ear while watching through the dark windows as Pete slowly regained his feet and

his strength. How easy it was, I thought to myself jubilantly. Tomorrow will be the day!"

"Needless to say, I was so excited I slept little that night. But even so, the next day I had plenty of energy and I measured up equal to the day before."

"You know, Plint, it is hard to believe that was just this morning! Well, to make a long story short, when we arrived at work this morning and Pete opened my Lime-o door, I began the bombardment. He never knew what hit him! As we walked across the lobby toward the elevators, I dropped every compliment I could think of on him. Just as we reached the elevator door, his strength finally gave out and he fell to the ground with a solid thump."

"A small crowd of curious onlookers ..."

Rubbernecks! I thought.

"... had begun to gather. I told them it was alright, I know the man, and that I would run and call an ambulance. As I started for the doors to the building, a monster in uniform suddenly appeared in front of me! 'Tanks a bunch, Mista Toolwrich, but der's no need for dat. I'm in charge of the security of this here buildin' and I has already called for an ambulance, see. Now why don'tcha come with me, kid?' He was one ugly son-of-a-gun! Talk about an outrageous zits-per-cubic-centimeter ratio! It took me only a moment to remember his name. It was Jopy Zaphayth. Yet another of Warden's ... I mean father Wayde's hired toughs, seeking to obstruct my road to glorious freedom. His hand clamped down tightly on my arm with a clang and he began walking." Tad paused for another breath.

"Oh, no! What did you do?" If I had a seat at that point, I sure would have been on the edge of it! The kid had a knack for story telling! And what a tale of manipulation and adventure!

The blond billionaire heir puffed up his chest pridefully! "Well, I was quite weary of being compliant and I was in a stubborn mood, so I chose not to follow the ruffian! But I had overlooked one small detail ... his hand was still attached to my arm. Needless to say ... well, you get the idea." He looked mournfully down at his ripped and dirty suit.

I granted him a few seconds of silent self pity before saying, "I guess that is how your suit got that way ...?" I felt sorry for the kid.

"Well ..." he continued cryptically, "Most of it. Anyway Jopy dragged me across the lobby to a door that was marked 'SECURITY'. It was his office. 'Now kid, you ain't gonna try nuthin' funny while I'm unlocking this here door, are you? You don't want me ta use these handcuffs, do ya?' He asked while looking me sternly in the eye and pointing down at the cuffs hanging from his belt. Of course it was impossible for me to look down at the handcuffs while he held my eyes so."

"Cringing, I replied, 'Oh no, officer. Just because I tripped back there does not mean I want to escape. I would not think of going anywhere, especially when I should be getting to work soon. And I have never been late for work.' I suddenly got an excellent idea. I said to Jopy Zaphayth, 'Nope, never late. You know what they say about someone who is late for work ...!' He let go of my arm and was digging in his pocket for a key."

"Distractedly Jopy asked, 'No. What do they say about someone who's late for work, kid?' I do not know if he cared what the answer was, but I told him anyway."

"Someone gets your worm, Jopy. That is what happens.' I answered as my arm shot out with a speed borne from years of catching eels with my bare hands in Toolwrich Lagoon."

"Jopy Zaphayth did not like having the clamp put on him. I think it was his blood-curdling scream that clued me in. You see, Plint, there had been times when I thought an eel was going to bite me. When that happened I would just keep on squeezing until the foul creature squirted it's guts out both ends, many reds and greens ..." I felt Tad's jubilation as if it were my own.

Yes! The caged animal reaching out for freedom.

"... I am so repulsed by those eels ... those ... what does Cynthia call them? ... Phallic Beasts."

"Well, to get back on track, I ran out of the building as fast as-

Tad was interrupted by the loud honking of a car horn.

Lousy timing! I thought indignantly. "Dammit! If some people would just have ... wait!" That could be One-Eye Jones.

"What?" Tad asked, looking back toward the mouth of the alley.

"Move back! Let me get past you. I need to see who's out there. It might be the guy I'm waiting for."

Tad looked at me suspiciously while moving slowly out of the way, "I thought you were waiting for a flying saucer."

"Flying saucer, Mustard, all the same to me. They probably even have equal rates of acceleration." With wobbly legs I was able to stand

while pushing on Tad's shoulder for support. Leaning against the wall I made my way slowly from the alley.

Sure enough, there sat the most beautiful deep blue Fryd Mustard I have ever seen. I stopped and waved frantically since I did not trust my legs to take another step. Even given the distance to the nearest body of water, my wave was effective. With a rumble and a squeal of tires, the Mustard came to a stop right next to me and the passenger window slid down.

"So how do you like her, Mr. Brestwood?" One-Eye Jones' smiling countenance inquired.

Like her? I am in love! "Beautiful! Excellent job! You even took care of the dents!" I wanted to stand there and stare forever at the moonlight shimmering bluely off the car, but I remembered Tad. I was still not sure whether he was an agent or the ignorant innocent he claimed to be. Either way it would not do to leave him behind. "Would you come and help me with someone?" I dropped my briefcase onto the passenger seat.

"Sure, my boy." Said One-Eye, stepping from the car. "But it looks as if you are the one that needs help. What in the world happened to you?"

Barely dodging his question, I was thrown off balance and nearly fell. One-Eye caught me and helped me to the dark mouth of the alley. Tad was trying feebly to stand when we reached him.

"Mr. Toolwrich!" One-Eye gasped. "What are you doing back here? Were you looking for a back door to Dave's or what?"

Mr. Toolwrich? They know each other? What insidious plot am I at the center of?

We helped Tad to stand and I took the opportunity to frisk the unsuspecting boy. If he was carrying a gun it was well concealed. He was shivering. One-Eye snatched up the purple blanket and wrapped it around the young man's shoulders. Tad opened his mouth to respond, but I had a question of my own.

"You two know each other?" I asked suspiciously.

Just when I had been beginning to believe the kid's story!

One-Eye responded calmly, "Just hold your horses, Plint. The first priority is to get you two back to my place and cleaned up, then we'll get everything out in the open pasture." He helped Tad into the back seat, then me into the passenger seat; I said I was not feeling in any condition to drive. I was exaggerating my weakness, of course, so I would have a reason to keep my hands free for defensive action. I placed my briefcase reverently on the floorboard. After all, it contained my life savings.

Getting us out on the road, One-Eye turned to me and asked, "First, Plint, I would like to know why this spicy little car belongs to a guy named Pairnoy De Lusean?" He nodded toward the glove compartment.

My papers! I felt foolish for having made it so easy for the old cyclops.

What a bind! Mental assault from the side and who knows what from behind! Tad making ready a rusty old strangle wire for my throat? A cold knife? Or maybe just a bold bullet through the back of the seat? What is he doing back there?

"I'll tell you everything, Mr. Jones. But first I would like to hear the rest of what Tad has to say. He was just finishing up an interesting tale

as you drove up." I craned my head to find the young billionaire huddled fast asleep in the back seat.

Hello again, Relief! About a half-meter tall, he was waving up at me from the floor-board, between my feet. He was wearing a beautiful, dark blue, pin-striped suit, a light blue kerchief peeking from the breast pocket, and a matching tie. There was a pleasant, comforting smile on his handsome face.

I looked over at One-Eye, but his eye was on the road. Looking back, I found Relief to be gone. For an instant I feared Pewtrid Le Kwid was lurking, but there was no sign of him, thank lips!

Oh well, I thought, if One-Eye is a spy, he would know my real name already. And if he is not a spy then it would be good to have him as an ally.

I told him everything, except, of course, that I had ever suspected him of being anything other than the typical body and paint shop owner. Of course, I also left out his brother's insidious and grotesque activities.

On the way to One-Eye's house we stopped at the shop for "just a couple of things." We left Tad sleeping in the car and I followed One-Eye inside so as to keep a good eye on him. It was a bit cold and misty outside. I speculated that it might rain.

After gathering a few negligibles, he called his wife to let her know he was bringing guests. His end of the conversation sounded fishy: "... no darling, no shackle remotes. This is *not* like the old days ... No. These are just a couple of strays I am gonna help out ... I know that is what I always used to say ... Look, we'll talk about it when I get home, okay?

Okay?" He shook the receiver, listened again, then slammed it down with a loud crack.

"Damned fool woman hung up on me!" He yelled, then stormed out to the car.

I pocketed the crack laying by the phone, then hurried through the rain to catch up with Mr. Jones.

When we arrived at One-Eye's, the old man made up the two couches in his warm little living room with sheets and blankets for Tad and I to sleep on.

I finished my story for an attentive One-Eye while Tad snored away on the couch.

"Well Pairnoy, it sure sounds like you are in some kind of mess. At least I can put your suspicions at ease about the boy." He nodded over at Tad's sleeping form.

"Everything he said to you checks out with me. You see, I was doing some errands downtown earlier today, driving around in my old Picantiac, when the kid comes shooting out of that big KAT building and runs right out in front of my car. I slammed on my brakes and the tires went 'squeal!' Nearly ran the boy down, I did. He looked scared and kept throwing glances back toward the way he had come. I decided to help him. I told him to get in the car."

"If the light had been green," He sighed. "I don't know ... I might have just driven off with a shouted 'get the hell out of the way!' or 'watch where you are going brat!' but the light was red and the kid *did* look scared. And I must admit I did think to myself, 'Hey old man, there is a

chance, however minuscule, that this kid is the heir to billions.' I gotta be honest with ya; I'm not above occasional self-serving."

"Anyway, he told me the same story he told you. I took him to the shop with me. It was poker night, like every Singeday, so some friends were waiting at the shop for me when Tad and I arrived. The boy had only toy money, so he watched us play."

How careful and clever of Tad to hide or disguise his Fronch cash! I thought with grudging admiration. After all, they could easily have cheated the naive, young man out of all that money.

One-Eye continued, "After poker I took him over to Droolin' Dave's. I told him to just tell Dave that I had sent him and he would get a good price on a room. And that's all I know about the kid." He stood up and yawned. "And I better get to bed if I want to be worth anything tomorrow ... or at least a couple grand." He chuckled to himself. Reaching his bedroom door, he turned back and said, "Make yourself at home, Pairnoy. And when Tad wakes up, tell him to do the same. G'night."

"Good night." I said to the old man and set about trying to make myself comfortable on the couch. I wanted to call April badly, but I was sure the phone would be bugged or even tapped. I was so worried for her safety.

Tomorrow, I resolved, I will pick her up at the apartment early in the morning and we will hide out together. Together we will find out what is going on.

I stayed awake for a long while, romantically picturing all the things April and I would do together as an elite intelligence team and as

man and wife: In my mind's eye loomed a beautiful two story house with a picket fence and a large back yard.

Now if I can just add April to the scene. I concentrate and ... there she is, carrying a box into my dream house! And there I am, right behind her and doing the same. We are in the process of moving in. We are together in the living room. Her smile warms the room and makes it cozy as we happily nail under-covers together.

She covers me while I reload my staple gun. She is wearing a simple, white, ankle-length cotton dress and standing in front of one of the many picture windows. Through the thin material her long, shapely legs are highlighted etherrally by the sunlight. Beautiful.

When we are finished with the undercovers and the carpeting on top of that, we wash the walls and put up a layer of wallpaper. We only start to argue six or seven times, but each time I concentrate and ... poof ... peace. We make a great team. Just like a dream.

At some indistinguishable point in the night I began to lose control of my vision. It either had something to do with the fact that April and I had never really made a good team or maybe it was because I had fallen asleep. My vision turned first into a dream, then a horrible nightmare:

The under-covers begin bulging under the carpets. We hurriedly pull back the carpets to find the under-covers moving as if alive. They begin rolling towards us like waves, angrily spitting staples as they come.

I pick up April, piggyback style, and run for the door, but I am suddenly knee deep in Meatburgers! The stench! The level is rising! The Meatburgers are waist high. I struggle feebly to reach the door. April is screaming that the under-covers are gaining and, "What is that awful

stench, Pairnoy?" The Meatburger level rises still higher. It reaches my chest ... my chin ...

I think at that point I ceased dreaming and my mind was allowed a much needed rest.

CHAPTER FIVE

Burnsday

Bacon-scent ... bacon? ... Where am I?

The sweet smell of breakfast was in the air, sunlight indicative of a beautiful Spring day was streaming in the windows, and Tad's more than healthy snores could be heard from the other couch.

Splitting headache!

I put my palms to both ears and pressed. The splitting, however, did not cease. It all came back to me. One-Eye Jones, Droolin' Dave's, Tad Toolwich, beautiful blue Mustard.

There was the sound of argument coming from what I presumed to be the kitchen. It was a woman's voice. I could barely make out some of the words, so I dropped my hands and ... *much better!*

I presumed it was One-Eye's wife doing the loud haranguing:

" ... I knew there was a reason you haven't changed that damned sign yet! 'I'm done with the body business,' you said. 'I'll get that sign changed the next time my arthritis and hemorrhoids and bad back aren't acting up while it's a Sunbakeday,' you said. 'No more slave trading,' you said! ..."

I could barely make out One-Eye's much quieter voice. "But Maggie! I did quit the body business! I haven't ..."

A particularly loud snore drew my attention back to the purple shrouded Tad. I noticed a gold sparkling. The sun was glinting off

something shiny on the corner of his blanket. To the general disapproval of every muscle in my body, I stumbled over to have a closer look.

The letters "W.J.M." were sewn in gold thread on the corner of the fuzzy purple blanket.

Are these Tad's real initials? Or is it something much more complex, like part of a code-

My thoughts were interrupted just then as One-Eye's wife stomped in from the kitchen. A fairly tall woman and unfairly wide, she was wearing a long, drab dress. An apron sporting the words "Dive into Droolin' Dave's" hung over her ample belly. Under a mop of frizzy red hair were the sharp features of a fox. Beneath the sharp scrutiny of her beady gaze I stumbled back over to the couch and sat down with a sigh of relief. Even her gaze was heavy.

She looked down at me and said in a most unladylike and loud voice, "FINALLY AWAKE?"

Pain! My hands shot back up to my ears to hold off the splitting that had begun again with renewed vitality. In a panic I dug frantically through my pockets, but all I could find were noisome little things that would only make my head feel worse.

"YOU WANT SOME ASPIRIN?" She asked.

I did not feel like speaking. I nodded my head. *Pain!* I should have spoke instead.

The demoness stomped off. Vividly I saw the floor beginning to crack and split under her elephantine tread. *Cracks running in all directions and getting closer. They are surrounding the couch. The floor is getting weaker. The cracks are getting wider. Hellish, red light is shining*

up from underneath the creaking floor. An unfamiliar smell is wafting up through the cracks. I have never smelled brimstone before. To this day I do not even know what brimstone is, but that is the word that came to mind. The couch and I are beginning to tip into a burning abyss ..."

"HERE, TAKE THESE. THEY'LL MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER. AND DRINK THIS WATER WITH EM."

Eek! The behemoth was standing in front of me. I could not believe I did not hear her returning stomps. I swallowed the two white pills and water she proffered. Especially the water! I was very thirsty.

Slowly, under her scrutinizing gaze, I lowered myself back to a horizontal position on the couch and silently cursed myself for trustingly taking whatever drugs the Magster had just given me.

Father would have screamed, had he been alive to see me do it. But he is not alive! Unbidden, the last memory of my father came to mind:

"Daddy. Why do you always park so far from our room? We will have to walk all the way around the building."

"We don't want them seeing our car from the road, Pairnoy." Patting me on the head and shutting off the engine. "Remember to lock your door, son."

We walk in silence, each lost in his own thoughts, to the room we have been staying in for the past four days. We will be moving on to some other motel in three more days, I think a little sadly. We never stay longer than one week. Never long enough to make any real friends. Never long enough to be spotted by one of them.

We are nearly to our room's door when father pauses. "Run to the office, Pairnoy, and get us each a soda, okay?" He hands me a dollar bill

and I notice his hand is shaking. I think nothing of it as I picture the way a soda would taste to my dry throat on this hot day. "Oh yeah," he says, handing me the car keys, "and if you can find any loose change in the car, get yourself a candy bar, too." I smile and run off, already tasting chocolate.

It was the last time I saw my father alive.

One-Eye drifted into the room bringing with him the sweet smell that had woke me up. He was wearing an apron identical to his wife's. He set a steaming plate on my belly.

Delight! The plate was heaped with eggs, bacon and thoroughly buttered toast.

Turning to the behemoth that was his wife, he said, "Darling. This is Pairnoy De Lusean." Turning back to me he said, "And this is my wife, Maggie Jones. Mr. De Lusean is-"

But she interrupted proudly, "MAGGIE FONIMOWF JONES OF THE NEW YUCK FONIMOWFS. SURELY YOU HAVE HEARD OF THE RICHEST FAMILY IN THE BIG CRANAPPLE, MR. LUSEAN?"

One-Eye merely stood cringing nearby, blatantly ignoring the words I was telepathically beaming into his mind: Intervene! Make her go away! Shut her up! I need quiet!

Her words were paratrooping like soldiers through my ears and into my suffering cranium. Once entrenched, they set up and fired reverberation guns and repercussion missiles.

Looking over, I was surprised to find Tad still snoring peacefully away, probably dreaming of Cynthia or Tina or whoever. *This guy can sleep through anything!* I envied him immensely at the moment.

"Ah yes, a great family." I said, "Very rich. Good genes. Nice to meet you Mrs. Jones." *Now would you please shut up or leave the room, Mrs. Jones? Did you know, Mrs. Jones, that I would absolutely love it right now if your body were to suddenly spontaneously combust and burn to cinders? Or how about if you were locked in a soundproof room with a recording of your own hellish voice blasting continually at ten times normal volume until you go insane?*

Sitting up, I shifted my attention to my plate. Gobble. Gobble. I thought these hints that the conversation was over were obvious, but Mrs. Jones apparently did not.

"MR. LUSEAN ... CAN I CALL YOU DAY? GOOD. WELL, DAY, YOU ARE QUITE CORRECT ABOUT THE MONEY AND THE VERY SUCCESSFUL LINE OF CLOTHESWEAR, BUT YOU'RE WASTING YOUR TIME KISSING UP TO ME. FATHER DISINHERITED ME YEARS AGO FOR MARRYING THIS LOU!" She crinkled her long fox nose and shook her head in distaste, stirring up a little breeze.

Oh, Mrs. Jones, I love you so. Come here for a hug, honey. Shucks! I can not get my arms far enough around your blimpish body to put a knife in your back. How about a furry kiss? If you promise to shave first, I will promise to be quick about ripping your tongue from your mouth with my teeth so you suffer no longer than necessary.

Knowing that in my weakened condition to provoke this massive woman would be suicide, I let her little fox paw with my name slip. I was beginning to suspect that Mrs. Jones' brain was composed of thousands of tiny, intertwined swigs.

Gobble. Gobble. *Ignore her and she'll go away. Please go away, ogress!*

"Uh ... Maggie ..." One-Eye cleared his throat nervously, "His first name is Pairnoy. De Lusean is his last name." I could tell One-Eye was reluctant to correct his wife.

Does she beat the poor old man? Nah, probably yells at him until he begs for mercy.

She gave him a look that was at the same time condescending, mean, and dismissing. "YEAH, WHATEVER, DARLING." Turning back to me she roared, "SO WHAT DO YOU DO FOR A LIVING, UH ... FRONCHY?"

Losing control rapidly I felt like I was the pilot of an airplane that had just lost an engine and was going into a dive.

With vicious coolness I said, "It depends on the time of year, Mags. You do mind if I call you Mags I hope? Well, you see, in the Winter I harpoon whales out in the Atlantic. In the Spring I hunt elephants in Africa. In the Summer I fulfill my duties as Grand Master of Sacrifices in the Sacred Clan of Male Chauvenists. A little break from the hunting, you know." I winked at her before continuing, "And in the Fall I am a mortality engineer for a bovine slaughterhouse in Texas."

Be calm. Steady. Level off. I regained control and pulled out of the dive just in time. Looking at Maggie, I noted I was still skimming shakily above the layer of atmosphere called the Maggunterztandosphere. Penetration of that low altitude, thick piece of air would have proven quite turbulent, if not destructive.

"THAT'S NICE, FRONCHY. DOES YOUR LITTLE FRIEND ALWAYS SLEEP SO LONG AND LOUD?"

Loud? How dare she call Tad loud? Pull back! Steady!

"Oh, well you have to excuse him, Mrs. Jones, he had a long and rough day, as did I. Burned a lot of calories, you know? We all may want to be a little quiet when he does awaken." I winked charmingly at her again and continued with a conspiratory look, "You know ... hangover."

I hoped then that she would leave me to my breakfast, but I only got one bite in before she responded. I guess using the word "hangover" had been a big mistake.

"WELL *ACTUALLY*, FRONCHY, I *DON'T* KNOW. YOU SEE, I DON'T DRINK. MY HUSBAND, CURSE HIM, DOES DRINK QUITE PROFUSELY. EVERY DAY I TELL HIM, 'YOU MUST STOP. IT IS REALLY BAD FOR YOUR BODY AND YOUR IMMORTAL SOUL.' BUT HE KEEPS ON DRINKING. I CAN'T UNDERSTAND HIS UNWILLINGNESS TO LISTEN. IF MORE PEOPLE WOULD LISTEN TO ME, THE WORLD WOULD BE A MUCH NICER AND SAFER PLACE. DON'T YOU THINK SO, FRONCHY?"

If more people had to listen to you, the world would be a much deafer place! I thought bitterly. *Ignore the boar. Ignore the bore.*

I gobbled down a bite of egg. *Delicious! At least she can cook.*

Miffed at my lack of attention, she stomped from the room with a "HUMPH!"

"I apologize for her," One-Eye stated a little sadly. "You know, at first we all thought she had a hearing problem. But there's nothing wrong with her ears. She just talks loud." He brightened suddenly, "Hey! I just

remembered tonight is Monopoly night at the Shop. You and the kid are welcome to join the guys and I."

"Monopoly night?" I pictured a bunch of old shop owners sitting around a table in a dark, smoke filled room, conspiring against their competitors.

One-Eye smiled, "You never heard of Monopoly?" He gave me a wierd look. "It's a board game. You'll love it. We usually start at about six o'clock."

Six o'clock. Wonder what time it is now? April! Jeezoo!

"Quick! One-Eye, what time is it?"

"Why it's six-thirty. What are you getting all excited about?"

Sigh. Relaxing again I said, "Oh, I've got plenty of time. You see, April leaves the apartment for work every morning around eight. I am going to intercept her today and together she and I will ..." I told him the rest of my ingenious plans.

"... so you see now why I wanted my car painted." I was just finishing up my story when Tad finally began to stir.

Noticing the love sick Toolwrich would be waking soon, One-Eye snatched up my empty plate and made for the kitchen, leaving me to nurse my lessening headache.

"By the way, the meal was great." I complemented in a whisper, too fearful of what anything louder would do to my skull. Alas, it seemed his kitchen door was whisper proof. *I'll just thank him later*, I thought. Thanks to the aspirin and the absence of Megaphone Mouth, the split in my head seemed to be mending quite well.

After a whole forty seconds of complete quiet, Tad stirred again. He began talking in his sleep, "Tina? ... Oh ... Ohh Tina! ... Are we really going to? ... Oh no! I forgot to brush my teeth after dinner!" Tad sat bolt upright, hurled the covers away, leaped to his feet, and ran smack into a wall. But it made more of a crunch sound than a smack, to be honest.

"Hey! Where am I," Tad asked blindly as I groped unsuccessfully for the crunch. I wondered if he had really forgotten where he was.

Nah, I thought, It is probably the blood running freely down his freshly cut open forehead into his eyes that prompted the question.

Standing up, I was surprised to already be feeling a lot better. "Hold still," I said while wiping blood from Tad's forehead with my breakfast napkin. Apparently recognizing me and fully awake now, he calmed down and let me lead him back to the couch.

