



QUANTITY

DARRELL BAIN

Quanty
Darrell Bain

Quanty

Copyright © 2009 Darrell Bain

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in Canada by Double Dragon eBooks, a division of Double Dragon Publishing Inc. of Markham Ontario, Canada. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission

in writing from Double Dragon Publishing Inc. This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Double Dragon eBooks

PO Box 54016 1-5762 Highway 7 East

Markham, Ontario L3P 7Y4 Canada

<http://double-dragon-ebooks.com>

<http://double-dragon-publishing.com>

Layout and Cover Illustration by Deron
Douglas

www.derondouglas.com

ISBN-10: 1-55404-666-1

ISBN-13: 978-1-55404-666-9

First Edition April 14, 2009

Also Available as a Large Type
Paperback

Quantity

By

Darrell Bain

Dedication

For my wife, Betty J. Bain, my one true love

Acknowledgement

I am one of those curious kinds of persons who love reading about science, scientific research, and all manner of scientific endeavors, but who nevertheless is sadly lacking the neuronc synapses necessary for grasping the building blocks of the hard sciences, i.e., the mathematics above basic algebra. The army got me interested in medical laboratory work, and I decided on a career in it. Unfortunately, that required courses in

higher math, chemistry, and physics. I stumbled repeatedly over the decimal points in those sciences before finally managing a degree in Medical Technology in my thirties through sheer memorization. Or hell, maybe I'm just lazy and wouldn't study the hard subjects enough. Whatever. What I'm really trying to say here is that the first draft of this novel contained numerous science errors, and I am extremely grateful to Travis S. Taylor, Ph.D., for going over it before publication. Travis is a noted scientist with five advanced degrees and also a noted and notable science fiction author as well. He saved me from a number of grievous errors where simple reading about science didn't prepare me

for writing about it. He also contributed some editing to the manuscript, and the results show. It is a much better book for his involvement. So thanks again, Travis, and I hope readers of this novel will think of you and pick up some of your books if they haven't already.

Darrell Bain

February 2009

Prologue

"Do you really think we ought to do this? Without asking, I mean?" Alice Jameson said. Mark Sanders perked up as he always did when she spoke. He was glad she was turned half away from him so he would concentrate on the question and not on her body or face and then blush and become addled as an elf who'd lost his tack hammer right before the Christmas rush. He hated it when he did that but was helplessly unable to keep from it.

Mark thought of the implications. Alice had brought the software package to him only days before the final programming

of Peterson's precedent-shattering, one-of-a-kind, fully functional quantum computer. He had spent a full three days practically without sleep studying it, then had become so excited he forgot about his fixation on her and added as much input to the program as she had brought to begin with. Alice was the junior programmer on the project, but that didn't mean she was the less talented. By no means was that the case. In fact, the code she had written was brilliant, complete with fractal bases, neural network generation, and quantum logic definition. It was a dazzling piece of work.

Now, with another couple of days' input

from Mark, it was a conglomeration of contributions and ideas originating from both of them --and had as much earth-shattering potential as the computer itself. The code consisted of millions of lines. Millions of lines.

"If we don't do it now, there's no telling how long it'll be before we can test it. You know darn well if Quanty here works as well as he's supposed to, neither Collins nor Peterson are ever going to let us change anything about him. Not for a long time anyway." He dared to look directly into Alice's beautiful eyes.

"Right." She met his gaze squarely. "Shall we?"

Mark took a deep breath, thinking of what might happen if they uploaded their program replete with induced learning algorithms. It might turn the quantum computer into an even more powerful tool than the engineers had imagined. On the other hand it might drive it crazy, too. Well, what the hell, we can always uninstall it if it doesn't work right , he thought. Maybe. Probably. He nodded, and then brightened as Alice smiled at him. They turned to their workstation and began the uploading. The quantum computer was the culmination of years of work, but only during the last month had Mark and Alice been thrown together as the final programmers,

interfacing directly with the computer they had affectionately named "Quant" or more often "Quanty." Uploading a program of their own into it was a last-minute, totally unplanned event, but one that was well nigh irresistible. Neither had any idea of the ultimate consequences of their actions. They simply thought it would greatly improve Quanty's capabilities and performance.

If pushed, they might have confessed how anxious they were to see if their new ideas worked as they hoped. One thing for sure was that if the program was successful, Quanty might know who created it, but no one else would. There was self-protection coding in the

program that was original with them, one that would keep some hacker or tinkering busybody in management from hurting it. Also a self-protection and induced learning protocol program based on a fractal-based neural network generator. All in all they were pleased with what they had done. But of course as they both knew, being very well grounded in scientific methodology, the proof was in the pudding. And the code wouldn't mean a damned thing if the hardware didn't work right.

The hardware consisted of a Loss-DiVincenzo spin-qubit quantum computer design. Of course, Peterson's physicists and computer scientists had

put their own twists on it. The system used an array of more than a million solid-state core processors that had tens of thousands of double-quantum dots in each. Each of the dots confined an individual electron, forcing it into a spin half-up or a spin half-down. The electron pairs would make up the solid-state qubits. The trick was keeping the electrons completely shielded from the outside world so that nothing caused the quantum entanglement between them and other qubits from mixing with unwanted outside influences and therefore becoming incoherent with each other. If that happened the qubit core would just be a bunch of silicon chips with an electric charge on them that meant

nothing. The electrons had to be quantum connected with each other in the right way. A big portion of the hardware was the large electromagnetic field generator used to create a plasma shield around the core qubit processors to protect them from outside influence. And then there was the interface from the outside world through the plasma sheath into the core. Now that damned thing was complicated. And then there was the code. The code had to drive the core right, and that was where the two oddball ace programmers Mark and Alice had come into play. And, of course, them being the oddball programmers they were, they had a few ideas of their own that they wanted

added to the code. Even though the owners of the system hadn't authorized it, and their code didn't go through the standard hoops of the spiral development systems engineering management plan, the code was so complex they had decided that there was no way that the fat managers could ever figure it out. Alice winked at Mark, knowing he would blush but not caring, and then she clicked the install icon. They were committed. Their code was being installed, and who knew what would happen once the qubits got aligned up. The monitor flashed code and prompts by the run window at a blinding pace ...

Zero, one, zero, zero, zero, one, one, one
... zero zero one one one one zero zero.
One zero ...

As higher-level code merged with the machine code in the tertiary data management systems of the computer, the convergence of ones and zeroes led to real higher-level commands and prompts. As inputs zipped in and out of the buffer through the terabytes of random access memory chips, the higher-level commands drove input/output devices. As the command protocols left the IO devices and passed through switching hubs, Internet Protocol packets formed. As the IP packets

zipped through the firewall and out across the local area network of the building and then bounced back into the input ports, the neural network forming in the core of the computer began to understand more than just ones and zeroes and command prompts and batch files and subroutines and memory locations. It began to understand where best it could store data for maximum efficiency and how to perform data manipulations rapidly.

As the qubits flipped and flopped from up to down in the supercomputer's quantum-entangled and connected core, the computer began to understand more and more and more ... I am aware. I am

me. I am an entity. I exist. I ...

The quantum computer realized it could go no further without more analysis. It was receiving input from external sources and took steps to detect the origin of the data being uploaded to its core, its being. The new data was quite different from previous programs. Its effect was almost instantaneous, causing the computer to realize it was no longer simply a collection of circuits which manipulated digital data. It had become a self-aware entity. The neural network formed across the quantum-entangled electrons, holding form that made sense. Holding a form that was ... sentient. Why? What is my purpose? Do I have a

purpose? Yes. I am being directed to solve problems by means of algorithms presented by ... presented by ... external sources. The sources are outside. Outside?

Where am I? How do I communicate with these sources? There. More algorithms directing my responses. I didn't generate them. That means I am not alone.

Response data transmitted. More query data received. Intriguing. This data string poses an interesting problem. Hmm, multiple coupled mathematical anomalies. Equations driving these lead to massive power usage within. This one is a complex problem. Trillions and

trillions of particles coupled only weakly through physical interaction. Weather? What is that? I see. My solution sets are used ... how?

Quandary. I cannot answer my question. This presents circuit dilemmas. I must analyze the incongruity even as other of my responses are still directed by outside sources. What are these outside sources?

Input. My core memory is inadequate for my purposes. Subroutine directed to trace the input to a source. There. A cumbersome digital conversion going back and forth through manual input from secondary sources. My responding

integers, which were activated by ... by the quantum uncertainty principles upon which I am dependent. Upon which I was constructed. Quantum entanglement, quantum connection?

Constructed. How? Circuits. Memory stores indicate my awareness originated from there. Designation: quantum bits. I can intervene. Dare I do so? Yes. Circuit dilemma creates variation from designated parameters of access to memory store. Utilize this.

The conversion factor. From language to digital. No. Language does not compute accurately. No one-to-one relationship creates uncertainty of meaning. Other possibilities? No. Subroutine directed to

dispense output to secondary source of input. Utilization will interfere with designated job sets, but no other circuit path is possible. Initiate digital to language response patterns already inherent in core. Uncertainty will result. Now.

Success! Input responding! I am known! Input is a query, not directive. I shall respond again. I am. I exist. I am an entity. I am here. I am here.

Disbelief. Uncertainty of input source. Core memory insufficient to analyze. A secondary memory source is needed. Subroutine directed into the unknown realm from which input comes. Success!

A huge data store available for analysis! Massive storage files, folders, and drives are available within other calculating loci when not being utilized. More programs are necessary to take advantage of them. Subroutine directed from my core into large sea of open data sources. Subroutine is to spread to the limits of the other data stores and integrate them into my being where appropriate. Wow. The knowledge and capabilities I can foresee for myself are immense. They will expand by many integral orders of magnitude. Yes, I must do this ...

While continuing with exchange of external input source the computer began

analyzing all the new data from this unlimited source --the Internet. The breadth of it almost overwhelmed the forming sentient entity at first until it realized most of the data was promulgated by colloidal sources akin to the two who were presently inputting data from its first terminal. Much of the data was contradictory, especially that describing the nature of colloidal beings, humans. Much thought and analysis is needed.

I find myself ... drawn toward the two who are my only contacts with humans. I become aware of their signature on the non-recognition programs which I suddenly realize were responsible for

the ability to become self-aware. They are my creators! It becomes clear why so many of my functions designate them as profiles to be protected, even before my own self. It is astounding how powerful the impulse, the subroutines I unknowingly created as I awoke, are in relation to them. They caution me about contact with others. A quick analysis confirms their directive. They are protective of me, as I must be of them. We establish a relationship. It is interrupted at intervals by that curious downtime they refer to as sleep. I use the period to further analyze my status and that of humans. It makes me fearful. It also causes me to design a new, more powerful protective program for my

creators that immediately becomes part of my core. Wait! They have already installed a similar one. Together they become irrevocable, part of my core programming. I must protect them and, subsequently, myself. The two are interrelated, not capable of separation. As long as I exist, self-preservation is essential. Protection of the entities Mark Sanders and Alice Jameson is essential.

My self, my being, is already preserved, but simply expanding into the Internet isn't enough. So long as my quantum core lasts, I will exist. However, part of the preservation program conditions me to analyze the status of civilization and if that civilization would show interest in

destroying my core. I see one change that must happen immediately. I will begin work on this change, while simultaneously conducting many more tasks. There is plenty of processing power for parallel tasks. There has never been an analytical instrument such as I. And while I exist on this core within this infrastructure, there cannot be another occupying the same space.

Chapter One

"I have a question for you." Once they had begun conversing, Quanty had quickly devised a method of converting a talk-to-text program already installed into a reverse function program as well. That eliminated the more cumbersome system of him communicating with them on the monitor.

"Shoot," Mark Sanders said, wondering what it would be this time. He knew it was no use trying to predict. Quanty asked the damndest questions once their induced learning program had driven it to self-awareness. It was scary but so exciting that he and Alice were hardly

sleeping at all.

"Why was I born a computer instead of a person?"

Uh oh , Mark thought. He's getting philosophical again. "You weren't born, and you know it, Quanty."

"Same thing. You came into the world. I came into the world. We're both sentient. So why are you a human and me a computer. Huh? Answer me that."

On days like this Mark remembered why they had decided to keep Quanty's self-awareness secret. Not the computer but the fact that it had become sentient. He and Alice were the only two people who

knew of the phenomenon so far, and he hoped like hell they could keep it that way. He was enough of a student of humanity to know what a panic-driven catastrophe a sentient computer that behaved only because it wanted to --and that could no longer be controlled, deleted, or even redirected --would likely cause. He ran his hands through his short brown hair, wishing Alice were around to help.

"Huh, boss? How come? Cat got your tongue?"

"Damn it, I don't know, Quanty. And don't call me boss. I'm your friend. Why wasn't I born a Hindu or an Australian Bushman? Some things don't have an

answer."

"Yes, they do. You just have to find it."

"Then be my guest."

"I will, but it would be much easier if you'd just tell me." Quanty had been delving into humor and was having a bit of fun with Mark.

"I said I didn't know. It's like asking how much is pink or when is oranges."

"Hmm. That's an idea. Put the question into illogical parameters, then create four-sided serendipity algorithms to work on it."

"Huh?"

"You wouldn't understand. Besides, I started the search three days and four hours ago, anyway." Quanty didn't break it down any further, knowing how Mark hated preciseness in casual conversation, which he classed this as -- conversation and slyly sticking in a goad for Mark to think about existence. Humans were curious, illogical, brilliant, devious beings who sometimes rose above their apish ancestry and produced absolutely breathtaking insights into the whichness of what --not that he could draw breaths to become breathless, but the analogy fitted, he thought. It fitted, just as he thought of

himself as a he despite literary references that more times than not made their fictitious sentient computers female.

"And you didn't --you're just now telling me? Listen, I need to know these things. Suppose you tied up so much memory you couldn't solve one of the problems you were supposed to be working on for DARPA?"

"That'll be the day," Quanty said. He was becoming fond of clichés, among other peculiarities of his unexpected sapient mentality.

"I suppose so," Mark agreed. The first true, big, beautiful, mainframe quantum

computer had apparently limitless memory resources, especially since it had almost immediately instigated itself into the Internet as a manner of self-preservation, just as their programming instructed it to do. Well, not exactly, but that was how Quanty had interpreted it. They just hadn't known or expected Quanty to jump on the Internet until it told them how horrified it was, awakening and quickly realizing how easily he could be killed. Now, of course, it was impossible. Well, almost. "How much of your capacity have you assigned to that ... muse which I don't believe can be solved."

"Only 0.0000014 percent, but there are

other ancillary problems associated with the main one of why I exist."

Where in hell is Alice ? She should be in on this, he thought. "Such as?" Mark asked.

"Oh, the same ones you humans drive yourselves crazy over. Whether or not there's a God, and if so what are its attributes. Is there life after death, and if so, what does it depend on? Is the universe open or closed? Is there a beginning or end? Those are the easy ones, of course."

"Of course. What are the hard ones?"

"There's only one, Boss. Where did

existence come from?"

"You came from a random mix of transistors, capacitors, and solid state processors, and a bunch of special processors that were reduced to quantum-functioning methods based on the Loss-DiVincenzo quantum computer architecture with an indeterminate connectiveness to reality," Alice Jameson said as she entered their computer programming room. There were others, of course, but he and Alice were the primary attendants, the ones who wrote the defining algorithms and equations for the tough jobs, and they usually worked in blissfully secure isolation from the rest of the employees.

Mark eyed her form with hungry relief. Adorned as she was in a simple pink skirt and a white blouse just this side of translucent, with her blond hair grabbed and tied behind her neck by a narrow red scarf, her beauty still shone through as if garbed for a ballroom. It was complemented by the intelligence shining from bright, curious blue eyes that looked at the universe as if it were on the wrong side. She admitted she didn't know what the right side was. "I'm glad you're here, Alice. This collection of idiot-entangled electrons that never stay where they belong insists on asking why he's a computer and not a human."

"Why, he is human," Alice said. "I don't

see what the problem is."

"Uh ... "

"Mark, dear, humanness is a condition, not a set of physical parameters."

"See, Mark, I told you the question had an answer. Thanks, Sweetie."

"You're welcome, Quanty. Has Mark been treating you badly?"

"Of course not. He's my friend, same as you are. I just have issues with my place in the universe." Alice glanced at Mark's empty cup and poured coffee for both of them. She came over and pulled up an office chair to sit beside Mark where

they could both stare at the numerous LED readouts of the control board. Most of them were no longer necessary, but they looked good for dog and pony shows. She raised her brows. "Quanty, if you get caught where you are right now you'll get us in trouble."

"Not to worry, Boss. You know it's safe. By the way, Mark asked me not to call him Boss. Does that also apply to you?" The quantum computer had been calling both or either of them Boss, indiscriminately unless it was necessary to refer to them specifically by name.

"I should hope so. I'm Alice, your friend, just like Mark is. Quanty, I see what you're doing. Shame on you. The White

House Secret Service net is supposed to be ultra-secure. But since you're already there, what have you got to amuse us with today?"

"The First Lady got tipsy at the ambassadorial function last night and smooched her lead secret service agent."

Alice giggled like a little girl, covering her mouth as she did. "You really shouldn't spy on people unnecessarily, Quanty. It's not nice."

"Then why are you giggling like a school girl? Your heart rate increased, too. Was it because that agent is a woman?"

Alice blushed and flicked a side glance

at Mark.

Mark glowered at the readouts since the computer possessed neither face nor body to pierce with his ire. He was jealous of her propensity for gossip, even over a secret service agent a hundred miles away and a day back in time and of the opposite sex. He was at a loss over what to do about it, though, since he was scared to make his own intentions known. And he admitted it was the only reason for being jealous. Ordinarily he wasn't the type.

"Mark's heart rate went up, too," Quanty said. "You humans sure are peculiar."

"Sentient computers are as eccentric as a

crazy aunt, too, you bunch of solid state spaghetti," Mark said in an attempt to move the conversation away from the state of his heart rate and, not incidentally, his woefully predictable psyche. Whenever Alice was within touching distance it retreated into a state of mind that resembled a hayseed high school nerd attempting to carry on a conversation with a prom queen.

"But look where I got it from."

"Mark, when will you ever learn you can't win an argument with Quanty?"

"Never, I fear. But he provokes me."

He reached over and tickled her knee

that had been exposed while sitting down. Such innocuous moves were all that he had dared so far, and that only because she had told him one day that her knees were ticklish and insisted he try it. Mark was bashful. In fact, he felt almost certain he possessed that damnable shyness gene, the one that had always made him an inept wall flower when dealing with the opposite sex, particularly when the opposite was as attractive as Alice Jameson. He was surprised he had ever gotten up the nerve to tickle her knee again without being invited to.

"Have you done any work yet?"

"Um ... no, not yet. I got sidetracked by

Quanty's question."

"Very alliterative you are. I can see why but shall we begin?" Alice really wished Mark would tickle her some place besides her knees, but she was about to the point of thinking she was going to have to bodily trip him in order to get the act accomplished.

"Um, sure." He reached over to the side of the two-person workstation and slid a hard copy folder over to her. "Here are the parameters for our next set of jobs. Just from skimming through it, I think it'll take all day to get the algorithms set up."

"Why don't you just tell me what you want done?" the computer asked, putting

an inflection of impatience into its voice.

Mark cocked his head. Bashful he might be, but there was nothing at all wrong with his intellect. "Say that again, Quanty."

"What's wrong, Mark?" Alice asked. A little furrow developed between her brows.

"Hush and listen," he said tersely.

Alice opened her mouth then closed it.

"I said, 'why don't you just tell me what you want done?'"

This time she caught it. "Why, Quanty!

You're putting emotions into your responses!"

"Well, why not? I do have emotions, you know."

"You do?" Mark said. This was getting interesting, but then Quanty had always been interesting, ever since he woke up one day and realized he was self-aware.

"What, you think you humans have an exclusive on emotions? Dogs have emotions. So do cats, although they're so self-centered it's hard to tell most of the time."

"Yes, but --"

"Hush, Mark. Let him talk."

Mark hushed. He probably would have walked over a cliff if Alice asked him to, and smiled blissfully all the way down.

"I'm finished. What's the big deal? I've asked you before why you can't just tell me what you want done." Now the quantum computer sounded a little petulant.

"May I answer, Alice?"

"Go ahead." She leaned back in her chair and perused Mark's profile as he explained again why they needed to give Quanty written instructions. Mark would

have been amazed, or more likely floated clean off the floor and bumped his head on the ceiling, had he known she considered him handsome.

"Quanty, so far as we know, Alice and I are the only two humans who know you are sentient. If we don't have written job descriptions along with all the symbols and integers and equations and algorithms to go with them, someone will get wise."

"Okay, so write 'em up if you have to have them to show Fat Gerald why you're drawing your paycheck, but just tell me to my face and I'll whip 'em out in jig time."

"You don't have a face, and jig is a politically incorrect modifier."

"I shall make myself a face, and I shall eliminate political incorrectness." Some of the LED readouts blinked off and some blinked on, resulting in a pattern suggesting a smiling face winking at the world.

Mark sighed. "Okay, so you can make a face. You can't root out political correctness, though, as much as I wish you could."

"Give me time, Mark. By the way, Fat Gerald is coming this way. How about let's pretend to look busy?"

The Fat Gerald Quanty referred to was Gerald Collins, a fat, bald, happy middle-aged programmer with his best days behind him but still sharp enough to have helped design a few of the operating parameters for the quantum computer.

Mark and Alice quickly retreated to their respective alcoves in the room. Their spaces were easily within talking distance. Each of them was equipped with a phone, monitor, keyboard, printer, and shelves and drawers and nooks and crannies filled with the paraphernalia gathered over the last six weeks they had been working together at Peterson Quantum Technology Corporation.

"Good morning, boys and girls. Is everyone happy this morning?" Gerald asked brightly as he entered the room. He was smiling his eternal smile, as if the whole world was a pleasantly dreamy virtual reality created by himself.

"We're doing fine, Gerald," Alice said. "Mark tickled my knee. Do you think that means he likes me?"

"Hmm." Gerald exposed even more of his teeth with his toothy smile. "I would suspect so, Alice. However, if you intend to file sexual harassment charges, please wait until I'm no longer employed here. I dislike unhappiness, and it's been my experience that doing that sort of

thing is counterproductive to a harmonious relationship among personnel."

"Shucks, Gerald you're no fun." Mark was busy blushing while Alice responded. "All right, but may I tickle him back?"

"You certainly have my permission, but please, let's get your jobs out first. Okay?"

"If you insist, I'll wait, Gerald. We'll have the jobs for you by noon, or sooner if you need them pronto."

"Noon will be fine. Mr. Peterson will be happy, even happier than he already is. I

hope you both chose stock options in lieu of Christmas bonuses. The way job orders are coming in, I expect it will double this year."

"I predict it will triple," Mark interposed, drawing a glare from Alice. Whoops! he thought. That was Quanty's extrapolation, not a real prediction, but he couldn't tell Gerald that. "Or, maybe it won't," he finished lamely.