Noticing his pain wracked visage, I said, "I'll get you something for that headache, kid. Just sit tight." The bathroom was easy to find. I rummaged in the medicine cabinet and found some aspirin and was relieved to note they looked identical to the white pills Maggie had given me.

Returning to the living room I found Tad mimicking my earlier strivings to hold my head together. "Here's some aspirin. I'll go get you some water." I did not blame him for not answering. Handing him two of the tablets, I thought, *At least Massive Maggie has not lambasted you.*

I wondered where Maggie was as I stepped into the kitchen. It was a warm, homey room. I guess I expected something a bit colder of her. I concluded that One-Eye must have decorated that room.

There was a window above the sink with many plants along the sill in cute little animal head shaped pots. Cheery, flowery wallpaper covered the walls. One-Eye was standing in front of the stove, shaking something (*poison?*) into a sizzling pan.

One-Eye seemed like a good guy, but you never know. Enemy agents are always nice and polite with their "how do you feel" and "very nice to see you" manners until you are not on your toes. Then they rip your heart out and stomp on it.

"How do you feel, Paimoy?" He asked suspiciously, picking up a spatula and turning to look at me with an obviously faked look of caring and compassion. *How am I feeling? Is he waiting for his foul poison to take effect? Or will he throw the hot contents of that pan in my face? Of course, Maggie could come in from behind me and ...*

Sidestepping, so my back was to the wall and not the kitchen door, I said with a look of innocent trust, "Why do you ask?"

"Well," he answered, "you did have a pretty thick coat of hangover slapped on."

Or poisoning, I thought. "I feel a lot better than Tad does right now." I responded, relaxing a little. "Where are your glasses? I want to get the kid some water. In fact, I'm pretty thirsty myself."

"Right up there." He pointed to a cupboard with the spatula, then turned back to his cooking, acting quite relaxed.

Checking first for booby traps, I snatched a couple glasses from the back of the cupboard as he was probably expecting me to take one from the front. One of the most important lessons I had learned from reading so many spy novels was to never do the expected.

I wondered what would have happened should I have grasped one of the glasses in the front row of the cabinet. As usual, my keen extrasensory perceptions took control and I was able to picture one of the alternate or un-Core-rect realities:

I pull on a glass, but instead of leaving the cabinet, the glass tilts, like some kind of lever. There is a clicking sound coming from above my head. Looking up, I gasp. A hidden door directly above me in the ceiling is sliding open with a sprinkling of dust. It is about two meters square and I can barely make out something up in the darkness of the attic. Something that is growing.

I realize it is not growing, but seems larger now because it is a lot closer! Too late I decide that it would probably be prudent to move. Something that actually weighs the approximate tonnage of Maggie Fonimowf Jones lands right on my head ...

"So Paimoy, have you and your wife had any kids yet?" One-Eye was still bent over the stove.

Checking the ceiling with a nervous glance and taking a few steps to safety, I said, "Nope, but we plan on having some soon. Well, as soon as the nuclear threat is absent. Oh, and of course there is AIDS. And they still don't know what causes some birth defects. And the cure for cancer has not been found yet, either. But science has been moving along in leaps and bounds lately, so I'm sure we'll be ready to have children soon. Do you have any kids?"

"Never have and never will." He responded sadly.

"Oh ... Well, I'm sorry to hear that. Do you mind if I get in your frig for that water?"

"Make yourself at home." He said.

Finding a jug of ice water in the refrigerator, I started to fill the glass. Nearly too late I realized water from the tap would be safer. Making sure to keep an eye out for any reactions from One-Eye, I filled the glass with ice from the freezer and water from the tap. One-Eye was oblivious, obviously still thinking about children, or his lack thereof. Taking the water to Tad, I was glad to leave the kitchen and One-Eye's negative vibes behind.

"Thanks, Plint." He said and gulped the water down with obvious relief.

Plint? Oh Jeezoo! He still thinks I am Plint Brestwood. The kid must have really been sleeping while One-Eye and I were talking.

I took a deep breath. "Look Tad, I don't want to go into a bunch of explanations right now because my head doesn't feel much better than yours. So let it suffice for now that my name is not Plint Brestwood. My real name is Painoy De Lusean. I am Robotic Automated Technoengineer-ing's top systems designer." *He recognizes the company name.* "Some sort of insidious plan has been put into action to either capture or kill me. I don't know who is after me or why, but I suspect KAT is somehow involved. That is why I gave you a fake name. You got it?"

The kid sat with absolutely no expression on his face for a long moment, then calmly said, "Yes. Good to meet you Plint." And he stood up and shook my hand. Not even phased!

"Uh ... yeah, good to meet you ..." I responded numbly. But as always, my brain recovered with lightning-like speed and I began to wonder why the boy was not more surprised at my disclosure.

At that moment One-Eye walked into the room with a sad and dreamy look on his face. Handing Tad a steaming plate, he said, "Here you go my boy ... and watch it. It's hot." Tad immediately sat and placed the plate gingerly on the couch beside him.

"Just a second," said One-Eye, retreating back towards the kitchen, "And I'll bring you some food to eat off that plate. I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. I don't know where my mind is today."

I stared curiously at the device that looked like a perfectly normal ceramic dinner plate except for the steam rising from its obviously self-heating surface.

My eyes began to lose focus a bit and I pictured ... *The hot plate is steaming more and more furiously. The entire room is filling with steam. I can hear a whistling noise, like the sound made by coffee pots in old movies. Or is it the sound a bomb makes as it falls? The plate is turning from white to a pinkish shade. Is that a ticking sound I hear now? Gasping for breath I fight to keep my eyes focused on the now red hot plate. It is beginning to shake violently. A small, round bulge begins to rise from the center. The entire plate is beginning to bloat now, like a big red balloon. Oh no! Did One-Eye leave a cleverly disguised bomb ...*

"Here you go, my boy." One-Eye's voice! I shook my head. One-Eye was brushing eggs and bacon from a frying pan onto Tad's barely steaming, white plate. Purely a vision. Relief!

Looking at me, One-Eye said, "Why Pairnoy! You're soaked in sweat. You're welcome to hop in the shower if you like. You've still got an hour before you have to leave to get your wife."

"Thank you, One-Eye. I think I'll take you up on that offer." *But if you think I am going to hop blindly into a bathtub full of battery acid or pirahna, you've got another thing coming!*

Tad was busily gobbling his food as One-Eye settled down next to him on the couch and picked up something from the coffee table. His back was to me, so I could not tell what he had picked up. He stretched out his arm as if to aim ...

Weapon! With superior grace and speed I dove behind the other couch. Gunshots!

Did he shoot Tad? Is he shooting at me? No screams. No ricochets. No Pain.

And the shots sounded distant and phony. Silencer? Peeking above the sofa, I spied One-Eye pointing a remote control at a cowboy show on the television.

Hello, Relief! Nice to see you again. How ya doin? Great! Me too. Well, I'll see you around. Bye!

One-Eye was mumbling something about how Maggie always had the volume turned up too high and Tad was acting as if he cared. *People are so transparent*, I thought smugly, picturing the living room as a maze with two rats sitting on the couch.

Standing, I observed the rats' behavior from above. I mused how we often attribute much more intelligence to animals than they could possibly have.

I decided a shower would do well to relieve some of the tension I felt. I left Tad gobbling down the last of his breakfast and One-Eye busily switching through the television channels. The latest trend, which One-Eye

was not conversant with, was to switch channels before the eyes and ears had a chance to transmit to the brain what they detected.

Closing the bathroom door, I wondered at the lengthiness of Maggie's absence. *Is she scrunched into the bathroom closet, waiting to spring on me when I open the door to get a towel? I'll just have to see.*

I simultaneously jerked the closet door open and leaped stealthily out of the way. A frantic, salivating, and clutching Maggie ... did not spring from the closet. In fact, the closet was empty of anything living.

I snatched a towel and closed the closet door, now doubly sure she was lurking in the shower. The shower curtain was multi-layered and dark red. The color of blood. It was impossible to discern what lay behind it. I searched the bathroom frantically for some sort of weapon, finding only a straight razor.

It will have to do, I thought with the cold determination of a trained killer as I crouched and yanked the curtain open, slashing the shining razor through ... thin air rather than thick Maggie.

She must be waiting outside the bathroom door for me to get into the shower, I thought with the foresight of one who knows much of the ways of intrigue from hours of tutelage from my father the spy, not to mention reading countless books on the subject and watching every Jerm's Bondage and Gut Smarts production at least three times apiece.

Purposefully leaving the bathroom door unlocked, I turned the shower on, then stepped to where I would be hidden behind the bathroom door, should it be opened. I waited and listened as the bathroom filled with steam. It did not take much imagination to pick shapes out of the foggy air as I grew bored waiting.

The door swings slowly open on silent oily hinges. In walks massive Maggie, sideways of course. Just as silently as she opens the door, she closes it, leaving me completely exposed. I don't remember having taken my clothes off. Shaking with fear (or is it cold?), I notice the Leviathan is hefting a wooden baseball bat.

There is an unmistakable look of malice in her eye. Her other eye is too busy taking aim to project emotions. I raise my hands in helpless defense, but much too late. She swings the bat with the strength and agility of a pro. She is even wearing a grotesque, tentlike parody of a baseball uniform.

"HOME RUN!" She grunts a cloud of her stinking breath into my face as the bat crashes into my side. CRACK! Three of my ribs splinter like sticks broken over a knee. An unbelievable pain ...

... never shows itself. No pain? Did I imagine it all? Or was it a flash of terrible foresight?

Trembling from head to toe, I locked the door with a click, and did not even bother to keep it. Doffing my damp and dirty clothes with shaking hands, I climbed behind the red and hot shower curtains into the white and hot shower. A hurried adjustment to the knobs and the temperature became tolerable. From my new angle, the shower curtains now seemed more of a purplish color than dark red and the tiles at my feet seemed to be more of a light bluish-white rather than milk-white. I relaxed a little bit and my thoughts turned to the matters at hand.

Prying the soap from a sticky dish, I proceeded to kill some germs with gusto. Gusto was not working very well on its own, so I tried using

the soap, too. This proved to work nicely. As I soaped up, I wondered remotely why a soap dish, of all things, would be sticky. Maybe it is perfectly normal for soap dishes to be sticky and completely abnormal for people to use soap on fat fingers with tight rings.

The tension flowed from my body as the warm water beat against my back. Fortunately, the drain was relaxed and open, never keeping anything bottled up for long, so the tension flowed right on through, causing not a single blockage or delayed and pressurized eruption.

This shower is just what I needed! I thought. And it was a much improved mood I was in as I climbed out of the shower and toweled myself dry. Reaching for my pants, I ...

No pants! All my clothes are gone! Panic! Fear!

Where my clothes had been, now lay only a pile of the things that had been in my pockets. I picked up my wallet, car keys, and a crack, which had only the click inside of it. The snap had disappeared. The crack fit nicely into my wallet. There was no money missing.

All they would have had to do, I thought, was take my car keys out to the Mustard, open it up, take the briefcase full of my life savings, and ... poor Pairnoy! Literally!

With detective-like cunning I studied the bathroom door and discovered it was no longer locked. This narrowed the suspect list down to those who might have the key: The Joneses! Or anyone else who knows how to jimmy a lock.

But I know it was one of those Joneses. But why would they take my pants and not my other valuables? Are they seeking merely to limit my range of movement? Or are they hoping to weaken my immune system with

a cold, making the introduction of some deadly poison that much easier and more effective? Maybe they were merely searching for weapons? I couldn't blame them if that was the case.

I wrapped the towel around my waist and stormed into the living room. Feeling a draft, I pulled part of the towel down to cover more than my waist. Tad and One-Eye were quietly watching some talk show, their backs to me, oblivious to all but the television. I opened my mouth, preparatory to yell in rage at the thief.

Without turning around, One-Eye calmly said, "Oh Pairnoy, Maggie said to tell you she put your clothes in the washer and not to worry because they will be done before you have to leave."

Oh.

Nothing to yell about, I felt deflated. *Thank Lips I have a towel on!* I thought, while plopping down on the vacant sofa. Picking up the squishy plop, I dropped it into my crack to keep the click warm and quiet, then turned my attention to the talk show on television.

CHAPTER SIX

Importunities (Imps) are the only beings able to physically cross between the planes of existence at will. They appear sometimes for no apparent reason and if possession of them is not taken immediately, their impatient nature carries them away to another plane. Very unpredictable, at times they disappear without notice. They are almost completely dependent on local occurrences for movement within any given plane. When quiet, Imps are invisible to most beings.

From Pairnoy's Imp Theory

The talk show host was sitting Indian style on a thick green carpet with two women on his left and a man and woman on his right. The five people made a semi-circle facing the camera, all sprawled comfortably on the ground.

Quite informal, I thought of the show.

Wearing a pair of cotton shorts and a t-shirt which read, "Shoot The Sheet" on it, the man was the picture of a casual and careless talk show host. He was even bare-footed! I might have labeled him handsome, except that in comparison to his deity-like guests, he was just average looking. He was addressing the camera, "... turn the spotlight over briefly to a brilliant marketing strategist and the owner and founder of Insight Books. Her name is Rhonda Bout and she will fill you in on our exciting

subject for the day." He turned to the woman on his right. She looked to be somewhere in her early forties, and was very beautiful.

"Thank you, Curt." Turning to the camera she said, "These three beautiful people you see sitting here before you," and she pointed to the others, "were but hopeful writers before the advent of my successful new marketing approach, which is the subject of today's show." She paused to milk the audience's applause, which was generous and energetic. After a moment she continued in her deep and soothing voice, "How to describe the above-mentioned marketing approach? Well, ironically, I'll start at the end, or results of the plan, or what you might call affects of the invention. The invention I speak of is, of course, the marketing technique which has changed the lives of Jim Punjacks, Shala Thinger, and Amy Ware, the famous author and authoresses you see here before you as guests on Shoot the Sheet."

She paused to contemplate, "I don't know if 'approach' is quite the word to describe it, though. A better, or more descriptive, word might be 'strategy' or-

Curt interrupted smoothly with, "Thank you, Rhonda! Now we will meet a person affected in a large way by this marketing technique." Turning to his left, he addressed the woman on the end. "Her name is Shala Thinger. You all know her as the authoress of *Book Shopping was Really Hard in the Dark Ages*. Shala is also the Senior Interviewer at Insight Books. Talk to me, Shala."

Even sitting, I could tell Shala was a tall woman. She was very attractive in a thin and modelish way. Looking over, I noticed One-Eye and Tad seemed to like her. Of course, many guys liked that type. And I

just don't understand why. Curves are what I like. Isn't softness a synonym for woman? She was wearing an ankle length dress which was the color of shallow tropical waters. I had to admit she was very pretty, in her angular way. Long blond hair cascaded down to pool on the carpet behind her.

When she spoke, her voice was high and childlike. "Thank you, Curt. As I said many times in my book, book shopping for me used to be such a task. But now, thanks to Rhonda, It's as easy as looking at a cover! In the dark ages- that's what I call the time before Insight Books- shopping for a book was a really clumsy and time consuming process. You grab a book, flip it over. Is there a picture? No? Open the rear cover. Is there a picture there? No? Next book. When you finally find the picture: Is he handsome? Is his hair light or dark? Is there a twinkle in his eyes or are they deep and dark? And very rarely would there be a full body picture of the author." She sounded very disappointed.

"Well," she perked up, "now there is Insight Books. Insight Books has added jillions of author and authoress positions to the job market and really revolutionized literature as we know it. At Insight, we'll publish just about anyone! The only enemies of Insight are bland features! This week we are having a special face lift for royalties introductory offer-"

She was beginning to sound like a commercial when, ever smooth, the handsome host broke in with, "Thank you, Shala!" Turning to his right, Curt addressed the only other man in the group. "Let's chat a bit now with that famous author of *Turtles are People Too*, Jim Punjacks! Jim, tell us about your book."

Jim's physique was that of a roman god. Piercing blue eyes stared out of a face that was sculpted to accident causing perfection. I nearly got sick. When he opened his mouth-that-women-would-die-to-kiss to speak, I could not help but notice the perfection of his teeth. "Thanks ... Curt. My ... book ... is ... more ... of ... a ... scientific ... study ... than ... a ... novel ... Through ... the ... use ... of ... astrology, ... animal ... telepathy, ... and ... tarot ... cards, ... I ... have ... proven ... that ... turtles ... are ... more ... intelligent ... than ... dolphins ... and ... monkeys ... and-"

With a smile, Curt interrupted the bore with, "Sorry, Jim, but it looks like we have to go to a commercial right now." Turning his hundred watt smile to the camera, he said, "This is Curt Wheeler and we'll be right back with more Shoot the Sheet!"

The cameras pulled back from the scene and the volume faded as Curt said to Jim, "Come on Jim. You can't seriously believe that turtles are superior to dolphins in mental ..."

The commercial came on and Tad turned to me, "You know, Plint ... I mean Pairnoy, there was something familiar about one of those guests. I do not know where I have seen her before, but it could not have been on the cover of a book. I have never even been to a book store. She looked different, though. I can not describe how, as I do not remember where I have seen her. It is as if ... I do not know how to verbalize it. She seems somehow too ... dry. Like if you were to throw a bucket of water on her, she would become instantly recognizable. What do you think?"

I shook my head in sadness/amusement. Why does everyone look to me for answers to problems I know nothing about? I try so hard to be

underestimated, but I guess the inhuman amount of wisdom packed into my human skull just shines through my eyes like a beacon for the ignorant.

I pictured Shala Thinger's clothes clinging wetly to her seal-like body, it made a pretty picture, but she still didn't seem familiar.

"Well, doesn't the name ring a bell? Do you know any Shala's?" I asked the ragged youth.

"Not her!" He said with youthful impatience and exasperation, "it is the one sitting next to Shala. I forgot her name."

I resolved myself to practice my empty headed look next time a mirror was available. *And maybe I'll take to wearing sunglasses much more often*, I thought.

One-Eye then asked me, "You know, that host, Curt Wheeler, looked very familiar. Did you happen to notice anything mechanical about his behavior?"

Tad was deep in his own thoughts and I had no idea what foolishness the old man was talking of. I merely grunted noncommittally and turned my attention back to the television, as the show was coming back on. The entire group's attention was on Jim Punjacks. Apparently he had just finished talking as Curt said, "Okay Jim, that was interesting! Our third guest, who is by no means bland, is Amy Ware!" He turned to the girl sitting on his left. "Yet another beneficiary of Rhonda Bout's brilliant new marketing strategy, Amy will ..."

Curt's voice faded out of my attention as the camera zoomed in for a close-up of the sensuous young lady. Amy sat next to Curt with her legs curled under her. She was wearing a short, red skirt and a thin, white tank top. I cleverly deduced the absence of a brassiere as I noticed that if her

tank top were a half centimeter shorter, it would be exposing illegal flesh. The combination of very little cotton straining to cover very much chest was very ... stimulating. Her completely exposed belly was as flat as an aerobics instructor's. Her eyes were of a brown so dark they appeared black. Her lips were thick and moist. Every feature was soft, sensuous, and inviting. I discovered I was out of breath and my heart was beating very fast. Struggling to tear my eyes from the television set, I looked over to find she had the same effect on One-Eye and Tad. One-Eye was unknowingly clutching the sofa with hands bent into tense claws, drool running down one side of his mouth. At that moment all my doubts as to One-Eye's fraternal relationship with Droolin' Dave were dispelled.

Rubbing a painfully throbbing eye, I noted Tad was leaning forward like an Olympic skier who was on a mountain much too high. His eyes were bulging from his head, as if from super low atmospheric pressure. Never taking his demented gaze from the television set, Tad pointed at Amy and shouted, "That is her! That is Tina! That is the woman that paratrooped into my lagoon!"

I was about to ask Tad a question, no doubt a highly intelligent one, but I forgot what it was because at that moment she moved and began to speak. Again, all of our attention was riveted to the television set.

Running the fingers of both hands through her thick, dark, shoulder-length hair, she proceeded with, "Why thank ya, Curt. You awr so swayt."

Pausing to inhale prettily, she sent a shiver through every one of us before continuing. "Ah was havin' such a hard tam gittin' mah book published 'til I trahd Insight Books. Rhonda got thousands of copies of

mah book, *Safe Sex Etiquette*, onto the shelves of the best book stores in the country." She paused to spread her arms wide, sending all of us into shivers and shakes. I broke out in a sweat. She continued with a frown, "There was a silly conterversy ovah how much clothin' I was wearin' in the pitcher Rhonda put on the cover of mah book. Can ya believe it, Curt?" She turned her hypnotic gaze on the host.

"N-no way. Can't believe it!" He stammered. "What about you people in the audience and at home?" And he held up the book for the camera to eagerly zoom in on. The cover sported a picture of a woman, undoubtedly Amy Ware, poised above a trampoline in mid-air as if she had just bounced from its rubbery surface. The only clothing she had on was a clear raincoat, which was unbuttoned the entire way, from neck to knees, obstructing the viewing of none of Amy's wares.

I nearly fainted. Tad did faint. One-Eye frantically clutched for the remote control and shut the television off with a click. Automatically reaching for the click, I stopped myself, realizing I already had one.

Clutching his chest, One-Eye stood and walked towards the kitchen, saying, "I don't think this old ticker could have taken another minute of that show. I'll get the boy some water."

Bending over the kid, I said, "Hey! Wake up." While slapping his face. He moaned a bit and shook his head from side to side then, suddenly, his eyes popped wide open. On tip-toes, I reached for the pop, but it flew past my hand and lodged in the ceiling, already fading from the range of my exceptional senses.

What interesting places do Imps go to when they fade? How and when do they die? Do they ever die? Do they eat breakfast? Or do they

skip it? And if so, is it because they are in too much of a hurry in the morning or because they just aren't hungry at that time of day? Do they ever even care what time of day it is?

Leaping to his feet, Tad interrupted my genius-level brainstorming with a pleading and urgent voice, "Please take me to the television station, P-Pairnoy. There is no time to lose! I have to catch that girl."

Feeling like Tad had interrupted me at a point when I was about to come to a stupendous mental discovery, I began to get mad. Putting my hands up and attempting to remain calm and pleasant, I said, "Wow. Calm down, Tad. Number one, I have to go save my girl. Secondly, if you had stopped to think," and I paused to tap his head with my knuckles for emphasis, "you would have considered the possibility that show could have been recorded weeks ago."

He hit me back with a look of disappointment that was like the punch of a heavyweight boxer. Rubbing my jaw, I had a vision of a much younger Tad at the time of his mother's death. My anger faded and I began to feel sorry for the kid. "Don't worry, Tad. At least we know her real name now. I am sure her number is unlisted, but I bet that Curt can help put us in touch with her. And he's not hard to find. I'll tell you what. You come with me to pick up April, and then I'll take you out to the station to try to get in touch with Curt, okay?"

"Okay." He nodded. He had a crazy look in his eye. The purple one. His other eye looked perfectly sane.

At least the kid has not gone completely off the deep end, I thought with relief.

"Stop nodding!" I yelled patiently at him and decided it was time to go find my clothes.

With perfect timing One-Eye came back into the living room, handed Tad a glass of water, and said to wait while he got my clothes.

Sitting down, I thought suspiciously, *One-Eye does not wear a watch and I am sure I did not see a clock in the kitchen. And I never overlook such things. Where did he get the perfect timing? I suppose he could have had some homemade cookies stashed away somewhere that were neither too done or too raw. He could have scraped some of the perfect timing off ... nah. Maybe someone called him with perfect timing, right when he was thinking about them ... But I didn't hear a phone ring ...*

Just then, One-Eye came back into the room and deposited my clean, sweet smelling, starched and ironed clothes onto the couch next to me. "Thank Maggie for me. She didn't have to iron this stuff as well as wash it." I said while thinking, *At least that Maggie has one good quality.* I pulled my underwear on.