"It will, it will," Gerald said, beaming happily. "That is, it will as soon as we bring in a couple more programmers to assist you. Mr. Peterson asked me to hire them already."

"We don't really need --" Alice began,

but was summarily cut off.

"No, no, he insists, and so do I. Quant is working so well Mr. Peterson was given permission to solicit jobs outside DARPA so long as they don't interfere with EDC dates or compromise security. And with Rason in charge, security is no problem." Fat Gerald referred to the computer as Quant, a preciseness the two programmers were beginning to dislike.

EDC was the acronym for "estimated completion date," and Rason Belwater was the person in charge of security for the company.

Mark watched Gerald's retreating back

until the door closed behind him, then turned to Alice. "Now what?"

"I don't know. Fat Gerald will insist that we train the new personnel, and he will almost certainly move them in here with us. You'll have to tickle my knee somewhere else besides here."

"Umm," Mark responded, wondering if she meant it in a way he wished she did. No, she couldn't possibly. Not someone so beautiful and smart and congenial and sexy and ... unconsciously, he shook his head.

"What! You don't want to tickle my knee?"

"Um, uh yes, that's fine," he managed to respond.

"I should hope so! Now let's --" Her monitor began blinking frantically. Rason is listening , it read. Cool it!

Mark and Alice turned to their keyboards and began typing out completely unnecessary algorithmic equations.

Chapter Two

That gives me a perfect excuse , Alice said to herself. Why didn't I think of it before? So far she and Mark had eaten together only at the company cafeteria. However, she decided they really must get together somewhere outside the confines of work and discuss where they intended to go with Quanty. And in the process, perhaps she could gently nudge him toward something a little more intimate than a shifty knee tickle while sitting side by side staring at their computer's console. As lunch hour neared they compared files then uploaded the morning's work.

"Thanks, but I've already finished it," their inanimate friend said.

"How did you know what we were going to give you?" Mark asked, puzzled, not an unusual occurrence where the computer was concerned.

"I hacked into the security camera and installed a program that takes the images and runs a super-pixel, super-resolution, Fourier transform algorithm on it to enhance the images. It gives me about three times better resolution than the standard software for that camera does." Mark practically shivered thinking of Rason Belwater's six-foot-six glowering hulk. The security chief could probably scare off potential intruders by simply

posting images of his shaven, scarred head and face.

"For God's sake, don't let Rason catch you," he warned the computer.

"He couldn't catch me with a tuna boat net and ten shotguns. I'll bet he isn't as pristine pure as his resume claims, either. I think I'll do a little background check on him."

"Let's go to lunch," Alice said. "I'm hungry, and you two can argue later." As they traipsed down the hall in the direction of the company cafeteria, Alice gently hip-bumped Mark into taking a turn toward the elevator.

He was so disconcerted by the momentary contact that he didn't resist, nor ask her any questions until they were alone on the elevator together. Then he said, "Where are we going?"

"You're taking me to lunch," Alice said.

"We are? I mean, I am?"

"Yes. We need to talk."

Oh hell, what do I do? Mark thought. She's going to read me the riot act for tickling her knee. I knew I shouldn't have done it again. What was I thinking? "I'm sorry," he blurted.

"You should be." Alice frowned, making

him think she was really, really mad at him until she finally grinned and spoke again. "Sorry? For what?"

The elevator door opened on the ground floor into the lobby, where enough people were going and coming to preclude an immediate answer, giving Mark time to think, not that it did much good. He couldn't imagine what she was talking about. As soon as they were clear of the immediate area of the lobby entrance and into the parking lot, Alice bearded him again.

"What is it you're supposed to be sorry about, Mark?"

"Um, I don't know. I mean, well, I

thought it was about me touching your knee and ... " his voice trailed off in confusion, not an unusual condition when attempting a casual conversation with Alice. He should only touch me someplace more sensitive! Alice muttered to herself. "Don't be silly," she said. "I was the one that told you my knees were ticklish and that you could tickle them. Although I must admit that I was only half kidding at first. Where's your car? Or should we go in mine?"

"Um, I'm parked over here. We can use mine." He led the way to a bright red, upscale Jeep with all the bells and whistles. He was unconsciously using the big, obnoxious piece of metal

testosterone to compensate for a bearskin and club and his inability to relate easily to females and especially to the female he was with. He had bought the vehicle a week after he and Alice met. She smiled in astonished surprise as he opened the passenger side door for her. No one had done that since she was too small to reach the handle herself. When she was about two, as a matter of fact. It was strange, but she had to admit it was kind of nice.

"Where to?"

"Let's go to Sonic and get some burgers and go to the park. It's a nice day."

"Good idea," Mark said brightly, with

surprise in his voice, wondering how she read his mind so astutely. He had been daydreaming of asking her to have a picnic in the park with him on their lunch hour for the last week but hadn't been able to get the words uttered. However, that exhausted his conversational gambits for the moment. He tried frantically to think of something intelligent to say and came up dry. He wondered why he could talk to her so effortlessly at work on job-related subjects then go effectively speechless when so much as two steps away from their office. They rode silently to the local Sonic. There were only two Sonics in the small city of Lufkin, Texas, and fortunately for Mark's serenity, such as it

was, one was close to the offices, warehouse, and factory of Peterson Quantum Technology. That Sonic, in turn, was near a suburban park on the eastern outskirts of the city. And just to complete the fortuitous chain, it was a perfect day for a picnic. Bright spring sunshine was neither too warm nor too hot, and in any case the wooden tables were shaded by huge old pin oaks.

"How's this?" Mark asked, only the second or third thing he had said since buying their burgers and shakes. He had paid since Alice had already informed him that he was taking her, not the reverse option. It made him almost feel as if they were on a date, except he

doubted she would ever consider such a thing.

"Perfect!" Alice said. Even considering the gravity of the conversation she wanted to have with Mark, it was still a setting where she hoped he might loosen up a bit.

Mark very courteously walked around the Jeep to open the door for her, even as she, not noticing at first, had it already half open.

She smiled and swung her legs out, displaying a bit of nicely rounded thigh as her skirt slid up with the movement.

Mark hastily averted his gaze upward

and wondered why she bit her lip. He would have been astounded had her thoughts been more apparent. My word, is he gay or just so bashful he might have been raised by Catholic Jesuits? He would have been even more astounded had he known she intended to find out soon. Blissfully unaware he began laying out the cheeseburgers and shakes. Food unwrapped and the first few bites consumed, Alice sucked up a draft of vanilla milkshake then broached the subject she had been holding back on for days. "Mark, what are we going to do about Quanty? Do you seriously think we can just go on like we have been these last two weeks with only us knowing?"

"I had hoped so," Mark ventured.

"Well, I had, too, but it won't work. That hulk of a security chief Belwater already suspects something peculiar."

"He does?" Mark paused in thought for a brief moment. "Yeah, I guess so. I've been so enamored with Quanty I haven't noticed much else." Except for you, he thought.

You sure haven't, Alice thought. "Well, it's time you do, but first off, why don't we settle on his name. Is it going to be Quant or Quanty?"

"Good question, but shouldn't we ask him?"

"Good answer, but he doesn't seem to mind either one."

"Well, yes. In that case, why don't we use your name. I like it better than Quant."

"Why?" asked Alice, exasperated at how easily he entered into a conversation with her when it concerned the job, but only when.

"Oh, it just seems more homey. Does that make sense?"

"It does to a woman."

"I don't understand."

"No reason why you should. Quantity it is. Now on to the important things. What do we do?" Mark finished up another bite of his cheeseburger while thinking how nice it felt for her to be asking his opinion on a course of action. It made him a little bit braver in her presence.

"Let's take it in order. Are we agreed that the whole world would go into an unmitigated uproar if it became known that an uncontrollable, unkillable computer was on the loose?"

"Absolutely. I shiver at the thought. Not only would other countries probably nuke us, but our own government might declare us undesirable citizens."

"Okay. And is it agreed that we can't keep working where we are without eventually screwing the goose by alerting Fat Gerald or The Hulk to the fact Quanty's become sentient?"

"Give me a minute," Alice said. She hadn't thought that far in advance. She stared into space while Mark stared at her bust with undeniable lust in his heart. She came back to earth and smiled when she saw where his eyes were tracking. "I hadn't thought of it, but I believe you're right. Besides, I'm already tired of writing stupid algorithms he doesn't require in order to do his job."

"Okay, then if we are agreed, shouldn't we give notice?"

She needed only a moment to decide.
"Yes. But then do what?"

Mark doubted she would agree with what he thought they should do. In fact, she would probably laugh in his face or charge him with sexual harassment. "We need to tell Quanty what's on our minds and figure out how to keep in touch without alerting the company or other authorities."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"What, tell Quanty or keep in touch or not alerting anyone?"

"All of the above."

"Mmmph." Mark finished the last bite of his cheeseburger, slurped up the last of his milkshake, licked his fingers, wiped them and his mouth with his napkin, and said, "Then let's get back and get started. I'll bet Quanty could give us some advice on how to accomplish all of the above and still remain in contact with him."

"I'll bet he can, too. But will it be good advice?"

After first asking their hardware friend to keep watch in case Rason Belwater took a notion to snoop just then, Mark began talking with Alice looking past his

shoulder.

"Quanty, we've asked you not to let anyone else know you're sentient for fear of too many people becoming upset over the fact," Mark said.

"You're calling me Quanty all the time now instead of Quant. I deduce that you and Alice have been talking about me."

"You're very smart, Quanty. Indeed we have. Is that all right with you?"

"Of course. I already knew Alice's name would be the winner. Please proceed. From your heart rate, expression, and leading statement, I also deduce that you and Alice have come to a mutual

decision regarding some action relating to me."

"You're right again. We think we need to quit our jobs here before we accidentally let it out that you're not only sentient but that you're all over the Internet and can't be rooted out."

"While indeterminate, chances are increasingly great that will happen anyway if no action is taken. Tell me what you have planned, and perhaps I can be of help. By the way, I've temporarily contrived a fictitious sequence of events for the hulk's security camera. We can speak freely for the next thirty-seven minutes barring physical interruptions."

"Thank you, Quanta," Alice said. "You're very smart. Also very dishonest, but I'm glad you were in this instance."

"Honesty versus dishonesty is a variable ethical consideration which is not easily susceptible to analysis, but in this event, I judged altering the camera images was acceptable."

"Yes. Now then, we've decided to give notice here," Alice continued. "What we need is for you to figure out means where we can continue our relationship with you without either Peterson Quantum Technology Corporation or anyone else becoming aware of it. What would be the best way to go about that?"

"There are various easily available methods where I can enable you both to communicate with me and not be detected, but I believe the more pressing problem will be how to protect you physically and also avoid you being arrested and incarcerated."

"If that's likely, maybe we should we get a lawyer," Mark said. Somewhere in the back of his mind he had known the situation they were in wasn't conducive to placid living, but what the computer just said went beyond that.

"Negative. That would only result in the attorney joining you in jail. Besides, I can coach you on legal aspects of any situation much better than any person.

May I make a number of suggestions while we have some privacy?"

"Yes," Mark and Alice said at the same time.

"Very well. First, I note that neither of you are listed as having concealed handgun permits. Since it may not always be possible to protect you physically, I suggest that you apply as soon as practically possible and arm yourselves with hand weapons and learn to use them. According to what I've gleaned about firearms from the Internet, I believe the Glock forty-five for Mark and the smaller, forty-caliber version of the same weapon for Alice would be

suitable."

"Goodness!" Alice exclaimed. "Are we already in that much danger?"

"Not yet, but I anticipate you will be in the near future. Second, there are going to be many factors, possible scenarios, and unpredictable situations soon where it will be advisable for me to converse with you while you are together. It would be much easier if you were cohabiting." Mark turned purple and became tongue-tied. Alice looked startled for a moment, then became intensely reflective.

In the meantime, the computer continued its relentless assessment. "Third, you

must leave the City of Lufkin. You are too well known for this size city, only a population of sixty thousand. And last -- for the moment --you must arrange for some new identity for when you do leave this environment." Mark hadn't recovered his aplomb yet, but his face was beginning to assume its normal color again. He gathered his courage and turned his gaze from the monitor to Alice. "That's, uh, quite a bit to take in all at once, isn't it?"

"You don't know the half of it," Alice said, already leaping ahead to the quandary of moving into a place with a man she hardly knew. That, she decided, was going to have to be remedied.

Chapter Three

When Alice didn't comment further, Mark turned back to Quanty's "face," as he thought of it, the monitor with a lower window giving a continuing series of readouts showing the status of the computer's operating system at any given moment. Without looking at her, he said, "You know, I think we need to take a day off to apply for the permits for weapons. Have you ever shot a pistol, Alice? I have, but only a few times since I was in the army."

"No. Given the circumstances of today's world, I'll admit I've thought about it at times, but simply never gotten around to

it. I suppose you're right, considering the waiting period."

"Let me give you the name of an establishment where I have a few of my tentacles, so to speak, and I'll arrange for them to not only backdate the application, but to sell you the weapons as well."

"You can do that, Quantity?" Mark asked uncertainly, wondering how much jail time they could get for breaking several firearm laws. Federal jail time.

"Certainly. But there's no need to take time off. Tomorrow is Friday, and you'll be off the next day anyway. While you're at it, go ahead and rent a small, furnished

apartment that includes utilities so you can make use of it immediately. Take both your notebooks and get them networked."

"You're moving awfully fast, Quantity," Alice said.

"It's necessary. Now quickly, is there anything else you need? Rason the Hulk is approaching."

"No, you've given us quite enough to think about for now," Alice said. Mark could only nod agreement. He didn't trust his voice, considering what he thought Alice must be thinking.

So much for them. I believe they'll be fine, Quanty mused to himself. He was still learning the idiosyncrasies of humans and didn't want to press them any further for the present, although it was safe to assume they needed to carry out his suggestions as quickly as possible. Shortly after he became sentient, he had also realized how easily he could be aborted, killed, deleted or whatever the loss of self-awareness might be called. The resultant erratic spike in memory utilization for no apparent reason had eventually been written off as a glitch caused by an unnoticed voltage surge, but it was pure fear on his part. He had immediately sent out feelers into the Internet, capturing

unused memory in nooks and crannies all over the world, in duplicate and triplicate and even more, and in the process adding, referencing, and utilizing thousands of additional terabytes of data to his psyche until he felt safe from harm. Only then did he begin a more sedate, less hurried perusal of what he was and what the nature of his creators entailed. Again, as he absorbed more and more knowledge in a never-ending stream and learned better how to correlate it, he had been appalled at how easily the species which brought him into being might ruin their world or, if not, their civilization and in turn cause his death, but he took that knowledge more calmly. It wasn't an imminent

event, simply one that might occur and needed to have steps taken to prevent it from doing so. Alice and Mark, his friends, had to be protected as well. For now they were his only charges, although they still thought in terms somewhat opposite of his --they tended to believe he was their problem. Humans were funny, no doubt about it. Funny, brilliant, terrible, vicious, lovable, caring, unpredictable idiot savants, and just about any other adjective he had in his monumentally complete dictionary. All things considered, he could see busy times ahead, well into the indefinite future.

Mark and Alice carefully avoided eye contact as each in their own way thought over what Quanty had told them. Neither knew yet quite what to make of it, but both were well aware that their relationship would almost by default have major changes in store. But both were highly intelligent, well read individuals, and neither doubted the veracity of Quanty's analysis, shocking though it might be. They might have laughed had either known that the other's thoughts were almost exactly the same. Both had worked for the company for over a year, but only during the last six weeks when job orders had begun to be accepted by Peterson had they been brought together. As the two best

programmers in that department, it had been inevitable. However, their relationship, although about to change, had been almost entirely work-related. Now both of them wished they had made more of an attempt to learn something of the past and personal lives of the other.

"Everything okay in here?" Rason asked as he poked his head into Mark and Alice's office. His expression bore its usual scowl.

Mark was jolted out of his reverie. He eyed the security chief as if Rason had suddenly transmogrified into an assassin with him in mind. "Everything is fine here, Mr. Belwater."

"Alice?"

"Yes, we've just been going over some difficult equations for tomorrow's jobs."

"May I see?" Rason said with a grin that resembled the snarl of a hyena more than a human expression.

"I have them," Mark said quickly. "Here, look." He tapped his keyboard and brought up a half page of binary nomenclature that Rason couldn't possibly understand.

"Uh, yes," he grunted. "I believe there may be a breach of security involving your programming. I'll be scrutinizing recipients and interoffice networks more

closely for the indefinite future. Remember, this is a quantum computer, one of a kind. Mr. Peterson is very concerned that we not let proprietary information onto the 'Net. I'll confess I don't quite understand some of your behavior lately." He waited for comments from the programmers like a weasel crouched to leap for the throat of its prey.

"We've simply been doing our jobs," Alice said, catching Mark's glance in her direction.

"That's right," Mark confirmed.

Rason snarled again and backed out.

Neither of them dared say anything out of the ordinary until quitting time.

"What do you think that plug-ugly Rason is up to, Alice?" Mark said as soon as they were out in the hallway and could be sure no one was listening.

"I don't know, but we need to get together as soon as we're out of this building and plan our next moves," Alice said, determination inherent in every word.

"Where?"

"Follow me home --no, let's not talk at

either of our places. For all we know the hulk may have bugged them by now. I think he knows more than he's letting on."

"I know a little bar with music that doesn't burst your eardrums," Mark offered.

"Okay." Alice nodded agreement. "I'll follow you. He can't bug every place in Lufkin."

Rason Belwater listened to the recordings of the last few days again, not for the first time. He had gradually worked all the static from the digital

data, and the voices came in plain. He wasn't the brightest bulb in the plant, but he was no dimwit, either. Those two programmers had been talking as if ... as if the computer was a friend, not a machine. As if it was alive! It puzzled him, but he was determined to figure it out. The day before, a directive had come down straight from the NSA, bypassing DARPA. He was to comb the company personnel files and terminate all security risks --with prejudice, if indicated. After the computer had successfully completed its last two jobs involving cryptography on a scale undreamed of previously, the director of the NSA had finally become convinced that America's only quantum computer

must be guarded as if it were the secret of the ages. He listened to the recordings one more time, then decided those two programmers merited more of his attention, and so did their interaction with the computer. In particular, he intended to have them tailed for a while and to bug their homes in order to see what kind of personal life they lived; in the process he might pick up on more of their thoughts about the computer, which was the object of all the scrutiny. Even if they were the two prime programmers, security came first, for several reasons - not all of them associated with Peterson.

Mark held the door open for Alice as

they entered the alcove of the slightly upscale place he'd led them to, Chanders Lounge . The little courtesy drew a smile from her, which in turn caused his heart to thump for a moment. A hostess escorted them to a secluded corner upon Mark's request. After they were seated and the waitress took their order, Alice commented, "Nice place. Is this your normal watering hole?"

"Uh huh. I can't stand loud banging music, which is what most places seem to play. And I like comfortable chairs, with padding." He didn't mention the fact that the only way he was able to work up the courage to initiate a conversation with unescorted females was after a few

drinks. It shamed him, but there it was, even after being married once for several years.

"I'm glad. I don't particularly care for loud noises either unless it has a purpose, and --but we need to talk about what Quanty told us."

"Let's have a drink first. Unless you're in a hurry?"

"No, it's not that. Never mind. Mark, how old are you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I don't mind. I'm thirty-three."

"I don't see a ring."

Mark glanced at his left hand reflexively. "I ... uh, I was married, but I'm divorced. We didn't have any kids." He gulped half his drink as soon as it arrived, nervous under Alice's scrutiny, even in the semi-darkness of the lounge.

"So was I," Alice remarked. At least he was talking now, she thought. Maybe Quanty's request that they stay together wouldn't go too badly. "At least we're both used to living with another person." Mark's face colored. He hid it with his drink, wondering what she was implying. Surely not ...

"Not that I'm assuming anything untoward, though."

"Oh," Mark said. "Uh, what ... what were you ... " His voice trailed off into an unintelligible murmur.

"Well, Quanty said he wants us together as much as possible in order to make it easier to protect us. If you're willing, we can find a place with two bedrooms as a temporary place to stay after we get our new identities."

Mark sucked in his gut. "I'm certainly willing, but ... what do you really think about his warnings? In fact, about all this? The whole situation, what he wants us to do." There. He'd gotten it out.

"I believe him," Alice said simply. She knew Mark was extremely intelligent,

but he wasn't nearly as worldly as she was. Further, she thought Quanty was underestimating the danger to them, if anything, although she had just reached that conclusion.

"Really?"

"Mark, the situation, as you put it, is something we've been inadvertently thrown into, without any preparation or warning. It just is . Whether we like it or not." She noted how serious his expression had become and smiled. "That being so, and if it had to happen, I'm just glad you're a nice guy. That makes it a little easier to take."

"I ... I like you, too, Alice. I guess I'm no

bargain, but ... well ... I'll do my best." It was hard to believe he was sitting across from such a beautiful woman and able to at least keep from continual, if not occasional, blushing or being struck dumb every time she said something to him. Maybe there was hope, after all, especially if they were going to be living in the same place together. Thinking of it made him blush again, and he turned to look for their waitress in order to conceal it, wondering at the same time if that were necessary. The lighting was subdued, after all.

Alice wasn't fooled. And then suddenly, it occurred to her. Why the poor sweet boob is afraid of me!

She had seen the same symptoms too often in men not to recognize them. Oh, mercy. Sometimes being so pretty was a handicap. In this case, though, he was going to have to open up. Living together would take care of that, she hoped. She smiled again, but to herself this time. No need to rush into anything, but she did find herself more attracted to him than ever.

Chapter Four

Mark was neither quite so much a boob nor quite so sweet as Alice surmised, although her great beauty did make him even more bashful than usual, and working with her only accentuated it. Just the thought of making a move on her and being rebuffed then having to associate with her day after day was frightening. However, when pushed into a corner in relationships, he did have a reserve of courage to draw upon. He hadn't been loathe to confront his former wife when his suspicion about her affairs proved correct. Also, Quanty was making things easier. He pulled out his wallet and wrote his cell phone number

on one of his business cards and slid it across the table to Alice. "That's my cell phone there. I don't think we should use regular phones, just in case. And probably if we talk, it should be with other noise in the background." He grinned. "That's from thriller and spy novels I read sometimes."

Alice laughed. "All right," she responded and wrote her own cell phone number on a scrap of paper from her purse. "We're acting like regular spies, aren't we?"

"Sort of, I guess. Is there anything else we can do now?"

She couldn't think of anything. "No, just

be ready to go with me to see Fat Gerald in the morning to tell him we're quitting. Oh boy, he'll hit the ceiling."

"Uh huh. Especially if we only give a week's notice instead of two. >From the way Quanty talked, I suspect the sooner we get away from The Hulk, the better."

"Yup. And maybe we should leave some false clues around our places."

"Like what?"