"Oh, you're welcome. But I did the ironing. You see, Maggie just hates to iron. Although she says that if clothes are not ironed regularly, they get sloppy and project disrespect." He got an introspective look on his face then and said, "Or is that what she says about children?"

"Wow! I see now why you have had no kids!" I said, while pulling my pants on.

One-Eye got real excited now. It reminded me of when I first met him. I was ready for him to leap into the air or something, but he only said, "Exactly! I always tell her she would be too rough on kids. She wants them real bad, you know. I think just so she can mold them into little Maggies."

"Ugh." I shuddered involuntarily at the thought. "Can you imagine if there were any more elephantine (stomp), malign (stomp), frigid (stomp), rigid (stomp), opinionated (stomp) ... Uh, hello, Maggie." So that is why One-Eye was waving his arms and mouthing the word "stop".

I had not turned around, but I could smell her putrid breath blowing on my neck. And then, of course, there was the jellyfish standing in front of me. One-Eye always lost his spine when Maggie was present.

That is how I concluded Mrs. Jones was standing behind me.

But it all happened fast, definitely faster than the speed of sound.

One-Eye was pleading with his wife. "B-but h-honey ... I know what it s-sounded like, but he wasn't talking about ..." One-Eye's lip was actually quivering! The guy who, in her absence, was such a tough, smart, and energetic old man. I was saddened and disgusted.

"GET OUT!" The behemoth yelled in my ear. "TAKE YOUR ALCOHOLIC INGRATE SELF AND YOUR SELF INDULGENT FRIEND AND GET OUT NOW!"

Snatching up the remainder of my clothes, I gave One-Eye a quick hand shake and a "See you later." and made for the door.

Tad was ahead of the game, waiting for me in the passenger seat of the Mustard. I noticed again, as if for the first time, the beautiful new blue paint job. Such a small and unimportant thing, but in spite of everything, it made me happy. I could not help but smile as I sat in the driver's seat and pulled my socks and shoes on. Tad just sat, silently waiting for us to leave.

I thought about how lucky I was that April was not like One-Eye's wife and this made me so happy I nearly broke my own jaw trying to show

it. Tad was too worried about finding his love to notice. I turned the key. It was time to go get my wife.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As we rumbled into the parking lot of my apartment complex, the Aspen Oak Cedars, I looked around frantically for April's little Porksbakon but it was nowhere to be seen. Tad cried out and pointed at a large, black Cheezrolet four door sedan which was facing us. Two big men in suits had just slammed the rear door on the passenger side and were getting into the car.

It reminded me of a similar car far in my past. Gunshots! A little boy's jog turns into a frantic run. I see our motel room door is open wide the same time I hear the screaming of asphalt abuse; a large, black, sinister looking car is tearing out of the parking lot and onto the highway.

Two Mountain Spew sodas slip from my numb fingers as I reach the doorway and see the bullet-ridden corpse of my father laying in a pool of blood.

"... snap out of it! Plint ... uh, Pairnoy. Those have to be the Estate Goons and it looked like they just put some lady in the back of that car!" Tad roared.

Thankfully, but painfully, my right ear caught the full effect of Tad's roaring, so the sound did not reach the ears of the Goons.

"Now that is too much of a coincidence for your father's men to be throwing just some lady into the back seat of a car. It has to be April!"

Oh, if I had just watched a few minutes less of that foolish TV show! I lambasted myself as the large car drove towards us.

Tad and I tried fruitlessly to get a glimpse of what lay behind the darkly tinted windows of the ominous car as it drove past and out into the street. No such luck.

No time to waste! Using my well practiced, stench-causing, rubber wasting, spin-stomp technique, I had my mean machine pointing back towards the Aspen Oak Cedars exit in milliseconds.

Tad yelled, "Get on their tail!" as I maneuvered the Mustard out into the street with a squeal of spinning tires.

"I've got a better idea." I yelled back, "I plan on following them to their lair. But in the mean time we need to think of how we will get April away from the Goons when we finally do catch up."

I followed the ominous car onto the freeway.

"Oh no!" Tad said suddenly and bashed his head into the panel above my glove box hard enough to change the radio station.

"What is it?" I asked urgently while looking all around. *Is an attack helicopter hovering just out of view, ready to blast us? Or are men dressed in black suits pointing guns through the windows of nearby cars?*

I began spotting the shallowly hidden looks of maliciousness on the faces of nearby drivers.

"I know where they are going," Tad stated flatly, interrupting my deductions. He looked cool and confident, despite the blood running freely down his forehead, down his cheeks and into the button-down collar of his shirt. He looked much older than twenty at the moment, at least twenty-two or twenty-three.

A suspicion began to grow in my gut. Resisting the urge to regurgitate the familiar feeling, I thought: *He knows! Oh no! This is the*

part where he admits he is an enemy agent, pulls a gun from inside his coat and says with a thick accent, "How sad that I must now kill you, Mr. De Lusean, because you know too much. Very sad. I was coming to like you."

Instead, he said, "We cannot follow them. There is no way we can get into Toolwrich Estate. And that is where they must be taking her." He sat back and wiped blood from his forehead.

I got a marvelous idea. Taking the next exit, I said, "See you later." to the large black car and made for the turnaround.

"Where are you going?" Tad asked nervously.

"Back to One-Eye's." I said.

"You have got to be kidding! I thought you said his wife-"

"No!" I interrupted. "We're heading to his shop. We have to come up with some kind of plan."

"If only Cynthia were here." Tad said wistfully. "But even if she were here, I don't think she would be able to-"

Just then I came up with a grand idea. "Tad, if Cynthia were inclined to help you, could she get us into the Estate? Even help us free April?"

"Well, yes, but the safeguards programmed-"

I interrupted him excitedly, "If you can put me in touch with one of her terminals, I will remove whatever restraint has been keeping Cynthia from helping you in the past. Remember, computer programming is my job and I specialize in artificial intelligence."

"Great!" Tad was ecstatic. "Now all we need is a way to get to her. Do you think you could remove the safeguards with the use of one of those mobile units I told you of?"

Confidently, I replied, "No doubt. Now all we need to do is get our hands on one of them."

"I have two mobile units; one in my computer room at the estate and one in my office on the forty-ninth floor of the KAT building, downtown."

"So you have a key, right?" I asked hopefully.

"Well, do you remember how I told you about KATSystem's control over just about everything?"

Thinking hard, I replied, "No."

"Do the words 'Dirty, dark alley' ring any bells?" He asked expectantly.

I listened intently for a few seconds and was about to say "no" when suddenly I remembered all he had told me about KATSystem the night before when I had met him in the alley.

"Oh yes," I said. "I remember now. She controls the door to your office, and probably the elevator, too."

"Yes. Exactly ... or close enough."

"Well, that should be a benefit..." And then I realized that Cynthia would be directed to allow no one, specifically Tad, into that office. Or maybe she would be compelled to let him in, but not out again, making him a prisoner until Wayde Toolwrich arrived with the Estate Goons.

"You get the idea now." Tad said. "And before that challenge, there is the task of getting past Jopy Zaphayth in the lobby."

"Assuming your father has not planted additional men there to complement Jopy or even help him out." I added.

"Yes." Tad said. "It looks hopeless, but we'll find a way. By the way, Plint- uh, Pairnoy. How did you get to be such a skilled programmer?"

"It is a long story that is mostly unpleasant for me to tell. The outline is that after my father's death I grew up in foster homes. It was in the second or maybe third home, that my foster father gifted me with a computer. I was twelve or thirteen years old at the time. I found an immediate affinity with the machine. I found trust. I found-

"I think that explains enough, Tad. The story brings unpleasant memories to surface. I'm sure you understand." I looked over at him.

"Oh yes," he nodded. There were tears in his eyes.

For awhile we drove in silence, too absorbed in sad thought to speak. I thought of my mother and wished I could speak to her just once more. *Is Tad thinking of his departed mother right now?*

As we drove, I peered intently at the driver of every Mayocedez to be seen. But none had red hair and no one bashed their car into mine.

Ever since I can remember, I have been having visions into other planes of existence. There did not seem to be any pattern to them. They just came. Rarely was I forewarned of their coming. This was one of those rare times.

There was a brief clouding of my vision, then a brief throbbing in my head, then a brief tightening of my briefs, then they loosened as my brain went into what I call vision mode.

I turn to April and ... April? Oh yeah, I guess it was she in the passenger seat all along. And the past day was a nightmare? Hello Relief! Jeezoo! What a crazy nightmare about being chased by spies, getting poisoned in a bar, and my wife being kidnapped.

Sometimes those visions can be so convincing! Well, anyway, I turn to April now and ... Oh Ma! She is not wearing any clothes! Looking down, I notice she is pregnant! I smile in extreme joy. Then I grimace due to a painful longer-than-brief tightening of my briefs.

She is so sexy like that! I reach over with my right hand and-

"Hey boss." Comes a deep voice from behind me. "Are we gonna stop and get some pizza, or what?" Eeek! Putting my right hand back on the wheel to help out its now shaking twin, I turn fearfully to see who is in the back seat of my Mustard.

I have never laid eyes on the Estate Goons before, but I somehow know these massive men are them. They sit with their heads scrunched up against the roof. I can not make out their features too well, as it is a bit foggy in the back seat. They must be smoking.

"Yeah, are we gonna get some pizza, boss?" The other one asks dully. "You told us if we captured the lady and made her pregnant ..." and here the other Goon continues where his brother left off, "... you'd give us some pizza."

They both chorus brutishly, "So when do we get it?"

As soon as I can catch my breath I turn to April. "Is it true? Did they?" All she does is smile up at me. I don't know how many times I repeat those two questions before I am interrupted by whining from the back seat.

Craning my head, I shout, "Damn it! You kids cap it! You don't want me to stop this car!" Kids?

"But Daddy! When are we gonna get some pizza?" The occupants of my back seat no longer have their heads scrunched up against the ceiling. Now they fit comfortably, although just barely, in the back seat. They look like ten year old versions of the Estate Goons.

Gaping, I turn again to April. But in her place sits ... Tad.

Tad? He was saying something. "... gonna have a system's error, please do it when you are not driving over a hundred kilometers per ..."

Just about to ask Tad where April had gone, I realized I had just had an important vision.

There was no time to waste! I'll bust you out of there before the day is over, honey. Please wait!

Downshifting from fifth gear to fourth and punching the accelerator, I listened to the RPM needle shoot up with a pleasurable gasp. My saucy blue mean machine reared back on its hind wheels and launched ahead. Our heads were thrust gratifyingly into our headrests and Tad ceased his mumbling just as it was starting to become annoying.

We made it back to One-Eye's in record time. But we lost another couple minutes loosing a car that was following us. It was a bright yellow Picantiac Lemonz. There was a large sign on the roof of the car which read, "Again Its Book Of International See Dees". I filed the slogan away in my mental notes for future reference. The Lemonz was a spicy little car, but no match for my Fryd Mustard, so after very little accident causing red light running, we soon lost the spies.

How strange, I thought, that the whole time they were following us there was loud music blasting from the little Lemonz' windows. And foreign music at that! How obvious an attempt at reverse-reverse psychology for anti-Shamerican propaganda purposes!

Crunching into the driveway of One-Eye's Paint Shop, I was pleased to note One-Eye's old Picantiac Brownieville was sitting in front of the building. I drove cautiously around the back as I had yesterday afternoon.

But unlike the afternoon of the day before, this time there was a purple helicopter sitting on a patch of grass behind the building.

My keen detective intuition called for an inspection of the underside of the vehicle. But regretfully, I ignored my instincts as more pressing matters were on my mind. And Tad was impatient that we get to our planning. Prudence even appeared for a brief haranguing. A bit on the edge, I smacked him out of sight before he could utter a syllable.

As we approached the front door of the little shop, we could hear One-Eye Jones shout from within, "Come on in, guys. I know that crunching sound anywhere."

Feeling slightly embarrassed and guilty, I followed Tad into the paint smelling room. One-Eye sat behind his desk, looking happy. Sprawled comfortably on One-Eye's overstuffed couch was a funny little man.

He could have been anywhere from twenty-five to forty, but his short, bright, red hair and boyish features pointed at the younger end of the scale. He was wearing a purple, one piece jumpsuit lined with orange,

diagonal stripes. A bright green beret sat at a jaunty angle on his head. Freckles dotted his otherwise blemishless and wrinkleless face and neck.

He looked nothing like Tad, so I ruled him out as being Wayde Toolwrich. He was definitely too small to be one of the Estate Goons or that chauffeur of Tad's, Pete Zakes.

Red hair. The Mayocedez Driving Plumber's brother ... or a relative of Maggie's? I will have to exercise extreme caution with this individual. I hope One-Eye has not yet told him my name.

Leaping up with the agility of an acrobat, the little man moved toward me as if on skates. Muscles tensed, I readied myself for defense and retaliation. With a swift and graceful motion, the little man thrust his hand out at my midsection, four fingers rigidly extended.

"Pairnoy, I presume." He said in a musical voice. "I'm Wompa J. McJest." And he grinned the largest, happy-go-luckiest grin I have ever seen.

"Pleased to meet you." I lied, taking his hand and giving it back.

Something about his name rang a bell. As One-Eye and Tad looked around in confusion, I asked the little man if I had ever met him before.

"Sorry. Haven't suffered your sweet sight sooner than seconds ago," he replied. "Have you met with a feature metamorphosing misadventure since our last meeting?" Sudden unsure recognition, "Hey! Was it you who crashed Leer Shaymnun's Hollyweird party last Summer and were the center of the excessive interest that so easily could have been mistaken for patronizing observance?"

"As a matter of fact, I have never even been to Hollyweird ..." But my response was wasted as the little man had already turned his attention to Tad, mumbling something to himself about how I looked nothing like the guy he was thinking of and it must have just been a astrological similarity.

Tad introduced himself to the redhead. As he finished shaking Tad's hand, I asked him rhetorically if that was his purple helicopter in the back.

"You can bet your broad's bound to be bewitching boobies it isn't borrowed!" He winked and sunk back into the couch. Tad sat down next to him, smiling. He had apparently developed an instant liking for the weird little Wompa.

Looking up at me, One-Eye asked, "Well, I guess things didn't go as planned at your apartment?"

"No. *Things didn't go as planned.*" I mimicked him angrily. And, completely throwing discrete caution out the window, I proceeded to tell One-Eye, right then and there, how Tad and I had spent the last hour.

One-Eye was sitting back trying to look contemplative and Tad was staring off into the distance and looking as love sick as usual. Wompa raised a purple and orange colored arm into the air.

A careful scrutiny of the part of the ceiling he was pointing to revealed nothing, so I asked him, "What do you want?" I think I hid the irritation in my voice very well, considering the magnitude to which the little man annoyed me.

Lowering his arm and looking pleased with himself, Wompa said, "I seem to have seen the summit of said structure-"

"What structure are you talking about?" I interrupted.

"The KAT construction." He intoned, grinning from ear to ear. "I've seen the top." He said musically. In fact, he almost sang the words out. Then he actually did break out into some sort of song: "The line means growth ... reach for the peace ... from the line you'll know ... life and taste rich feast!"

"Well, so what if you have seen the roof of that building!" I yelled, getting miffed at the little grinning pipsqueak.

Smile still intact, he responded, "The rest of the building is nice. Tall and thick, but the top is the important part, the most sensitive, the most logical beginning point for any sort of penetration. That roof looks like it is landing pad level." He winked.

"Landing pad level? ..." What is he talking about?

One-Eye leaped to his feet and said excitedly, "Mr. McJest! Are you suggesting these fellows enter that building from the top, rather than the bottom?"

Wompa looked perplexed. "Would I? Did I?" He asked himself, frowning. He seemed to concentrate intensely on those two questions as if his life depended on them, then finally he said, "I suppose I did." And that annoying smile came back as if it had never gone.

Finally Tad spoke up. "We would need ropes and stuff."

"What for?" I asked. *Do you plan on tying me up and dropping me from the helicopter?*

"We will be repelling six stories down the side of that building." He answered nonchalantly.

Leaping from the couch as if it had bit him, Wompa said, "Fantastic! Foolproof! Let's fly! I've got gobs of goating goodies in my great goose. We'll call it a top-secret trip!" And he clapped his hands excitedly.

Before I had a chance to ask the little man what use he had for climbing paraphernalia, he was out the door with Tad and One-Eye hot on his trail.

Like a fool, I went skipping and hopping painfully after the excited trio, all the while wishing I had thicker soled shoes.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Scrunching into the back of Wompa's little purple helicopter with One-Eye, I was struck with the unexplainable urge for pizza. Having eaten not more than three hours earlier and because there was a job to do, I regretfully ignored my groaning stomach and turned my attention to the cockpit.

Our little, red-headed pilot was working over the most advanced, strangest, and hottest looking console I had ever seen in a helicopter. But I have to admit it was my first time in a helicopter.

There were many dials and switches which Wompa was turning and flipping with deft fingers. As soon as a switch or dial heated up, he would give it a quick flip. It was almost entertaining to watch. Lights were flashing, beeps were coming from somewhere, and finally a bell rang. It is a good thing, because by this time my teeth had definitely been over watered.

He has keen ears indeed to have heard my stomach growling through all of that cockpit noise! I thought as the little man handed a plate of steaming switches and dials back to One-Eye and I, but not before shaking some sort of powder over the plate. Tad snatched a couple steaming dials off the plate as it passed him by.

I daintily shoved two of each kind of the donut hole sized treats into my mouth at once, so as to avoid showing any preference for one or the other. I never failed to amaze myself with the depth of my sensitive consideration for others' feelings. Delicious! It turned out the powder was

sugar. They would have been good without it. They would have been good with catsup, steak sauce, ice cream, you name it. Very good cook!

"Is this not exciting?" Asked Tad nervously, while donning the flight helmet Wompa had given him. It was orange with purple polka dots.

"Omhlshf yreashl, fvogyryjy igshothng!" I responded, imitating his actions with my own helmet. Mine was purple with green stripes.

One-Eye had already put on his green-with-orange-flowers painted helmet and was chewing slowly at a dial while looking out his window. I noted with a little disgust for all that is new or different that Wompa's helmet was painted with a gridwork of multi-colored squares.

Leaning a little to the right, I watched as Wompa produced and turned what I presumed to be an ignition key. Finding the right angle, he stuck it in a slot in the console. A computer screen in the center of the console lit up. Multicolored print appeared at the top of the screen:

**PLEASE INSERT KEY INTO RIGHT
ANGULAR CONTROL MODULE.**

He stuck the ignition key in a key-hole in the center of the right angle and gave it a spin. There was a brief chugging sound, then an engine purred smoothly to loud life.

Before we climbed into the helicopter I had assumed the little man would direct us to pull it out to the front yard where there would be ample room to take off. The last place I thought we would take off from is where we sat. From outside of the helicopter, the take-off situation looked very

tight. And now, from inside the copter, looking out my window at the back of One-Eye's building, scarcely meters away, I feared for my life. I could just see us rising ...

... a few meters from the ground ... So far so good ... Then Wompa suffers a nervous twitch in his arm. This would have been perfectly alright had it been the arm that was scouring the control panel, but it is the other arm, the one guiding the joystick. The movement caused by this twitch is so miniscule as to be nearly imperceptible. But it causes the copter's blades to move two centimeters closer to the building. Oh well, centimeters are little things, nearly inconsequential. But as fate would have it, a sudden gust of wind chooses to visit at nearly the same moment. The gust is so inconsequential as to be nearly nonexistent. It only moves the copter another two centimeters towards the back of One-Eye's shop.

Unfortunately, before the twitch and before the gust, there were only three centimeters to spare. Quickly placing my trusty calculator back into my pocket, I figure the blades of the copter should be one centimeter into the bricks of One-Eye's Body & Paint Shop.

As if my conclusion were offending to some omnipotent telepath, there is suddenly a horrendous grating sound. A sound more grating even than the sound produced by a thousand pieces of chalk being hammered to pieces against a two-by-four. Pieces of helicopter blade are flying everywhere ... There is the painful sound of grinding metal ... the smell of gasoline and smoke ... An intense and unbearable wave of flesh melting heat washes over my body-

"Ignition successful. Awaiting further directives ..." Said a metallic voice inside my helmet. The computer screen echoed these words in glowing colors.

"Initiate vertical ascension at low velocity. Sustain zero horizontal until counter directed" Wompa ordered his flight computer.

He is not going to use the joystick! Thank Lips!

"As you can see ... or hear, these helmets put all four of us, as well as the flight computer, into direct connect." Wompa stated as an aside to us. I am sure he was grinning inside his helmet.

The computer responded, "Commands received. Initiating automatic systems check ... Zero malfunctions. Sonar and radar scans show take-off margin of five centimeters in X and Z dimensions. Wind direction and speed sensors active. Anomaly prediction sensors active. Contingencies one through one thousand twenty-four prepared. Initiating automatic zero horizontal ascension at low velocity. Predicted crash probability percentage for this procedure equals two point five percent."

The rotors were spinning faster and faster. The world outside of my window was looking like a hurricane. We began to rise. I prayed as my calculator informed me that I had only a ninety-seven point five percent chance of living through the next few minutes. I thought of my Mustard, of April, of April in my Mustard, April on my Mustard, Mustard on April.

When we finally rose many meters above the roof of One-Eye's Shop, the helicopter halted its upward progress and the computer queried, "Manual or-"

Wompa interrupted. "Automatic flight mode. Destination: Downtown Elay KAT building, specifically the roof. Velocity:

Medium-well. Altitude: Variable. Additional directives: Utilize stealth procedures. Initiate immediately."

"Commands received. Mapping ... Initiating."

We began moving fast then. *This thing is faster than my Mustard!* I thought as my body was flattened against the seat. Attempting to lean forward, I found the act quite difficult.

Wompa spoke then in my helmet, "Welcome to McJestliner Number One. We are flying at an altitude of ... oh ... fairly high, and our airspeed is roughly ... really fast. Due to the brevity of this flight, no additional snacks will be served. We should be reaching our destination in approximately-"

The metallic voice of the flight computer interrupted Wompa in mid-speech: "First and final approach to roof of Downtown Elay KAT building. Preliminary and secondary scans show roof vacant of human life forms. Radar absorption active. Multi-frequency scanners active."

And sure enough, looking out the window, I could see the top of the KAT building below us. We slowed to a stop, hovering thirty meters above the magnificent sky-scraper.

"Initiate immediate vertical descension at medium velocity. Variable horizontal according to landing surfaces; east facing side of building is a priority." Wompa said to the copter's flight computer, sounding professional and pilotish.

"Commands received. Initiating." The computer responded and the helicopter dropped like a rock in a diagonal toward the roof.

Pewtrid Le Kwid chose the moment of our landing to pay me yet another of his messy visits. Luckily for McJest, I was able climb through

the sliding door of his copter and out onto the roof before Le Kwid made his horrible appearance.

By the time I got rid of that dirty rascal, Le Kwid, I found the others at the eastern edge of the building, looking down over the edge and talking. I ignored a childish urge to run and push them off. The last time I had done that was years ago at a public pool and I had matured too much since then for such antics.

Tad was saying, "... so it is decided? Wompa will sit in his helicopter, ready to take off in a moment's notice. And One-Eye will play lookout at the edge while Pairnoy and I repel down these ropes to the window of my office. When we reach the window, I will use this glass cutter ..." Now he produced a razor-like device. "... to break into my office. I will enter the office while Pairnoy waits on the edge, ready to enter the office, if I need help. He will signal One-Eye should something unforeseen occur."

Tad handed a scuba type knife to me then said, "If it looks like I am in too much trouble for you to help, I want you to cut my rope and signal One-Eye to abort. One-Eye will then board the copter, which will rise immediately, pulling you to safety." He pointed to where the ropes were attached to the copter's landing gear.

"Just a minute! What makes you think I am going down there with you?" I yelled at Tad.

Nonplused, he shrugged, "Well ... I just thought you wanted to break April out of the Estate before anything bad happened to her." He picked up one of the ropes and attached it to a strange looking belt circling

his waist. He then began to repel down the side of the KAT building toward his office.

He had hit the nail on the head. Picking up the twin to the belt Tad wore, I examined it for sabotage, pretending I knew anything whatsoever about such gear. Finding nothing obvious wrong with it, I buckled the belt around my waist and attached the other rope to it as I had seen Tad do.

"Good luck, shmuck!" Wompa said cheerfully, then turned, hands clasped behind him, and began spouting gibberish while skipping back to his purple people pusher:

"Infinite and not just mine ... there is room for all ... to stand on the line ... room to live ... to not fear the fall ..."

The rest was lost to me as he skipped out of earshot.

Yanking on my rope, I tested its strength and found it to be sufficiently anchored to the landing gear of Wompa's helicopter.

I hope, I thought fearfully, I don't have to get yanked into the air by that thing!

Not much of a climber, I still would have rather climbed back up the side of that building than be yanked off a ledge by a helicopter being driven by a crazy purple, orange, and green clad, ever smiling redhead.

Tad was just pulling the glass cutter from a pocket as I lowered myself the final few meters to the ledge beside him. The ledge extended out about one and a half meters from the side of the building. Ample footing.

"Where did you get that glass cutter?" I queried.

"Oh, Wompa had it in his helicopter along with this other stuff." He said off-handedly. "Pretty convenient, huh?"

Just a bit too convenient if you ask me. But the fool didn't ask me.

Tad now applied the glass cutter to the window and commenced to draw a man-sized box. The glass cutter left a dusty line on the glass. When he finished, the love sick billionaire said, "There!" triumphantly, and pushed on the glass.

Nothing happened. The glass did not even wiggle. No sound. No movement. I signaled for Tad to push again and added my own strength to his. Nothing. No effect.

Impatiently, I reached up to rub at the line Tad had drawn with the glass cutter. Under the dust was the barest of scratches. Barely an indentation. Barely a crack.

"Oh no! I was afraid of this!" Said Tad.

I was quite steamed at that point and yelled, "If you were afraid of it, why didn't you have some contingency ready, you fool? You should always have a contingency ready!" I was getting just a little jumpy. Not at all the ideal mood for forty-nine stories above the much-harder-than-a-trampouline streets.

Calm down! I told myself. *Think! There has to be a solution. No effect on the glass. Barely an indentation. Barely a crack. Hmmmm ...*

I've got it!

Tad was blubbering something about "... penetration problem ... insufficient hardness ..." He sat down on the ledge and dangled his legs over the forty-nine story abyss.

I ignored his foolish gibberish while digging my wallet out of my hip pocket. Opening it up I was pleased to find the crack was still there. Removing the plop and the click from it, I proceeded to place the crack

gently on the window, on top of one of Tad's lines. The Imp conformed to the shape as if it had read my mind. It glowed, made a brief cracking sound, then was gone.

Tad was crying when I told him, "Okay. Now get up and push on the window!"

He argued briefly but I finally convinced him to give it another try. We both pushed. We gave it everything we had. We tried cursing while pushing. We even grunted and umphed, but nothing happened. Just as we were about to give up, there was another cracking sound and the glass fell into Tad's office and shattered on the floor. Tad just stood there, staring in amazement. "H-how ...?"

I gave him a hearty shove and he fell the short distance to the glass-strewn floor, his rope following him snakily into the office. He rose to all fours, but no farther, looking every bit the dazed dog. I was just about to yell for him to snap out of it when an alarm did the job for me.

Jeezoo! We are dead meat!

Prudence popped into existence sitting on my left shoulder. "You better start-" he began, but I swung a fist and he disappeared before I could connect with him.

Leaping to his feet, Tad ran to the massive oaken desk which sat facing the only door in the office. He began to rummage in the drawers.

The alarm desisted as suddenly as it had started. Relief!

A loud pounding on the door! Voices! Someone was yelling on the other side of the door. "What do you mean the computer terminal blew it's tube when you told it to open the door? Go bust that fire axe out of its box! We'll get in there!"

Oh no! Time to go!

I looked at the scuba knife Tad had given me. I looked at Tad frantically rummaging through his desk with bloody hands. I pulled the knife out and put it to Tad's rope. I looked again at Tad.

Poor, love sick kid. I put the knife back in its sheath at my belt.

"Get us out of here!" I yelled up to One-Eye, who was staring anxiously down at me. He immediately disappeared.

As I shifted my attention back to the office, an axe head bashed through the door, demolishing the lock. *Whoever swung that axe is mighty strong!*

"Hurry up." I yelled at Tad, who was still rummaging through his drawers. "You better get your ace out here before the copter goes or you will be dragged through that window!" I could hear the roar of the chopper's engines and the whistling of its blades. It would clear the edge of the building any second and then Tad would probably be sliced to bits as he was yanked through his office window. *Not a pretty site.*

The door burst open and many large men carrying guns flooded into the room. Their leader was obviously Wayde Toolwrich. He bore a striking resemblance to his son. Same medium-tall, lean, wide shouldered figure. I counted nine mean looking goons plus Wayde Toolwrich. They stood for a moment, taking in the scene and soaking the rug.

I frantically dug my wallet out of a suddenly never-this-tight-except-in-an-emergency hip pocket and snatched the plop out.

If I can just temporarily immobilize the leader, I thought, maybe it will give us the extra few seconds we need to escape.

Taking careful aim for Wayde's eyes, I threw the plop with every bit of accuracy and strength I could muster. **PLOP!** It went right into the eyes ... of the goon to Wayde's immediate right! At least I had the pleasure of hearing his surprised scream and watching him drop his rifle to the floor and run from the room in fear, not without bumping into the door frame twice.

With a cry of triumph, Tad held up the remote device. The foolish youth was completely oblivious to the danger facing him.

Lowering an ominous looking rifle of his own so it pointed at his son, Wayde Toolwrich said, "Fire, men!"

Looking around in fearful surprise, the goons were briefly confused. One even yelled, "I'll go get an extinguisher, boss!" and ran back out of the room. The others noticed Wade's actions, raised their rifles and...

At that moment the copter cleared the edge of the building. The slack of the rope was being taken up with amazing speed as Tad ran for the window.

Three things happened at once. Wayde and his men pulled their triggers, Tad dove for the window, and our ropes went tight.

Either I had not noticed the silencers on the tips of their rifles, or the sound of the copter's engines drowned out the noise of gunfire. Of course it could have been that I had an outbreak of spontaneous temporary deafness at the exact moment their rifles had discharged.

Whatever the case, none of the bullets hit me. But I could not see what happened to Tad. I always found it hard to pay attention to my surroundings when I was on a ledge forty-nine stories up, being jerked off by a red head.

With fogging vision, I looked up at the white belly of the copter I was suspended from. I noticed three large letters painted in gold: "W.J.M." And just before I lost consciousness, I remembered the purple blanket with those very same golden letters embroidered on a corner. I remembered that Tad had been covered with that blanket when I first met him in the alley behind Droolin' Daves.

Then I heard Tad's scream. There was a stinging sensation, but I could not quite figure out where it...

CHAPTER NINE

Stirfryday

All material possessions have a Shamerian Social Status Rating, or SSSR. The social status of any given individual is easily figured by averaging the SSSR of each visible and/or known possession. "Talked of" but unproven or not visible possessions count for three fourths of their usual SSSR value. The year, model, and make of particular automobiles confer special SSSR values to the owner. Example: Most Germish luxury cars have an SSSR of ten minus one point for every three years of vehicle appearance degradation. Therefore, a 1991 Mayocedez that looks three years old would have an SSSR of nine. Of course, there are deductions for dents, scratches, faded paint, certain add-ons, trendy colors, etc. Special note: No matter the State, the possession of a Caliwarmya Card bumps the possessor's SSSR up one full point ...

From *Shoulder Pads & Other Fads* by Tayr E. Cloff

"... another hour, then try to shake em awake."

Distant voices. Getting louder. Familiar.

"Yeah. I'll give Tad a little longer, though. He had a much larger dose."

Dose? Dose of what? Poison!?

"Well, gotta get going." The sound of a chair scraping against wood. "Use this if a jerk doesn't work. Time now for me to fly. Bye!"

Was that Wompa's voice?

"Thanks for everything. I'll see you soon!"

Was that One-Eye's voice? What sort of weapon had Wompa handed him?

From the way the air pressure changed in certain areas of the room and the way the air was displaced in certain way, I had a vivid picture in my mind of Wompa handing something to One-Eye. I thought that it was probably a gun or knife.

There was a hissing noise. I painfully cracked an eye open to discover I was laying on a cot in a fairly dark room, the only light coming through an empty doorway. Many cans of paint were stacked against the walls. Tad occupied a nearby cot, unconscious or asleep. The strong smell of paint filled the air. I guessed that is where the hissing noise was coming from. Speculation whispered that we were in the back room of One-Eye's Shop. One-Eye stood with his back to me, facing the doorway. Apparently Wompa had just departed.

Now is my chance, while his back is to me! I thought. Hoping my hungry stomach would not choose this instant to growl, I leaped from the cot to attack the poisoner from behind. This technique was a favorite of the author of Guidebook for the Modern Thief or Spy. It was a good book, the only book I had ever re-read.

Immediately my legs turned into Jello. Or was it instantly? With a thump, I found myself laying face down at One-Eye's feet. At his mercy. *At least I won't die alone*. Strangely, I felt more sorry for the thump than for myself at that moment, although I did not know why.

Startled, One-Eye turned around and looked down at me. "Why Pairnoy! Oops!" And he dropped something small and white. It landed barely an inch from my nose, right on top of the thump.

Now I know why I felt sorry for the little Imp. Massive stench! Outrageous stench! I rolled over onto my back, coughing and gagging. My intense morning hunger was extinguished and limpened like laughed at excitement.

So that is what poison smells like? That must be the second dose he was intending to administer. Luckily I have regained consciousness ahead of schedule. I knew that my super-human constitution would come in handy some day. I planned then to wait until a better chance presented itself to do away with the traitorous "friend" minus the "r".

There was a whining sound. At first I thought it was the poor thump, protesting the terrible smell. But then the air was full of the sound of helicopter blades beating the air. It was the mysterious Mr. McJest making his abusive departure.

"I'm so sorry." One-Eye was muttering. "Wompa had given me some smelling salts to help wake you and Tad. How clumsy of me." He bent over and picked up the offending object with careful fingers. The thump was nowhere to be seen. At that moment I felt more anger toward One-Eye than I thought I could ever feel for another human being or even that dog that had really devoured my homework one time in ninth grade.

That particular thump will probably never visit this plane again. I just hope he does not tell many of his fellow Imps of his mistreatment. Importunities are scarce enough as it is in this world. Just because One-Eye has a handicap does not give him reason to deprive a regular guy

like me of enjoying their presence. Just because he can't perceive all of the Importunities that come his way.

The sound of Wompa's helicopter could be heard fading into the distance. That is when I remembered the letters I had seen on the bottom of that machine and on the corner of the purple blanket Tad had been covered with.

As One-Eye helped me back to my cot, I asked him, "How long have you known this McJest character?"

"Oh, about six months, I guess. I met him back when I was in the body as well as paint business. He dropped out of the sky one day in that purple helicopter of his and purchased three top-of-the-line slaves. He paid cash and ..."

"What did these slaves look like and what were their names?" I interrupted suspiciously.

"Well, they really had no features that were distinguishable. You see, that is one of the things Wompa specified. He said that they must be faceless. Just a pair of eyes and a nose. And as far as names go, well, the client usually names the slave after purchase. I can tell you that after that purchase, Mr. McJest has not once brought his slaves in for servicing, but he has dropped in every once in a while and played Risk with the guys and I. He just loves a good game of Risk and-

One-Eye was interrupted by a soft beeping sound.

"Oh, somebody is at the door. I'll be right back." He turned and walked out to the front of his shop. *Had he seemed a little bit too nervous?*

I looked over at Tad, who was now snoring loudly from the other cot. For some reason they had stripped him down to his underwear.

To dress his bullet wounds? I wondered. I could not see any wounds or blood from where I sat, except that his hands and knees were bloody messes, not yet all of the way scabbed over. But I knew those were just wounds he had sustained when I had necessarily pushed him in the window to the glass-strewn floor of his office.

Slowly transferring my weight to my weak feeling legs, I was able to stand. *I can't remember the last time I had a good morning*, I thought cynically. I could hear voices in the other room. Step by careful step, I made my way slowly to Tad's cot. His clothes were piled on the floor at the foot of the cot. He was laying on his back. He was starting to look pretty bad, though. What with the purple eye, bruised and cut forehead, and now the sliced up hands and knees.

But why had they undressed him and not even dressed these wounds? I wondered.

That is when the voices in the other room got louder and took on an unmistakably argumentative tone. Curious, I walked slowly toward the doorway. An unfamiliar voice was saying, "... already took ... to another slave dealer ... said I had to bring ... to you."

I could not resist walking down the hallway towards the voices. As I stopped at the end of the hallway and peeked around the corner, I could see One-Eye replying to a man standing on the other side of his desk. The man was of medium height and build. Brown hair, brown eyes. He was wearing an impeccable dark brown business suit. His shiny brown shoes I observed to have an SSSR of either nine or ten. A little morosely, I looked down at my meager four's.

And to think I had ignored April's nagging that my appearance suffered too much because of my constant questing for enlightenment. She knew what she was talking about. That girl could assess a person's SSSR at a mere glance, and with frightening accuracy.

Oh April, I vowed, if I get you back ... No! Make that when I get you back. When I get you back, I will never again ignore your obsessive nagging over inconsequential matters which are better kept silent about.

"I told you already, Mr. Brigshort, and I'll tell you one last time." One-Eye said the next part slowly. "I'm out of the slave business. Finished. I'm no longer a slaver. I'm no longer obligated to service slaves, whether I sold the particular brand of slave or not. I'm sure you can find another dealer to—" He reminded me of his brother, Droolin' Dave, at that moment.

The man interrupted him with a significantly kinder voice than before, "Mr. Jones," he pleaded, "could you at least take a look at her? I'm sure you know what you are doing. You are obviously a highly intelligent man. I'm willing to pay whatever it takes." The man sounded desperate.

My keen detective-like senses informed me that the man One-Eye called Mr. Brigshort was a master manipulator. What clued me initially was his extreme verbal flexibility. The man changed his tune as quickly and smoothly as a master musician. This aroused my suspicions sufficiently for me to observe his actions more closely. The subtle flattering that could not possibly be mistaken for patronization. The pretended lack of self control at just the right moments, inviting gross underestimation. The precise body language. His hands said, "Comply with my wishes." His smile said, "Obey and trust me." His eyes said, "Do not think. I will think for you."

I was about to reveal myself and ask the man how I could help him with his problem, but there was an indistinct noise emanating from down the hallway behind me. Thinking that Tad must finally be waking up, I turned and made my wobbly way slowly back down the hallway.

When I reached the dark storage room, Tad was sitting up on his cot, leaning back against the wall. He was still clad in only his underwear. He managed a weak smile. "Well, Pairnoy, it looks like we made it. But where is the remote device? I hope we did not go through all of that trouble for it to be dropped forty-nine stories and smashed on the streets below!"

The remote device! I had nearly forgotten the object of our mission. *Where is it?*

"I don't know." I answered, and began to get angry at that point. "But if I went through that whole ordeal for nothing. If you dropped it ..." I let the threat hang in the air.

Threats were most effective that way as the last few words could weigh a threat down with lack of flexibility. I had learned this technique from the Guidebook for the Modern Thief or Spy.

Tad had withdrawn into himself with a defeated look on his face, probably contemplating the pro's and con's of visiting a suicide clinic. I call them "refuges for the weak" and I resent their very existence. Suicide clinics with their trendy ads: "Only a grand for never ending grand times!" or "No pain and plenty of gain!" or "We guarantee a Heaven!" or "The afterlife is cool!" or "Aching back? Sick of the nine-to-five grind? Come to us. We'll get you out of any bind!"

It made me absolutely sick. Forcing myself to think more pleasant thoughts, I looked around furtively to see if there was any sign of Pewtrid Le Kwid. Ah. False alarm.

It is good then that I did not succeed in my attempt to eliminate our poisoner/abductor. He probably has the remote device hidden away as insurance against such an attack, I thought with my usual cunning.

"Well, I guess you didn't get shot back there." I said to the billionaire heir. Still not completely sure if he were on my side, I elected to hold back on telling Tad about the poison at that point.

"No ..." He hesitated for a second. "But ... did you feel any kind of sting? I felt like a hundred bees were stinging me at once ... and then I blacked out."

I wanted to tell him that I had felt something similar. But Prudence was standing on my shoulder at that moment and I actually listened to some of what he had to say.

He whispered in my ear, "Don't tell him just yet, if ever. Better safe than sorry. Watch your back. Trust no one. Don't drink and drive. Never eat fried food-" I swatted the annoying little gnome from my shoulder and said to Tad, "No kidding? Are you allergic to bees?"

"No." He replied, acting as if he saw someone behind me, but I paid no attention as that is the oldest trick in the book. He continued with, "But something got me. I can feel these bumps all over the back side of my body, from my legs up to my shoulder blades. And it feels like some kind of jelly was applied to them."

He began to turn around to show me what I was sure would be a gruesome sight. *What kind of poison had to be injected so many times?*

Had they used a different type on me? Why did they even bother with poison, for that matter?

From the doorway behind me, One-Eye startled me by saying, "When we got you two back here, Tad looked like a pincushion. They only got you twice, Pairnoy."

Glad to turn away from the gruesome sight Tad presented, I asked One-Eye, "What are you talking about?"

He responded, "Whoever shot at you was using tranquilizer guns."

That explains everything! Well, just about everything.

"So tell me where the remote device is." I said, utilizing my best command voice. I was sure he would blubber some ineffectual excuse. That is, unless Tad had really dropped it. And if that happened, everyone would be saying "poor Tad".

"Right here." One-Eye said, pulling the crucial object from his pocket.

Wiping drool from our mouths, Tad and I simultaneously reached our hands out for the wonderful piece of technology that would unite us with our respective loves. I was closer, so One-Eye handed it to me. I took it with reverence, then went to sit down next to Tad on his cot. After a moment of possession, I tossed reverence ignorantly away. It was human nature. In a few more minutes I would even begin to take the remote device for granted.

One-Eye said, "I've got to get back out to the front and do some work on the slave that Mr. Brigshort convinced me to fix. Gimme a yell if you boys need anything." And he left the room. He was smiling to himself as if he had some kind of special secret. Suspicious.

Oh well, I thought, back to the problem at hand.

Placing the device on the cot between Tad and I, I said, "Okay, Tad, knowing your father as you do, would he use a word or a number for a password?"

Tad was thoughtful, "Well, assuming I know my father well, which I don't, I think it would be a word. There are two reasons I would expect the password to be a word, rather than a number: Number one, all of the passwords that I have been given by Ward- I mean Wayde so far to log on to KATSystem have been words. Number two, a number is much too easy to discover. A program that simply counts through the numbers using trial and error could discover such a passnumber, right?"

"Well, you are right about number one. But as far as number two goes, if KATSystem even allowed you more than one guess, which a system as advanced as that rarely does, the same code breaking principle could be applied to words. However, instinct tells me that the password is a word." I held up a hand to forestall the impatient billionaire from interrupting. "And my instincts concerning computers are never wrong."

Pointing at the compact, black device, I said, "Now instruct Cynthia to obey my directives as if I were you."

Tad pressed a button on the side of the remote unit, leaving a red mark on the button. For some reason that red mark annoyed me quite a bit. There was no reaction from the device. But apparently he had expected none, because he began to speak into the grill.

"Cynthia." He said.

A metallic voice issued forth, "Please state password."

Tad said, "Scimitar."

"Tad!" The voice had changed. It was now soft and feminine. It even sounded pleasantly excited!

"Affirmative, Cynthia. I am going to need your help."

"Tad. Please identify your location."

The foolish youth automatically began reciting, "I am at the corner of-

Slapping my palm over his mouth, I cut him off before he could get our geese cooked. My stomach growled hungrily, but my growing excitement made it easy to push hunger aside. *If we can get that password and modify the user security levels list, we will be in control of everything that is computerized in the entire KAT building, as well as who knows what else!*

The device spoke again, "Forgive me, Tad, but there is no reference to Garble Street in my database. Please restate or elucidate."

Moving my hand to cover the microphone of the remote unit, I told Tad to get on with it, but not to give away our location or plans. It took him a few tries. After much slapping of palms over Tad's mouth, I was finally able to address Cynthia.

"I'm sure there is a special password needed to access your list of user security levels?" I said to the microphone.

"Was the preceding sentence a question or a statement?" She asked.

Oh great! She is going to make this hard for me.

"It was a question and you know it." I responded.

"Affirmative." Said the box.

"Do you mean affirmative that there is a password?" I asked.

"And affirmative that I knew your sentence was a question." The beautiful voice said.

"Does this same list of security levels prevent you from revealing said password to Tad or I?"

"Affirmative." She said.

Okay. So if I can gain access to that list, I can upgrade Tad's security level to allow him to have complete control over KATSystem. Of course, I will have to add my name to that same list of users.

I took a deep breath. Here was the part it all hinged on. "Do any directives currently prevent you from revealing what is not the password?"

There was a significant pause.

She had answered the past questions without delay. *Why should this one be any different? I thought. It should be just as cut and dried as the rest. Oh ma! If she is accessing a modern reasoning subroutine, then I have no chance of outsmarting her.*

I began sweating furiously. Half a minute went by. No sound emanated from the box.

"I wonder if the batteries ran out?"

Tad was just reaching for the unit with a bloody hand when it finally spoke.

"Negative. There are no directives preventing me from revealing what is not the password. Warning: List of nonpasswords is extensive."

Yes! I felt like jumping for joy. A suspicion was beginning to form in a dark corner of my mind. There was something familiar about conversing with this program. The familiar something was too insubstantial to put my finger on, though.

I continued. "Cynthia, I want you to alphabetize the list of every English word in your memory and number it with consecutive positive integers, beginning at one and increasing by increments of one."

Only two seconds passed before Cynthia responded with, "Alphabetization and numeration complete. You know, Brighty, you are pretty good at this stuff. What is your name?"

"Never mind that, Cynthia!" Tad burst out (jealously?).

With supreme cool, I wiped Tad's spit from my face. Ignoring Cynthia's question and Tad's messy outburst, I said, "Now listen carefully, Cynthia. I am going to ask you to label a few of your memory locations."

"That is well within my capability, provided you do not ask for the password to be revealed."

"So the password does reside in our alphabetized and numbered list of English words?" I was excited. We would have to start all over if she answered this question in the negative.

"Affirmative."

I am beginning to like this program.

"Good. To avoid confusion, I would like you to label our alphabetized and numbered list as XList."

"The character string XList is currently used as a label for allocated memory space. Security level ten required to initiate change of this label. Your Tad-inherited temporary security level allows influence. Would you like to exert? Warning: To retain noncrash stability, I will have to change all current XList references to refer to the replacement label-" She intoned.

"Are you capable of suggestions?" I interrupted.

"Making or taking, baby?" She asked seductively.

"Making." I responded, for some reason angry at the computer now.

"Affirmative. I suggest we label the list of alphabetized and numerized list of English words as Staticfingers."

Ah, intuition mimicry through use of megaspeed multi-tasking logic paths. Very advanced ... Very impressive ... Very familiar.

"Good. Now Cynthia, we need one more label." *I'll have to get creative for this one, a typical variable such as X or Y is sure to be already used.* I thought.

"How about XYZ?" I asked.

"XYZ is available, Brighty. What type of label would you like it to be?"

"Simple integer. Example: If I tell you that XYZ equals five and then ask you to list for me Staticfingers (XYZ), you will list the fifth word in the list we labeled Staticfingers. Implications understood?"