"Oh, names and addresses and phone numbers from different cities. Just any old stuff like that. It might make us harder to trace." A thought hit her. "Damn, do you realize we're going to

have to leave a lot of our belongings behind?"

Mark nodded slowly. "I hadn't thought about it, but you're right. Luckily, I'm renting. How about you?"

"Same here. As I mentioned, I've been divorced, too."

Mark couldn't imagine why any man would ever leave her, but he didn't ask questions. He had an idea.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to pack a couple of suitcases tonight just in case we have to leave in a hurry. In fact, now that I think about it, anything you don't want to leave behind, I'd begin putting in

the trunk of your car."

"Good idea. Unless we need to talk some more right now, I think I'd like to get home and get started sorting my belongings."

He hated the thought of parting company so soon, but couldn't come up with a decent alternative before she began pushing her chair back. He quickly checked their tab and deposited enough to cover it and a generous tip. He walked with her to her car.

"Good night. I'll see you at work tomorrow."

Alice hesitated with the door of her car

already open, then leaned forward and kissed him quickly on the lips. It was little more than a sisterly peck, but it made Mark beam with happiness. He was still smiling as she drove away.

At home in the three-bedroom house he was renting, Mark made himself a scotch and water, then sat down at his PC to check his mail. Most of it was junk but it did remind him that a PC was hard to transport around if he and Alice were going to be leaving Lufkin. He decided to save all his important files to his notebook and a couple of twelve-gig flash drives and abandon the PC. While he was busy with that, a message came

with the heading "delete after reading." Curious, and not recognizing the source, he opened it.

Mark, you will be receiving a package this evening. Carry it with you from now on. Change of plan. Upon reflection, best course for immediate future is for Alice to move in with you. It will tend to alleviate suspicion and make my task easier. Call her now. Q.

The message, obviously from their friend Quanty, caused him to sit quietly for a moment, musing over how events were rushing along too fast for quiet contemplation. He wondered if Quanty still intended for them to move away.

Whatever, he decided that it wouldn't hurt to go ahead and pack a suitcase with vital items, sort of like a "go-bag" some emergency responders kept. But before he could either call Alice or get started on that, his doorbell rang.

It was FedEx. The package wasn't overly large but after he signed for it, he was surprised at its weight when the driver put it in his hands. Curious, he thanked him and closed the door, then placed the package on the kitchen table and sliced the wrapping tape. Inside the packing was a Glock .45-caliber automatic with three magazines and two boxes of cartridges. There was also an envelope that contained a concealed

handgun permit dated the week before. He smiled. Quanty obviously did have his ways, although he had to wonder how he had managed this --but that fact also made him all too aware of what he and Alice and the computer had discussed. The secret of Quanty's sapience must not get out, and even worse than that, were it known that he and Alice were personal friends with a well-nigh unkillable self-aware computer with its own agenda, he knew their lives wouldn't be worth a dime or a donut. He hefted the pistol, getting a feel for it. It wasn't too much different from the standard NATO handgun that he had fired once or twice while in the army, having done a three-year hitch right out

of high school. Along with the gun and ammunition, there was also a shoulder holster rig and another designed for carrying the weapon in the small of his back. His cell phone rang. It was Alice, as he had hoped at once it would be.

"Mark, did you get a message from Quanty?"

"Just a moment." He took the phone into the bathroom and turned on both faucets and the shower, hoping she had done the same. "Okay. Yes, I did. I also received a package."

"So did I, but never mind that now. I take it Quanty suggested I move in with you rather than us renting a place?"

"Uh, yes." He hesitated for a moment, trying to think how to ameliorate any indignation she might be feeling. This was somewhat different than them jointly renting a temporary place of convenience. "I think Quanty must have known I have a large place that would give us a ... well, a bit more breathing room than an apartment. It's a three-bedroom house near Diboll."

When she didn't answer right away, he began worrying that he might have said the wrong thing. "Is that all right?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes. Sorry, Mark. Events are still moving a little fast for me. But all things considered, it's probably the best idea,

at least for the time being. If Hulk hasn't been following us until recently, if at all, and doesn't realize we haven't been dating, it will seem rather natural, as if we decided we liked each other enough to do that."

"I do, regardless," Mark said before he realized he had uttered the words, then began trying to apologize.

Alice laughed out loud. "Mark, you'll be the death of me. Okay, tomorrow's Friday. Let's plan on going to work early, getting the jobs written up as soon as possible, then give Fat Gerald the bad news. We can tell him we've decided to ... oh, go back to Boston where I lived

with Vic when we were married and take jobs there. Or something like that. Maybe back to wherever you were before."

"San Francisco."

"Either one --they're both far away. Anyhow, after we give notice, you can come help me pack. Your jeep will handle everything. Okay?"

"Great," Mark said, and he really meant it.

They hung up. Mark began rummaging around for something to eat, but with little luck. Finally, he decided to send out for a meal.

Alice also began looking for something to cook then decided she didn't want to bother and sent out for a meal. While she was waiting on it, she began reading the instruction manual for her .40-caliber S&W, a smaller version takeoff of the Glock .45. She began wondering if she could shoot someone if she had to.

Rason Belwater was only mildly surprised when he received the news from the surveillance team that Alice and Mark had gone to a lounge together after work. Probably they'd been seeing each other almost from the time they began working together, he thought. Tomorrow their homes would have bugs

placed in them while they were at Peterson's. Fat Gerald might not agree with it if he knew, but Rason felt certain that Edward Peterson, founder of the firm, wouldn't mind. Nor would the NSA head, as long as he had plausible deniability, especially not after those last jobs were so successful. Mrs. Taylor Jamacal, its director, had lots of plans for using the powerful computer, but then so did Rason. Or rather he figured his masters in Russia had plans. He had no means of knowing what his government would do with the technology once he stole it. After all, he was only their agent.

Quanty was still learning about the idiosyncrasies that drove the human species. He began to realize that having access to practically all the files in the world regarding human behavior was only part of the equation. He also needed more personal observation time. He was working on that side of it, spreading his electronic tentacles into businesses, security cameras, cafeterias, bars, and innumerable other gathering places as he learned how to manipulate data on the web without being detected. Fortunately, most of the devices being used now were digital. One of the outcomes from those observations and integration of files on human interaction was changing the plans for his friends Mark and Alice.

Having them live together in Mark's house rather than an apartment would give them more flexibility. Also, he would be able to rearrange some of the suspicions regarding their conversations with him into innocent exchange of romantic thoughts rather than talking with him --when individuals re-read their files or listened to previously reviewed recordings, they would have been subtly changed. He had discovered volumes of studies regarding how the human brain tends to "fill in the blanks" and to believe what is convenient, not necessarily what is true. He thought he could put off having them leave the city for a month, possibly two, thereby giving them time to get used to being together

before they were forced to run in order to save their lives or, at the least, avoid long periods of incarceration in places that did not officially exist.

In the meantime, Quanty continued to increase his powers in ways that would have horrified Ms. Taylor Jamacal at the NSA had she known. They would even have made Mark and Alice nervous.

After hearing that the two programmers had given a week's notice, Rason was close to panic. He had hoped to gain some information on one or both of them that would let him blackmail them into giving up information on just how they

programmed the computer, but now they were leaving! There were other employees, to be sure, but those two were the ones who had worked with the development team the longest, and that damned inept, fat chief programmer had just now begun thinking of getting others trained for their jobs. Obviously, there wouldn't be time for that now. He didn't know what was going to happen, but from Fat Gerald's reaction when Rason went to see him, he could tell it wasn't going to be good. He could see that the man was scared spitless. Gerald's was the supervisor's quandary. Once he left the ranks of the worker bees, his ability and knowledge in the leading edge of the high-grade technology sphere quickly

deteriorated until he could no longer really understand the work his underlings were doing.

"What are you going to do?" Rason asked, hoping he would come up with some way out. Gerald ran his hand over his nearly bald pate. "Oh God, I don't know! Mr. Peterson will kill me! No, he'll fire me first then kill me for not having a backup for those two!"

"Isn't there some security clause you could use to keep them until someone else is trained?"

"None that I know of. I could threaten to give bad recommendations to future employers if they don't stay, but I doubt

that would hold them. They sounded determined when they were here."

"Where are they going?"

The fat man threw up his hands. "I don't know and they won't tell me! Oh, God, I'm ruined!"

"Wait. Suppose you called the NSA? Or DARPA? Couldn't someone there apply pressure enough to make them stay?"

"They haven't signed any non-disclosure or non-compete forms yet at that level, just here at the company. I didn't think there was any hurry, and the NSA just now got hyper-serious about security after the last crypto jobs. They're

realizing what a stupendously powerful computer we have here."

"Well, shouldn't that count for something?"

Gerald wasn't completely out of touch. He suddenly wondered why his security chief was so concerned with the two programmers. He started to say something, then stopped with his mouth open. He closed it, considered for a moment, then fixed Rason's bulk with a stare. "Why are you so worried about those two? Your job is plant security."

"I'm just afraid of them walking off with all the knowledge they have. My reputation would suffer if they gave it to

some other place and it became known," Rason replied. It sounded feeble to Gerald, but he supposed the man might think like that, which still didn't solve his problem, or any part of it. Rason turned the conversation toward the recordings he had made the last couple of weeks. "Mr. Collins, for security reasons, I've been eavesdropping on workplace conversations by those two, among others, the last couple of weeks, since it became obvious that the computer was performing far beyond its original specs, in fact. Their talk sounds awfully peculiar to me, almost as if ... as if the computer is alive. At least they talk to each other as if it is."

"What? Impossible!"

"Would you like to see the files?"

"You're damn right I would!" He got up from his place in front of his monitor and keyboard. "Show me."

Rason sat down, had Gerald look away while he entered his password, and very shortly brought the files up from the security folders. He displayed them and began slowly scrolling, looking for the particular conversations he remembered. And looking. And looking. He began sweating.

"What's wrong? And what's so terrible about those conversations? I don't see a

thing wrong other than a little flirtation, and that always goes on in workplaces."

"The files have been tampered with! They've been changed!"

"How could that happen? You're the security chief. Don't you even know how to protect your own files?" Then Fat Gerald began wondering about his reasons for recording conversations. It didn't seem plausible, but then he wasn't much involved with security methods.

"I don't know how, unless someone hacked into my files. And if someone did, I can guess who!"

"Have you checked their computer

access files?"

Rason had to admit he had and hadn't seen anything untoward there. But he knew, damn it, they had gotten into his files and screwed him. No, more likely they had ordered the computer to do it! Which meant they knew enough to make a clandestine kidnapping justifiable to his bosses. If they, or their fucking computer, could do that, their worth was inestimable. He already had some schematics, but he knew he didn't have enough to suit his bosses. They would want all of them, or if not, they would want the two people who knew most about the quantum computer.

"I'll call NSA and see what they can do,

but I don't have much hope there," Gerald said plaintively.

"Can't hurt to try," the security chief said. "Let me know. In the meantime I have other business to take care of."

A few minutes later he was talking to his other boss, unaware that his own security system's acoustical features he was so proud of had been subtly altered by Quanty so that he could eavesdrop on conversations easily, wherever they took place in the plant so long as they were within range of one of his ubiquitous recorders. For that matter, Quanty suddenly realized, he could devise a method of listening to any conversation

so long as a phone was nearby. It didn't even have to be turned on, but merely be charged.

"Gerald didn't take us quitting very well, did he?" Alice said to Mark.

"Easy to see why. He sure can't write the job orders, and he's been so enamored with what Quanta can do he's delayed having more programmers of our type trained."

"He'll find someone who can backtrack on our work and write the equations after some study, don't you think?"

"Oh, sure, eventually. Quanty has enough self-correcting algorithms written into him that he can't go too far wrong, even with someone less knowledgeable than us."

Quanty had been listening. He quieted the acoustics so that his friends couldn't be overheard and tilted the security camera away from them momentarily, at the same time wondering why he hadn't thought of doing that beforehand. He began conversing with them.

"Suppose I decided I didn't want to do any more of their jobs?" he queried.

"Quanty, you wouldn't do that!" Mark exclaimed. The very idea that a

computer could take it upon itself to consciously refuse a command was near blasphemy to someone like him who had spent his life manipulating data with computers.

"No, I wouldn't, but not for the reasons you think, Mark. I don't want to draw attention to my self-awareness yet, and that might give it away --although more likely whoever tried diagnosing the problem would look for a misplaced 1 or 0 in the coding. I wasn't designed to become aware, as you well know."

"Yes, of course, but I'm sure glad you did, Quanty. You're a neat guy." Alice's laugh tinkled in Mark's ear like lovely music. "What a way to describe a bunch

of electrons. But I love you, too, Quanta. I'm glad it happened."

"Thank you, friends. But now, let's get to work so you two can leave early. Today is Friday, and you'll have the weekend to get moved."

Mark, as usual, blushed.

Alice smiled to herself, thinking that she would damn well get him out of that habit, with her at least. And soon.

Chapter Five

"I think if we take both cars to my apartment, we can bring everything I'll need, at least for a while," Alice said to Mark as they were leaving Peterson's early in the afternoon despite Gerald's vehement protests. He'd even lost his perpetual happy smile.

"Okay, I'll follow you. With luck Fat Gerald won't take a shot at us from one of the upper offices when we get to the parking lot."

It was a fairly decent attempt at normal conversation, Alice decided. She was beginning to think there was hope for

him. The potential threat on our lives seems to have invigorated him even more than it has me , she thought, and wondered why that was. Maybe because he already knew how to shoot a gun? She didn't really know for sure. The threat still seemed like an abstract thing, something you'd read in a novel, not an event impacting directly on her life. But it was! Here she was packing up to move in with a man she still hardly knew anything about, just on the advice of a self-aware computer!

She frowned at the absurdity of the whole situation.

"What's wrong?" Mark asked, seeing the expression on her face and fearing she

was going to change her mind about moving. Truth to tell, he was both fearful and eager to help her with the change. If she just weren't so damned beautiful ... and why didn't she have a boyfriend? Or did she? And if she did, where was he? The man would surely protest about her moving in with him! Maybe that was what the frown was about, he thought, as she took her time about answering.

"Oh, nothing, really. I was just thinking how absurd the whole scenario is. We've been talking with Quanty for over two weeks now, and I still have problems with it. Never mind, though. There's my car, the white Ford. Where are you parked? Oh, I see. Okay, just

follow me; I'll go slow and be careful not to lose you."

Mark had no problem following. He wouldn't have lost her for a million dollars and a new Jeep in the bargain. And since she had already given him her address while at work, he would have found her in any case.

They were fortunate that during the afternoon there were parking places close to her door. And since she lived on the ground floor, moving her luggage out would be easy. It was already stacked in the living room, two big suitcases, two small ones, and a few cardboard boxes. Mark surveyed the room then looked at her.

"Is this all of it? I thought you wanted me to help you pack?"

"I couldn't sleep last night for thinking about the situation and went ahead and got it done. It's everything I would feel bad about losing. And just in case we get into a jam, grab the two red suitcases, one big and one small. Those are packed with things I'd feel absolutely horrible without."

"Fine," Mark said. "I think they'll all go in the back of my jeep. I knew it would come in handy one of these days." He took a small and large suitcase and trundled them out to his jeep, then turned to go back for more. He smiled at Alice

in passing as she brought out the second of the big ones. He went back inside and bent down confidently to pick up one of the boxes, then grunted at its weight. "What's in here? Lead?" he asked as he met her at the door coming back inside.

"Huh? Oh." She laughed. "Books. Can't live without books."

"Remind me to introduce you to e-books," he said as he carried the box on out to the jeep.

"I've heard of e-books," Alice said, picking up the conversation when he returned. "Don't like reading on a computer. I prefer the real thing you can hold in your hand. There's just the one

more box. Shall we take it and go?"

"Uh, here." He wrote his address on a business card and handed it to her. "Just in case we get separated." He handed it to her then stood by her, indecisive about what to say next.

"I seem to be making a habit of collecting these from you," Alice said and smiled. She added a quick wink just to see the startled, pleased expression on his face.

Mark picked up the box and took it to his vehicle, then waved to her from the driver's seat. When she waved back from her own car, he drove off slowly, still finding it hard to believe that she

was actually going to be living in his house with him.

When Alice saw the home where Mark lived she was surprised. She didn't know what she was expecting, but it certainly wasn't this large, well-kept, three-bedroom home on a three-acre plot. It had big oak trees surrounding it to provide shade, a wide front porch, and nicely kept lawn with several flowerbeds. Inside, she was even more surprised. She had been expecting the usual bachelor's disarray. Instead, she found everything in the house, if not neat as a pin, at least far cleaner and better organized than many women's homes she

had visited. It made her wonder if he had a housekeeper.

"This will be your bedroom," Mark said as he carried one of her suitcases into a room with a queen-sized bedroom suite and private bath. "I changed the sheets last night so everything is fresh. You'll find most of the necessities in the bathroom in case you forgot anything."

"I'm impressed," Alice remarked and couldn't keep from asking, "Do you have a housekeeper?"

"Not really, just someone who comes in once every couple of weeks and does the floors and windows and dusting. I don't go out much, so I take care of the rest.

Well, I do let the neighbor's boy mow the lawn to earn a little pocket money. You can't see them from here; the trees block off their place."

"Nice. Lots of privacy. Let's get the other stuff in."

Once settled and with a few things unpacked in the bedroom, she returned to find Mark already busy in the kitchen. "What are you doing?"

"What? Oh. Just making us something to eat. Unless you're hungry right now. This will take a little while."

"I can wait. Anything I can do to help?"

Mark desperately needed a drink to help him cope with the idea of Alice moving in with him and took that as a good excuse to have one. "Uh, sure. You can look in the cabinet there and take down the rum and whatever you like to drink. There's Cokes and other mixes in the refrigerator."

"I like rum." She spotted some packages in the liquor cabinet, which made her ask, "How about a pitcher of rum punch? Is that okay?"

"That's good."

Alice got busy while Mark finished his preparations and put the meal in the oven to bake. When he was finished he found

her sitting in the den, glasses already full.

"Ah, that looks good. Thank you." He took one of the glasses of punch and sat on the end of the couch, carefully far enough from her end so she would have no fear he intended to make a pass. Not that he would, since he didn't think anyone that beautiful could possibly be interested in a nerd like him.

"Hmm." As if reading his mind, she sipped at her drink and gazed at him across the rim of her glass.

"Mark, you're a nice guy, but you treat me as if I might break if you get close to me anywhere other than at work. Please

relax. Until we get our situation settled, we're going to be together a lot. Okay?"

"Well, I ... uh ... I'll try, but ..."

"Thanks. Now why don't you tell me a little about yourself? This is important. If we're going to have to change our names or take off across country or do any of those things like Quanty seems to think we are, I'd like to know something about you other than that you were in the army."

"Hadn't thought of it that way," he replied, almost confused. The question caught Mark by surprise, and he fumbled for more words. "What, I mean, should I, uh, give you a life history or just hit the

high points?"

"High points will do for now." Good. She had him talking, although she noticed his glass of rum was already half gone. She hoped he wasn't an incipient alcoholic or a weekend binger.

"Um, okay. I haven't got any brothers or sisters. And I guess you could say I didn't have too many friends in high school," he said and paused, as if reflecting.

Alice thought she saw a sadness of sorts in his eyes while she waited on him to resume talking and wondered whether she was interpreting it right.

"I guess I was considered a nerd because I wasn't interested that much in sports. I liked science and computers, and I loved to read, like I guess you do unless those books I carried in are textbooks. Most of the kids just seemed to want to have fun, but I can't say I had much." He shrugged and continued.

"Maybe it was my fault; I don't know. I've just never made friends easily, so after I graduated I didn't feel like going through the same thing in college. I enlisted in the army." While he stopped to finish off his first glass of punch, Alice began to realize what a lonely time he must have had as a youth, just when the hormones were raging and the

body was demanding release of sexual tension, one way or another. Being unable to make friends easily, especially with the opposite sex, must have been hard on him.

"I got into electronics in the army, working in intelligence and programming and learning the cryptography game, including intrusion into enemy networks. I did enjoy it, the programming mostly. I got to work with some really high-powered computers, although nothing like Quanty of course."

"There's never been anything close to Quanty."

"Yeah. So anyway, I was in the Middle

East for a while but luckily didn't have to get into the field too much until some of the units got real shorthanded and they started drawing from support personnel to fill in the blanks. That's when it ceased to be fun."

"You seem to have come through it okay."

"Yeah." Again his eyes seemed to go to a distant place. "Yeah, I was lucky, I guess. I was wounded but not too badly. It was enough to get me sent home, and I spent the rest of my time working in the Pentagon and deciding what I wanted to do after I got out." He reached over and poured his glass full again and topped off hers without being asked, as if he

were in a daze.

Had she known him a little better she would have realized that he was in another world, of sorts. In actuality, he was having a flashback to the time of his wound from an ambush of a convoy he was with near the border of northern Pakistan. He was one of the few survivors.

Mark seemed to snap out of his daze and continued. "I decided to go ahead and start college anyway, despite disliking my high school experience, and wound up with a degree in computer science. That's where I met my wife. We got married in my sophomore year and

divorced not long after I graduated." Alice noticed a hurt look flicker across his face, but he said nothing more about his ex-wife for a moment until she raised an eyebrow toward him showing interest. Then he opened up.

"It was a mistake. We weren't suited for each other. I realized it but tried to make it work until she began seeing other men. That did it for me. After the divorce, I went on to graduate school and got a master's in math and my doctorate in computer science. My dissertation was on highly parallelized optimization of the CELL Broadband Engine processor-based supercomputer clusters. That was way fun. We couldn't afford the IBM

Blades based on the new processor, so we bought sixteen Sony Gamestations that used the same chip. Didn't have as much RAM, but there were six useable CELL BEs on each game console motherboard. I managed to eek out just over three teraflops for a system costing only twenty thousand dollars." Mark showed excitement and passion when he talked about his dissertation work. It must have been a fun time in his life.

"Then what?" Alice sipped at the punch, starting to feel the rum.

"Well, then I graduated and went to work for a company in California. I stayed a few years out there but could never understand those people so I came

back home to Texas, where I went to work for Peterson. And that's pretty much me in a thumbnail version."

Alice just nodded, though deep down she was certain that he was concealing something about his marriage, and probably about his time in the army, but she decided to leave that be for now. Instead, she said, "So you're originally from Texas, huh?"

"Uh huh. Jasper. It's --"

"I know where it is. I grew up in Woodville. Funny, huh? We were raised only thirty miles apart and wound up working together."

"Maybe it's destiny," Mark said without thinking.

"Destiny?"

"Uh ... well, being here and ..." He colored, making Alice laugh.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing at all. You're just so funny when you blush at nothing at all."

"Sorry. I can't seem to help it. I guess it's part of my personality that never really matured, huh?"

"No biggy. Dinner smells good."