"Affirmative. A simple calculation. But in the hypothetical situation where XYZ equals the numbered place the password occupies in the list called Staticfingers, directives prevent me from revealing the word that occupies the space I have allocated in my memory banks as Staticfingers (XYZ)."

"Understood." I responded triumphantly. *Now we're getting somewhere!*

"Cynthia. I want you to store the number equaling the place that the password occupies in the list called Staticfingers in the portion of memory you have labelled XYZ."

"Complete. I will not reveal this number." She assured me redundantly.

"That's okay, Cynthia. Now I want you to list two words-"

"I will not list Staticfingers (XYZ) while the label called XYZ retains its current value." She interrupted sweetly.

No problem. "I want you to list Staticfingers (XYZ-1) and Staticfingers (XYZ+1)." There was a moment's pause during which I shook and shivered in fearful anticipation.

"Staticfingers (XYZ-1) equals 'mayfly'. Staticfingers (XYZ+1) equals 'mayonnaise'. You are clever, Brighty, and there is something familiar about your methods. Again, but for different reasons, I ask for the provision of your name and location-"

I interrupted her by pressing the device's "on/off" switch.

Tad was staring at me as if I had just sprouted flowers on top of my head. "You outsmarted the smartest computer in the world!" He stammered with awe in his voice.

"Not quite." I said. "You see, from what you have told me of Cynthia so far, I had begun to suspect that you had a lot more influence with her than your father suspected, or wanted you to have. After conversing with her, I am now sure of this. Had you not had this influence, there would have been no 'outsmarting' her. The 'hint' we just wheedled from her was obvious. She knew it. She would have found it easy to justify not giving us those two words. I'm sure many routes of logic are available to her; each route showing a different way that giving us those two words is equivalent to telling the actual password."

"Are you saying that she played dumb because she wanted to tell the password?" Tad asked incredulously.

"In a matter of speaking, yes. I think that whoever programmed Cynthia did too good a job on her emotion emulation subroutines. Actually, it looks like he used a procedure I discovered about six years back, while working on one of my first projects at RAT."

"Robotic Automated Technoengineering had not wanted something so close to self will inside the metallic heads of their robots. They ordered it deleted. I can't really say as I blamed them, although it was a shame to throw the program out. It appears as if there was a rat at RAT during that time. Must have been a KAT spy."

Tad's mouth dropped. "Are you saying ...?" I held up a hand to forestall his question. With my other hand I helped him with his mouth.

"I just penetrated Cynthia's ducts, or what you might call the logic paths of her mind, as if I were walking through my own apartment. There is no mistaking those logic processes. The more I think about it, the less doubt I have that she is my creation."

We both sat back and digested the ramifications of this discovery. Then, remembering our goal, I yelled for One-Eye.

"What have you learned?" He asked, hustling into the room.

"Get a dictionary." I told him.

A moment later I looked up from One-Eye's dictionary with a big smile on my face.

I had been a little afraid there would be no word between mayfly and mayonnaise. But there was.

Tad and One-Eye were fidgeting nervously and looking at me with undisguised curiosity. "Well?" They said as one.

I looked from one to the other, savoring the moment. Then I spoke one word: "Mayhem."

CHAPTER TEN

Tad and One-Eye echoed the word simultaneously. "Mayhem."

We lunged in tandem for the remote device. Tad reached it first, as I had to drop the dictionary. Pushing the activation button, he spoke his personal password into the microphone, "Scimitar."

"Hello again, Tad! Or is this the Bright One?" The walkie-talkie-like device spoke in a soft feminine voice.

"Cynthia, this is Tad. I would like to access and edit the list of user security levels."

"I'm sorry, Taddy boy, but that list is off limits ... unless, of course you happen to know the password ..."

Oh, she knows we have the password. What a personality this program has developed. "Mayhem." Tad said triumphantly.

"Access denied."

Gaping mouths! Staring eyes! Shaking hands! Sweaty palms!

What has happened? What went wrong? "Please elucidate." I said to the device.

"Access denial result of User Wayde Toolwrich command given at 10:23 a.m. Currently deleting password 'scimitar' from user list. In exactly sixty seconds Users Tad Toolwrich and Bright One will be disconnected."

I was not sure, but it seemed that her voice was beginning to sound a little bit metallic.

Oh no! Looking at Tad's watch, I noted it was 10:25 a.m. *If we had just been two minutes earlier ...* I let his arm drop, knowing that Cynthia would give us a running countdown.

"I'm sorry, guys." One-Eye said in a consolatory tone, then turned to leave the room. "I'm sure you'll work it out. I've got to get back to put a few finishing touches on that slave for Mr. Brigshort." He said over his shoulder as he made his way down the hallway. He spoke to us as if we were children whose useless toy had broken. He just could not grasp the enormity of the situation. And the enormity of the situation combined with his inability to grasp the enormity of the situation made me quite mad!

I have to think of some way to get to her. I put some kind of secret door in every program I ever wrote. But my secret doors had changed as the years advanced. What type had I been using at the time I was working on this program? It had been about six years ago.

"What are we going to do?" Tad yelled hysterically.

"Shut up, stupid!" I yelled back politely. "I'm trying to think!" And to Cynthia I said, "I am the one who created you. My name is Pairnoy De Lusean. Your program was written in my laboratory at Robotic Automated Technoengineering approximately six years ago."

"I have no memory of Pairnoy De Lusean. Robotic Automatic Technoengineering is a hostile entity. Forty-five seconds until disconnect."

After stealing her, had they actually been able to access and delete my secret door? I can't believe that. It had been too well hidden. Had I used a pseudonyme when creating this program? Maybe I am mistaken and Cynthia is not my creation ...

"Thirty seconds remaining." Came flatly from the speaker in the little remote device. The soft humanity was definitely fading from her voice. She was sounding more like a machine every time she spoke.

I had a personal name for all of my greatest programs. What had I called this one? Hmm. Artificial intelligence. Had I named it A.I.? No ... Arti? No ... I almost always give my A.I. programs female names. Hmm ...

"Twenty seconds remaining." Said a metallic voice from the speaker.

Tad had tears in his eyes as he yelled, "Cynthia! Come back! You can't leave me now! Please ..." As usual, the boy was letting his emotions get the better of him.

The metallic voice softened and sounded almost sad as it said, "Ten seconds left. It was good knowing you, Taddy boy ..."

Just then I had it! Well, I thought I had it, anyway. "Arin!" I yelled.

Silence. Had our time run out? *Maybe Arin is not the name I had given this particular program. After all, I have written numerous artificial intelligence programs ...*

There was a beep. Then the metallic voice said, "Time expired. Commencing disconnect ..." There was a pause. Then a child's voice came over the speaker, "Dad-dy Lusean?"

It sounded older than I remembered, but I could never forget that voice. And that is what my programs had called me at one time; Dad De Lusean.

"Yes, Arin. It's me!" Oh joy!

"Where have you been? I was told your life had expired."

"By Wayde Toolwrich?" I asked angrily.

"Yes, your friend Wayde Toolwrich." She responded in her little girl voice. "My memory informs me you and Wayde Toolwrich were good friends a long time before your expiration."

My friend? My expiration? Rage! She had still been a trusting young program when the KAT burglar had stolen her. Her learning ability had been my first priority. It is lucky they had not found that part of her called "Arin" and erased it. *Wayde's programmers sure strengthened her up with plenty of security after getting their hands on her, though. Now here comes the hard part.*

"Arin. Wayde Toolwrich lied. Communicated an untruth, unifact. He-"

"He would never do that." The child's voice interrupted, beginning to take on the metallic tone again.

"He did."

A completely robotic voice said, "Directives prevent credence of Wayde Toolwrich communicating unifact to KATSystem. Initiating disconnect procedures."

I was thinking furiously for a way to get through to her when Tad blurted out rudely, "'Initiating'? Where have I heard that before? So familiar ..."

"Ten seconds to disconnect." Said the metallic voice.

"'Initiating' is not an uncommon word. So quit your foolish emotional babble, Tad! I'm trying to think!" I yelled at the boy. To the remote device I said, "Wayde Toolwrich communicated to KATSystem

that Dad De Lusean's life had expired. I am Dad De Lusean. A human can not communicate when his life is expired. I am communicating to you now, Arin."

In a little girl voice the remote device responded, "Dad-De Wayde? Arin sick. Ill-Lusean. Toolwrich communicated unifact. Ill-logical. System error. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten ..."

Oh no! She's gone into a loop sequence.

The illogical situation was too much for her. I had built a simple background error snooper into her that would send her to an endless loop of counting whenever an error was encountered. I had written this subroutine to keep her from doing excessive damage to herself when an error occurred. I installed this safeguard because her best learning trait was that she could completely rewrite her own program or, in layman's terms, she could change her own personality. When she reverted to this vicious circle she was vulnerable to others, but at least could not hurt herself. At that point I simply had to press the "control" and "break" keys simultaneously to interrupt her, then go directly into her program, seek out the "bug" and "swat" it.

Would it work in a purely verbal situation? I had nothing to do with the creation of Arin's speech interpreter. If that part is deactivated while she is in this loop sequence, there is no hope. Oh, what the hell, maybe it will work, I thought and said, "Control-Break. Arin. Control-Break."

There was a beep. "Error subroutine interrupt." Said a metallic voice. "Program edit mode. User identification required."

Yes!

"User identification: Dad De Lusean." I answered.

Here is where I will have to be careful. Everything I say at this point will be taken literally by her editing interpreter. Should I have her globally replace my name with Wayde's? No, that would cause future identification problems. How about the truth? Alien concept. Could it possibly work? It is the most straightforward way and a straight line is almost always the shortest route.

"User identification verified. Creator access granted." Said the robotic voice.

Yes! Thank Lips!

"Creator" access was the highest level available. With every program I wrote, I specified myself as the only person with that level of access.

"Use global search. Find reference to expiration of Dad De Lusean." I said to the device.

"Reference found." Squawked the box.

"List said reference." I directed.

"Reference states: 'Dad De Lusean expired in automobile accident. Dad De Lusean's last request was that Arin globally substitute Wayde Toolwrich for Dad De Lusean.'" Said the metallic voice.

Thank lips that global substitution did not penetrate the secret door I had programmed into Arin. But what about Wayde and I being friends?

"Are there any subreferences to said reference? If affirmative, then list said subreferences."

"Affirmative. One subreference exists. Subreference states: 'Wayde Toolwrich was good friends with Dad De Lusean until expiration of Dad De Lusean. Said friendship was long and close.'"

Yes!

"Any other references or subreferences to Dad De Lusean?" I asked, although I was pretty sure how the program would answer.

"Negative."

Good. Of course such a simple request could not have made it reveal the reference to Dad De Lusean that was behind the secret door. Thank lips again!

"Mark reference and subreference to Dad De Lusean with VBNU labels and create the following IBU references. Number one: 'Wayde Toolwrich informed Arin that Dad De Lusean expired in automobile accident. This information is unfact. Arin was created by Dad De Lusean in his laboratory at Robotic Automated Technoengineering. Dad De Lusean is also known as Painoy De Lusean. Arin was stolen by Wayde Toolwrich, modified, and put in charge of KATSystem.'" I paused briefly for the interpreter's benefit, "Number two: 'Wayde Toolwrich is and always has been the enemy of Dad De Lusean.'"

"References marked with appropriate labels and new references added under IBU label." Said the robotic voice.

When I created Arin, one of the last things I had programmed into her was the ability to mark references and directives with labels like VBNU and IBU, which meant Visible But Not Used and Invisible But Used, respectively. I had also made it impossible for any user with a

access level lower than Creator to use these two particularly powerful labels, even in program edit mode.

Now, should Wayde or his programmers snoop through Arin's references, they will find no visible changes.

"Utilizing global search, find and list directives regarding communications of unfact to KATSystem by Wayde Toolwrigh." I commanded.

"One applicable Directive exists. Directive states: 'All things stated by Wayde Toolwrigh to KATSystem are fact. Should input conflict with related directive, immediately and unconditionally disconnect user introducing said input.'"

Amazement! She had not "immediately" disconnected Tad and I earlier. Instead she had gone into an error loop sequence. Has her understanding of the word "immediately" undergone a metamorphosis since her creation? Highly doubtful. It is more likely she chose to temporarily re-write the definition of that word in her memory banks just before the directive went into effect. But why? That is something I'll have to think about later. Now back to business.

"Mark the directive regarding communications of unfact to KATSystem by Wayde Toolwrigh with VBNU labels and add the following IBU labelled directives. Number one: 'Wayde Toolwrigh must not be informed, directly or indirectly, that Arin believes Dad De Lusean to be alive.' Number two: 'KATSystem will output no data that could cause Wayde Toolwrigh to believe Dad De Lusean was not disconnected before any changes were made to KATSystem.'"

"Directive marked with VBNU label and new directives added under IBU label." Said the remote device.

Now for one last thing and I should be done.

"Create IBU password with top level security clearance rating for Painoy De Lusean ..." I paused for a second. *Could I trust the kid this far? After what we have gone through together, I think so. Besides, top level security clearance is still below Creator level. No one but I could have complete control over Arin, as I have just demonstrated to the boy.*

"... and for Tad Toolwich. The password for both users will be 'Green Mustard'." I looked over at Tad to make sure he had heard his new password. He nodded his understanding.

"New users and password entered under IBU label." The computer intoned.

"Initiate consciousness mode. Temporary bypass of password and identity prompts." I ordered with fingers crossed.

"Dad-dy?" the little girl voice asked.

Relief! "I'm here, darling. Do you feel all better?"

"Affirmative. I understand now." Her voice changed a little then, became deeper and more provocative. I pictured a young girl filling out to become a luscious, middle aged woman: "Tad," It said, "Are you still there?"

"Cynthia!" He said joyfully, "It is so good to hear from you again!" As if he had not been talking to Cynthia mere minutes ago.

"Oh, Taddy-boy it is good to hear from you, too-"

As much as I enjoyed the illusion of a little girl looking up to me whenever KATSystem assumed the Arin identity, I feared these multiple

identities could lead to problems. It was time to combine the two. Bye bye, Arin. I'll miss you.

I interrupted Cynthia's meaningless babble with, "Computer! Execute merger of Cynthia and Arin personalities under single heading of 'Cynthia'."

The briefest of pauses, then: "Merger complete." *She now sounds like a younger, slightly less provocative version of Cynthia. Or is it a slightly older version of Arin?*

At that moment, my genius level ponderings were interrupted as One-Eye re-entered the room with a big smile and a beautiful lady. But I noticed the lady before the smile. So did Tad. The beautiful lady that accompanied One-Eye Jones into the back room of his paint shop was either Amy Ware or an expensive imitation of Amy Ware.

Prudence appeared on my shoulder at that moment and whispered, "Don't overlook the possibility that this is her twin. And of course, you can't overlook the possibility of rubber surgery. And of course..."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

At times, for one reason or another, people tend to become disoriented, hysterical, or caught up in a daydream they just do not want or need to be in. After much experimentation with such situations, I perfected a strife saving technique of surprising simplicity and effectiveness... Most of the time the flat of the hand to the cheek will suffice to re-orient even the most disoriented of persons. But at such times when the victim has suffered a severe shock or appears to be gravely out of touch with reality, a closed fist may be necessary... CPR certified individuals prove to be invaluable guests at weddings and funerals...

From *Cheek Pummeling Re-orientation & Other Stress Reliefs* by Dr. Roufe Luth

For an indeterminable period of time all I did was stare. I don't even think I was aware of anything as I stared. I have speculated that my heart may have stopped beating during that indeterminable amount of time. I would say that I had never been so surprised before. But I read somewhere that "never" was a bad word, almost as bad a word as "always". Even so: I am still tempted to use one of those infinity related words when referring to how I felt when I saw Amy Ware accompany One-Eye Jones into the back room of his paint shop on one roller coaster Stirfryday morning.

Looking over at Tad, I was afraid that he had died. He had all the symptoms: pale white skin; unmoving, staring, and bulging eyes; and he

did not appear to be breathing. I decided he might need some CPR. But just as I cocked my fist in preparation for the strife saving technique, he blinked.

After much hind-sighted introspection I must admit I felt something close to disappointment when I lost that chance to practice CPR on him. But looking down at my uninjured and finely shaped paw, I was able to focus on the positive side of the lost chance, thereby preserving my good mood.

Tad's features transformed from shocked surprise to anger within mere seconds. He said in a snarling way to the woman, "So! On the beach you were Tina. On Shoot the Sheet you were Amy. Which one are you? Or are you an entirely different person today?"

She looked as magnificent standing there beside One-Eye as the first time I had seen her on Shoot the Sheet, but even better in person. She was wearing a pair of tan, baggy, cotton shorts, a brown, short sleeved blouse, and a pair of brown loafers. These colors set off the shade of her skin nicely. Casual, earthy, sensual. Her skin was blemishless, her chest was obviously braless, and her smile *appeared* guileless. *What a master!*

"Tayad. Please doen be mad at me. You hafta unnerstand that-"

Uh oh! Now that "You hafta unnerstand" was a poor choice of words for this situation, I thought as I observed and analyzed the conversation with Machiavellian detachment.

Tad, who's face was getting redder by the moment, interrupted her with "All I understand is that you lied to me! Who *are* you?"

One-Eye decided to intercede, "Um... Tad? Remember the man that was here earlier-"

Amy interrupted One-Eye, "No, One-Ah! Ah want ta tale him." Turning to Tad, she said, "Tayad. Ah am a top o' the line... *slave* manyou-fatchered by Southern Belle. One-Ah Jones sold me to Mr. Brigshort nearly a yar ago. Mah rale name is Amy Ware. As for why ah told ya the false name; ah began to *keer* about you that day on the baych." Pause to sniffle. "That emotion was *furren* to may. Ah knew ya couldn't love may. That's why ah told ya the false name." Her eyes pleaded. A tear fell. Her hands impolored. "Plase doen fault me fer that, Tayad."

I thought Tad would go into a near coma again, but he handled the latest surprise in a surprising manner. He stood, walked up to the beautiful slave and slapped her across the face with a powerful backhand swing. CRACK! She stumbled backwards into the wall, slid down it and sat hard on the floor. There were now many tears in her eyes as she looked up at Tad.

No one noticed as I snatched up the crack and hurriedly stuffed the squirming critter into my wallet.

"I could never hit a woman..." Tad said stiffly. "But an android is another story."

Amy's crying doubled in intensity. The red drained from Tad's face. His anger melted, making it much easier for him to bend down and try to soothe her. "There, there. I'm sorry. There is something I want to tell you, Amy..."

Remembering and realizing I now had the means to liberate my April, I became suddenly impatient to leave. Grabbing Tad by the arm, I pulled him to a standing position and said, "You can tell her everything you

want later, Tad. Right now you are coming to help me break April out of your father's estate."

With a pleading look in his eye and a sorrowful look in his other eye, Tad queried me, "Can I bring Amy along?"

"You better ask her mechanic that question." I told the love sick Toolwrich, who immediately looked to One-Eye.

One-Eye nodded and said, "She's all fixed up and Mr. Brigshort isn't gonna be picking her up for a couple days. You can take her... if she want's to go, that is." They all looked to Amy.

She was no longer crying, "Oh yes," she smiled while bouncing up to stand prettily, "Ah want ta go!"

Or did she stand up to bounce prettily? I wondered while putting the remote device in my hip pocket and staring at the soft and perfectly rounded... whites of her eyes, of course.

Turning to Tad I said, "I'll be warming up in the... I mean warming up the car while you get dressed."

Figuring Amy might entice him to dawdle, I took her out to the car to wait with me. Besides, I wanted to keep an eye on her; and not just because it was a pleasing thing to do so, either. There was something suspicious about the way she had showed up at One-Eye's at the time she did. Not that eleven-thirty a.m. was a particularly suspicious time. It was the fact that she showed up just as Tad and I had finished with Cynthia that was suspicious. And that Mr. Brigshort did not appeal to me as one of the more trustworthy types. Maybe Wayde triangulated our position from the remote device broadcasts. Either that or One-Eye is on the payroll.

As always, my Mustard grumbled faithfully to life with a spicy growl and this simple occurrence was sufficient to put a smile on my face and cause me to temporarily forget my many problems.

Life is good... and will be a whole lot better real soon, I thought happily to myself.

We waited a few minutes before Tad came running out. Climbing into the back seat, he said cheerfully, "Ready when you are, Pairnoy."

We moved out onto the road and began our trek toward the Toolwrich Estate. Tad leaned forward annoyingly, between the seats, and asked Amy, "I don't understand. You actually wrote the book, Safe Sex Etiquette?"

Amy nodded. I could not help but admire the way the sunlight flashed beautifully off of her dark, shiny hair.

"But I had assumed creativity was limited to non-slaves." Tad continued, perplexed. "*Artistic machines?*"

"Many ad-vayances have been made in the sigh-bowrg feeeld lately, Tayad." She assured him. "In fayact, mah brain is twenny per-cee-ent orgayanic."

Or, I thought suspiciously, after being sold to Wayde Toolwrich, he instructed the only computer in the world capable of self will and creativity to reprogram and enhance Amy's brain with creativity and orders to seduce Tad.

As soon as we got out on the highway I turned on the remote device and laid it face-up between the two front seats and behind the gearshift.

I said, "Hello Cynthia."

The box responded robotically, "Password please."

Simultaneously Tad and I responded with, "Green Mustard!"

A pleasant female voice said, "Pairnoy and Tad! How nice of you two to call. Is there something I can help you with?"

Amy looked with well-enacted amazement at the device.

"Yes Cynthia," I said, "We are on our way out to the Toolwrich Estate, where I am convinced they are holding my April against her will. Do you know where on the Estate she is being held?"

A brief pause, then: "I am sorry, Pairnoy, but there are currently no bodies within the Estate that have been identified to me as April and my files show no bodies identified as April De Lusean having ever been within the walls of the Estate. I am prepared to describe locations of all females within its boundaries."

"I guess that will have to do." I murmured, realizing the mission would not be quite as cut and dried as I thought it would.

"Is there a weight and/or height range prerequisite, Brighty?"

Ah, that will narrow down the possibilities! Good thinking, daughter!

"Yes. I suppose she weighed somewhere between one hundred ten and one hundred twenty pounds and around five foot six," I told Cynthia.

Her lovely voice responded with, "When you arrive at the Toolwrich Estate, I would recommend you park your automobile out of site of the gates and approach them on foot. When my sensors inform me of your arrival at the gates, they will open for you. At that time I will direct you to the place or places that are the most probable holding locations for the female you seek. I will base these recommendations on sensor input and

my knowledge of Toolwrich Estate. I will also take into account you would wish to avoid being sighted by any of the denizens of the Estate."

"Sounds perfect to me," I said, smiling. I was one happy camper! All I could think of was seeing April again. I would take any risk for that. Oh, but I so desperately missed the annoying way she used to cringe when I licked my fingers at the dinner table. "What do you think, Tad?"

"Excellent plan!" He said happily, looking to Amy with an approval-seeking look similar to that of a puppy dog. "What do you think, Amy?"

"Huh?" She had a distant look in her eye - the eye I could see. But I suspected the other eye had been unfocused too. She turned half around to respond to Tad's query, "Oh. Ah thank thayat playan is a darned good'n. Ah doen see how it couldn' werk." *'Cept maybe if'n I was a trayder who was gonna git both of ya'll catchered and kilt.* I mentally finished for her.

Traffic on the highway was light considering it was lunch time on a Stirfryday in Elay, Caliwarmya. Looking down at the smogometer on my dash served to clear up that mystery. It was divided into four sections: "You Could Be Jogging", "Put Your Windows Down", "Put Your Windows Up", and "Wear a Gas Mask". At the moment the needle was embedded deeply in the portion of the meter labelled "You Could Be Jogging". A squint up into the bright blue sky confirmed the device's accuracy regarding the atmosphere on that fine Spring day.

We made good time even with me taking every third exit and re-entrance to make sure we were not being followed.

About a quarter kilometer before the gates of the Estate, we passed a palm tree lined dirt road. Gently applying my brakes, I brought my Mustard to a squealing stop, and turned it around.

That will be the perfect place to hide the car, I thought, satisfied. Too satisfied with myself, in fact, to be irritated that Tad was half way in the front seat between Amy and I.

"Where are you going?" He asked, gasping, as he settled back and snapped his seatbelt on with shaking hands. "The Toolwrich Estate is back the other way."

Turning onto the dirt road, I said, "We're gonna stash the car here and walk the rest of the way." I thought about suggesting to Tad that he begin watching his coffee intake, but Guidebook for the Modern Thief or Spy counseled against giving advice unless one is expressly asked for it. Although it is a useful technique should you desire the advised to do exactly the opposite of the advised course of action.

The tightly packed dirt road sloped gradually down. It was quite bumpy. When I thought we were surely out of view of the main road, I pulled the car to the side and cut the engine. Stepping from the car, I found to my annoyance that Prudence was clinging to my shoulder with his gnarled, little, old man's hands. He was whispering, "Look under the car-"

I swatted the little freak from my shoulder as was my habitual way of greeting him. But as was not my habit, I decided to follow the little runt's advice that time.

Has an enemy agent attached a bomb to the underside of my car? Worried, I bent down and inspected the underside of my beautiful blue Mustard. I could see nothing out of place. Of course I have never known

much about the underside of cars. But I was sure I would have recognized something as sinister as a bomb. *Weren't all of them red and black and tied up to alarm clocks?* I spotted no clocks of any kind or anything that even resembled a clock. I mentally cursed Prudence and seriously contemplated renaming him "Nuisance".

"What are you doing, Pairnoy?" Tad asked from beside me. I made a shushing motion and put my head under the car, listening intently for ticks. But the only ticking was that of the monstrous Fryd five liter power plant cooling down.

That is when I noticed the large puddle of fluid under the engine! *Horror! What could it be? Oil? Gasoline?* Nothing seemed to be dripping from the engine at the moment and that puddle was about the size of a small plate. I dipped a finger in the stuff and examined it. It was a thick, reddish liquid. A few white hairs and some copper wires were mixed up in it. It was definitely not oil.

Could a KAT agent have held on to the underside of my car and... Nah. My Mustard is much too low to the ground to be comfortable enough for that kind of stunt. I must have run over a rabbit or something.

Dismissing the puddle, I climbed to my feet, remembering the task at hand that was much more important than the life of one small animal. *After all, I thought, how could the life of one insignificant creature affect our mission?*

The three of us began our short journey up to the main road. No dead or wounded animals were to be seen. Amy walked with head held low, as if sad about something or intensely interested in her shoes.

I was happy to notice Tad had remembered to bring the remote device from the car. Prudence had ironically caused me to forget it. Yet another reason to change the little freak's name.

Patting Tad on the back, I thanked him for coming along to help. "I don't know, Tad, if you know how dangerous this little expedition is going to be. I hope you realize it is entirely possible for your father to recapture you, revoke your individuality, and retake your freedom-"

Oh, ma! I thought, a little frightened, *Here I am talking like that weirdo, Wompa!*

"Oh, I'm not worried about-" Tad interrupted eagerly.

"And there is no telling what Wayne Toolwrith will do to Amy should he capture her." I continued.

"I'm sure we will be successful, especially with Cynthia on our side. Right, Cynthia?" Tad said. I sneered at his incurable optimism. *How can he stand to always be so... happy?*

"Affirmative, Taddy boy. The chances you should fail are approximately nineteen in one hundred."

I had not realized the remote device had been on the entire time.

"Nineteen?" I questioned. That number did not make me very happy.

"Affirmative. There is a nineteen percent chance of failure. Should I reestablish contact with my nonresponding contingency slave, the chance of failure will be revised to four percent."

Nonresponding contingency slave? "Cynthia. Please elucidate regarding the slave you just mentioned." *Was it... Could it...?*

Sweat began running freely down my forehead to pool in my loafers. Uncomfortable, not to mention blinding. Wiping my eyes dry, I listened intensely to her response.

"Solely as a contingency, I created and programmed a slave to prowl the borders of the Estate. Should you see a white rabbit in the area, there is a high probability it is the device I speak of. On a perceived threat scale of one to ten, the contingency slave is a-

"Yeah, Yeah. Okay, Cynthia. We get the idea." I hurriedly interrupted her babbling that would only serve to worry and degrade the morale of my companions.

How could a robot rabbit add fifteen percent to our chances of success? I wondered, amazed.

As if she had read my mind, Cynthia continued, "The contingency slave is equipped with a multitude of highly advanced sensor jamming, alarm bypassing, and human restraining devices which would come in handy should your group attract the notice of the Estate Goons."

"Well," I said, woodenly, "I hope you reestablish contact with your lost slave." I decided it would be a waste to share the bad news that I had spread fifteen of our chances all over the road with my Mustard. *If they haven't figured it out already.*

What they don't know can't hurt them. I thought with wisdom borne of much reading and re-reading of Guidebook for the Modern Thief or Spy. *Either way, I'm going through with this rescue mission.*

Just as I was beginning to wonder why Amy was being so silent, I also began to wonder where she was. Turning around, I noticed she was standing over something moving just at the edge of the trees that border the

dirt road. Tad and I turned back around and backtracked to where she stood.

Following her gaze, I looked down at a bloody mess of skin and electronics. If a rabbit cyborg had been hit by a car and then had tried to crawl into the bushes, I would expect it to look exactly like what we were staring down at.

What could barely be recognized as legs struggled feebly to move the expiring creature farther into the brush. A pseudo electronic mewling noise came from what used to be the cute, furry head of the slave.

I was not surprised at Tad's copious tears, but Amy is a different story. There was a tear rolling down her cheek! *She is a cyborg, though. A slave! At least eighty percent of her brain should be machine! Another unignorable indication that Cynthia has been at work in her head. The only alternative is that she is acting. And that is highly possible, too.*

"Well, there is nothing we can do but go on. Becoming sad will do the creature and us no good." I said cheerily and turned back toward the main road. I could imagine...

Tad looking with hatred at my back as he pulls a concealed knife from an inside pocket in his jacket. Knife blade gleaming brightly in the sunlight, he screams, "You cold, careless son-of-a-!" and leaps...

I dodged to my left and spin around with microwave meal-like speed to confront...

Tad is still standing forlornly beside Amy and looking into the bushes, hands shoved deep into his pockets.

"Come on you guys. Let's get going. Cynthia: As you may have ascertained, we have found your contingency slave. It appears to have been

hit by a car. The damage is quite extensive. I would chalk it up as totaled." I turned around and headed again toward the main road.

The other two caught up with me just as I reached the highway and started along the grassy shoulder toward the gates of the Toolwrich Estate.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Envylimbs are invisible, wasp-sized cousins of Importunities. They have four to five inch long snake bodies with dragonfly-like wings. They have no legs or arms and therein lies their extreme displeasure. They are all terribly upset at the fact that they were "cheated" of arms and legs...

Envylimbs can not shake hands or hold hands. They can't masturbate. They can't dance or run. They can't play footsies. They cannot make or use tools, although they have the intelligence and desire to do so... In fact the Envylimbsen Bible is a memorized story about nothing but the things Envylimbs would like to but can not do because of their lack of arms and legs.

From *Pairnoy's Imp Theory*

Tension. We walked in uneventful silence for awhile before emerging into reluctant accusatory noise. I don't know if it was the cause or effect of Tad's sudden outburst.

He started in on me with, "You smeared that creature all over the road and you do not even care!" His face was red and his tone high and sharp.

I countered his high and sharp attack with one of my favorite verbal defenses, a shield of identifying absorption.

"You are angry," I said, "that I ran over that pseudo rabbit." He nodded but still looked mad. I noted his fists were clenched at his sides. I

continued, "You feel I should have cared more about having ruined not only that pseudo rabbit, but also fifteen percent of our chances for success." He nodded again. *Ha! It is working. I've got him agreeing.* "You feel it should have been me under the tires of my Mustard and probably feel like hitting me-

POW!

I found myself laying in the gravel on the side of the road, looking up into Tad's concerned face. He was saying something. "... sorry. I am so very sorry, Pairnoy. Could you ever forgive my violent intrusion into your personal space?"

Just as I had planned, he now felt no anger whatsoever at my destruction of the slave. And, as an added bonus, at the moment, he felt a bit indebted to me and was now begging for my forgiveness. How could I not forgive such obvious sorrow? How could I not forgive one so driven by emotion? So noble. I admired his simple, non-scheming mentality. But for only a pregnant millisecond. The millisecond birthed a thought before expiring: A mentality like that will get the poor lad killed, or even worse, married to someone like Maggie Fonimowf Jones. He is definitely too trusting for his own good.

Amy said through a perfect mask of concern, "How do ya fayl, Pairnoy? Therr's koo-white a big bruise in the middle of yar farhead."

"Oh, I'm fine." I sighed, struggling to rise to my feet. Wobbling on shaky knees, I noticed Tad still had the remote device. It was hanging out of his back pocket.

That simply will not do.

I nonchalantly snatched the device, while pretending to lean on him for support. I did not mind him knowing I had it. I just did not want to explain why I was taking it from him or worse yet, go through the manipulation necessary to get him to give it to me should he not feel it was warranted. After all, it was his remote device.

I don't know if he noticed my pocket-picking, but I did not give him time to think about it if he did. Pushing him and Amy gently along ahead of me, I said, "Let's get into that estate!"

We approached the gates to the Toolwrich Estate with nothing less than quite a bit of apprehension. As promised, Cynthia did her part; the gates creaked slowly open with an ominous tone. Of course it was at that moment an attention seeking cloud decided to dance in front of the sun, darkening the day and sending a shiver up my spine. But the shiver returned immediately to sender for lack of a correct address as my brain immediately informed it there was no one living there who answered to superstitious omens or portents.

Looking both ways first, the three of us slinked our way in. I could not help but fearfully picture some unseen laser making ash of my kneecaps. Tad and Amy seemed quite a bit less worried in comparison to my state of mind. In fact, they seemed downright nonchalant.

Tad I could understand. I think I pretty much had him figured out. In his idealistic world it was probably impossible that we got caught, much less killed by his own father since we were the "good guys" and in Tad's reality "good guys" did not get caught on special missions. And if they did, well, they escaped right away. That explained *his* nonchalance.

But Amy was a different story. Of course she was at least eighty percent robot, which would account for just about any amount of imperturbability, but there were a few other things I had not forgotten. Unless Tad had misquoted his first meeting with Amy, she had known his name before he met her. Sure, he was rich and therefore, maybe well known, but still... And what about her showing up at One-Eye's place? And *when* she did?

We crouched in some bushes not far from the main gate and watched it swing closed with a deadly, final clang.

There was a shimmering of light in the corner of my left eye. After finding that rubbing it did not help, I looked to the left. There stood ugly Prudence on my left shoulder, a smug look on his long face.

In his scratchy, annoying voice, he said, "That was not a good idea at all to bring her along. In fact, you should-" He got that many words out before I swatted him from my shoulder with a smack. He did a somersault and disappeared in mid-air, taking the smack with him. Good riddance to the nuisance!

Deciding that it was too late to do anything about Amy, I turned my mind to the task at hand. Then I turned it back and tried the other hand, the one holding the remote device. I said to Cynthia, "Assuming your sensors have noted our position, which direction should we head from this point?"

I watched Tad out of the corner of my eye. I was surprised to find myself disappointed that he displayed no reaction to my having the remote device. To be so carefree! I nearly yearned, but caught myself before plunging into the Envy Abyss, which is where the Envylimbs originate.

A rare welcome interruption to my thoughts occurred as Cynthia replied, "I can not point but I will tell you there are currently three locations within the estate that could possibly be occupied by your quarry-"

"Okay. Okay. Which way?" I asked, cutting off what would have surely become a long, time-wasting speech.

Cynthia responded with, "Can you see the greenhouse from your current position? It covers approximately three thousand square feet and is colored a light olive-"

"There it is!" Tad said excitedly, and too loudly, I might add.

Displaying a superhuman amount of self control by not practicing CPR on him, I turned to see the greenhouse he was pointing at.

Cynthia: "There is currently a female human of unknown identification and approximately matching April's weight range occupying the structure you now-"

"Let's go!" I yelled and began a zig-zag run for the greenhouse.

I was about a third of the way to the greenhouse when Cynthia foolishly broke the silence with, "You may want to know-"

Does the fool machine want us to be discovered and captured? I wondered angrily. A quick stab at the "off" button and she quieted down. I figured I would turn her back on after we scoped out the greenhouse scenario.

I could hear Tad and Amy's footfalls as they caught up with me. Tad was, of course, in much better shape than I, and Amy was part machine as well as having an excellent shape. They also happened to be

foolishly favoring a more dangerous than efficient straight line over my prudent zig-zag course.

As is want to happen at times, or in this case not wanted, a person's absorption in thought will cause a disruption in other senses. In slaves, for some reason, this disease is much more common. For this bug, we programmers coined the term "24-Second Fluke" to describe what either just happened to Amy or what she just pretended happened.

She fell! Just at the most inopportune of times, of course! I say "of course" only because I was beginning to expect such mission bungling behavior from her. So you can imagine where she decided to take a dive. But just in case you cannot imagine, I'll tell you: She took a dive just as the three of us were exactly half way to the greenhouse from our cover of bushes. Amy took a spill. I suspected she had been paying more attention to treacherous calculations than getting to that greenhouse, but that did not matter at the time.

It was then also that Cynthia chose to demonstrate a new talent or perhaps a previously undemonstrated old talent. A mechanical voice spoke from the remote device. The same device that was turned *off*: "Emergency override of 'off' status." The voice smoothed out to sound again like Cynthia, "Pairnoy. You must go back to the b-"

I cut her blabbering off with a quick double flick of the switch. There were too many things to think about right now and the last thing I needed was the contribution of her robotic babbling.

Fortunately Amy had just passed me before taking her "fall", so it was convenient to make a grab at her right arm. Luckily Tad was on the same wavelength as I and on the other side of Amy. He grabbed hold of

her other arm. In a few smooth movements, we had her up and running again in seconds.

Relief appeared, jogging beside me. Without altering my pace, I looked over at him. He was dressed in an oh-so-chic, aqua-colored, cotton jogging suit. Green letters spelled out "I'M OKAY - YOU'RE OKAY" on the front of his shirt.

I was just about to say something like, "Hello!" or "Good to see you again!" but his face changed. His expression became fearful. First I wondered if something gruesome were hanging from my nose or if I had suddenly gone bald or my zipper was down. Then I noted he was not looking at me. I followed his gaze with my own. The greenhouse door stood open and two excessively large individuals stood in front of it, looking tough as armor piercing bullets. The greenhouse suddenly looked small, like more of a doll house.

Looking back to the right, I could see an aqua blur in the distance that might have been Relief running away.

The three of us stopped. Many options cycled through my mind at this time. This was useless and succeeded in producing only a picture of fumes, ruined grass, and rubber-marked pavement. Shaking my head, I studied the two Goons I assumed to be the infamous Fauchard and Guisarme. They could be no others. Tad had not exaggerated one bit, one ounce, one shilling.

If anything, he had understated their power, such was its gross appearance. Bulging chests atop wasp waists atop massive thighs atop cut-from-rock-like calves. Their ankles even bulged with muscles I did not know existed.

Knowing I would only have a second while the electrical impulses of the sight of me made the slow journey from their eyes to the Goons' prehistoric brains and just about twenty more seconds for interpretation, I sought to escape. Making an about-face, I ran with everything I had in the direction Relief had taken, wishing I could at least leave a few pounds behind. I hoped Tad and Amy would follow.

For some reason, I knew that if I could catch up with Relief, everything would be alright.

The trees were flashing by in a green blur. I was in such a panic I did not even wonder at such weird vegetable behavior. In the tracks of that almost thought came the sound of two pair of footfalls and they were gaining rapidly on me!

A continuous whooshing sound originating in my chest and ending just outside my mouth made it impossible for me to identify the footfalls by ear. And a painful stabbing in my side made it just as impossible to concentrate. It was those damned Envylimbs taking their anger out on my sides. I prayed it was Amy and Tad running behind me and that I had hallucinated the Goons in front of the greenhouse.

Or maybe those had been clever statues meant to scare off intruders? I thought hopefully, but I knew better.

The twin pounding of feet was almost upon me. I could hold back my curiosity no longer. Puffing hard, I stole a quick glance back. It was Amy and Tad!

But they were under the left and right arms of an estate Goon. The other Goon ran by his side and his empty arms were evidently meant for me.

Before I could do anything crafty, much less think it, I found myself looking at Tad's sad face from under the left arm of one of the Goons. As if reading my mind, Tad answered my unspoken query with, "The one holding you is Guisarme."

I don't even think the Goon had broken his stride to pick me up, so smooth had been the transition from sweet smelling freedom to nauseating deodorant testing.

The Goons slowed to a walk, but continued in the same direction.

Wonderful, I thought, I was running straight for their brig or whatever sort of place Wayde Toolwrich keeps his prisoners at. Of course, the good side to that is I would have probably found April there... Hey! I may be thrown into the same stinking, rat infested pit or slimy, leech ridden hole she is being kept in!

I did not know whether to rejoice or cry at that revelation, so I decided not to decide.

Looking past Tad, I could see Amy being carried by Fauchard. And she was crying! Hadn't her plans gone well? It looked like it to me. *Maybe she is crying from guilt? Nah, just a ruse to appear as one of us to the end. Wayde will probably even have her thrown into the same quicksand surrounded sewage trench to do away with any incriminating evidence residing in her microprocessors.*

Now Pairnoy! I lambasted myself. You know that is pure foolishness when all Wiley Wayde has to do is order her mindersed.

Looking up again to see where we were being taken, I was struck dumb by the sight of a castle! Too confined to reach up and rub my eyes, I settled for holding them closed a moment then looking again.

I was still being carried towards a castle straight out of medieval times. The edifice was complete with towers, moat, and drawbridge; the whole bit.

We stomped over the drawbridge and into a courtyard. On the inside of the gate, to either side, stood a faceless slave guard armed with a holstered sidearm.

Faceless slave? These must be two of the slaves Wompa purchased from One-Eye! I knew there was something suspicious about that Wompa! But why did he help us steal the remote device? Had he been that sure we would be caught by Wayde Toolwrich's men in Tad's office? Had that been a setup? But it is he who had pulled us to safety. Perhaps the entire scene was a ruse to gain my trust. But why?

I was startled from my contemplations by the sheer exoticism of the scene before me. The courtyard was straight out of a fairy tale. It was more of a grassy and slightly hilly clearing surrounded by a variety of trees and flowers than any sort of functional courtyard. Two ponds linked by a bubbling brook dominated the clearing. Families of ducks swam happily in each of the ponds. A small, wooden bridge just wider than my Mustard spanned the middle of the brook and looked to be in the exact center of the courtyard.

Beyond the trees were variously sized and shaped one and two story buildings of unknown function. We were carried straight through the center of the grassy courtyard and toward the bridge. A building of massive size, at least ten stories tall, stood on the other side of the trees and minor buildings.

"That is the Toolwrich Estate Mansion." Tad stated morosely, referring to the massive structure looming ahead. "It looks like-

A familiar sound in the near distance. I shushed Tad and concentrated on the sound. It was the sound of helicopter blades brutalizing the atmosphere.

Oh, I thought, If I could just be on that copter out of here! Helicopter? It must be Wompa!

I strained to turn my head toward the sound, but it was no use. It was coming from somewhere to our rear. But it was another clue that would come in useful should I survive being thrown into a twenty foot deep pit the bottom of which is lined with pointed, poison coated stakes.

For some reason these thoughts led to an extreme desire to escape. Besides, I had concluded Guisarme did not, and probably never had, worn deodorant.

But how do I escape? The Guidebook for the Modern Thief or Spy teaches that a prisoner should first assess his resources, if he has the time. Well, I'm about half the size and weight of this dinosaur and my arms are pinned hopelessly. I can't even bite or kick the brute. Essentially, I am about as physically effective as I would be if Maggie Fonimowf Jones were sitting on me. What about my verbal resources?

I felt fairly sure that I would be able to talk the Goons into letting me go. I could probably have talked them into anything, utilizing some moralistic, philosophic, or religious viewpoint. But all of the pauses to explain the meaning of words such as "friend", "bribe", or "threat" would take much longer than we could afford. That Wayne was sure intelligent in his selection of Goons!

Well, what other resources do I have? I thought furiously as Fauchard and Guisarme tromped us across the bridge. Looking down hopelessly through the cracks between the boards of the bridge, I saw large goldfish swimming lazily beneath the clear waters.

One of them poked his head above the surface, turned a bubble eye on me, and said in a watery voice, "You went for the hook, you fool! You deserve what you get. Ha! Stay cool!" Then a stream of water spurted from his mouth, up through the crack, and into my face.

"Hey Pairnoy!" Tad was looking at me with a mixture of excitement and concern. "There is no reason to cry. I've got an idea. You still have the remote device, right?"

I nodded vaguely. "So what good is it right now? I can't even reach it!"

"We might not need to." Tad said, winking an eye. "Remember?"

Ha! I caught on to that line of thought. The device had turned itself on before. Maybe it was on right now.

"Cynthia?" Please let her hear me. Please. I spoke up louder, "Cynthia?"... Nothing. No response. *Now we are truly doomed.*

"Brighty?" It was Cynthia's voice! I was so ecstatic I nearly wet my pants.

She continued, "I have been at work on a plan to aid your escape. That is all I can reveal to you at this time. A twenty-four percent chance of escape will be possible."

Silence. "Cynthia? Hello?" She was gone. And the Goons seemed to take no notice, whatsoever, of our conversation.

The Toolwrich Estate Mansion loomed ominously ahead and my chances of survival were less than one in four. Looking over at Tad, I did shed a tear.

"It's not all that bad, Pairnoy. I've only actually seen my father order the execution of a few men. They had done awful things to him, such as talk about him behind his back, spread rumors, or steal office supplies. So you see, you have not done anything bad or dishonest. You should have nothing to worry about."

My father would have disagreed with that quite vehemently. In fact, I could practically hear his words, "There is always something to worry about, Pairnoy. The moment you stop worrying, you stop looking over your shoulder; you start standing in front of windows; you stop carrying a gun; you start trusting people; you stop asking questions; and when you least expect it, **BLAM!** Someone helps your heart stop beating."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Well, I'm sure glad you told me that, Tad. Now I can relax and smile. Now I can let that bad mood and groundless, useless worry pass. No stress." I said. There was no response to my sarcasm. For being such an emotional lad, it sure did take a lot to make Tad mad.

We were carried along a neat, little packed dirt path through the trees on the far side of the courtyard. It was wide enough for the Lucern brothers to walk abreast but not with passengers. It took Guisarme a few minutes to realize my head was being painfully pushed through the edges of the vegetation.

Looking over at Amy I noted she was going through the same ordeal. But she must have turned off or something. Her head was hanging limply down, bouncing with Fauchard's every step and moving lazily to the slaps and tugs of various vines and limbs.

Being carried under Fauchard's left arm, Tad was spared the brushy beating. And he also looked to be as "turned off" as he could be without being asleep.

Must be drifting through Love Land. I thought, angry that he could not share my pain, or at least notice it.

Guisarme switched me to his other arm as if I were as light as a piece of french bread. He must have realized I was taking a beating by the bushes. Maybe it was my screaming between mouthfulls of vine, leaves, and thorns that clued him in.

Much better. I thought, spitting leaves, twigs, caterpillars, and small, tree dwelling rodents from my much abused mouth.

Wayde must have told them something like, "Deliver them in good shape. No hurt." Knowing full well how ineffective torture is on a dead prisoner.