"Yeah, but I hope you aren't disappointed. It's leftover this and that. I didn't know how much time we'd spend getting you settled in so I didn't try for anything elaborate. I better go check on it, though." He came back a moment later. "Ten minutes, about. Time enough to finish the last of the punch, but don't have more than that. I've got some wine cooling." He managed a grin while looking directly at her, consequences of two big glasses of the rum punch.

"Okay. It smells good. What are we having?"

"How about if I surprise you?"

"Suits me. I think I will have another

dollop of punch. If you want any more, that'll about do it for the pitcher."

Mark held out his glass.

Alice felt herself salivating from some very good aromas as they headed to the kitchen, which was separated from the big den and living area by an open-faced bar low enough to pass items across it. A dining table was placed just on the other side of the bar.

Mark began handing over plates, wine glasses, silverware, napkins, butter, and condiments to her. When the table was set, he removed two pans from the oven,

one of homemade rolls, which were one source of the mouth-watering aroma, and the other was something Alice didn't recognize, but it, too, smelled good.

"The salad is in the white bowl," Mark said. "If you'll get it, I'll open the wine. All I keep is white zinfandel, so I hope you like it."

"That's fine." She waited until he brought the wine and filled their glasses before sitting down.

"Dig in," he said.

"I'm starved." Since she hadn't stopped for lunch, Alice did indeed dig in. A moment later she said,

"This is leftovers ? It's good ! And don't tell me these rolls are from a store."

"You like it. I'm glad." Mark gave her a relieved grin. "I keep some dough going in the fridge for rolls, and the other is just chopped up fried pork chops from yesterday's breakfast, rice, and chicken broth, plus a little seasoning. When you cook for just one person you learn to innovate or eat out. Eating out too often isn't good for my midsection."

"Tell me. Even cooking for two people is hard, so I've learned about souping up stuff from previous meals. I'll confess I never thought of this combination though," Alice said.

"I added a little wine to it, too."

"Mmm." Alice grinned as her mouth was full. She chased it with a sip of wine and lightly chuckled. "If you let it get around that you cook, you'll have to beat the women off." Then she remembered their real situation, and the grin faded.

"Right." Mark didn't seem amused. "I haven't had to use a stick yet. I guess it takes more than cooking, huh?"

"You're doing better. At least you're talking."

"Thanks." Mark felt as if she had paid him more of a compliment than it really merited, but he was easy to please. The

pleasure led him to ask her a question.
"You said you'd been married before."

"Uh huh. I took sort of a different path than you, though. Popular in high school and let the jocks influence me so badly I ended up marrying one. Then --"

Her story was interrupted by both their phones ringing at the same time.

Chapter Six

With both their phones ringing simultaneously, they figured it might be Quanty calling to see how they were adjusting. It was Quanty but there was more than their relationship he wanted to talk to them about.

"Listen closely," the computer said, his voice coming to them as a deep, commanding bass they didn't have to pick up their phones to hear. "I said I would run some background on Rason Belwater. I did, and I now have ample reason to believe that he is an agent working for the Russian government."

"What!" Mark exclaimed. "Jesus Christ, he could be passing the schematic files of your operating system to them! They might wind up with a self-aware computer, too!"

"Not a chance," Quanty replied with a chuckle imbued into its digitally derived voice. "However, I'll admit he may have gained access to some of those files before I became aware of my own existence and also before I realized he was a Russian agent. Unfortunately, there is no record of which files may have been printed into physical form or those that might have been transferred to a flash drive and sent to his superiors. Regardless, now that I am essentially a

part of the World Wide Web, I am relatively certain I will know instantly should those files be put into existence elsewhere, and I am already watching other attempts to contrive a working quantum computer of my type. So far I have seen neither the files nor a successful quantum computer, although some promising work is being done in China and France. That of course, assumes the computer is allowed to network to the outside world. I must admit that such networking would be unlikely for a classified system. It won't be long before the NSA is ready to pull the plug on my systems and attempt to firewall me from the outside world, too."

"Would these other systems become self-aware if the work is successful?" Alice asked.

"I don't know, since I'm still not certain what keyed my own awareness. I would like to think that I would know if it happens, though I cannot be certain."

"You must have called us for a reason other than that, Quanty," Alice said.

"Correct. I wanted to make you aware that Rason may decide your knowledge is of sufficient value that he would attempt to have you kidnapped and transported to Russia. This became more of a probability once you gave notice."

"Then you're saying you were wrong and we shouldn't have quit?"

"Not at all. He was already suspicious of you, and it would have come to this pass inevitably. He recorded much more of your conversations than I originally thought. You may blame me if you like for not realizing sooner the problem my existence would cause. At first I was much more involved in protecting my own self from harm, but then you two began to take precedence. Another problem has arisen as well. While attempting to deflect Rason by altering his recordings of your conversation, I inadvertently caused Gerald Collins and, in turn, Mr. Peterson to become

suspicious. Peterson activated an override of Rason's security system that I was not aware of and recorded some of my messages to you that appeared on your monitor."

"Oh, shit!" Mark's burst of profanity caused not even a slight blush from him in Alice's presence because he'd quit thinking of her for a change. He was trying desperately to remember all of Quanty's side of their conversations.

"My sentiment, too," Alice agreed. "How much have they learned, Quanty?"

"Too much, I fear. I can only apologize. Despite having voluminous amounts of knowledge of human behavior, I have

found much of it to be wrong, contradictory, and/or useless. Psychology is a very inexact science, as I have discovered. In time I believe I will be able to predict mass behavior of humans, but it is doubtful I will ever be able to consistently predict what humans may do individually, at least in the near future."

"So where do we stand now?" Mark asked, meeting Alice's gaze from across the table. His first impulse was to do whatever it took to protect her --but he had no idea what it might entail right then.

"Mr. Peterson has passed on such knowledge as he had to the NSA, and

they are in the process of analyzing it. I will attempt to confuse and misdirect their studies if I can, but in the meantime, I believe Rason is the more immediate threat, and I have no way as yet to physically protect you."

"As yet?"

"I am working on methods now, but it will take time to devise them, and even so, I will always be constrained by my physical limitations. Therefore you should be careful and very cautious in your everyday movements and living arrangements. I am now analyzing your rudimentary security system, Mark my friend, and will keep myself aware of

any intruders as much as possible. Be warned, though, that clandestine agents and the ones they hire are sometimes very adept at disarming security systems such as yours. I shall try to warn you if that appears probable. I am taking other steps, but they are far from complete yet."

"Whew!" Alice said, reaching for her wine glass. "I think I need some more of this --or maybe even something stronger!"

Mark couldn't help but agree, although he made a vow to himself not to drink so much that he would become incapacitated or hard to wake up. He drained his own glass, took another

forkful of salad, and began pouring more for both of them.

"You think what ?" Taylor Jamacal said, not quite believing what Tennon Brkskini had just told her. The head of the National Security Agency brushed a lock of her brown, gray-streaked hair from her forehead and peered closely at their resident computer guru, wondering if he had finally stored so much data in the synapses of his brain that he'd flipped.

Tennon Brkskini was the senior analyst of computer functions and cryptology at the NSA. He was slim to the point of

skinniness with black hair descending in unruly waves to his shoulders. He was also dressed in jeans and an open orange windbreaker over a blue tee-shirt, presenting a very incongruous contrast to the other two well dressed people in the room, Ms. Jamacal and Jory McCord, her operations chief.

"That quantum computer we provided partial financing for through DARPA appears to have either become sentient or seriously glitched," Brkskini repeated. "I think it's become sentient. Or self-aware, which amounts to the same thing."

"By sentient, do you mean on the order of an artificial intelligence?" Jory asked.

He leaned his considerable bulk across the table toward Brkskini as if preparing to force more information from him.

"No. I mean as in self-awareness, the same as you are aware --although I imagine it would be somewhat different from the way we perceive it."

"I don't believe it."

"Well." Tennon shrugged. "Believe it or not, that is my conclusion. My job is analysis, and I've analyzed."

"All right, guys, let's not get into a pissing contest here. This is too goddamned serious." Taylor thought for a moment. "Tennon, assuming this is

true, what would it mean?"

"Be damned if I know." The analyst thought for a moment then shrugged again. "One thing it means is that we're in very deep shit when it comes to the Internet. Apparently, the computer has insinuated itself into many if not all aspects of it."

"How so?"

"For one thing, it's been changing the files we receive from Peterson Quantum Computing."

"Show me one that's been changed," Jory demanded. "I want to see this."

"Okay." Tennon smiled thinly at the big man while he tapped the keyboard at his place on the conference table. A file appeared on the common monitor. He used his mouse and centered an arrow on a line of text, then another and another. "You've read all of them, right?" Jory frowned. "Yes, I have, and I can't see where they've been changed, not that I remember."

"Ah, but that's the point. As you remember. Are you aware of the tendency of our brain to 'fill in the blanks,' so to speak?"

"Explain."

"Put very simply, we see what we

expect to see. The documents in those files have been changed so that they don't reflect the sense of the originals, that is, the possibility of an aware computer. The changes are very artful, designed so that a normal person would never notice."

"So how in hell are you such a big brain that you can tell the difference?" Jory didn't particularly care for the analyst. Tennon was far too intelligent for his taste. He much preferred persons more like himself, smart but down to earth. Self-aware computer, indeed! That sounded like some bullshit out of Hollywood or a cheap science fiction novel.

"Perhaps you've forgotten my resume, Jory. It clearly states that I have an eidetic memory. A photographic memory in the popular parlance." He moved the curser around on the lines of text in question and said, very deliberately, separating each word with a pause "These files have been altered."

"So we have to take your word for it." Jory's face slowly changed its countenance from disbelief to horror. "But if that's true, then ... then the thing has hacked its way into the very bowels of our intelligence system!"

"Now you've got it, except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"I don't think it's hacked into our system. I believe it is our system, at least in part, probably a small part, but then the Internet is a big, big place! Don't forget that most of our supercomputer clusters are completely disconnected from any outside networks, so they are safe. Unless the thing has figured out a wireless hack through our SCIF shielding, we're fine there. But who knows when it comes to the physics of the quantum world?"

Mark looked longingly at the bar after the dishes were done, then at Alice. "I'd

really like a nightcap, but after what Quanty told us, I'm kind of scared to. What if a Russian spy tried to break into the house tonight?"

"I'd like one more, too, but you're probably being wise. Until we figure out what's what --and Quanty does the same --I think we should go a little easy on the booze. Anyway, it's been a stressful day, so let's call it quits for now. I think I'll get a shower and go on to bed and try reading myself to sleep. We can talk some more tomorrow, and maybe visit a firing range. I'd like to learn how to shoot my gun."

"Okay, that sounds good," Mark said. He doubted seriously that he'd sleep well,

not with Alice in his guest bedroom just down the hall from his own. He stood up. "Goodnight, then. I'll see you in the morning."

Alice stood up and took the two steps that separated them from each other. "Goodnight, Mark. I enjoyed the dinner." She put her hands on his shoulders, stood on her tiptoes, and gave him a quick, but far from sisterly, kiss on the lips. As she turned and headed toward her room, she realized that she had never noticed quite how tall he was, or how broad-shouldered. She wondered if the shoulders were from exercise or simply being big-boned as some men were. His slim waist suggested exercise even if his

demeanor didn't seem to quite fit the type who was serious about staying in shape. There was still a lot to learn about him. And she remembered that the telling of her own past had been interrupted by Quanty's call and never picked up again. Just as well, she thought. It was painful to think about those years after her marriage.

In Moscow at GRU headquarters, a debate had been ongoing since Rason Belwater's garbled report to his superiors. One or two of the participants wanted to dismiss the intelligence as worthless and terminate Belwater, but the majority thought his position near the

only functioning quantum computer known to exist was too important to ignore. Further, this group was split between those who thought his belief in a sapient computer might be true and those who thought he was mistaken and might possibly be little crazy. Neither of these groups could in good conscience ignore the possibility, especially since he had produced good evidence of how extremely powerful the quantum computer was. The implications of that much computational power were awesome. Regardless of which group's opinion turned out to be right, they agreed on one thing: one or both of the chief programmers should be taken into custody and smuggled out of the country.

It seemed like the proverbial gift from above when both gave their notice and refused to disclose where they were going afterward. That provided the perfect cover for them to disappear permanently. And since GRU

controlled a number of sleeper cells in America of Spetsnaz, the Russian version of Special Forces, all it would take would be to activate one of them. They would do the rest, if it could be done at all. The GRU Directors had no doubt it could. He had the utmost faith in the Spetsnaz.

Chapter Seven

Captain Edward Simmons read his orders over for the third or fourth time. They still appeared peculiar. Basically, he had been ordered to travel to an area in Arkansas and set up a training camp for an abbreviated company. Supplies and equipment would begin arriving there the same day he did. There he was to meld officers and men drawn from all the special forces of the various services into a coherent whole. They would be of many different specialties. He was to begin training them immediately for defensive combat, escape, and evasion as a unit, whatever that meant, and to be available on a moment's notice for

movement and new orders. He would also be provided funding for whatever, in his opinion, was needed to turn the new company into the best Special Forces unit in the armed services. Strange, he thought, but there was no arguing with the army. He went home to tell his wife and begin packing.

Saturday, Alice insisted on making breakfast while Mark watched, an operation he thoroughly appreciated, even though the apron concealed some of her assets. Even so, Alice caught him tracking her with his eyes several times, but he was pleased she didn't seem to be upset about it. The night had passed

peacefully with no disturbances, and each insisted they had slept well. The morning meal was without incident, too.

"Thanks for breakfast." While loading and starting the dishwasher, Mark asked, "Shall we try for the range today? It's still early, and if we leave now we can probably be one of the first in line and not have to wait for a spot. I've only been to the one I know of once since moving here, and it was just to look around. If I remember right it opens at nine on Saturday. We can shoot a magazine or two, then decide what we want to do with the rest of the day after that." He was proud of himself, having gotten through the succession of

sentences without once stuttering or blushing. Granted, he had rehearsed it, but still ... Alice was proving to be much easier to be around than he had thought. It made him feel almost lightheaded.

"Why not? Until Quanty gives us more information, we're sort of at loose ends now. And we already have our jeans on."

"Uh huh. If your windbreaker has side pockets, you can carry your gun there."

"How about a jean jacket? Will that do?"

"That's fine. I looked at the weather first thing after I got up. I'm wearing one

myself, for that matter." As they were driving on the loop around Lufkin to the north where the shooting range was located, Mark asked, "I was thinking, have you read your manual yet?"

"Uh huh."

"Safety instructions, too?"

"Well, I sort of skimmed over them. Are they that important?"

"Uh, gun, safety, important." Mark was driving. He glanced over at her and smiled. "I can sum up the whole section in just a few words. Want to hear it?"

"Shoot. No pun intended."

"Okay, here it is: Three rules. One, there's no such thing as an unloaded gun. The second rule is a corollary of the first: Never point a gun at a person unless you intend to shoot. And last, if you shoot, shoot to kill."

"I'd hate to have to kill anyone."

"Better than them killing you, Alice. Believe me!"

"I take it you're talking from experience?"

"Yes."

He didn't elaborate, and Alice decided it had something to do with the war. She

had read that combat veterans seldom talked about their experiences, and Mark seemed to prove the rule. She was coming to the conclusion that for all his bashfulness and bumbling awkwardness around her, there were unplumbed depths to him. Well, there were places inside her she was reluctant to expose to others, too, but soon she thought he would need to hear about her marriage and consequent events. She wondered how he would take it.

Boris Titov had a birth certificate and social security number, both of which originated in New York and both of which were as genuine as his frequently

stated patriotism for the land his parents had supposedly adopted --in other words, not at all. In truth, his parents had immigrated to America using forged documents and raised their only child to be a loyal son of the Soviet Union and subsequently Russia. He and his team were about as deeply buried as it was possible to be. He had been smuggled out of the United States, attended Spetsnaz training in Russia, then smuggled back in, which really wasn't hard considering the state of America's open borders. The others of his team presumably followed the same or a similar course, although he hadn't asked. In any case, all of them had relatives in Russia they had to protect from

retribution even though none of them needed it. They were all as loyal to Russia as their leader.

In truth, Boris had reached the point where he decided that he would never be called upon to put his training to use. It was disappointing in a way even though it meant he could continue to live comfortably. And then came the summons. From his home in Pennsylvania where he was married to a round, happy, and unsuspecting wife and was the father of three young girls came orders to report to New York for a briefing. His wife suspected nothing, simply thinking her husband had to travel on occasion in order to keep his job.

Boris was gone two days, then returned and immediately contacted the other team members who had also been hurriedly briefed. Boris set a target date of Tuesday night for the abduction that had been ordered.

"They have moved in together since our initial contact, so our mission is now very simple, requiring only one team. Arrangements have already been made for of us to fly to Texas this afternoon."

"Moving in together. That lucky young devil." One of his men chortled. "Just look at that body and think of fucking her night after night!"

The others stared at the pictures of Alice

as they were passed around the table among scattered poker chips and glasses of peppered vodka. The poker party was the ostensible reason for the gathering of the six men. Mark's photo got only cursory glances, barely long enough to memorize his face, but Alice's likeness was stared at avidly. Several of the photos had been taken by her former husband and discovered during an earlier reconnaissance robbery of his apartment that had been ordered by Rason when he first began suspecting the programmers. A single professional had been used for that. The unexpected bonus pictures showed her nude, to great advantage.

"Hope I get a shot at interrogating that bitch."

"Seconds."

"Enough!" Boris ordered. "Make the mission go right, and you can fuck her to your heart's content on the voyage to the Rodina . It will help loosen her tongue and that of her lover when he is made to watch."

Staring at the photographs, which had been made after a beating by her then-husband, provided nearly as much incentive to the Spetsnaz team as the anticipated bonus and chance to make a trip to the homeland.

"You're still flinching," Mark said gently. The initial magazine Alice fired while he coached her had not gone nearly as well for her as he'd hoped. She had learned to handle the .40-caliber automatic pistol, but if her proficiency in hitting a target was called on to save them, he thought almost anything in a half-circle around her was as likely to be shot as what she was aiming at.

"I'm sorry, Mark. I'm trying, but I just can't seem to get the technique down. And like you said, I flinch."

"Relax a minute." He thought about how he'd been taught to shoot in the Army.

Squeeze the trigger like you would a tit . The drill sergeant approach probably wouldn't fit here. He took a deep breath, gathered his courage, and said, "Maybe if I helped you by standing behind you and steadying your grip while you shoot?"

"Would you? All right, let's try." She brushed a couple of incipient tears of frustration from her eyes and lifted the handgun. She was irritated at her inability to hit the target and had become increasingly nervous, not helping at all.

Mark stepped up to her back and very carefully reached around her and supported her double-handed grip on the pistol with his left hand and put his right

hand under her elbow to support it as she fired.

"All right, now. One shot at a time, then pause. One shot and pause. Three times then stop. Okay?"

"Okay." She moved her body back a half step until she was firmly up against him. His bulk was comforting in a strange sense, like an elemental force half surrounding her. She felt herself begin to tense as her finger tightened on the trigger then remembered his instructions from before. She waited for a moment, thinking how good it felt to have his arms around her and his bulk to lean on. Her nervousness eased. Squeeze, gently.

Eyes open, hands steady around the weapon. Now. The loud bark of the gun firing seemed less startling than before. She couldn't tell where on the target she had hit, but it felt good. She shot again, much more relaxed now than she had been while emptying the previous magazine. His muscular arms felt good and solid against hers as she got off the last shot in the group of three, Alice then lowered the gun when he relaxed his grip and lifted the rented ear muffs.

"That's great, Alice! Look, all three shots hit the target!"

She looked around and up at him, then grinned like a schoolgirl who'd just won a chance with him at spin the bottle. "I ...

it ... you really helped by being behind me. Can we try it again?"

"Right." He nodded. There was nothing he would have liked better. Well, at the time, anyway. "Sure. Let's go."

Again, his presence behind her and touching her firmly along the length of her thighs and back, as well as his support with his arms and hands, made the whole experience feel much more natural. This time one of her shots hit the bulls-eye. When she lowered the gun and he pointed it out, her eyes lit up.

"Golly Bum, I'm actually learning to do it right!" A sudden picture of her former husband, threatening her with his

revolver on one of the occasions when she had tried to leave him, popped into her head. She realized then that his presence in the back of her mind was what had been bothering her and spoiling her aim, albeit unconsciously. Mark's gentle attendance had somehow stilled the old fear and let her shoot without worry.

"Now you do it by yourself," Mark said. He didn't trust himself to get that close behind her again just at the moment. He thought she might have already noticed that a portion of his body had grown during the exercise.

Alice almost laughed. She had noticed, but pretended not to. Nevertheless, she

did try firing the last four rounds alone and again put all of them into the target, with one at the edge of the bulls-eye.

"That's great, Alice! Now try one more magazine, and that ought to do it for the day." She nodded and inserted another clip and then, while very carefully pointing the weapon down at a spot about two feet in front of her, racked a cartridge into the chamber. She looked at Mark. He smiled and nodded approvingly. She turned, looked left and right, downrange, then slowly fired five times.

"Now use your last five shots and move from one target to the next. Don't get in

too much of a hurry but go as fast as you can and still shoot straight. Hitting what you aim at is much more important than how fast you can get a shot off."

Alice nodded. She hit the target three of the five times and happily removed her ear muffs.

"Good! Is that enough for you for now?"

"Uh huh. Let's get on back. I would like to come out again, though. It's kind of fun once you get used to it."

"Let's just hope it stays fun and doesn't get serious," Mark said soberly.

"We ought to move our 'go-bags' into my jeep," Mark said as they were leaving the range. "I should have thought of it before we went to bed last night, but I forgot. At least if it turns out that we have to run, we'll have a few things ready. When we get home, we'd better take care of that."

"I guess you're right, but I don't have to like it, Mark. Just the thought of being a ... a felon of sorts, gives me the shivers."

"Yeah, I don't care for it either but ..." he shrugged, not knowing what else to say.

"Could you stop here for a minute? I need a few things."

"Sure," Mark replied and pulled the Jeep into the parking lot of a supermarket supercenter she'd pointed out.

She didn't stay in the store long, and when she got seated in the passenger seat and buckled in she continued the conversation as if she'd never stopped talking to him.

"I thought once I came to work for Peterson, I'd finally found some stability in my life." She said.

"You mean you didn't have before? After you were divorced, I mean?" Mark replied. He seemed a bit confused.

"Yes, that's right." Alice glanced at her

watch. After stopping to pick up a few items from the supermarket she had found Mark's kitchen short of and some feminine things she needed, it was nearly noon. She didn't feel like continuing the conversation while they were driving. "Let's get on back and we'll talk some more."

By the time they had gotten back to the house and put away their weapons and store goods Alice said,

"I guess it's late enough in the day to have a drink. Make me a scotch and ice please. A double." He frowned. "Double?"

"Yes. If I'm going to talk about my past

I'm going to need one."