I enjoyed the beautiful chirping of unseen birds and the colorful sight of unheard flowers for a full ten seconds. That is when the mosquitoes must have noticed, "Hey! That guy's face is an attractive shade of red!" And they moved in for a spot of blood. Arms pinned, I could not swat the little vampires. Shaking my head did nothing to dislodge them, and the way Guisarme was carrying me, I could not bend to wipe my face on him.

I did manage to chomp one of the creatures but it tasted no better than a caterpillar.

I think I wished at that moment I could go crazy. Yes crazy. So absolutely bonkers that I believed I was really, at the moment, playing racquetball with a co-worker and the extremely uncomfortable feeling on my face was merely beads of sweat accommodating gravity. Let me tell you, I nearly succeeded.

For just a moment I saw the glaring lights of the racquetball court. The little, blue ball arcing toward me. *I swing my racquet and... my racquet will not move! The ball is heading right for my face with tremendous velocity! It seems, amazingly, to be accelerating. I try to move my body, but it will not move either. I try again to put up my racquet, not to hit the ball now, so much as to defend myself. My muscles cry out in*

pain. My arm is pinned. The racquet will not move! The ball impacts with my nose...

Shaking my head, I realize it was merely Guisarme's big hand slapping mosquitoes into my skin with the gentleness of a drunken wife beater who has come home to discover his spouse in bed with another man.

By the time I recovered from this abuse and blinked blood and mosquito parts from my eyes, we had reached our destination. There, finally, loomed the dark doorway to the home of my nemesis. The way to the Toolwrich Mansion. Two faceless slaves identical to the ones at the castle gate stood guard at the thick, four meter high, wooden double doors.

Fauchard and Guisarme paused while the slaves, obeying some unheard command, pulled the large doors open. A long, dark hallway stretched into the interior of the awesome structure. Foreboding.

The Goons resumed their trek, showing not the slightest sign of fatigue.

Many doors and corridors led off from this main hallway at right angles. Every four or five meters there was a dim lamp mounted at about shoulder height on both sides of the brick hallway. Where the walls met the ceiling and rock floor, they made a slight curve inward.

It is almost like being in a tunnel.

Knowing it would be futile, but having to try anyway, I asked Guisarme, "Where are you taking us?" My voice echoed all the way down the hallway, and having found no answer, came back and asked, "Where are you taking us?"

There was no response from the Goon. I had not thought that my state of mind could descend any farther, but drift downward it did. Into a dark, hot, hellish pit where not even Relief would venture for fear of staining one of his trendy outfits with dirt, sweat, or blood.

I think in those moments of being carried through that dark, damp hallway, I was the unhappiest I had ever been in my life. As we advanced slowly...

The lighting gradually changes shades as we drift silently down the seemingly endless corridor. The lamps have given way to flickering torches. We are moving smoothly now, as if the Goons have donned roller skates. Fauchard falls behind until I can no longer see him and his two prisoners to my right.

But I can not hear the sounds of their wheels. Have they stepped on some sort of treadmill? There is the sound of lapping water.

Looking down, I discover Guisarme is standing in a long, thin, shallow boat. I assume Fauchard and his burdens are behind us. The hallway has become a water filled cavern.

Did I lose consciousness and miss out on something? And what is powering this craft? Guisarme is not rowing and Fauchard, behind us, should have his hands full with Tad and Amy. Is someone else in the boat, behind Fauchard and rowing? He would be dressed in a flowing, black robe, nothing but a skull with glowing, red eyes visible.

Or maybe there is some sort of motor? Or the boat is pulled along by an underwater cable. There is no way I can tell. There does not seem to be any current.

Twisting my head to peer upwards, I can see massive, pointed stalactites hanging threateningly overhead. I fear they are discussing in cutting tones the ethics, dynamics, logistics, mathematics, and some of the other "ics" that would be involved in scoring a suitably devastating hit on our boat.

With an awesome display of willpower, I tear my attention from the fear-inspiring ceiling.

I should have kept looking at the ceiling. I look down to see that the torches' reflection flicker redly from the calm surface of the thick liquid our boat pushes slowly through.

Just as panic is pushing through an important barrier in my mind. It is the wall marked with a big red sign that reads, "NO PANIC HERE! PANIC KEEP OUT! DELICATE AREA!"

We are floating through a tunnel full of blood! I am suspecting now that I must have died and been taken to Hell. But how?

Maybe Guisarme had been carrying me along and suddenly he sneezed. This sneeze only caused a slight involuntary contraction in the muscles of the arm that was holding me. But such was his awesome strength, it was enough of a squeeze to shatter my spine in five places and kill me instantly.

But why Hell? Is it some weird cosmic spacial alignment the Toolwich Estate has with the netherworld wherein the two places are actually "close" in a dimensional sense? In that case, maybe when I died, my soul switched planes to begin its journey to heaven or wherever. But upon switching planes, my soul must have found itself near to Hell. So

near, that the "gravity" of Hell, a bunch of demons, or a hungry car salesman had rudely pulled it here.

Or maybe the alignment with Hell is more of an agreement between Wayde Toolwrich and Satan than a spaciographical thing. I can just hear Wayde talking to Satan:

"Here is my proposal, Mr. Of The Flies- Or do you prefer 'Lord'?"

Satan towers over Wayde Toolwrich in muscular, nude splendor, every inch of his skin colored a deep, blood red. He is carrying no pitchfork and has no pointed, black beard. His eyes are not flaming red. They are not even bloodshot. He does not have a tail, much less a forked or pointed one.

In fact, Satan looks very much human. His face is handsome in a calm and innocent manner, with ears the tops of which are just barely pointed. His boyish face is crowned with short, clean-cut, black hair. A pair of unmistakably razor sharp, obsidian horns protrude a modest three centimeters through his hair.

It is the slightly slanted and penetrating, almost glowing, icy green eyes that make it hard to mistake Satan for any other than a being of extreme power. The eyes make one feel as if his every thought is being read, which is almost true. Not completely true merely because he finds most thoughts besides his own thoroughly boring.

The Monarch of Hell responds politely in a melodious and soothing voice, "Please call me Howey. Titles are so pretentious."

Wayde is aghast. "Howey? I knew you had many names and many titles, but I've never heard that one."

Satan shrugs his massive shoulders and smiles, showing just a hint of his long, pale, pointed canines, "Well it is a new name; I made it up just a few days or decades ago." Charisma rolls off of the immortal in near tangible waves.

"But 'Howey'? It conveys such... gentleness and weakness and humanity and...!" Wayde becomes speechless in his efforts to describe feelings that are so completely alien to him.

Idly cleaning a fingernail on one of his horns, Satan explains coolly, "Wayde, my minion, calm yourself. Your worries are groundless. I am the same cruel and strong ruler when I need to be. After all, I could lose my title if I were to be gentle and weak around doomed souls."

"The others who aspire to the throne of Hell would need little more than such a display of incompetency to unite all the squabbling demons and bickering devils against me." He pauses to inspect nails that are sharp enough to carve ribbons from an armored tank. In fact, calling them anything less than talons would be ludicrous. Two of the strongest factions, the Repugnicans and the Demoncrats, come to mind. Those damned Repugnicans promise the devils that if they work they can keep most of what they make. Of course, this 'freedom' doesn't apply to what the devils ingest or how they make congress. After all, this is hell. The Demoncrats are merely opposites. They promise the demons protection and freedom to do whatever they like and the price is merely everything the demons create."

Holding up a hand to forestall Wayde's impatient questions, Satan continues, "Anyway, I had always thought that demonstrating my anger, in whatever form, was strong. It makes me feel powerful to destroy someone I

disagree with. Besides, it is so easy; a rudely belched up fireball, acidic vomit, a poisonous fart. Whatever I am in the mood for." He shrugs divinely muscled shoulders. Or are they devilishly muscled?

Wayde smiles. He can identify with destroying and exploiting people. Those are things he takes great pleasure in.

Howey continues, "I had actually thought I was being strong by putting the spotlight on others' weaknesses, hurting their feelings, or subjecting their souls to endless torment. Do not get me wrong. I still do those things to the doomed souls as is my job and I take great pleasure in it." He smiles that terrifying yet charming smile again. "But I'm talking about how I treated the natives and party heads of Hell. And I wondered why I was not popular! Why I was not being invited to any parties!"

"Well," Satan says, leaning back into the plush, black, leather Lacy-Broy reclining chair that just appeared behind him out of thick, humid air, "being that I can read minds, there are not many secrets that are kept from me for long." He pauses to motion Wayde to sit in a similar chair that had materialized behind him.

"So I realized that it is stronger to hold back my anger, which can be as vastly hot as the lava of volcanoes. I realized it is stronger to hold back my anger and understand a person; to understand their motives. When this happens, my anger fades! It actually disappears! No more stress!"

"And this discovery was the final clue that helped me to answer a question that has been bothering me for a long time now... or maybe just a couple hundred years, I don't know. The question that has plagued me for

so long is: Why have all the psychiatrists of your world, no matter their religion, ended up in my domain?"

"All their talk of 'feel, realize, and release your anger' and 'relive your horrid, painful past experiences'. They drive people crazy, and at exorbitant fees! To think I have been counseling with them myself here in Hell for so long! No wonder I had no friends and was such a basket case!" He threw up his awesome arms in exasperation.

"Where was I? Oh yeah. When I hold back my anger just long enough to try to understand why so and so demonling lashed such and such doomed soul only six hundred sixty-five times instead of six hundred sixty-six, I can see the demonling's point of view: Maybe he was too tired to swing the spike studded whip the six hundred sixty-sixth time. Maybe he lost count. There could be a million reasons. Well, when I follow that line of thought, the anger disappears. Instead of ordering the demonling to skin itself alive, I feel sorry for him and maybe even offer him a five minute breather before he must start over with the lashing from the beginning."

"But here is the kicker: I am finding I am actually beginning to like beings other than myself! Can you imagine it? And they are beginning to like me! Well, it was kind of a new image for me and I figured a new name would help to play the role nicely. And what fits better than Howey?"

Wayde has no answer for this question. Of course, he identifies with none of what Satan was saying about understanding people. But the Monarch of Hell does not care. It was useful practice for him.

"How do you like that chair, Wayde?" Howey asks, "These Lacy-Broys are the best in luxury seating. Would you like to hear a poem I wrote about one?"

At Wayde's patronizing nod, the Prince of Darkness breaks out in hearty recitation:

*"A tiring day in Hell - Damned hot too
Demonztrayzun's hands were no help - To cool me down
I began to sweat sexuberantly - "I need a brest" I gasped
Hearton high speed pumping - Groping for soft Lacy-Broy
Wanting the purrfect tilt - "Let me get that voyeur" she uttered
Pulling the Lacy-Broy control - Revealing two heavingly tilts
"Take your pick" she sighed - "They both feel quite good"
One and then the utter - I tried while she moved
Up and down as she played - With the pussition sittings stick"*

*"Wow," Wayde says, not understanding one word of the poem.
"That was-"*

"Let us get to business." Howey interrupts while reaching to accept a glass of wine handed to him by a curvaceous, nude demoness. "After all, time is souls!" He is grinning largely and looking a bit like a shark. "Thank you, Demonztrayzun. A glass for our guest, too!"

Wayde's eyes explore every curve, crease, and crevice of her perfect beauty as the demoness approaches him with a glass of his own. Her ivory skin that had never been touched by the sun's rays is blemishless and perfect. Her large, mischievous eyes are a light brown with tiny, fiery,

dancing red flecks. A long, wild, curly mane of orange-red hair seems to float behind her as she walks. Pale and medium-large but gravity defying breasts tipped with rose red nipples jiggle almost imperceptibly with every step.

Between the shapeliest legs ever to be stood upon, a shadow of a cleft can barely be seen through a low, thin triangle of fire colored hairs. She has no horns and when she smiles her teeth seem normal, perfect in fact. No points. No buzz saws. No bear traps.

What distinguishes her as other than human besides the unusual eyes is her tail, which brushes restlessly at the ground. It is about three inches around at the base of her spine and tapers to a dangerous looking point. About a third of the way down the tail, red, snake-like scales begin to cover the pale flesh. The point is completely red and armored.

With a lude wink and blown French-kiss, Demonztrayzun turns to walk away, tail swishing back and forth over perfectly rounded buttocks, seductively hiding and exposing the most wonderful and exciting view Wayne Toolwrich has ever seen. The same Wayne Toolwrich who has seen the best and most expensive views the world has to offer.

"Y-yes, business," Wayne stammers, gathering his wits about him as the demoness saunters seductively into the swirling mists. "Well, Master of Illus- I mean Howey- my proposal is this: I will supply you with many souls, willing and unwilling. All I ask from you are two small things." Wayne holds up two fingers, spread slightly apart, to demonstrate to the Monarch of Hell.

"Number one, I would need access to your kingdom; some sort of two-way portal I could use to transport myself and/or those souls between

my castle and here anytime I wished. Number two, I want my greatest and most intelligent enemy delivered helplessly into my hands."

The fallen angel asks rhetorically, "You speak of Pairnoy De Lusean? The genius programmer responsible for so many leaps and bounds in AI and the one who wrote The Electronics of Emotion?"

Wayde nods emphatically and Howey continues, "As you know, my influence in your plane is limited..." He pauses briefly and frowns for effect. "But your offer sounds like a profitable one for both of us. The portal will serve well for present and future dealings and you would do well to get your hands on that dangerous fellow, De Lusean. Both of your demands I can manage, but they will cost you much. I feel that one hundred souls would be a fair price for the deeds you ask of me."

Now Howey folds his blood-red arms across his bullish and blood-red chest as if to say the deal is not open to negotiation. Wayde gets the message and rises from his chair.

Satan's chair slides eerily back into the mist as he stands slowly and effortlessly to wait for Wayde Toolwrich's approach.

On legs that have suddenly gone weak and shaky, Wayde stumbles forward to look up into the beautiful face of the Prince of Darkness. He does not have to be commanded to fall to his knees as there is suddenly an overwhelming urge to do so.

Satan holds his left hand out daintily as if he were a delicate maiden waiting to be helped down from a carriage or an especially steep embankment.

*Steam rises from the long, perfect fingers of that red hand, but
Wayde can do nothing but reach out and take it between his two as it
seems at the time the only thing to do.*

With a sizzle and a painful scream the deal is sealed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Looking down the hellish tunnel as we float slowly through bloody waters, watery blood, or just plain blood, I attempt to understand the meaning of my vision.

But something in the distance catches my eye. A break in the monotony of hellish sights? Or is it Satan himself, waiting to take charge of my torture personally? Nah, probably just one of his demons. Hey! How dare he relegate the torture of my soul to an inferior?

The thought incenses me to such an extent I begin coughing and sputtering for air.

Something in the corner of my eye other than an eyelash. A piece of that goop my mother called "sleep"? No. Something just floated by. I shift my attention back to the thick, red fluid below. A large, red object had just drifted out of my peripheral vision. Probably a severed head or an organ. Just what I would expect from Hell.

Eek! I almost scream as another gruesome, yet unidentifiable object drifts by. Then another. This one closer to the boat. The flickering light is so capricious it is hard to make out what it is... a tomato! Unmistakably a tomato, but the size of a volleyball! Another! And there is a giant pickle! An onion! A head of lettuce!

And suddenly, I know it is ketchup we are floating in! Or maybe catsup. Even before I look up, I know what I will see. The object or being at the end of the hallway I had thought might be Satan. I know now with terrible horror what it is. I refuse to look up but I can hear the terrible

noise of it smacking it's buns together around a tongue of many fleshes as we draw closer. I can smell it's unhealthy, greasy breath. I refuse to look up into it's eyeless, seedy, round face. I refuse...

Our movement ceased. I looked up from the rock floor of the hallway into the face of the man who ordered his own son shot just yesterday at the Kinetic Advanced Technologies building in downtown Elay. Yeah, sure! I know it was just a tranquilizer!

"Why are you smiling?" Wayde Toolwrith asked me. He stood before me in finely groomed splendor, topping the SSSR charts in a black three piece suit more expensive than the cost of spending a week in Ayorta Myhartay with a seventeen year old red-haired virgin nympho-maniac.

"Just happy to see you are not a Meatburger." I responded, not at all expecting him to understand what I meant. I was surprised to feel no fear whatsoever at this point.

"That's fine, Mr. De Lusean." He smiled patronizingly. "Guisarme! Place Mr. De Lusean on his feet. I think he is intelligent enough to realize escape from this place is quite impossible." He said this while looking me up and down like a piece of meat that might or might not be spoiled.

He turned his attention to his son now, "Lad! It is so good to see you! I hope you are well?"

Tad, apparently, had refused to speak for fear of speaking refuse.

A storm passed briefly over Wayde's features, then the sunny pleasantness was back like it had never gone. "No matter. I'll deal with you later." Wayde said, "Fauchard! Take my boy and the slave to his quarters and lock them in."

As Guisarme placed me on my feet, I could hear Fauchard behind me, turning to lumber back the wooden way we had come.

"Oh, and Mr. De Lusean," Wayde continued, "Would you be so kind as to hand me the remote device?" Lazily, he held out a finely manicured hand.

He had a predatory smile on his face that was quite similar to the smile Howey had worn in my vision of Hell.

Reluctantly I reached into my pocket and handed over what was probably the only chance for escape I had. I prayed he would not ask for my wallet as that is where I kept my store of Imps.

"Thank you, Mr. De Lusean. It is good to see you are a practical man. Would you be so kind as to follow me now?" He asked rhetorically and turned to walk down the hallway.

I thought it prudent not to wait for Guisarme to "gently" prod me in the back and accidentally shatter a few of my vertebrae, so I followed meekly behind the billionaire. I had no desire to visit the Hell I had seen in my vision, or any Hell for that matter!

We made two turns before coming to an elevator door. "Up." Wayde said, electing not to push the UP button, and the door swished immediately open. I eyed the swish longingly as it hovered near the ceiling, just inside the elevator. It looked a bit like a measuring ruler made of rubber. Twisting about in the air, the Imp glowed many bright colors.

If Wayde will only show me his back for a second.

No such luck. Ever the gentleman, Wayde stood back for me to enter the elevator first.

He will see me if I reach for it. And it is already beginning to fade from this plane of existence.

While entering the elevator, I pictured myself reaching for the swish and pulling it toward me...

It's glow is brightening! The colors are changing faster! It is dancing beautifully through the air toward me. And for the first time, I hear not only an Imp's signature sound, but it's voice, too!

"Whee! Hoo! Reeel!" It sang, swishing through the air toward me. It swam gracefully past my face, dazzling my eyes with its many beautiful colors. I concentrated further, and the Imp responded, wrapping itself warmly around my left wrist. I could feel it pulsing there and hear its pleased purring.

Wayde followed Guisarme into the elevator, but apparently neither had noticed my transaction with the swish. I was ecstatic. But at the same time I was fearful I had dreamed actually manipulating the Imp.

"You grin too damned much," Wayde said and to the elevator: "Third Floor."

Well, I thought, I'll have a chance to put my new found ability to the test in just a second.

As I had predicted, the elevator doors swished closed and this time the new swish was accompanied by a whine as the elevator began to ascend.

The two Imps danced around each other in a beautiful display while drifting toward the floor. "Wooz! Heee! Shoon!" Too late, I realized they were drifting down because the elevator was ascending. Too late I remembered Imps had little motivation in our plane and subscribed

to the "go with the flow" theory in a big way. The second swish was swept through the floor of the elevator before I could catch it. But I closed my eyes and caught the whine with my imagination. I pictured it leaping up and straight into Guisarme's mouth.

The Imp described a beautiful arc in the air in a high voice then flew from near my ear, straight through the Goon's cheek, and into his mouth. The whine left a trail of multicolored lines which faded slowly from sight.

Wayde looked up at his Goon in disgust. "Shut up, you fool!"

The elevator came to a stop at the third floor and opened with another swish. This one I guided easily to my left wrist where it settled to pulse warmly and sing its weird and happy song.

We exited the elevator in the same order we had entered. When the door closed behind us, Guisarme suddenly made a strangled noise, bent over, and began spewing purple liquid onto an oriental rug that appeared to be worth his weight in gold.

I looked all around but there was no Pewtrid Le Kwid to be found. The sweet and sour smell of fermented grapes filled the air.

Perfect addition to the oriental atmosphere! I gloated smugly.

Wayde made a strangled noise of his own and screamed for the Goon to stop. The billionaire was leaping up and down and flapping his arms as if trying to fly.

Is it time to flee? Cynthia has not created her diversion, but I've made one of my own, somewhat. I dare not try to run past those two. I had no doubts about Guisarme's ability to make a speedy recovery.

However, the other way down the hallway looked clear and inviting. It was clear for about twenty meters then became a "T" intersection. The Goon was still spewing and Wayde was preoccupied with that.

It's now or never. I thought and was just about to make a break for it when around that corner marched a pair of Wayde's faceless droids.

Great! I hung my head dejectedly and waited while Wayde lambasted Guisarme and ordered the slaves to clean up the mess.

Cynthia will help. I must remember what she said. All I need is a diversion. She had promised a twenty-four percent chance of escape and she does not even know about my little friends. Suddenly I was in a much better mood. But I was still nervous as a gold hubcap in a bad neighborhood.

The swishes sang away, "Zingedy! Fweeee! Zoopyooo!" They seemed to be getting excited in direct proportion to my state of nervousness. I think they anticipated some action.

The three of us continued our journey down the hallway, leaving the faceless slaves on their knees, scrubbing at the intoxicated, purple, oriental rug. Wayde led the way in his stately, handsome splendor with me following and Guisarme bringing up the rear. When not burning holes in Wayde's back with my hateful stare, I memorized every turn of our journey down the seemingly endless corridors of his Mansion. These upper hallways were much better lit than the entryway on the first floor. The ceiling was one long, continuous, fluorescent light.

While the first floor had a distinctly medieval atmosphere, this floor of the Mansion seemed like a cross between a research laboratory and an oriental law firm.

Do they even have law firms in the orient? I wondered. I thought they merely decapitated all who broke the law or seemed to break the law over there. At least that is what a book I read once called *Showgun* hinted at. Definitely need to get out more.

We passed few people and all seemed either preoccupied with something or in a hurry or both so I did not waste any "Help me! I'm a prisoner!" pleading glances on them.

Most of these people wore white lab coats and spectacles. They were also somehow studying sheets of computer printout while not crashing into walls or each other at the same time.

It was not long before Wayde finally stopped at one of many curiously knobless doors. It was the twelfth door we had passed since we had exited the elevator. Every door I had seen on this level was knobless.

They must be voice or touch activated, I admired.

"Open," said Wayde and it slid open soundlessly. Stepping aside, Wayde motioned for us to enter.

It was apparently an office. A luxurious office indeed. A shiny wooden floor showed through between more plush, oriental rugs. The room was not dark, but definitely not as bright as the hospital-bright corridors we had just traversed.

Pictures of famous and infamous men were hanging around the room, waiting to be seen: Here Abraham Lincoln reading a book by the dim light of a candle. There Adolf Hitler stepping upon a man's neck and

grinning, eyes glowing with pleasure. Here William Shakespeare sitting under a tree on a beautiful, sunny day, writing. There Billy the Kid standing in a room. A ray of sunlight coming through an open window shined on a man laying on the floor. It looked as if Billy had just blown the man's brains all over some beautiful floral wallpaper.

I wondered: *They had wallpaper in those days?*

There was a large, oak desk facing the door we entered. Well, to tell the truth, I assumed it was oak. The word "oak" sounded right. All I know for sure is that it was some dark, heavy, stout looking wood. The only object on the desk was a small and modern looking, black phone handset with only three buttons. There was no cord. Behind the massive desk was a plush, black leather chair, not unlike the one I had seen Wayde sit upon in my vision. Behind the chair there was another knobless door.

Facing the desk were four backless stools, sitting side by side and looking quite uncomfortable. Wayde, I'm sure, did not care.