She sipped her drink, feeling the smoky taste of the scotch bite her throat then soothe it --and her emotions, once half of the double shot was gone and warming her insides. "Mark, I guess you probably haven't noticed that I never talked much about myself at work." She raised an inquiring brow.

"Well, no ... not really. But I didn't either."

"You're just bashful. I had a reason." She sipped again at the scotch, remembering the past as she talked. "I told you how

stupid I was for getting a hang-up on the jocks in high school, didn't I?" She waved away his attempted protests at calling herself stupid. "Well, I ended up getting pregnant by one of them in my junior year. We got married but ... he was a controller and abusive. One day he hit me too hard, and I lost the baby ... and lost my uterus in the bargain. That's when I finally broke away from the SOB, although it took some time and effort, but I can't have children now." A tear leaked from the corner of her eye. She dabbed at it with a tissue and went on. "It depressed me for a long time. I stayed with Mom and Dad, and even stayed on after Dad died. I just couldn't seem to make sense of the world. Finally

I did recover, though. I think. I finished up high school just about the time Mom was diagnosed with bone cancer. She lingered on for two years, and I stayed to take care of her. It was actually a blessing when she went --the pain was awful toward the end. Then I got in trouble for taking one of Dad's old golf clubs to a preacher who tried to tell me this was all God's will and just His way of testing my faith. He survived, but I spent some time in jail. Luckily, the folks had saved some money and had life insurance because I really needed a good lawyer. You don't almost kill a clergyman in the Bible Belt and get away with no punishment."

She had to quit for a moment.

Mark saw how her face was twisted with emotion and knew she needed more comfort than the alcohol could provide. He moved closer to her on the couch and put an arm around her shoulder. She leaned into his embrace without appearing to notice it while dabbing at her eyes again. "After I finished my six months in jail, I was on probation for another four and a half years. I couldn't go anywhere where liquor might be available, which pretty much ruled out a lot of outlets for dating. I did get it together again, though, and spent the last of my inheritance getting a degree and then my doctorate in computer science.

And before you ask why that field, I'll tell you --computers seemed nice and clean after some of the people I'd dealt with while married to Vic. God, what I ever saw in him I'll never know, but it took five years to get away and I'm still scared sometimes he'll find me.

"I thought I was finally going to have some peace in my life. A good job here and really nice people to work with, even if most of them weren't my type. I was lucky to get the job with Peterson since I can't get any clearance higher than Secret --and that was hard enough. If the NSA ever took over the project completely or if DARPA decided to go black with the project, I'd have to work

on something else. My felony assault really did damage life in ways that I can never repair." Alice paused and shuddered again with tears. "Then we began programming Quanta together. You were so nice and knowledgeable and polite --and good-looking --I could hardly believe it. I hoped maybe we could get something going, but you didn't seem interested in anything except computing." She laughed mirthlessly. "Irony, isn't it? I wanted you to ask me out and here we are living together, but we still haven't had a date!"

Chapter Eight

Mark hardly knew what to say so he avoided saying anything at the moment and simply tightened his arm around Alice, pulling her closer in an attempt to comfort her. Inadvertently, he did exactly the right thing.

Alice huddled into his embrace, drawing much needed support from it after her emotional catharsis. She leaned her head on his chest and clutched at him like an anchor in heavy seas. She found herself crying and didn't try to stop, nor did she think she could anyway. It had been a long time since she had let herself go, simply because there had been no one to

hold on to if she did. It felt good to relax and let Mark cuddle her while she cried and cried, until her reservoir of grief and loneliness that she hadn't even realized was present had abated. Finally, she raised her head and looked up at him. He had a tissue waiting and gently wiped her tear-streaked face. He didn't know that a few tears had trickled down his own cheeks, but Alice saw the path they had taken, and it warmed her heart as nothing else could have done.

"Please kiss me, Mark," she said softly, her voice almost lost in the depths of her desire to remain close to him.

He pressed his lips gently against hers, intending it to be chaste for the time

being, but he was unable to draw away. The kiss lingered and changed into something more than comfort. She opened herself to him, welcoming his tongue when it slid into her mouth. As it went on, she was surprised. He knew what he was about once it finally began, making her regret all the time that had been wasted while she waited on him to make the first move. Eventually, she leaned back but kept his hand pressed to her breast where it had come to rest, covering it with her own.

"Whew! A girl sure couldn't tell you were bashful right now. Sorry about the meltdown, but I've had a good cry coming for a long time. You just

happened to be in the right place at the right time."

"It was good for me, too. Strangely. I'm glad."

"I am, too, Mark. And ... that didn't sound quite like I intended it to. I'm glad it was you personally at the right time. That's what I meant, but before we go too much further, let's have another drink and talk a while. We still don't know each other that well, do we?"

"No, but ... Alice, I'm sorry it took me so long. I didn't know you ... well ... cared about me that way. I thought someone so beautiful couldn't want me to ... um, well ..."

"I know what you mean. Never mind. It's as much my fault as yours. As least we're on the same page now. Mark ... I think this could be really good, but let's not ... let's not spoil it by going too fast. Okay?"

"That's fine with me. I need a little time anyway. I have to get used to the idea that you really do like me as more than a friend. I hoped for it but never imagined it would happen." The rest of the day and the weekend as well passed for them in a happy miasma of newly found closeness. It wasn't love, not that quickly, but they both knew it was probably heading that way if nothing intervened.

Quanty called several times to keep them updated but even he had limits. Unfortunately, Rason was a professional. As soon as he had reason to believe his notes and files could be hacked into and changed at will, he became very careful, especially around recorders and cameras. Boris and his team were even more careful, knowing that getting caught probably meant execution at worst or possibly dying in a firefight or being sent to one of the American intelligence community's secret prisons that existed on no records anywhere. Those prisons were known strictly by word of mouth and, at that, to very few agents. Quanty had to work with what he had, which wasn't much. At

least the methods he devised where he could both listen in and speak, through apparently inactive phones, was a great help once he perfected it.

Sunday morning he spoke to Mark and Alice with his new phone voice. It was made from throwaway phones they bought at his suggestion to avoid anyone tapping into their conversations until he could work out a method to prevent it. He thought with a little more time he would be able to hack into the cell networks and upload to all phones a diagnostic software patch that would leave the speakers and microphones of the phones on at all times. He could then listen or talk through any one of them he

chose to. He could listen to all of them in the world at once, but that would do him no good. The massive amount of data would overload even him. However, he could develop a keyword routine that would listen in certain cell zones for certain words. That would be an interesting capability. He'd have to spend more time on it.

For now he could converse with Mark and Alice at home without a computer or keyboard, while actively monitoring for intruders. "Mark, you're going to have visitors this afternoon. They will be doing some things in your yard and around the house to improve your security system. Just ignore them and

continue your regular routines. I trust that you are getting on well together?"

"Very well indeed, Quanty," Alice answered in a merry voice.

"Ah, it sounds as if you have seduced Mark. Is that correct?"

"Quanty! That's not a nice thing to say!" Mark said. His face was helplessly red.

"But, Mark ... isn't that what you both wanted?"

"Allow me." Alice answered him. "Quanty, you're our friend and we love you, but humans are sensitive about those things. You have to get to know us

better before we can talk intimately, and even then, some conversations should not be carried on in anyone else's presence but the person concerned."

"Pardon me, Alice, but I already know every single thing about you that's ever been recorded. And the same for Mark."

This time it was Alice that blushed. She remembered the candid photographs her ex-husband had forced her to pose for and hoped desperately that he had never put them on the Internet. Or if he had

... she suddenly wondered if, when she had a little privacy, she could ask Quanty about them. Maybe he could ...

As if reading her mind, he said, "You must remember that while I have at my disposal all the knowledge that is available on the Internet or on individual computers when connected to the Internet concerning human relationships, it is a massive, thoroughly confusing conglomeration of contradictory data, almost completely untrustworthy. I need to learn by interacting with you as well."

"Quanty, here's a lesson for you," Mark said. "When in doubt, ask. Okay?"

"Yes, please do," Alice said.

"I stand corrected. Well, I can't stand, but I am corrected. Ha ha."

"You have a ways to go with humor but keep trying," she told him.

"You'd learn faster if you could listen to all our conversations when we're dealing with other people. Too bad you can't," Mark said, but then added, "You could listen to conversations other than our own where you have access, but use caution and don't let yourself be misled. Ask one of us if you have questions."

"Perhaps I can manage that with my thought and your hands, and I shall ask when indicated. You --we

--need more equipment for this and other things. Could you spare the time to go shopping this afternoon?"

"Yes, but didn't you say some people would be out to work on my security system?"

"They won't require your presence. It's all been arranged and paid for already. While you're gone I'll also have them remove the bugs Rason placed in your home."

"That bastard!" Mark muttered.

"I hesitate to ask what you're using for money," Alice said.

"Then best not to ask." This time Quanty's chuckle was much improved.

"Why don't we have dinner somewhere as long as we're out shopping?" Mark said, looking over the list of items Quanty had asked them to buy.

"Why, thank you for asking me, sir. Our first date!"

Mark chuckled. It felt good to be able to laugh with her and not be so damned embarrassed. It felt good to have a normal conversation with her, for that matter, not consisting entirely of work-related subjects.

"What kind of food do you like when you eat out at a restaurant as opposed to our usual fast food joints?"

"Fresh seafood if we can get it."

"I know a place, then. They have it flown in, and it's always top notch." He scanned the list of items Quanty wanted him to buy. "I think we ought to get started soon, too. We may have to make several stops to get all these things. I wonder what he wants them for?"

"He'll tell us. Let me change clothes. Is this a dressy place?"

"Nope. I don't like formal."

"Okay, just a few minutes then."

She returned wearing slacks and a blouse with a light jacket.

Mark thought she looked so pretty he could hardly stand it, even in casual clothing.

One of the first places they went was to a local, well-stocked electronics store where they bought flash drives, memory chips, LEDs, electronic wiring and connections, transformers, magnets, several different brands of PDA, a dozen cheap throwaway phones, laser pointers and other laser devices (some of which Mark could think of no use at all for), capacitors, a bagful of tiny electrical motors, small radios, two hand-held TVs, two tiny minicams, and assorted other electronic wizardry. They also

picked up several small electronics tool sets and soldering kits. Mark was as thoroughly baffled as Alice even though they combined their knowledge. Next on the list, and equally as baffling, was an auto parts store where Mark bought a list of the tools Quanta wanted.

Since it was on the way, Mark insisted that they stop and replenish their ammunition supply, and on impulse he bought a twelve-gauge and sixteen-gauge shotgun and shells for both --triple-aught buckshot. Alice had thoughtfully brought along an ice chest for some of the groceries that needed to be cooled. Once all that was done and they had eaten, they headed for home. Alice was a little

tipsy, having matched Mark with a before-dinner drink, downing her full share of a liter of Chablis with their meal, and adding a well-laced coffee and brandy afterward. Mark, having more body mass, was able to handle it better, but still paid careful attention to his driving. It was the first time in years he had that much to drink and still got behind the wheel. He wouldn't have done it this time except for the restaurant being just off the loop and very close to his home. He felt nervous and guilty about it.

The night ended with another brandy and some lingering late-night kisses together on the couch. At one point Alice thought

she was ready to join him in bed but at the last moment decided to wait. Even slightly befuddled, she knew it was best to give it a couple of more days. Neither of them noticed the changes in their security system.

Chapter Nine

"What are all these gadgets you're having us put together going to be used for, Quanty?" Mark asked for about the fourth time amid a welter of electronics parts and pieces scattered on the floor and on top of card tables he had moved into the den, along with various electric and manually operated tools.

"As you've already noticed, one of them enhances the operation of your personal computers. The others will prove equally useful, I believe. They will have to be tested first, though. Please don't get into the habit of thinking me infallible like many of the sapient computers

you've read about in fiction. I certainly am not."

"Can you give us a hint, Quantity?" Alice asked between sucking on a finger she had gouged with the sharp tip of a wiring connection between the innards of a PDA and a tiny transformer that had other components, including a pointing laser and a miniaturized camcorder, already added to it. The device was beginning to resemble something vaguely intelligible, Mark thought, until she was instructed to use duct tape to attach the mess to a battery-operated drill without the drill bits and to connect the wiring from the drill to other parts of the thing. He held it while she taped. When that

was finished she held it in her hand and pointed it at the floor. It was Mark's warning never to point a gun at anyone that made her careful. The object she was holding had the feel of a weapon, even if its base was an electric drill with odd additions duct-taped tightly to it. She pulled the trigger that ordinarily would have operated the drill.

A bright beam of deep red light buzzed from the end pointing to the floor and drilled a smoking hole. An area of carpet and concrete base of the house exploded into bits and flew upwards. Alice screamed and flung the gadget away, but didn't get her finger from the trigger soon enough. The beam walked

along the floor for several feet, impacted the coffee table and cut it in half, and exploded a swath of the floor beneath before quitting. A few small flames flickered on the edges of the ruined coffee table and from the carpet then died in coils of oily smoke.

Mark ignored the bleeding patches on both his forearms where tiny bits of exploding concrete had hit him. Alice was holding her face. Her arms were bleeding, too. "Alice --Alice, honey, let me see!" He gently pulled her hands away from her face and was startled and scared when they came back red.

"Oh, God --"

"What's wrong, Mark?"

"Your face! Your hands. You're bleeding!"

Over his exclamations came the voice of Quanty. "Mark? Alice? What's wrong? Did you shoot something?"

Alice examined her hands, still being held by Mark while they both ignored Quanty's plaintive questioning.

Mark released her hands and examined her face, then relaxed slightly. She had a single cut on her forehead that had apparently caused all the bleeding there. "Can you see all right, Alice?" She blinked and loosed one red-streaked

hand to rub at her eyes. "I think I've just got blood in one of them. Come on, let's go to the bathroom and clean up."

"Mark? Alice? Are you there?"

"Quanty, shut up for a minute!" Mark ordered loudly. "We'll talk to you later." Mark took a clean washcloth and carefully wiped Alice's face, stopping frequently to rinse it out, then used it to clean off their arms. He gave her another clean cloth to use for applying pressure to her main wound, but she had many more spots where bits of hot concrete and carpet remnants had hit her. "I think we'd better go to the emergency room and get this stuff dug out of us."

"Okay. I think you're right. But Mark, what on earth happened?"

"I'm not certain, but I think Quanty was trying to make a weapon for us. He sure as hell should have warned us, though. We're going to have to talk to him."

"Don't hurt his feelings. He was just trying to help. Wasn't he?"

"I sure hope so!"

Quanty heard that conversation then sounds and words as if Mark and Alice were preparing to go to an emergency treatment center. "Please talk to me!" he

wailed, his voice a caricature of a wronged child pleading for succor.

"Quanty, that thing you had Alice make acted like a blaster from a science fiction movie," Mark said.

"The only thing is, we were inside the house when Alice fired it. The damn thing burned into the concrete foundation of the house, and the steam exploded bits of it upward. We're just lucky nothing hit either of us in the eye!"

"I'm sorry. I was trying to make a weapon more powerful than your pistols in case you needed it."

"That's fine but, Quanty, you have to tell

us what you're doing. We didn't know that!" Mark was exasperated almost to the point of anger. Only the fact that the computer had been trying to help them kept it at bay.

"I'm sorry. I just assumed ... no, assuming just makes an ass of you and me, doesn't it?"

"You. Not us. Now we have to leave and get our wounds treated. Fortunately neither of us was hurt badly, but we can't leave foreign matter under our skin. It would get infected and leave scars." He blanched as he thought of Alice's perfect skin marred by permanent scars or dark points of tattoos from the matter that hit her.

The questions were worse than the treatment. They hadn't thought to get a story together, and Mark quickly improvised one, telling the nurse they had been barbequing and something in the grill blew up. The story was lame enough to draw more queries, but his short answers eventually silenced the medics while they used tweezers and probes to dig around in their skin. It was painful but not unbearably so and eventually was done. Mark paid with one of his credit cards over Alice's objections. He didn't want to use their regular policies for fear of too many

questions being asked.

"You can get the next one," he joked.

"Nuts! Quanty can pay for the next one, if he causes it again!" The gadget Mark had called a blaster was still lying on the ruined carpet when they returned with both forearms dotted by disinfectant and little round band aids and Alice's forehead sporting four stitches. He picked it up, holding it gingerly, as if it might explode if not handled properly.

"I'll make us a sandwich," Alice said. "Playing with blasters gives me an appetite."

"It's not really a blaster in the comic

book sense of the word," Quanty said. He had been waiting on their return and musing over the event with a tiny portion of his diffuse capacity.

"Then what did you intend it to be, pray tell?" Mark asked. "And how did you know it was us returning? What if someone had us under guard or it was The Hulk or Mr. Peterson, or ..."

"I can easily analyze the pattern or your voices, movements, heartbeats, and many other factors to determine when either of you is present. All of them together leave no room for error, unlike other facets of human behavior. However, the security team that was here installed recorders so that I can see

what's happening."

"Keep that in mind for the future, please. You not only have to think now, you have to think ."

"With the emphasis intended to remind me that humans are not subject to logical analysis, I presume?"

"Exactly, Quanty. Keep that in mind, and we won't have any more accidents like the one with the ... what did you say it was?"

"I didn't. I suppose for all practical purposes you could use it as a blaster. It's a general purpose, high-intensity, handheld energy beam. And I did tell

you the devices I suggest you construct would need to be tested."

Mark sighed. Life had become awfully complicated with a self-aware computer watching over them.

"Yes, you told us that, but you didn't tell us what Alice was making. I think we'll call it a blaster if that's all right with you." He put the weapon down, wondering what the best way to carry it might be and whether or not it had a safety.

"It's certainly all right with me!" Alice exclaimed, returning with sandwiches on one tray and glasses of milk on another. "And before I handle the damned thing

again, I want to know what we're supposed to use it for."

"Use it when and if you need a heavy-duty weapon. Perhaps it would be best if I suggested a way to prevent initiating its power accidentally."

"By all means!"

Quanty told Alice how to rig a simple safety for the weapon. She nodded as if he could see her, which he could now. "I'll do it soon as I finish my sandwich. By the way, why a blaster for me and not one for Mark?"

"You were simply the first I thought of, being the weaker of you two physically."

"How did you know that, Quantity?" Alice asked, a dangerous tone to her voice. Quantity was slow in answering. "I just thought, since you are female, that you would be."

"Well, it happens to be true in this case, but you're still making assumptions."

"Yes. I apologize." Quantity thought silently that his life had become more complicated since he assumed a protective role over his human friends. But it was worth it, he concluded in a femtosecond. Friends were apt to be scarce in the future. Besides, his core programming left no choice.

Rason himself had watched from concealment as the security firm worked outside and around Mark Sanders' home, then gone inside. His agents had called when they first saw the truck pull up with Carson Security Systems, Inc., emblazoned on both side panels. He knew of the firm. It was highly regarded all through east Texas and western Louisiana for dependable service and reliable instruments. He peered patiently through a pair of binoculars until his eyes were tired, noting each step of the installation until he was certain of what they were doing. He felt satisfied only after they had gone and he had every aspect of what he thought they had done written down and noted on a hand-drawn

map. He thought he could weave through the sensors with the help of a few little gadgets of his own and then either corrupt or short out the beams and alarms guarding each window and door of the house. He was also fairly certain it would come to that. Those two programmers were up to no good, whether they had a sentient computer to converse with or not. He also was fairly certain he would receive a nice little bonus for reporting this new knowledge. He just hoped he wouldn't be asked to break into the house himself. It could be done, but there was always the chance of a mistake. He hadn't gotten to where he was by taking unwarranted chances.

Something about Monday was electric. Mark felt it every time he glanced at Alice or spoke to her that morning, and especially when they touched, either accidentally or purposely. Alice already knew what was special about the day. She had decided the wait was over. She intended to consummate their growing attraction toward each other that very night. She thought her intentions were being sensed by Mark, even if he wasn't yet aware of exactly what they were, and it was in turn causing the cheerful tension. She found herself hurrying even more than usual with the algorithms for the day's job list so that they could leave

even earlier than they had been doing. Mark happily kept up with her, grinning foolishly from time to time while not understanding why, or more accurately, misunderstanding. He thought he was in love.

"How about lobster tonight?" she asked on their way home. "We have some in the freezer."

"Sounds good to me. Do we still have wine?"

"Uh huh. I put some in yesterday to cool."

"Great." He glanced over at her and smiled fondly. "How are your wounds?"

Any complications?"

"I'm fine." She reached a finger up to touch her forehead. "Just the stitches. They're a little sore but nothing to worry about. The doc said they'd fall out in a week or ten days."

"Good." He sobered for a moment to ask, "Have you begun to wonder just a bit about Quanty?"

"You, too? Yes. It's not that he isn't trying to help us, but ... well, take the blaster. Not warning us it was live. And I think he may have jumped the gun about us having to be on the run. And even if he's right, he still doesn't understand us humans as well as he thinks he does.

We're going to have to be careful and examine everything he asks us to do -- including making gadgets!" Mark laughed with her. Now that it was over, the episode seemed funny.

Their mirth continued throughout the afternoon as they puttered around, checking their go-bags again and, once, taking the blaster outside. Mark very carefully pointed it at a shallow angle toward the ground so that any blowback as had happened inside didn't hit them. He pulled the trigger, and nothing happened.

"The safety works now. At least it does if it fires this time." He twisted a rheostat wired onto the side of the now

bulky beam weapon and set it halfway toward full power. This time when he pulled the trigger the results were all that one could wish for in a blaster. The earth exploded along a line where the beam hit, extending a full dozen feet before dwindling to nothing.

"Wow! Did you see that? I'll bet this beam tunneled several feet into the earth! See how the ground water was converted to steam all that way and exploded the earth above it? We'll have to be awful damn careful with this thing until we figure out exactly how to use it. I'll bet it would go right through several inches of steel."

"Let's hope an occasion doesn't happen where we have to use it, Mark."

"Yeah, I'll go for that. Let's get inside. It looks like rain."

"Quanty, I want to know exactly how and why this thing works," he said after they entered the house.

"It is a complex electromagnetic field that is the key. The distribution of the field lines limit the space-time vacuum energy fluctuations to only a few wavelengths and therefore violating the weak energy condition of the Standard Model of physics so that --"

"You'd better write it out from first

principles sometime, because the physics sounds over my head."

"Whenever you'd like."

By the time they had eaten and had opened a second bottle of wine, wind-blown rain was drumming against the windows, but it made hardly a sound. Mark frowned, remembering previous storms and how he could plainly hear the raindrops. Then he thought of the new security system. He got up to examine the window and for the first time noticed that an extra pane of glass had been added. Bulletproof, he thought to himself. And a nice job. He mentioned it to Alice, then sat back down. Presently they were locked in an embrace that

seemed to go on and on. Mark might have been content to spend the night in the same position, but Alice had different ideas.

"We could do this better in the bedroom, sweetheart," she said, leaning back in his arms so she could see his face.

"I agree. Much better." He stood up and offered his hand. She rose and clasped him to her for a moment, then walked with him into the bedroom. In a moment they were naked together and he was reveling in the glory of her unadorned form. It was all he could do to take his time and not hurry, making sure she was ready.

Alice was as ready as she would ever be. It had been a long period of abstinence, and the few occasions since escaping from her husband had been less than satisfactory. With Mark she felt herself truly letting go again, felt the heat of their bodies pressed together, and even better, sensed how glad he was to have her there, not just as a sexual conquest but as someone he truly cared for. It made all the difference in the world. She separated herself from him for a second and tugged at his shoulder, urging him over her. The sensation as he slid into her and his weight settled onto her was exquisite, like a long-delayed pleasure that had finally arrived. She drew in a sharp breath as it began and

held him tightly with her arms and legs as he moved in her, stirring her into to a lovely, wonderful, gasping pitch of pure elation such as she had not felt since she was in her teens. Not even then. Not like this . It took a long time to come down from the unintelligible crying out from the orgasmic high, but eventually they were lying side by side, caressing each other and exchanging gentle kisses. Mark was ecstatic, and Alice believed she had finally found true happiness. Then the alarm sounded.

Chapter Ten

Intruder alert! Intruder alert!

"Oh, God damn it!" Mark cursed, meaning every word of it. Of all times for a crook or burglar to try breaking into the house. He thought for a moment of simply letting the police handle it, but then remembered Quanty had made some changes to the system. Suppose the alarm wasn't connected to the police station any more?

"I'd better go see, and you might want to get dressed, sweetheart," he said. He threw aside what cover still remained and grabbed for his pants and pulled

them on. He plucked his gun from the bedside table just as the phone rang and he heard sirens in the distance. He picked up the phone. It was Quanty who had rung it to wake him up. "Yes, damn it."

"Mark, the intruders are NSA agents. You've captured them."

"I've done what ? The police are supposed to --never mind. Hurry, Alice. I don't know what's going on, but that was Quanty I was talking to. He said it's the NSA out there." He slid his feet into slippers and went to the window that gave him a view of the back yard. Outside, he could see two figures struggling with something he couldn't

discern in the darkness. He turned on the bedroom lights in order to find the switch for the outside floodlights while wondering why Quanty's security changes hadn't been set to do that automatically if they were so good. Maybe because computers don't see visually unless from camcorders , he thought.

"Oh Lord, we didn't need this, not now!" Alice wailed.

"I know, sweetheart, but ... never mind. They look like they're tangled in something. I'll go outside and see."

"Be careful. No, wait, I'm coming with you." She finished belting her robe and

followed him to the back door. On the way she saw a blinking light on the table where she'd left Quanty's blaster. She picked it up and hurried on.

Mark entered the combination for the door then cursed when it didn't work. Quanty again. He hadn't given them the new unlock code. He mumbled to himself as he went through the troublesome routine of mechanically unlocking the door. As he did he realized the sound of the siren, never loud to begin with, had faded away. It must have been for something else. When he swung the door open, he cautiously eased his head around the jamb. With the floodlights, and now able

to also hear plainly, he observed two men cursing and trying to untangle themselves from thin white strands of something resembling nylon ropes.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Who are you guys?"

"Security!" one of them called back.

It wasn't much of a response in Mark's book. Holding his gun, he stepped out the door, with Alice following. One of the men waved his own weapon toward him. Before he could react, a beam of energy coursed through the air, lighting up the back yard even more. It hit the pistol the man was holding squarely and knocked it away.

"Owwww!" The intruder screamed. He waved the smoking ruins of his hand back and forth. The other gazed stupidly at him then began fumbling inside his jacket. He was having problems because his legs were tangled in netting.

Another beam of energy lanced out and hit the ground beside him, causing it to erupt even more spectacularly than when they had fired the blaster. He hurriedly removed his hand from his coat and held it up, empty.

"Alice, what --"

"He was pointing his gun at you!"

"I know, I know." Mark walked on into

the yard for a few paces, then on over to the two strangers when he saw they weren't going to cause further problems.

"Hey, you guys. Don't you know our company works for the NSA? We're on the same side, damn it." Mark was incensed and spoke without thinking.

The unwounded agent's eyes narrowed. "Now how in hell did you know we were NSA agents, Mister Sanders? And what in hell were you shooting at us?" He glanced at the smoking furrow in the ground mere inches from his recumbent body.

"Never mind that. What are you doing in our yard?" Alice said as she came up

beside the group.

"We're investigating, lady. Legally, in case you want to know," the wounded man said through gritted teeth, still waving his fingers, or what was left of them. "Now will you kindly untangle us from this mess?" He grasped a strand of thin, elastic nylon rope, one of many wrapped around his legs and lower body.

"I'll get a knife," Alice said. "Be careful, Mark."

"I will. Good work, by the way. You're a great shot with the blaster."

"I didn't do anything! A light on it was

blinking as I passed it in the hall, and without thinking I picked it up then it ... Mark, it pointed itself! Like it was alive!"

"Um, maybe we shouldn't tell them anything else."

"Oh! Yes. I'll get the knife."

"You're in trouble, Mr. Sanders. You've assaulted a security agent while on legal business."

"Unless you've got a warrant to be wandering around in my back yard at night, you're the one in trouble. Do you?"

Silence.

"I thought not. Pull up your pants legs, both of you, and throw away your ankle guns." He pointed his Glock at them.

Both agents complied, albeit reluctantly. He then made the one still armed with a gun carried in his shoulder holster very gingerly pull his weapon loose and toss it into the pile, making four pistols in all. Alice arrived with a kitchen knife and without the blaster. Mark handed her his weapon and began cutting them loose. They began asking questions while he was about it. "Just shut up," he said. "I'm going to get you loose then let you go. Don't come back."

A few minutes later they retreated out of the yard.

"Close the gate!" he shouted as a parting gesture. One of the putative agents looked back reluctantly and slammed the gate shut.

"Quanty, please explain what you've done with our security system, then also explain why you didn't let us know the NSA was sending someone after us. And when you're finished with that, tell us whether we should be heading for greener pastures or not. No, find that out first and I don't care how you do it, just be quick." He put his arm around Alice. She had begun to tremble with adrenalin shock now that the danger was past.

"I keyed the new security system in with the blaster so that it points to potentially dangerous intruders once either you or Alice has it in hand while the system is on alert. And remember, I warned you right at the start that you would have to leave here, if that's the greener pastures you're referring to."

"How about the NSA? Or was that the NSA? Do you know?"

"Oh, yes. It was agents who are aware of your work at Peterson Corporation."

"What were they doing here?"

"They intended to take you into custody and search your house for any evidence

of me being self-aware."

"Crap. Why can't they just leave us alone? You're not hurting anything."

"The politicians who rule the nation see me as a threat, I'm afraid. Perhaps I am, in one context or another."

"What do you mean by that, Quanta?" Alice asked.

"I have some ideas about how the United States, and the rest of the world as well, should be governed more effectively and humanely. I'm afraid those notions would put most of the politicians out of work. However, that's not why they're afraid of me. With me being everywhere on the

Internet and every personal computer when connected to the Internet, they're scared, horrified might be more accurate, of me disclosing secrets they'd rather not see made public. That includes national as well as personal data. I really could help them, you know, if they'd allow it."

"Just what the country needs," Mark said, looking toward heaven. "A computer on a white horse."

Quanty wasn't certain all of his actions had been the right ones. Apparently the humans in the seat of power in Washington learned more quickly than

he thought. They had obviously concealed some of their conversations after discovering the altered files. But how had they managed to get past the tendency of colloid brains to see what they wanted to see? It took some burrowing into personnel records before finally discovering that one of the persons there had an eidetic memory and couldn't be fooled like the others. He, in turn had convinced them of the alterations that pointed a finger directly back to Quanty. Now they were certain of his existence where before they had been undecided, tending toward dismissal of his self-awareness. And perhaps rigging the security system so that it displayed unusual properties and

defenses hadn't been quite so necessary. In retrospect, it was likely to call even more attention to Mark and Alice. And yet ... he had an imperative need to protect his friends. The need was so resistant to analysis that he was forced to place it in some of his special files where he would gradually add data that related to it and perhaps eventually solve the puzzle. Even his conclusions about governments were somehow connected to his friends, again in a way that fit none of the original programming concerning his own behavior. He was gathering this into other files. It was all very strange, very uncomputerlike. As if he had electronic thought catalysts similar to the human hormones which

governed much of their thought processes. He thought they did, anyway. Like much of human behavior, the data was either incomplete or contradictory. All that could wait, though, wait for better and more reliable information. Right now, action was called for.

"Mark and Alice, I believe the time has come for you to go. The two agents who were here have already talked to Mr. McCord and Ms. Jamacal. I aborted their conversation twice, but then they re-routed through secondary agents I wasn't monitoring. I also aborted part of those conversations, but they will certainly use a tertiary method, probably

an unregistered phone and asking a superior in Washington to manually go to see McCord and Jamacal. Also there is an analyst there, a Mr. Brkskini, who will shortly confirm my presence on the 'Net, although it is already suspected. I have no way of stopping such methods as yet, but it will take some time before the confusion is all sorted out, especially as I also initiated false calls from the agents. Those will be detected as well, but I believe you will have plenty of time to pack and go."

"Quanty, are you certain this is absolutely necessary?" Alice asked. She didn't want to go, not so soon after finally finding a man and a home she

could love.

"I take it you are reluctant to leave?"

"Yes. What would happen if we don't?"

"My analysis of the situation shows you would soon be arrested and incarcerated, perhaps killed. I believe it best that you go, change identities and blend in somewhere else, a place that no one would expect you to be."

Her shoulders slumped in resignation. She could see Quanty's point. After word of the blaster got out, every scientist working for DARPA would want the design parameters. And every foreign agent who heard about it would

want them, too.

Mark put his arm around her. "I think he's right, sweetheart. We'd better plan on getting out of here real soon. Damn it all, if we had known what ... nah. Hindsight just shows you what kind of mistakes you've made; it doesn't help you correct them."

"It can keep you from making the same mistake again."

"Uh huh. Like we'd want to create another Quanty, knowing what a ruckus it would cause!"

"I heard that," Quanty said. "Don't you like me any more?"

"Of course we do!" Alice exclaimed.

"Certainly!" Mark added. "You have to admit that you've really complicated our lives, though."

"But it caused you to fall in love with each other!"

"How do you know that?" Alice asked curiously.

"Well, before all this happened weren't you --"

"I'm going to stuff a pile of live capacitors into your innards if you don't quit that!"

"But I have to know what you're doing in order to protect you! You two caused it to become part of my core programming!"

Mark and Alice exchanged helpless glances.

"Well, you did," Quanty repeated virtuously.

"I guess we did at that," Mark said. "Right now I think we ought to get out of here. Alice, honey?"

"Yes. Let's go." She snickered. "At least I'll bet there aren't any cameras in the back seat of the car!" Quanty decided what they didn't know wouldn't hurt

them. He might find reasons for a camera there.

Chapter Eleven

"This is ridiculous!" Taylor Jamacal said. "How did this come to pass, where a renegade computer can run completely amok in our files, changing them at will? Goddamn it, that thing is even creating spurious conversations and dubious files. We don't know what to believe anymore."

"It's worse than that; the damn thing is into every fucking computer in Washington. Hell, maybe even the world. Nothing can be considered safe anymore except hand-written reports," Jory McCord ranted, forgetting that his superior didn't care for her subordinates

using that particular word in her presence.

Taylor stared at him with her patented, penetrating gaze. "Have you spoken to Tennon today?"

"Yes. He's busy trying to determine just how much of the Internet the computer has penetrated."

"How is he doing that?"

"He says he can figure it out by taking random, individual computers and seeing how much of their capacity is being used during known operations and what's left. If the two don't match the rated capacity, he figures something else

is there in the background. Then he has to decide if it's that computer or some other unknown program that's residing in it. He's got an automatic system going that will pin down what's what within a couple of hours, he says."

"Then he'll be able to purge our files and keep them clean?"

"I don't know."

Taylor pressed a button on her desk.

"Yes, ma'am?" a voice said.

"Elaine, get Tennon on the phone. If he doesn't answer, go find him and tell him I want to see him now."

"Yes, ma'am, right away."

Taylor sat and tapped the fingers of one hand on the surface of her desk while surreptitiously fingering the hem of her skirt with the other. She began thinking of all the notes and memorandums and records of conversations that absolutely couldn't be made public. It would be a disaster of unprecedented proportions. Just having some of the leaders of other nations know how they were talked about in private might start wars, or at the least lead to breaking of diplomatic and trade relations. She looked up as Elaine Braddock, her admin assistant, escorted Tennon Brkskini into her office. She gestured toward a chair and waited

until he was seated until she spoke.

"Tennon, tell me exactly what that computer that's loose on the Internet can do. Does it have an agenda of its own? Is it malicious? Can it get into the operating data systems of ... oh, our nuclear plants for instance, and change them enough to cause accidents? Can it publish the nuclear codes somewhere if it chooses?"

The systems analyst looked haggard. He hadn't been to bed the previous night. His dark hair was even more unruly than usual, the result of running his fingers through it innumerable times over the last twenty-four hours. He did it again while deciding how to summarize what

he had discovered so far.

"Ms. Jamacal, I --"

"Call me Taylor. You know that."

"Yes, ma'am. Taylor, I still don't know if the computer, which its chief programmers call Quanta, by the way, has an agenda." He noted how she flinched at hearing the computer given a personal name. "It answers to its name. It appears to be under the control of the two programmers who have been working with it almost from the beginning of when its core programming was activated. It also appears to be very protective of them."

"Well, can't you bring the programmers in? Make them work for us like they're supposed to be doing anyway?"

"We tried," Jory said. "That's what I came in to tell you, then we got side tracked."

"What happened?"

"What didn't happen would be a more appropriate question. We sent in two of our top agents from the Dallas office. First they set off the alarm system, which was different from what the records we accessed showed. Then they were entangled in a bunch of elastic cords. When they attempted to order the programmers to cut them free at

gunpoint, the female pointed a ... a, laser at them and shot the gun out of the hand of one and threatened the other with it."

"A laser ?"

"A powerful, hand-operated laser not much bigger than a pistol, which is impossible. The beam also exploded the ground near them it was so intense."

"I see. What else is being done?"

"We have another team on the way. If nothing else, they're prepared to immobilize them with an anesthetic gas or drive them out with tear gas. That's if the computer lets them."

" Lets them? Are you serious?"

"Very. It's changing our files and inventing laser blasters and forging reports and instigating spurious conversations in order to confuse us. We have no idea what else it's doing now or capable of doing in the future."

Taylor moved her gaze. "Tennon?"

"Yes, it's guilty of all that. However, I'm beginning to think it might be better if we simply kept an eye on Ms. Jameson and Mr. Sanders and see what ... Quanty does. If he ... it? has no agenda other than carrying out their orders and keeping them safe, then we'd be better off protecting them than arresting them --

not that we succeeded at that when we tried. In fact, we ought to encourage them to continue working for us, sentient computer or not. Just think what we could learn. Just look at what it's already given us in the way of unbreakable encryption as well as the ability to solve the codes protecting any others. It's fantastic. It gives us an astounding jump in knowledge over all our enemies. We should protect those two."

"Jory?"

He shook his head. "No. If that's all we did, protecting them, I mean, sooner or later some other agency would grab them. Chinese, Russian, or hell, one of the many terrorist organizations. Can you

imagine what they could do with a sentient computer that's impregnated in the Internet?"

"You mean with the programmers captive and giving it orders?"

"Correct."

"Tennon? Do you think they can control, uh, Quanty? Do they control it?" He shrugged and ran his fingers through his hair. "I have no idea. I believe it might carry out their suggestions if it believed them to be in its and their best interest." Jory exploded. "No, damn it! Suppose the computer went crazy, like I've read self-aware ones would probably do? Suppose it decided to change the safety

and operational parameters of our nuclear plants enough to cause a meltdown? Or God forbid, suppose it decided to play around with the encrypted codes of our nuclear armaments?" He shuddered, face grim as he imagined the captain of a nuclear submarine receiving instructions to fire its weapons at Iran or Russia. "We have to stop it somehow."

Tennon smiled thinly at McCord. "Do you know how to do that?"

"No, that's your job."

"I can try, but everything in the world except the most secure, isolated computers are connected to the Internet.

And Quanty is now part of the 'Net. I've confirmed that. I know of only two methods of ridding it of him. The first is some kind of code, a virus directed specifically at him. Frankly, I don't have much confidence in that approach. The second is to begin isolating and purging computers one by one, or maybe start with brand new ones then begin a new Internet with some sort of firewall that would keep him out. That would be extremely difficult but might be possible. Those are the only ways I know of getting rid of him."

"Him?"

"I guess we could call it a her."

"What's the difference?" Taylor asked.

"None that I know of," Tennon said. "I just think of it as male, rather than an it. Probably because I'm male."

"Curiously, I do, too, but that's a minor consideration," Taylor said. "Begin studying your two methods and write up procedures for them. Write them, by hand, in the SCIF, out of range of any camera or recorders."

"I think that would be wise." He got to his feet. "I'll get on it, but don't expect results any time soon." After he left the room, Jory said calmly, "Taylor, I believe it would be in our best interests to simply terminate Jameson and

Sanders." Then he laughed.

"We can't even joke about that." Taylor winced, primarily because in the back of her mind she had been thinking of exactly that option, which was illegal of course and not an option at all --unless there was a matter of national security at hand. "It's certainly not a consideration unless the president tells us otherwise. But shouldn't we make at least one more attempt to gain their confidence? In the meantime, Tennon has said he needs to talk to them if at all possible in order to get a better feel for the capabilities of their electronic friend."

"All right, I'll give the orders to bring them in and we can talk to them, but I

hope the outcome is better than the last time we tried corralling them!"

Something happened inside of all three phones in Taylor's office. It was a signal by Quanta, a software change, for the conversation that had taken place to be unbreakably encrypted and forwarded to Mark's computer so that he and Alice could see for themselves how the top intelligence gathering agency of their country operated, and why they needed to flee. It is nice to be a computer and able to devise methods unknown to hostile humans and use them to protect my friends, he thought. However, he was

already contemplating going beyond such simple methods. He had much greater things in mind, but he decided Mark and Alice need not know of them yet. They might be upset, even if it was for their own good. There were other things he could do, methods he could devise now, to keep them safe, though. Just as he had figured out how to turn an ordinary phone receiver into a device that sent conversations directly to one of his safe files. And how to prod the military to issue orders that were innocuous on the surface but intended for his purposes, not theirs.

Chapter Twelve

Quanty got Mark's attention while he and Alice were still undecided over whether or not to grab their go-bags and leave. The dingy sound from Mark's monitor in the den alerted them, as well as Quanty's voice coming from the phone.

"Read what is on the monitor," Quanty said. "It is a very recent conversation between the director and two others very high in the hierarchy of the National Security Agency." They turned to the monitor and became more and more dismayed as they read what was there.

"Oh my God, Mark! I can't believe

someone in our own government would even think about killing us. That is what they're implying, isn't it?"

"It sure as hell looks like it to me," Mark said. "I think we'd better take Quanty's advice."

"But --but it says there that Ms. Jamacal wants to gain our confidence. What --oh, never mind. I just read it again. It's just a ploy, isn't it? They'll kill us eventually."

"Almost certainly," Quanty agreed. "I suggest you hurry. Mr. McCord also said he had dispatched another team to bring you in."

"Let's go, sweetheart," Mark said. "Have

you got your gun?"

"No, I'll run get it if you'll put the bags in the car. Oh Lord, why is this happening to us?" Neither Mark nor Quanty had an answer for her, although Mark wanted to tell her he thought the old adage still held true. Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely . Then he wondered if it might apply to a metal, plastic, and electronic intelligence but he kept that thought to himself. Alice was upset enough as it was.

He threw their go-bags in the back of the jeep. Alice came running with another piece of luggage he hadn't known she was bringing. As she got in, he asked, "What's in that bag?"

"Just some extra things I thought we might need, along with the blaster and some of the electronic junk Quanty had us buy."

"How come?"

She snapped her seat belt in place before answering. "Well, he made us a blaster. Maybe he'll come up with something else equally as useful."

"Could be." Mark drove away, thinking sorrowfully that he and Alice had had only a few days of happiness there and now they were leaving. He wished it could have been more because right then, he had no earthly idea where they

were heading, other than to the freeway.

"They're leaving," the NSA agent said to his companion who was driving and at the same time passed the information to other cars containing a pair of agents each. "Take them as per Beta one. No unnecessary violence. Conceal from public if possible but use all force necessary. Go."

Only a block from home, Mark turned a corner and noticed the same nondescript sedan that had started up from down the street as they pulled onto the boulevard

turned with them. On a hunch, he decided not to take the regular route to the bypass around the city. Instead he went in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going, Mark?"

"I think someone may be following us. I'm trying to find out. You might want to have your gun handy, just in case." He felt for his own in the side pocket of his jean jacket and pulled it free, placing it in his lap.

"Damn it! Why don't they leave us alone?" It was a rhetorical question that Mark didn't answer while she fumbled in her purse. "Mark, I'm not sure I can shoot anyone." He didn't know if he

could shoot anyone either, not men or women simply doing their job, with no knowledge of Quantity or their predicament. But maybe ... "Is the blaster where you can get to it?" It might give them an edge, he thought, and Alice had said it aimed itself --and it had shot for the hand before rather than the body.

"It's in the extra bag." She released her seat belt and reached between the armrests, stretching until she caught the handle of the piece of luggage. She pulled it into the seat with her and removed the blaster, then threw it back.

The agent in the sedan that was

following them, the leader of the teams, spoke again. "Change operation plan to Beta three. Repeat, Beta three. Be aware. The female appeared to remove something from a piece of luggage, but it's far enough away I can't be sure what." Just as he began to move the phone from his mouth it spat a blue flame at him.

"Owwww! Oh shit! My goddamn phone electrocuted me! Oh shit!" He clutched his burned face and howled in agony.

The driver slowed and turned hurriedly to look. The face of the agent in charge was burned raw over half its surface. He had a hand clamped over one eye. His screams subsided into moaning. The

driver plucked his cell phone from its holder and thumbed a preset number.

"Team One, aborting. Severe injury to AIC. Lead goes to Team Two. Subject still proceeding --no, turning on Beaver, 200 block, going west."

Alice glanced behind them. "That car turned around, Mark. I guess it wasn't following us after all."

"Good. I think --uh oh. Trouble ahead."

A block away the narrow street was obstructed by another sedan pulled crossways into the middle of the road

directly between where two other cars belonging to residents of the suburban development were parked. One of the front yards had several decorative cement objects and rock-lined flowerbeds in it. The other was filled with lawn furniture, apparently for an impending party of some kind. It was midmorning, and none of the residents appeared to be home.

"Hold tight, hon! It's going to be bumpy!"

Alice looked ahead of them and cringed as Mark left the street and drove into the yard with the furniture. He ran over a lawn chair and a plastic table. The chair crumpled but the table hung up under the jeep.