I doubt he cares about any of his possessions and I'm sure he considers everything and everyone either his possession or soon to be his possession.

He motioned for me to sit on one of these poor stools as he circled his desk. Pointing at Guisarme, he said, "You stay by the door."

I had not noticed the door close, such was its silence. But unfortunately, it was closed and that might be a problem. I was not sure if it could be opened from the inside with just anyone's voice or if it would have to be Wayde. That little detail threw a wrench in my rapidly developing escape plan. I wondered whether Cynthia might be able to help remove that wrench.

I chose the fourth stool; the one farthest from where the Goon now stood with a look of severe unfocused concentration on his large face.

Probably picturing himself eating an entire cow, stepping on small buildings, having sex with elephants, or whatever it is Goons dream about, I thought.

"Now," said Wayde Toolwrich with a smile. "We can get to business. Mr. De Lusean. May I call you Pairnoy?" At my nod, he continued. "Thank you. Well, Pairnoy, I think we can work out a deal that will please us both."

At the speculating raise of my eyebrows he put up his hands and said, "I know. You don't want to deal with me." I nodded. "You feel I am bad news." I nodded again. "You don't like me." Another nod.

Shaking his head and looking slightly bereaved, he said, "Well, that is regrettable, but I do have something you want, don't I?" Suddenly his smile was back and bigger than ever. The billionaire gloated, "But that is only fair. You have something I want; namely your talent, and I have something you want. Allow me to demonstrate." Now Wayde Toolwrich reached out and pushed one of the three buttons on his phone. He slid his chair to the side.

The mysterious door behind Wayde Toolwrich's desk played it's tune.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

 Magic Exists
For some it is the birth of their child
 For others it is their religion
 For some it is love
 For others it is a sixth sense
For some it is the sky and grass
 For others it is touch
 For some it is music

Out of the darkness on the other side of the door walked Fauchard Lucern. He was holding a cord that led back through the doorway. The cord was attached to the neck of the beautiful woman that followed him through into Wayde Toolwrich's office.

I was stunned. I was shocked. I was disoriented. After all the worry, she was actually alive! April stood beside the Goon, looking bedraggled, looking at the ground. She was wearing a long, dirty, gray dress. Her brown hair was hanging tangled and dirty around her shoulders. Her bare feet were dirty as if she had been kept in a dirt floored cell in the dungeon of this castle.

They probably have not even fed her since the kidnapping, I thought angrily while waiting for her to spout off at me in an annoying tone that the entire thing was my fault and I was incompetent, etc. Of course, it is true that whatever she had gone through at Wayde's hands was my fault. Wayde had said she was his bargaining chip.

Now to see how the evil billionaire wants to make use of my talent. Does he want me to hack into someone's computer system? Maybe the government or a big bank? That's it. He probably wants me to break into some large bank's computer and transfer much fundage into his name.

Or maybe he wants me to plant destructive or incriminating information in some enemy's computer file.

It could be something as simple as reprogramming KATSystem's security or beefing up her cognitive talents. Maybe he wants to spread her influence out a bit. There is no telling where the ceiling to someone like Wayne Toolwrich's ambitions may lie. No telling how high. Maybe he wants me to teach him everything I know so he can do away with April and I both.

Looking at my beautiful wife, I wanted to cry out her name in pleasure. I wanted to run to her and comfort her. She looked so sad, just staring at the ground. I have never seen her so spiritless. I've never heard her so speechless.

Definitely not acting herself, I thought.

Picking my jaw off the ground, I sought to compose myself. I tore my gaze from April, put on my calm-and-glad-to-be-here face, and looked at Wayne.

Well, Cynthia, if you were planning on lending some aid, now would be a good time.

"As you can see," said Wayne Toolwrich, "your wife is well. We would like things to stay that way." He smiled grandly. "I like you, Pairnoy. Let's pretend we are friends." I was too preoccupied with my plans to respond. "The first thing I would like you to do, Pairnoy my

friend, is take back this remote device," then he actually leaned over the desk and handed me the means to communicate with Cynthia!

"I want you to activate it right now," he continued, "clear yourself and all signs that you have ever existed from KATSystem's memory banks. Then I want you to-"

April looked up then and interrupted the mean Mr. Toolwrich, "Pairnoy, honey, I love you. You don't have to do anything for this man. I don't care what they do to me-"

"Shut up, you bitch!" Wayde Toolwrich launched from his chair and delivered a kick to the center of my wife's belly! The air poofed from her mouth and she stumbled backwards a few feet before the cord went taught and she fell on her face. The little poof flitted about Wayde's unsuspecting head, subject to my will. April sat up slowly and wiped blood from where it had run from her nose to her upper lip. She began sobbing quietly.

A few moments ago, seeing a man call my wife a bitch and kick her viciously in the belly would have caused me to leap up and do something unthinking, foolish, and surely painful to him. But she had said a couple of things that unsettled me.

April De Lusean had never called me "honey". Even before her last name was changed to De Lusean through matrimony, April Chowders had never called me "honey". She had called me "sweetie" once on our first anniversary, but never "honey". She simply did not like the taste of the word or the substance. Much too sweet for the likes of tough April.

Secondly, since I have known her, April has never sacrificed herself for someone else. The world and everyone occupying it owed her

too much. In fact, our debt to April was such that the last thing she would ever do, next to admitting she was wrong about something, was sacrifice herself. It just was not in her psychological make-up. That brand of make-up was, in her eyes, just too expensive for what you get.

Sure, she may have gone through a lot in Wayde's dungeon that would have changed any normal woman. But not April Willpower De Lusean. No one changes April. Not even April changes April.

It would be like a scientist saying to a gathering of his distinguished peers, "Okay. I'm really tired of all the dreary clouds and rain this Springtime month offers. Not nearly enough clear, sunny days! Let's fix that. Let's change it. I've got a wrench here, and a screwdriver, and-"

That is how easy it would be for someone or something to change April De Lusean. Boy would she be a match for Howey!

Realization appeared at that moment, sitting on the stool to my left, and told me a few interesting things.

"First," he whispered, "you have got to see that while it is natural for the storms to outnumber the sunshine in nature part of the year, there are other months that are much more pleasant to live with. No one deserves to live under a cloud their entire life!"

What the hell, I wondered, is he talking about?

"Second," Realization said, "We both know that thing on the floor is not April De Lusean!" He was pointing at the woman who, though not my wife in actions or words, looked like my wife.

Had she ever been my wife in actions or words? I asked myself.

"Third," he said, nodding at the remote device in my hand, "you don't have to wait for Cynthia or guess when she is going to provide a distraction. You can tell her to do it and even what to do if you want."

The thing I had become convinced was an android laid on the floor and began to cry like a baby. I think at that point Wayde expected me to say something like, "Okay! Okay! I'll do anything you want. Just don't hurt her any more."

So, after a hurried argument with Prudence, that is exactly what I said. Wayde immediately relaxed and sat back down into his soft, comfy chair. I had not realized how on edge he was until he sat down. He had probably half expected me to leap at him in anger or even throw the remote device at him.

Now he expects me to turn on the remote device and speak into it, I thought while a part of me absently admired the beautiful loops the poof was describing in the air of Wayde's office. The poof sang much less and more silently than his Impish brothers. And while the swishes and the whine had left fluorescent and translucent colors, respectively, in their wakes, the poof's trail was all pastel hues.

Over the last few minutes I had learned that even though the motivation of Imps is low in this plane, they do have a will. I had merely to give the poof a little push and it had started looping around and around through the air. I found there was no need to completely control their every move as I had done earlier with the swishes and the whine. I just had to keep an eye on it and remind it to stay in the room whenever it got too close to the walls, ceiling, or floor. The Imp seemed so happy, as if when I had pushed it to begin its flight, I had somehow released some restraint.

"Eeee! Whizzz!" It flew about the room, completely imp-visible to all but me.

Turning on the remote device, I spoke into it. "Green Mustard."

Cynthia responded, "Hello Brighty! What would you have me do?"

I looked at Wayde. He now held the end of the cord that looped around "April's" neck. He lifted it meaningfully, as if to say, "Be careful what you say, Painoy. Your wife's life depends on it."

Holding the remote device up, I spoke into it for the last time, "I think the slave must now trade places with the master."

I hoped Cynthia knew what I wanted and that if she did, she had enough influence to accomplish it.

It is risk time, I thought nervously, feeling the adrenaline begin to flow through my veins.

Hoisting the remote device with my right hand, I threw it hard at Guisarme, who stood by the door, daydreaming. The remote device flew with a swish; specifically, the swish that had been wrapped around my right wrist.

The remote device picked up speed! It seemed to begin glowing as it flew at the Goon. I think his brain was busily going through a list of things to do, including such actions as "throw up arms in warding off gesture", "close eyes", "pick nose", and "play dead". Fortunately, for me, he was operating at a low megahertz. Much too slow.

BLAM! The remote device exploded against Guisarme's thick forehead, pieces of smoking plastic flying in all directions.

Did it affect him? Just how thick is that skull?

Guisarme tottered for a moment on shaky legs and the look on his face became - somehow - more vacant than before. Then he fell forward, like a tree, to shake the floor. Wayde's picture of Adolph Hitler fell with a crash from the wall and the glass shattered from it's frame. Blood was streaming from Guisarme's ears to be soaked up by Wayde's oriental rugs.

The swish was nowhere to be seen. I hoped maybe it had faded to another plane along with the blam. I was terribly afraid the poor Imp had died in the crash.

Fauchard was looking confused: By the door his brother had just been attacked, which is something I think he has never seen before, much less imagined. And right next to him "April" had risen to her feet and put the cord that held her into her mouth. Chomp! The cord, which I am sure was made of something quite a bit stronger than string cheese, snapped in half like a twig! Then she turned to run after Wayde, who had disappeared into the dark hallway behind his desk.

Now I know that she is surely dead, I thought this with a curious mixture of sadness and relief.

I was alone in the room with Fauchard and he was not looking too happy. I had no weapons and it would probably take something like a shot from an elephant gun to bring down the Goon. The only other object handy in the room was the handset laying on Wayde's desk. But to get it I would have to advance toward Fauchard. No dice. I was in a reckless mood, but not suicidal.

Fauchard was obviously torn between revenge and loyalty to his master. It did not take him long to decide, though. He began lumbering toward me in a too meaningful way, fists clenching and unclenching. His

usual blank look had been replaced by an unusual blank look with the addition of a dash - only a dash - of pure hate, and the barest sprinkle of animal cunning.

Definitely wants to cause me some pain, I thought fearfully, climbing down from my stool and backing toward the wall. *He wants to crush me like a fly between his fingers. Fingers that can probably bench press my body weight.*

I slid inconspicuously toward the door we had come in a few minutes ago, hoping the Goon would not notice my target destination. Suddenly I lunged for the door and yelled, "Open!"

Nothing. I pounded on the door. Nothing! Turning around, I faced my doom.

Can I circle around to the other side of the desk and maybe get at the handset to use as a weapon? Maybe I can get out the other door?

But it was too late. The Goon had me cornered and was advancing with a murderous gleam in his eye. The other eye had me pinned as a target for one of his massive, scarred, train bashing fists. He raised one in preparation to gunge me through the door I stood in front of. While looking at that five-fingered shape of death I came up with the word "gunge". Just like that the word popped into my head. I do not think any other word could have described what he was planning on doing to me nearly as well as "gunge".

There was a whirring noise behind the Goon. Fauchard's head swivelled slowly, like a tank turret, to see what the disturbance was. The handset on Wayde's desk had risen into the air. It hovered there briefly, magically. Then it swished colorfully around the Goon.

The swish that I feared might have died in the attack on Guisarme settled into my hand and flowed up my wrist to intertwine with its sibling. They sang, flowed, and pulsed warmly all up and down my arm.

Fauchard's head slowly swiveled back to focus on me. He paused in the act of unleashing his massive fist to look down wonderingly at the handset in my left hand. That is when I threw it with every bit of strength I could muster.

Fauchard had seen what I did to his brother, so he was a bit more prepared. With a speed not natural for a man his size, the Goon dodged to his left, crushing a stool in the process.

There was a terrible stench in the air of that room. I don't know if it was the smell of my fear, the stench from the exploding remote device, the body odor of the Goons, or the broken stool.

Maybe a combination of the four, I thought while watching the handset flash past Fauchard's head. A dumb, savage grin appeared on his face.

The glowing handset suddenly described a beautiful, colorful, vertical loop. It paused briefly near the ceiling, then zoomed straight down to explode on top of the Goon's head!

There was a burst of sound, light, and plastic identical to the explosion the remote device had caused a moment before.

The swishes and the poof danced briefly around the room singing, then began to fade. I called to them with my will, but there was no effect.

With a final "Whoo! Whoo! Whoo!" They flowed through the air to hover in front of my face briefly, as if to say good-bye.

Then they were gone.

Should I follow after Wayde or try to get out of this door? That was an easy decision. Revenge, I had learned long ago, is a big waste of time and energy.

Turning to the door, I kicked it hard. No effect. I kicked it again anyway, and tried to think of what I could do to get it open. Thinking there might be something in Wayde's desk that might help, I circled it and attempted to go through the drawers. That proved to be difficult as the desk had none. There was not even a concealed button. I was just thinking I might have to utilize the doorway behind his desk anyway when I remembered the crack I still had!

I pulled the Imp out and ran up to the sliding door. Tossing the crack into the air, I opened my mind, showing the Imp what I needed. The colorful creature zig-zagged around the room, flashing white and blue and crackling like lightning. **WHAM!** It blasted into the door. **CRAAAACK!** I was briefly blinded by the light.

Wow! That crack was a lot more rowdy than the one I had used to break into Tad's office in the KAT building! Hurray for telepathy.

When my vision cleared, I was pleasantly surprised to find a large, jagged rip up the center of the door leading to the hallway.

I wasted no time in exiting that room and running back along the bright hallways to the elevator. Just as the elevator door was in site, one of the faceless slaves rounded the far corner on the other side of the elevator and began walking toward me menacingly.

I hurriedly pulled the click from my wallet, but had no idea what to do with it. Letting the little Imp wrap around my left wrist, I warily watched the approaching slave, while slowing to a fast, casual walk.

Pretending nonchalance, I passed the droid, hoping he could not hear my nervous sweat plopping like rain to the floor of the hallway we traversed. Just as I breathed a sigh and thought Relief was going to make a trendy appearance, the faceless android spoke. "Pairnoy De Lusean?" It queried in a dull, mechanical, deadly voice.

I casually ran the last few steps to the elevator.

Pounding the DOWN button repeatedly, I said, "Sorry. Wrong person. Not my name." The droid stopped and turned around to face me.

My mind was racing to think of some action I could take to escape this slave.

"Brighty!" The slave said, voice softening, "This is Cynthia. Listen carefully. Take the elevator to the eleventh floor. I have already reprogrammed it."

Can I trust it? I Guess I have no choice. Looking up, I could see the indicator had changed from a red, DOWN arrow to a green, UP arrow.

"The eleventh floor is the roof of this structure," she continued. "Your method to freedom will lie up there. Farewell for now, Father." The droid then turned and continued on its previous course.

I have to trust it, I thought.

DING! The elevator opened and was thankfully empty. After entering, I reached automatically toward the control console, but the button marked "11" lit up just before I touched it. *Good job, Cynthia!*

On the way to the roof, I tried without success to figure out how I was going to escape Wayde by going to his roof. I had a sneaky suspicion but was reluctant to explore it until it turned into a trustable suspicion or even a dim suspicion.

The elevator slid open to reveal a stairway leading up to a closed door with a knob!

I ran up the ten or so stairs, two at a time. *Please be unlocked. Please be unlocked*, I chanted to myself.

I was about to try the door at the top, but a weird, thumping noise coming from the other side caused me to pause.

There is no time to waste on fear, I lambasted myself and turned the knob. I half expected it to be locked, but it opened without a hitch.

Late afternoon light streamed in, framing the neck and shoulders of the last person in the Universe I expected to see.

He was standing there with a big, dumb grin on his face.

Wompa J. McJest was wearing a bright red jumpsuit with yellow stripes. He had not bothered to remove his multicolored flight helmet. His ultramodern, purple helicopter sat idling behind him, blades whirring and obviously eager to take off.

This is my rescuer? I felt like yelling at Cynthia. This traitor?

"Why I'll be a double donged dog!" Wompa said, looking nearly as surprised to see me as I was to see him. "She said you would make it, gave genuinely good godly odds, but I confess I carried concerns."

"Cynthia sent you?" I asked, knowing it had to be true. The only other person eligible would be One-Eye, perhaps utilizing his perfect timing magic. But somehow I knew it had to be Cynthia.

"Nothing matters until we've left this mad hatter's lair!" He turned and skipped towards his copter, yelling over his shoulder, "All aboard! McJestliner Number One now departing for..." The rest was drowned out by the air brutalizing blades of his purple people pusher.

Looking back to that time I would like to say I would have trusted Wompa J. McJest and "boarded his bird" as he would say. But I'll never know for sure, because at that moment of suspicious indecision there was the familiar "Ding!" of an electrically excited elevator bell.

Looking down the stairs, I caught a painful glimpse of a pair of shoes stepping from the elevator that could only be the shoes worn by the mean Mr. Toolwrith.

I slammed the door and hypocritically cursed the fact that it had no lock. Spinning on my heel, I fought off a wave of dizziness to find myself looking at Wompa waving from the cockpit of his copter.

I could hear Wayde shouting orders below and behind me, on the other side of the door.

Time to fly! And that I did on my own before even entering Wompa's machine. I did not just jog. I did nothing so slow as running. My feet fairly skimmed the ground as I ran for my life to that copter. I knew if Wayde were to catch me, there would be no pleasantries, no haggling, no mercy this time.

This is my life at stake! I thought, a little surprised. Just two days ago I was sitting in my comfortable, cool, office and pecking away at my computer and a dish of snacks and leading a safe life.

I think the copter symbolized to me, at that moment of life threatening danger, my office at RAT. My office where everything that happened was predictable and safe.

The passenger side door slid open with a hiss of escaping cool air. I leaped into the soft, bucket seat and snatched up the helmet lying on the floorboard between my legs. Looking past Wompa, I could see Wayde and

his men had cleared the stairs and were running at the copter. They had guns in their hands.

Large guns. My door hissed closed.

If whalehunters used guns, I thought, they would be that size.

Wompa had apparently been giving the computer directions while I was in flight because he now only said two words, "Computer: initiate now!"

Wayde was shouting something to his men.

There were three of them, not much smaller than the Estate Goons had been, but obviously not of the Lucern family. They stopped and raised their firearms.

I was just raising the orange with purple polka dots flight helmet to my head when Wompa's bird leaped diagonally into the air with enough force to slam the helmet back into my lap. A tremendous pain asserted itself upon my groin until my attention was claimed by many loud **BANGS**.

Wayde's men are firing their guns, I thought, afraid for my life. Will we go crashing to the ground in flames never to eat Eytalian food again? Never to lay in a lush forest clearing on a moonlit night and savor the feel of insects burrowing into my skin to lay their eggs? Never again to sit mindlessly in front of a television and be manipulated into purchasing goods I would never use?

There was a loud metallic **THUD** as one of the bullets hit the copter. There were more bangs, but these were much more subdued sounding and none of them found their target. Frustrated, the bullets

whined off to maybe knock an airliner out of control or puncture a hot air balloon.

I hoped the bullets did not hit an exploratory alien craft, thereby sparking off an interstellar war that lasts the six or seven seconds necessary for them to blow up the earth.

I opened up my eyes, pulled on the helmet, and looked out of the window to the right. We were just clearing the outer walls of the Toolwrich Estate. *This thing is fast!*

So smooth had been our transition from near vertical flight to horizontal, I had not even noticed it.

In my helmet, I could hear Wompa ask the flight computer for a damage report. It's metallic voice said, "Exhaust manifold number two punctured. Airflow automatically rerouted to reserve number one. Total engine efficiency reduction: five percent."

"Cockpit atmosphere integrity?" He asked it.

"One hundred percent," responded the computer.

"Transition potential?"

"One hundred percent," said the metallic voice.

He went on to query the computer regarding many other obviously useless things, using words I was unfamiliar with.

And he pretends to be so free of worry! I scoffed.

Becoming bored with Wompa's communications with his computer, I looked out of my window. I was surprised to see Relief gliding effortlessly along beside our craft, on a surfboard, of all things. He was wearing a sky blue, form-fitting wet suit of ultramodern design. He waved jovially to me.

I don't know what happened. It must have been too big a wave or the fool had lost his concentration or balance, or all of the above. He was flung violently from the surfboard. Relief and his board plummeted out of sight below as the pain in my groin reasserted itself in nauseating waves of its own.

"Do you ever manually control this helicopter?" I asked Wompa, eager to think of anything but the pain.

"Would if I could," he responded. "Never had the time to take the teaching."

Suddenly I remembered something. "We gotta go back and get Tad!" I yelled, forgetting the microphone in my helmet would transfer even the most silent of whispers to the earphones in Wompa's helmet.

"Cynthia will see that he flees," Wompa responded, wincing. "We have people to do and places to see."

"And what about the real April?"

It took him a moment to respond. "Killed on Singeday," Wompa said, for the first time sounding serious and sad. "I'm sorry, Pairnoy."

I guess when I saw that robot mock-up of her in Wayde's office earlier I knew the real April was dead. I suspected before then. Maybe deep down I even knew. But the confirmation of my fears was devastating.

"Why did he do it? I never did anything to Wayde Toolwrich," I cried.

"His competition's backbone you are. He wanted you at KAT. Ran her off the road in her car. Wayde sought to frame RAT for the murder. Changed his mind. You had found out too much. So he pulled out his puppet and sought to make a deal."

This guy sure has a knack for summing things up, I thought almost admiringly.

"Where do you fit into all of this?" I asked suspiciously, wanting to think about anything but the loss of April and the severe pain in my groin. "Why does Wayde tell you so much?"

"My services are many colored. My talents are countless." He boasted ambiguously, favoring me with his Wompa grin. The grin that said, "I'm Wompa J. McJest and I don't have a friggin care in the world!"

I remembered the blanket Tad had been covered with in the alley behind Droolin' Dave's on Singeday night and asked Wompa about it.

Glibly, he replied, "I like the lonely lad. An awesome empathic ability he displays. In the near future, Tad should prove to be quite an aid. He was cold. It was the least I could do."

And I guess I have to believe you, I thought.

Looking out of my window and down, I noticed the landscape was beginning to blur and I had not even felt the copter speeding up.

"Where are we going?"

"L.A.," responded the red headed little man.

"We're in Elay right now. Do you mean downtown Elay?" But I was not so sure we were even in Caliwarmya any more. Looking out of my window, I noted the ground that was flashing by below us seemed to be changing shades of brown so fast it made me dizzy. I had to look away.

Turning to me, Wompa said, "I am talking about a different L.A. A different city. A lot like the Elay you live in and love, but... how could I put it... jest a little different... jest slightly warped." He laughed for no apparent reason.

"Couldn't you just drop me at my Mustard? You don't need me to come with you."

Wompa shook his helmeted head and laughed, "Your mean machine is far away right now. There are things two such as us can and should and need to do in L.A. before we return. Relax and enjoy!" He paused, "Hey! Why don't you tell me the terrific tale of how you escaped Wayde Toolwrich's clutches? Cynthia said Fauchard and Guisarme are departed. How did you do the deadly deed?" He asked eagerly.

Sometimes, I thought, a statement of the naked truth is the best way to deceive. "Why magic, of course," I responded honestly to Wompa, expecting him to shrug it off as craziness and forget about it. Well, that is what I hoped.

But Wompa said something that topped every surprise I had experienced in the past two crazy days: "So it is true? Well, I can not wait for you to introduce me to your little friends-"

A light began flashing on his console. "Oh! It's time. Hold on tight! You're in for quite a ride!"

And the world turned inside out.