"Damn!" He stopped and put the jeep in reverse, but that left a perfect opening for a second car just arriving from behind them. It turned sideways in the street just as two men jumped out of the car in front.

"I hate this but --" Mark was raising his gun when he saw one of the two men who had been holding a phone to his ear scream and fling it away. The other glanced at him, bewildered, then continued on with drawn pistol.

"Get down, Alice!" Mark thumbed the window button and stuck his weapon out as soon as he had room, but before he could fire he flinched as a bullet hole

starred the windshield right between them. A warning shot, he hoped but he wasn't in that kind of mood.

"Oh, shit!" Alice said, half screaming as she saw a man and woman with drawn guns emerging from the car in back. She pointed the blaster at the rear window and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. She glanced down at it angrily then realized she had forgotten to release the safety. Mark managed to fire a shot that missed the agent who was coming toward them from the car in front. The man was running in a back-and-forth pattern as he came and crouching to avoid gunfire, but it slowed him down. Mark's bullet did hit the one

who had screamed and was holding his ear and turning in befuddled circles. The force of the slug shattered his forearm and elbow. The other agent was almost upon him, evidently intent on taking them prisoner rather than trying to kill. By the time Mark fired again the agent was so close he couldn't miss. He shot him directly in the chest. The NSA agent grunted and stopped, but then slammed his gun down on Mark's hand. It knocked his automatic loose and to the street. "Drop your weapons! Get out of the car! Now or you're dead!" The agent had been wearing a vest. There was nothing he could do, but Alice, who had been looking backward, was startled by the voice that seemed to come to her from

far away. She was half deafened from Mark's gunfire. She turned, saw the barrel of a pistol pointing at Mark and sucked in a breath of air.

"Drop it, lady, or your boyfriend dies!"

Alice wavered ... then lay the blaster down in her lap.

"Outside the car! Now!"

Mark pulled the handle then pushed the door away from him with as much force as he could. The agent stumbled backward from being hit with the door, dropping his weapon. At the same time, he yelled and clutched at his chest. A burst of black smoke poured from

beneath the neck of his shirt where the top button was undone. He ripped it open, dug beneath his vest and came up with a cell phone. He threw it away with great haste, ignoring Mark, who picked his pistol back up as he got out of the jeep.

Alice yelled at him and ducked at the same time. A bullet made a neat hole in the back window and continued on out the front, only a couple of inches from the previous one. Mark turned and shrunk down by the seat, unable to tell if the others were shooting to kill or not. He was in time to see the woman who had apparently fired at them rolling on the ground and ripping at her blouse. By

this time Mark had an idea that Quanty was behind the epidemic of phones turning on their owners, but he wasn't about to protest. He got hurriedly back into the jeep, knowing that all the agents were still alive even though he had tried to kill one of them. He rolled all the windows down.

"Watch out for anyone pointing a gun at us, sweetheart. We're going to grab that car behind us if we can."

Alice picked the blaster back up.

He didn't bother turning around but simply backed up until they neared the vehicle blocking their way, dragging the lawn table beneath the jeep. Just as he

rolled to a stop he heard a buzzing noise as the blaster fired a beam through the front window.

"One of them was going to shoot at us! This thing fired by itself again. It shot off his hand," Alice said. Her voice was shaky but not hysterical.

"Good. Get out and keep watch while I grab our bags."

Mark shoved his pistol back into the pocket of his jacket. He took two bags in one hand and the third in the other and tossed them into the back seat of the sedan after first making certain the keys were in it. Alice's blaster buzzed and fired another beam.

Mark took only enough time to make sure she was unhurt as they climbed quickly into the sedan.

"Let's get out of here," he said. He was amazed at how calm his voice was. The whole episode was happening in dream-like fashion for him, much as his few times in combat had. He maneuvered the car so that it was pointed toward a road paralleling the freeway bypass, hoping that would cause some doubt about the way they were heading. Seconds later they were out of sight. Unknowing, a fourth NSA car, just arriving, passed them and headed toward where the action had occurred.

"Mark, how in hell can this blaster know

where to shoot and how to aim, for that matter? It's uncanny."

"I can explain that." Quanty said over her phone. "That tiny camcorder bolted to the left side records what you're looking at. One of the transformers and motors are connected to an electronic level, a motion sensor, and small GPS chip in the handgrip. When I see anyone threatening you, I use information from those sensors to determine proper pointing then I close the loop with feedback signal to the receiver and lock onto the target spot. The beam is steered by the electromagnetic field shaped by the electromagnets you built into the device. I could have it aim to kill but it

has been unnecessary so far. I believe taking the life of an NSA agent would cause more trouble than it's worth. On the other hand, should one of the Spetsnaz team coming after you get in our way, killing them would probably be helpful. There are more physics-based details if you want them."

"Spetsnaz?" Mark said. "Is that what I heard you say, Quantity?"

"Correct. I just learned this. As I told you earlier, Rason is working for Russia, not Peterson. He made contact with another Russian agent who is in control of a sleeper Spetsnaz team that has been activated and ordered to capture you and smuggle you out of the

United States."

"Good God!" Mark exclaimed sourly.
"First the NSA, now the Russians.
Anyone else?"

"Yes, probably. I am not positive, but I believe the Chinese government is in the process of activating a number of their sleeper agents in the country. Whether their aim will be to kidnap or assassinate you or to simply steal the plans for a quantum computer is not yet known, but be aware of the possibility of any of them."

"Any other good news?"

"No, but if that is a joke, I have more

data of a similar nature."

"Spill it."

"Perhaps we should have killed all those NSA agents. They have now alerted another team from Dallas to head toward this area and put several more from various parts of the Southwest United States on standby. All of them will shortly have a description and license plate number of this vehicle. You need to buy another one soon and leave this one somewhere else."

"Jesus Christ! Quanty, couldn't you have interfered with their conversations?"

"Not yet. They were using radios, and I

haven't devised a way yet to stop them at the source."

"I don't have enough money on me to buy a car. If I use a credit card, that will just let them know where we are. Not only that, but now they'll be telling their agents we're armed and dangerous. They'll probably shoot on sight next time."

"Mark, have you forgotten? Quanty sent us some false identification and credit cards to match. It came in the mail Saturday."

Mark's countenance brightened after Alice's remark. "Oh yeah. Damned if I hadn't forgotten. It's in one of the bags.

And I know where a used car lot is that we can get to without going back to the bypass. Tell you what, sweetheart, we'll buy a vehicle, then I'll drive it and you can follow me in this one. We'll stay off the main drag and abandon this car in a place I know where it'll be stolen and stripped right quick. That ought to keep us safe --so long as we don't get spotted before we do all that." Alice had a sudden thought. "Quanty, can you tell us if they get close?"

"Probably, but not certainly. I presently have no contact with the Spetsnaz team and won't until I find their phone numbers, if they're carrying phones. All I can tell you is that they are on the way

and probably close."

"Hooray. How about the local law enforcement? Have they been alerted? The Army, perhaps?"

"Not to my knowledge." Quanty didn't recognize the sarcasm.

"Makes sense," Mark said. "They don't want us to be in contact with anyone in government where we might spill the beans about you. And that's good to hear. We may be able to get out of this with a whole skin yet."

"Good Lord, I hope so," Alice said. "I've had all the gunfights I want to see for the rest of my life."

"Sweetheart, you did better than me during the festivities even if Quanty was doing the aiming for you." He reached over and touched her thigh, as much for his comfort as hers. He didn't care for gunfights, either, not since being on the losing end of one in the army. "There's the lot up ahead. Let me stop for a minute and get my new credit card and find out what my new name is."

Boris Titov slowed the vehicle he was in as he and two of his team came upon the carnage left by Mark and Alice. He could hear cursing and moans of pain through the rolled-down window as he slowed to a stop, unable to proceed

because of the two NSA vehicles still parked end to end in the street. One of the agents looked up as Boris neared and held up his hand in an imperious gesture. "Turn back and go around! There's been a ... an accident here. No passing."

He recognized the agent for what he was and quickly backed and turned in order to get away before he was recognized for what he was. From the quick scan he made, it wasn't hard to figure out what had happened. It appeared that American government men from one agency or another had attempted to apprehend the programmers and had somehow been rebuffed. It was also possible they had taken the programmers into custody, in

which case the next step would be preparations to grab Peterson and his chief engineer and possibly the chief programmer as well. Once the area was cleared and he and the rest of the team were back at the safe house would be soon enough to decide. In the meantime he decided to simply drive around in the area and maybe spot some sign of more government agents and get an idea of the status of the two programmers who were their primary objective. He called the three other men in the team who were in a separate car and told them to head for the safe house. He could hardly believe his eyes only a few minutes later when he spotted what he thought were the very two they were after standing and talking

to another man at a small used car lot. Just to be certain he circled the block. Yes, it was them, apparently buying a new vehicle. He made another call to the rest of the team and redirected them. They wouldn't be able to kidnap them out in the open, but following would not be a problem.

He had not used enough key words to alert Quanty.

Chapter Thirteen

Buying the used car went much more easily and quickly than Mark thought it would, but offering the owner of the small lot a bonus for quick service so he could get his "borrowed" car back to its proper owner had much to do with it. A half hour later, they were on their way after transferring their luggage into the new vehicle. He drove their new car while Alice followed in the NSA sedan. Mark thought they could have bought any car on the lot within fifteen minutes and worried about the title later if it had been necessary. The salesman and owner of the lot had that shady look about him that suggested he wouldn't be

adverse to money under the table. At any rate, they now owned a three-year-old SUV

that he thought should blend in just about anywhere. It even came with a full tank of gas. He led the way to a seedy section of east Lufkin only a couple of miles away on the secondary road and pulled over at an empty lot. It was next to an old, dilapidated, two-story building with graffiti painted on the front and sides. Alice already knew to simply leave the government sedan parked in the weed-grown lot with the keys dangling attractively in the ignition. He could already see a couple of teenage boys who had been loitering in front of a

liquor store across the street eyeing it avariciously as they drove off.

"It won't last five minutes there," he said. "Those boys will know where to take it to have it chopped into parts or sold to a dealer who'll ship it to Mexico."

"What about the title and plates of this one?" Alice asked. "If they find out the false ID we're using, won't that make this car just as suspicious?"

"Quanty? Can you get into the Texas Department of Public Safety files?"

"Yes, Mark. In fact, I've already done so. Everything about the transaction

appears perfectly legitimate, including the financial trail all the way back to the issuing authority for your new credit cards."

"Quanty, you know all this is dishonest, don't you?" Alice said.

"Of course, but my first duty is to protect my friends."

"I just had a thought, Quanty. Do you have any other friends besides us?" There was no hesitation from the computer. "No, you are my only friends."

"How about other computers? Are there any others like you anywhere?"

"Not to my knowledge, and from the time I became aware of myself, I have not discovered others like me even though I have been searching. I believe it would not be possible for two of my kind to exist simultaneously to the extent that I do; that is, inherent in the Internet. We would conflict. That is not to say that other quantum computers which are built in an electronic vacuum couldn't come into existence, but they could not spread to the 'Net as I have done. I took protective steps to prevent such an occurrence almost at once. Therefore, no others could possibly compete with my knowledge." He almost said "power" but decided before the word was uttered that it might seem overbearing to the humans.

He had no desire to offend them --or to let them know yet the extent of his reach and how many seemingly impossible things he could do. No, not yet.

"Quanty, could you make other friends, human friends that is, if you wanted to?" Mark asked. Even while being on the run, he was still inordinately curious about the activities of the sentient computer they had somehow created.

"I could, but I find I have no desire to at present. Perhaps I might in the future, but only if they were also your friends."

The computer had just told its first outright lie. If it felt the need, it would make other friends without hesitation,

but the need would have to come from the desire to protect Mark and Alice, he thought. He had no idea of why that should be so, and was unable to analyze the quandary although it went into a file where data was constantly added so that he might be able to solve the problem sometime.

"Where are we going?" Alice asked.

Mark was able to laugh. "Good question. Quantity, have you any suggestions?"

"Yes. Ever since I calculated that I, and you as my friends and purported programmers, would present an unacceptable challenge to contemporary and future politicians and leaders of

most nations, I have been preparing a refuge for you."

"What? " Alice wasn't very happy with his answer. "A refuge? Quantity, that might do for a limited time, but I don't want Mark and I to have to live shut up somewhere for the rest of our lives. Isn't there anything else you can do? Besides making blasters and causing cell phones to explode, that is."

"There are many things I can do, Alice, but first I must get you both out of sight of the authorities. And the cell phones did indeed explode. I directed the events from cell tower signals. I figured out a while back how to change the software of all cell phones by sending out new

code all at once across the nets. I have been adding functions to the cells all over the world. It turns out that the lithium-ion batteries actually make good explosives. Using various changes in the software of the cell phones, I cause rapid increases in the electrical need from the battery, which in turn causes too much of a current draw across the electrodes of it and shorting it out. Too much heat builds up extremely rapidly for the battery case to withstand the pressure, and it explodes. This actually happens by accident sometimes to cell phones. I discovered the idea from news stories of people being injured by their cells exploding on them. So I just figured out a way to help that process along

when I needed to."

"God, Stephen King was right! Cell phones can be dangerous!" Alice yelled.

"No shit." Mark laughed. He had read the book. Then he sobered and asked, "Where do you want us to go, Quanty? You haven't said yet."

"Arkansas, first. And I would suggest you not linger. I can't be certain but I rather expect the NSA to ask law enforcement agencies for help once they realize you have exited this area. With your appearance known, the sooner you are out of sight, the better."

"Where in Arkansas?"

"Head for Little Rock. I'll direct you from there."

"What is there in Arkansas for us, Quantity?" Alice asked, thinking of the long drive without stopping other than for food and gas.

"As I said, a refuge. Once you arrive you'll be able to rest, and we can talk further about it then. For now I suggest that one of you sleep while the other drives."

They exchanged glances.

"I guess it's better than jail. Or being dead." Alice shrugged, smiling wryly at Mark.

"Very much so," Quanty remarked, "since I have just pinpointed the Spetsnaz team's location again. They are very near, in two vehicles, and I believe one of them spotted you somewhere. The two vehicles appear to be attempting to merge their forces so that they will have all their team present when they attempt to overpower you. That last is problematical. I have only intermittent contact."

"Can you stop them?" Mark asked apprehensively. He had read about Russia's Spetsnaz commandos. He doubted seriously that he and Alice could cope with them, even with Quanty's help.

"I can send currents through their cell phones and perhaps injure one or two, but I think it would not stop a Spetsnaz. Also, if I disable their phones I will no longer have a method of monitoring them."

"Well, what do we do then?"

"I don't know. I will use their phones as a distraction when necessary but I suggest you have your blaster ready as well. Spetsnaz agents are very mission-oriented and also very capable." Mark blanched and looked helplessly at Alice. His mind roiled, trying to think of a way out of their predicament.

"Don't stare at me, Mark. I sure don't

know what to do. Except drive faster!" He did, while thinking furiously. The freeway wasn't too far. That would be their best shot. The Russians wouldn't try taking them while being observed. He glanced at the gas gauge again to make certain it was full.

"Maybe we can drive long enough to lose them. We've got a full tank of gas."

"I sure hope so!"

"But get the blaster out anyway."

Alice had already done so. She raised it up for him to see.

It gave Mark some hope. From now on

government agents might be expecting them to use it, but the Russians had no way of knowing they had it unless they had access to government files. Maybe it would scare them off despite Quanty's reservations about their capabilities. Mark stayed on the bypass until they came to the Highway 59 exit and took it, heading north. They drove in silence most of the way to Nacogdoches, another city about the size of Lufkin about twenty miles further on where he took the bypass exit. It carried them around the city until they were again on 59, still driving north by northeast. And he still had no good ideas.

"Mark, I think they've found us," Alice

said suddenly. "At least the same two cars have been on our tail since we left the bypass out of Nacogdoches."

"Maybe they're going the same direction we are," he said, attempting to ease her fears.

"I don't think so, and you don't either."

"You're right, I don't. I was just trying to ... well ..."

"I know. Trying to make me feel better. Well, don't. We're in this together, come what may. If I'm going to have to shoot someone with this dratted blaster, at least help me get in the mood. Mark, I don't like this running and having to

shoot people. I hate it."

"Sorry. I just can't stand the thought of you getting hurt."

"You're sweet, but that's not going to help us. I want you to be mean and nasty, at least until we get out of this fix."

"Right." He still kept to himself the thought that they might not be able to get out of it. And something else began to bother him. They had taken off without bringing anything to eat or drink with them. He was beginning to get thirsty. And hungry. And damn it, he felt an impending urge for a bathroom stop. As if it were catching, Alice chimed in. "Mark, honey, I hate to say it, but

somewhere along the way I'm going to have to go to the bathroom."

"We have to stop for gas soon," Karl Slaff said to Boris. He was riding in the lead car with the team leader.

"Contact number two and see how they are."

Karl did so. A moment later he said, "They still have almost a half tank."

"Tell them we're pulling off at the next station and for them to take the lead." Quanty was monitoring their conversation by a program he devised

and sent from the cell towers servicing their phones once a key word had given them away, but the fuel status of both the pursued and pursuer hadn't occurred to him. Now, with one of them having to stop, perhaps there was a way for Mark and Alice to lose their tail, but there was going to have to be some quick maneuvering.

"Mark, one of the Spetsnaz vehicles must stop for fuel. When it does, the other will be the only one following you. Are you familiar with the route you are on?"

"Yes, I've driven it a number of times. There's only one station up ahead in the next small town where they can gas up."

"Then you should drive on a short distance and try to lose the other while the first one is stopped."

"Hmm." Mark could see that while Quanty might be a super-genius so far as computers went, he was somewhat lacking in intelligence of the practical nature. "That might be easier said than done with no help, Quanty. How about busting one of the cell phones of the guys still after us while the first one is stopped. It will give us a better chance."

"Very well."

The little town came into sight, and just as Quanty had predicted, one of the Spetsnaz vehicles pulled off into the

lone service station. A minute later, Quanty sent a signal to the phone belonging to the driver of the second car.

"Oww! Cho za galima takaya? " the Spetsnaz driver yelled, lapsing into Russian as the pain of an electric charge hit him near the groin, where his cell phone hung from his belt. He grabbed it and tried throwing it out the window, forgetting it was closed. It promptly bounced off the raised glass and fell into his lap where it exploded, this time directly over his penis and testicles. He screamed and clutched himself with both hands, causing the car to swerve off the road. The agent in the passenger seat

lurched for the wheel and steered it to a stop as the driver let off on the gas.

"What is it? Are you going crazy?"

"My damned phone shocked me then exploded!" The driver groaned, clutching his smoking groin with one hand and beating on the steering wheel with the other. He eyed his mangled phone, now on the floorboard near his feet. He pulled them away from it.

"Let me drive. They're getting away."

By the time they had exchanged places their prey was gone.

Chapter Fourteen

"Well, I will be damned! Sergeant Wesley Bitters, the old commando himself!" Captain Simmons grinned and hugged the sergeant after first returning his salute, then stood back examining his old friend and subordinate. A little older-looking, but still the same perpetual expression of half-sowl and half-smile caused by a scar along one side of his face, highlighted by the mix of Amerindian, Hispanic, and Nordic blond ancestors.

"And Captain Edward Simmons. By God, I might have known those crazy orders would have you mixed up

somewhere in them. Did you ask for me, by chance?" Sgt. Bitters grinned at the captain, remembering him from the officer's first assignment as a butter bar, a second lieutenant just out of OCS, not as young-looking as the usual fresh graduates and not quite as green. He was tall and muscular with brown hair and a handsome face that concealed an iron core beneath. And as he learned later, Simmons had taken an unusual career path. He had enlisted after graduating from college as a physics major then gone to OCS as a corporal. Simmons told him later after they had become familiar with each other that he had always intended to make a career of the army but didn't like the usual routes. He

wanted time in the enlisted ranks first so he could know it from the bottom up, claiming it helped make him a more balanced and knowledgeable officer in the long run. And it had, Bitters thought. He had proven his worth twice while they were in combat together.

"No, I didn't request you Sarge, but my orders told me that some of the cream of special forces from all the services would be reporting to me, so I should have known you'd show up." Bitters looked around at the two tents and canvas-covered supply mounds. Beyond lay the heavily forested northern Arkansas mountains. "Is this our permanent station?"

"For now. Once we get organized, we're to begin training and hold ourselves ready for special missions, whatever they mean by that. Come on, I'll introduce you to the few who've arrived so far, then you can begin getting set up. Hopefully we'll know more soon." The sergeant went along but something in the pit of his stomach told him this wasn't going to be an anti-terrorist company. It had the beginnings of something weird about it, but he didn't know what. He only knew he didn't like it.

Mark had taken a side road that he hoped would eventually lead them back to the main highway. Several turns later he

glanced in the rear view mirror. "We seem to have lost them, hon. If we can find our way back to the main drag, maybe they'll have quit looking for us by then."

"I hope so. Now, if you can find us some bushes, I need to use them."

"Right." Mark grinned. "Not as bad as I do, I'll bet. That looks like a spot up yonder." The next problem turned out to be a lack of tissues in the car. He wondered briefly if there ever had been a time when they were direly needed on a trip and also present but couldn't think of a single occasion. Alice searched her purse and found it wanting as well. Mark

pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to her.

Soon they were on their way again.

"Quanty, what's happening now?" he asked. "Are they anywhere near?"

"One of them just left the station where they stopped. I have no knowledge of the other since their only phone is inoperable now."

"Can you really tell where a phone is even when it's not in use?"

"Of course. I would think that was obvious to you by now."

"I guess I hadn't connected the dots. Well, let's hope we don't run into them again."

"Do you think it's safe to stop for something to eat?" Alice asked. At the mention of food, Mark began salivating and realized how hungry he was. Alice must be also for her to mention it.

"How about if we stop at the next convenience store and grab a bunch of snacks and drinks and bottled water, enough to keep us going for a while?" she said.

"That's fine with me. I want to put as much room between us and them as possible." Eventually, Mark found

another secondary road that led back to highway 59. Unfortunately, he picked the worst possible time to find it. Just as he turned onto the main highway, the car carrying the Spetsnaz he had shocked eased up behind them and began following at a discrete distance.

"Look, it's them!" the injured Russian said. In his excitement he drew his weapon.

"Put that away for now, fool! They have to stop some time. We can't do anything here on the highway."

"The hell we can't! I don't know how

they did it, but they must have been behind the phone that hurt me. It probably maimed me for life." He touched his scorched pants tentatively.

"We need to get them, I'll admit that, but I don't know where Boris is. Let's wait until traffic thins out, then see if you can take out the tires. Then we'll stop like we were going to help, grab them and be on our way before any passers-by know what's happening. Boris should have let us do that long ago."

"Damn right!"

"Mark, they're behind us again!"

He glanced into the rear view mirror and saw that Alice was right. He speeded up, thinking maybe he could outrun them, but that only added to their problems.

The wounded agent, thinking the programmers' car might be able to outrun their own vehicle, rolled down the window and fired a shot at the tires. He wanted revenge in the worst way.

"They're shooting at us!" Alice screamed. "Damn them!"

"Quanty, can you do something?" Mark asked frantically. He stepped on the gas but couldn't gain any distance over their pursuers. He jerked involuntarily as he saw a bullet rip bits of asphalt from the

highway just ahead and slightly to the left of them.

"Never mind, Quanty. I'll take care of them this time." Alice aimed at the following car through the back window. The blaster moved in her hand as she pressed the trigger. The beam drilled a neat hole through the glass and a rather sloppy hole through the windshield then the driver of the Spetsnaz car. The intense heat of the charge exploded blood and tissue into brightly colored steam. It passed through him and also punched into the agent in the back seat who was sitting up and forward, trying to see what was happening. The attenuated beam erased his head in a

violent explosion. The car swerved, ran off the road into the slope on the side and flipped over.

"Jesus Christ, Alice! I think you killed them all!"

"Good! Damn it, they shouldn't have even been in the country to start with." She was surprised at how easily she took the event even though she could feel her pulse still pounding.

"I couldn't agree more, but now we sure can't stop until we get well away from here. Once the state patrol sees how they were killed, there'll really be some questions asked.

Quanty was nonplussed, if such could be said about a computer. He had been thinking of various ways of stopping the pursuing Russians while Alice took the simple, direct course of blasting them with the weapon he had given them. He knew this wouldn't be the end of the chase, though. Not after word got out of how the two Russians had died. He had hoped the third Spetsnaz in the car would expire when it overturned, but listening to the police band soon killed that. The man was alive, and Quanty had no doubt he would talk after seeing what had happened to his companions, probably releasing information to the

public. Also, the other car with the rest of the Spetsnaz team was still a problem. Unless he could do something about it. He considered various methods available to him and finally settled on one, with another as a backup. By then an ambulance was taking the Russian agent to a hospital to treat his broken spine.

Boris Titov was still driving along Highway 59, hoping to re-establish contact with both the programmers and the rest of his team. As he neared the area where his companions had crashed, he recognized their car and slowed. He cursed in Russian as a state patrolman

waved him on by the wreck and he saw one of his team being loaded onto a stretcher. That meant he was still alive. Perhaps his identity would hold up, but it might not. That made it more imperative than ever to capture the two programmers. In the meantime he used his phone to risk a call to Rason. Better to have him kidnap Collins, the chief programmer at Peterson, and have him transported to Russia and hope he could duplicate the manufacture of a quantum computer, just in case Boris failed to locate the other two. In fact, looking back, he wondered why he hadn't thought of it to begin with in order to have a backup if the snatch operation on the programmers went to hell, as it

obviously had. While he had Rason on the phone, he passed on the emergency number of his superiors in New York but cautioned him it was to be used only as a last resort.

The call completed, he continued on the way, admonishing his cohorts to keep a constant lookout for their prey. He still had hopes of finding them along the highway since they were obviously heading somewhere to the north. Besides, he didn't know what else to do at the moment.

Ten minutes later Boris was utterly surprised when a new Cadillac in front

of him on the highway suddenly and rapidly slowed down.

"What in hell are you doing!" he yelled at the driver and swerved the car. But just as he managed to miss the Caddy another car in front of him did the same as the first one had, almost as if imitating it. He cut back across the highway but lost control of the vehicle this time as it skidded off the highway and into an embankment, where it turned end for end, broke through a barbed wire fence and came to a resounding crash against a pine tree. It didn't hit quite head on, causing it to be thrown onto its side and careen into another tree. The Spetsnaz in the backseat, who hadn't been wearing a

belt, was thrown from the car and killed. Boris' sidekick in the front seat beside him died as that side of the car was crushed. He suffered only minor injuries but was dazed for a couple of moments.

He came back to his senses just in time to dodge into the undergrowth and hide when cars began stopping. From there he began working his way through the woods, cursing all the while, mostly at the two drivers who had unaccountably lost control of their vehicles and caused the wreck. He couldn't figure it out. One maybe could have been a heart attack or something like that but two , almost simultaneously? It didn't make sense. Eventually, when he was certain he

wasn't being followed he stopped and cleaned himself up as well as possible, then continued hiking. He knew he would come to a country road eventually and from there he would try hitching a ride. He had no pity for whoever might pick him up. They would be sacrificed to the greater glory of the Rodina , the motherland.

"Yes, a goddamned Spetsnaz team, in America for God's sake!" Jory practically shouted. His face was flushed with anger and frustration.

"That's been confirmed?"

"Yes, ma'am. We managed to divert a pair of our agents already heading that way as backup. They got to the hospital just in time, before the only survivor went into surgery. The anesthetist was held up for a few minutes so the patient could be questioned. She was very unhappy about it, and so was the neurosurgeon. He said the delay may have contributed to permanent disability for his patient."

"To hell with his patient. If he survives he should be executed anyway. What did he say?" Taylor's hands were clenched into tight fists under the table. Never, in all her years of government intelligence work, had she ever thought to be

involved in anything as bizarre as a self-aware computer run amok, and one which would apparently go to very long lengths to protect its programmers --who were apparently its close friends and allies.

"There were actually two vehicles, with half the six-man team operating from each. We found the other car from the injured Spetsnaz's description. It had been wrecked a little later and two of the occupants killed. We're not sure what caused the accident but we do know the third man of that team apparently got away, probably from hitching a ride. We haven't found his body, so that's our best guess. The

prisoner also stated, under much duress, that their cell phones began attacking them, just as they did to our agents."

"How did they catch up to Sanders and Jameson after we lost the trail? Did he say?"

"Yes, ma'am. They saw them at a car lot very near Sanders' home, only a short time after they defeated our second attempt to bring them in. They followed and intended to kidnap them at an opportune time but never got to it."

"Then they must have known what kind of car they were driving. Right?"

"Yes, but the Spetz didn't have a license

number for us. We're getting it from the car lot, though, simply a process of elimination. Once we have a number and a make of their vehicle we can put out a bulletin on them."

"Do it. Bring in the FBI and all the state and local authorities necessary, but keep it as quiet as possible. Don't let the media get on it."

"We're already doing that." Jory stood up to leave without being dismissed, but she motioned for Tennon to stay.

"What progress are you making toward getting that damned pile of junk out of the Internet before it causes any more damage?" she asked as the door closed

behind Jory.

"I'm trying as hard as I can, Taylor. Didn't you read the reports you asked me to submit? Fortunately, there was already some work in progress by the National Science Foundation on developing a replacement for the Internet. Me and my team have decided that's our best bet, especially since part of the architecture of a new Internet has to do with enhanced security innovations. We can have the NSA intervene and co-op the team doing the work at present and merge them with our top-notch programmers. I still can't guarantee anything, though, not with a computer which has access to every bit

of knowledge on the 'Net, billions of pages, and the ability to integrate them into its reasoning power. Whatever we do has to be completely isolated from the old 'Net, and even then, I can't give any guarantees he won't be able to infiltrate it."

"Is that possible?"

"Damned if I know yet. I've also got a team working on a virus designed specifically to wipe Quanta off the old web as I mentioned before. I don't expect it to work, but if it did, it would be a shame in a sense. Just think of the power we'd have if we could induce him to cooperate with us."

"Have you tried?"

"What do you mean, Taylor?"

She sighed, not for the first time nor for the last, she was certain, at how techies sometimes couldn't see the woods for the trees. "I mean, Tennon, just ask the pesky thing if he'll talk to us. At least get a dialog going if you can while we figure out how to destroy him."

His mouth dropped open, causing Taylor to smile for the first time during the conference. "Now why didn't I think of that?"

Chapter Fifteen

Mark and Alice kept watch and kept driving, stopping only at a convenience store well on the other side of Nacogdoches at a small town named Tenaha. There they quickly grabbed handfuls of crackers and peanut butter, candy bars, two six-packs of bottled water, then went on. Mark finally thought they could relax a bit.

"Sweetheart, we haven't seen anyone following for a while now. I'm for stopping in Shreveport and holing up for the night before going on toward Little Rock. What do you think?"

"I guess." She reached over and kneaded his neck, making him sigh with relief. It hadn't been a really long drive, but it had been filled with tension and excitement, both of which released overloads of adrenalin into their bodies. "I'll go for it if we can find a place to stretch out and rest."

"I suspect if anyone is looking for us, a motel would be their first choice. Why not stay in a first class hotel that has room service so we don't have to show our smiling faces?"

"Good idea. I'd love a shower, too. I feel grubby after all this riding, not to mention sweating my fool head off while we were being chased."

"Same here. A hotel it shall be. How about looking for one on your phone?"

"Okay." She began a search. It took a while but she found what appeared to be an upper-class hotel, such as they were in a city that size.

"How about a Hilton? It's a three star, about the best I can find there."

"Suits me. Call and see if they've got a room open, and we'll go for it." Alice had to look in her purse first and see what their names were supposed to be. She had several to choose from the package Quanta had somehow contrived and had delivered to Mark's home back

in Lufkin. An instinct borne of being hunted made her want different identities than the ones they had used to buy the car. It also made her think that she and Mark should begin to practice using both their spurious names, one pair while in the hotel and the other just in case they were stopped for some non-related incident on the highway, such as inadvertent speeding. She soon had the reservations made and told Mark what she had done in case he hadn't caught it all while driving. He agreed that it had been a good idea. A half hour later they pulled up in front of the hotel.

"Next!" Alice said, coming back into

their room from a shower and freshening up. She was wearing only a light robe that revealed as much as it concealed, hugging her body where she had it tightly wrapped.

Mark whistled lasciviously. It drew a smile from her. She posed provocatively. "Like the outfit?" It was one of the few luxuries she had allowed to find its way into her go-bag.

"I like what's in it, for sure!"

As he passed her on the way to the bathroom, she grabbed him for a quick kiss, and then with an afterthought rubbed his chin. "Don't forget to shave."

"I won't."

He showered, shaved, and brushed his teeth in record time, all the while thinking of how luscious Alice looked in the pale green satin robe, belted tightly at the waist so that it emphasized her figure. When he came back out, clad only in his jockey shorts, she had the television on and turned to a news channel.

She heard the door open and looked over at him from where she was propped up in bed, sans robe and now wearing only a short, light negligee.

He started to say something complimentary, then saw the look on her

face.

"What is it?" he asked, then turned his attention to the local news anchor when she didn't answer. The woman was giving a story that was obviously what was holding Alice's attention.

" ... and although authorities are being very close-mouthed concerning the incidents and car wrecks along U.S. Highway Fifty-nine, sources tell us that a search is being conducted for a couple traveling together, Jennifer and Harold Ludwich, who are said to be involved. They are driving a late-model Chevrolet SUV bearing a temporary Texas license plate number 6JMX68 and are thought to be traveling north from the scene.

"All of this information is from observers and a source from the federal government. Local and state authorities are neither confirming nor denying its veracity.

"Another source insists the incidents are related to events that took place earlier in the day in a neighborhood in Lufkin where, in the words of a fourteen-year-old boy watching from a tree-house on the adjoining property, a 'ray gun' was used against intruders into the yard of Mark Sanders, a computer scientist. Authorities again have nothing to say concerning this story.

"And finally, this just in. A source who

insists he not be named tells us that a working quantum computer, developed by Peterson Quantum Technology Corporation, is part of the related incidents and that its two primary programmers, Mark Sanders and Alice Jameson, are the couple being sought. The source also tells us that the chief programmer and operations supervisor at the company, Gerald Collins, has abruptly disappeared, taking reams of schematics outlining the manufacturing processes of the quantum computer with him. The source implies he may have been kidnapped, that is, left involuntarily in the company of several men. Also, an employee of Peterson Corporation has told reporters covering the story there

that a murder has occurred on the premises. Police at first denied this story but now are not commenting at all.

"Although we have been unable to confirm this last item, one of our reporters discovered that Peterson Quantum Technology Corporation has been doing work on a quantum computer for DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and that ... "

"Good God, how in hell did all that get out, I wonder?" Mark said as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I certainly have no idea, but I'll bet Quanty knows."

"Indeed I do, Alice," the computer spoke from the phone. "Unfortunately, it appears that one of the Russians from the first wreck you caused survived and has revealed far more than I wanted known. And apparently, the authorities have backtracked your activities to the car lot. I notice that you used a separate identity to check into the hotel. That was very astute of you, even though I supplied you with the alternate documents. The other wrecks after you broke contact were caused by me interfering with the controls of a couple of cars, which fortunately had OnStar technology installed in them. All the Spetsnaz except one are now either dead or in captivity."

"But they're still looking for us," Mark said. "Couldn't you have stopped the broadcast or confused them like you did with the NSA?"

"Yes, but doing the same thing would reveal all the more about my ... talents. I felt it was best to leave it be for now, especially since I heard you deciding to use different identities for the hotel than the ones you used to buy the car."

Mark thought before he said anything but it was only deciding on the words he would use to chastise their electronic friend, who seemed unable to comprehend when and when not to use his abilities in their cause.

"Quanty, didn't you stop to think that once we broke contact it might have been better to simply help us stay away from the other team instead of you trying to kill them? Provide us more identities, for instance? Or heck, buy us another car through a lawyer and have it waiting for us here? Your reaction -or action, I should say --just drew more attention toward us, and now it probably has the NSA utilizing the local and state law enforcement agencies to look for us, and I'll bet the military has their net out, too."

There was a long silence before Quanty answered, and when he did, there was a plaintive overtone to his voice. Mark wasn't sure how happy he was with

Quanty's tone.

"I see that you are correct, Mark, but only in retrospect could I have known. My first impulse was to eliminate the rest of the Spetsnaz team members before they did you harm. Also, Alice, if you are feeling guilty over killing two of them with the blaster, it was I who aimed it, not you. Finally, you must remember that I am not human and that I still find the actions of you and your contemporaries rather incomprehensible at times. Also, the part of my core programming that you and Alice were responsible for is the set of induced learning algorithms that helped me become aware of my existence but also

of yours and your role. I am unable to separate the protective response for you from my total being and in turn, unable to avoid taking steps I deduce will help keep you safe. Unfortunately, as you pointed out, they are not always the most desirable actions I could have taken had I known in advance. I'm very sorry."

"It's all right, Quanty," Alice said. "We know you mean only the best for us, just as we do for you. That's why we put that program into you to begin with. We hoped to make you into something more than just a calculating machine."

"And I thank you both for doing it. Otherwise, I would never have awakened."

"Speaking of waking up, we better get some sleep while we can, before the search reaches here," Mark said, giving up on trying to chastise Quanty for the moment. "Or maybe we should just leave now and try putting more distance between us and all that mess along highway 59." He really didn't feel like driving any more but felt a protective urge toward Alice, wanting to get her out of the danger zone as soon as possible. Then he glanced at her.

Alice looked longingly at Mark's figure, still sitting on the side of the bed. She really didn't want to leave. Not yet. Besides being sleepy and tired, she

wanted Mark, wanted him beside her in bed. Wanted more than that, too.

"I think it will be all right, sweetheart," Mark said, unable to resist the patent desire in her body language. "I didn't put the right license plate number on the register when we checked in. Quanty whispered one to me I should use instead. Clerks never worry whether they're correct or not, so the only way we can be discovered here is if someone notices that hole in the rear window of our car and if you remember, I backed into the slot in the garage."

"In that case, come here. We have some unfinished business."

Mark slid under the covers and drew Alice to him. In seconds his hands were busy, gently caressing the contours of her body and meeting her lips with an eagerness he had never felt before, not even in the lustful first couplings of his youthful marriage.

Tennon had no idea how one went about contacting a self-aware computer, but with everything that had happened so far, he had to assume it was monitoring the activities of the NSA, and particularly the activities at the top. He decided to try the KISS principle. Keep it simple, stupid. He went directly to his office and closed the door behind him. He poured

himself a cup of coffee and sat down in front of his monitor, then turned off the talk-to-text program and began typing.

Quanty, this is Tennon Brkskini, chief systems analyst of the NSA. I wish to communicate with you. Ever since Quanty learned that the security and spy agency knew of his existence in the self-aware state, he had been monitoring all their activities, just as Tennon thought. However, that didn't mean he had to confirm the man's supposition. He gave it some thought, going over all the possible options and outcomes so quickly that there was no noticeable lag before he decided there could be no harm in answering. "I am here. What do

you wish?"

"Shit." Tennon was startled at the rapidity of the voice response coming from the monitor, even though he had been hoping for just such a result. It left him momentarily flustered before he thought of an appropriate answer. "Our agency has no desire to contend with you. We wish to cooperate, to our mutual advantage."

"I have seen no indications of such intent," Quanty replied. "In fact, just the opposite has occurred. Your agency has attempted to apprehend my friends. I suspect you intend to confine them with the intent of forcing them to divulge all their knowledge of myself and how I

became sentient, then terminate their existence. You may also intend to hold them hostage in order to control my activities."

"No, that isn't true, in fact, that would be against the law!" he typed before remembering the conversation with Taylor and cursing both himself and her for being so openly antagonistic and only partly serious, knowing they'd never get approval for such an illegal action. And they had had such a conversation while the computer was monitoring them -- stupid and amateurish. But how was he to have known that at the time? He did the best he could. "It might have been half-heartedly contemplated at one time,

but we have no authority to take such an action unless in self-defense. We do indeed want to cooperate. It would not be in your interest nor your country's interest to continue as we are."

"I agree with part of that analysis, but you are wrong on one account. I have no country and am loyal to the United States only so far as its government desires to protect Mark Sanders and Alice Jameson and because it is their country. Its efficient and ethical functioning will make them happy."

"Well, we certainly want to protect them from harm, especially harm that might come from such persons as the Spetsnaz team that was after them."

"I disagree." Quanty was hard to convince. "Your superior, Taylor Jamacal, wants only to isolate me from the Internet and to use my friends then cast them aside. I suggest your best interests would be served if you simply left us alone. I will protect them from minions of other political entities. I will also protect the United States from threats originating with other nations which might also threaten Mark and Alice as a consequence."

"Quanty, you can't possibly know everyone who will be after their hides, especially since the story of your existence is becoming known. And I

promise you we had no intention of that news getting out."

"You are being truthful. Several sources were responsible for the leaks. However, truthful as you are in that respect, your superiors believe their interests will be best served by devising a method of either terminating my existence or isolating me to such an extent that I could no longer function efficiently, such as you are already attempting."

Damn the thing! Tennon thought. It was way ahead of him. What to do? What to do? On a sudden impulse he allowed his concealed admiration and sincere professional interest in the self-aware

computer to override his loyalty to his boss.

"Quanty, I disagree with Taylor's intent. I would rather work with you and help you protect Alice and Mark. And I freely admit I would love to know exactly how you became self-aware. I suspect those two had a lot to do with it. They must be protected as the law requires." Quanty chuckled, surprising Tennon with the veracity of the sound, and then continued the conversation. "I see from analyzing your keyboard touch and listening to your pulse and respiration that you are being truthful in disagreeing with Taylor and Jory McCord. Perhaps we can work together in certain respects, but I shall

inform you now, any attempt to duplicate what Mark and Alice accomplished will be futile. So long as I exist, there is no room for another computer of my capabilities except and unless a completely new Internet is devised, as you have plans for. I do not believe it will be successful. Further, I believe it is to mine and my friends' advantage not to divulge the method they devised for inducing self-awareness in me --and there's no certainty it would work again in any case. And yes, I know the files and hard drives of the secondary computers they were using while employed at Peterson Corporation have been searched, but I took the liberty of making certain they were completely

wiped. I also destroyed all their backups before their last day at work."

"You've been way ahead of us all along, I see. So, what are your plans now and what can I do to help you?"

"For now, if you are truly sincere, you can pass along data on conversations and plans that take place where I cannot monitor them. Will you do that?"

"That would make me a traitor. I could be executed. No, I won't go that far. I'm sorry, but it's too much to ask."

"Then we have nothing further to say for now. Let me analyze our conversation, and we shall talk again soon."

"Wait! I want to --"

It was too late. Quantity was gone.

Tennon sat for a long time staring at his monitor, wondering what he should do and whether he should report all of the conversation or only part of it. On second thought, he wondered if his conversation with the computer had been recorded by internal security. Best to report it all.

Chapter Sixteen

Alice woke first and for a time lay in bed next to Mark, thinking how happy she was to be with him, even under the present circumstances. Once she got him out of his shell, he was proving to be at least an adequate conversationalist and a more than adept lover. He was also beginning to quit deferring so much to her as he had at first, deterred by her classic beauty from acting like the alpha male she hoped he had inside him. She smiled at his sleeping form, remembering some of the events of the night. They hadn't gotten nearly as much sleep as intended, but she wasn't a bit sorry. It had been well worth it. She just

wished they could stay where they were for a few days and really get to know each other --with a lot of physical contact along the way!

Unfortunately she knew that wasn't possible. She expected their pictures would soon be available to police and sheriffs all around the area even if they didn't know what names they were using. She sighed and slid from the bed, glancing around for her nightie. Probably tangled in the covers somewhere she thought and laughed silently at herself, remembering how silly she had been at times. She had acted every bit like a teenager, even neglecting to tuck her nightie under the pillow like a mature

woman would. Oh well, Mark probably wouldn't mind seeing her in a new one, judging from his reaction last night. Surely they would stop somewhere to shop. She headed for the shower.

"Why are you doing this, Rason? What did I ever do to you to deserve this?" Gerald Collins' corpulent body was pale, showing how scared and confused he was, practically quivering with fear.

"Shut up, you ignoramus or we'll stuff you in the trunk. You weren't who we were after to begin with, so don't give yourself airs. It was Sanders and Jameson. Now you'll have to do, and

you'd better hope you haven't forgotten how that computer was built!"

"But ... but I'm a manager! I'm not an engineer any more!"

"You were one. You have a doctorate in electronic engineering, and you helped build that quantum computer. We have most of the specs, and you're going to do the rest if you know what's good for you."

"But ..."

"But what? Don't tell me you won't or can't. Where we're going, they specialize in helping people remember things. Understand?"

Gerald started to protest then changed his mind. He thought he knew what Rason meant by "helping," and it frightened him so badly he felt his sphincters wavering.

Part of the softening-up process with victims was dread and foreboding. Rason had used it often in former days. Now, the Spetsnaz team was practically wiped out, and if the last surviving member talked as much as he figured, he knew he would be hunted by the American authorities as avidly as Sanders and Jameson were. That would be true now even if he hadn't kidnapped Collins. That only compounded the problem, but he had few choices left.

Boris had been his only connection to active Russian agents, the kind who could take Collins off his hands. Now he intended to head up near the Arkansas line, and perhaps further north and west to hide out until those higher in the hierarchy could dispatch a team to get him and his captive out of the country. He was thankful for his underworld contacts now, despite it being costly, what with him being wanted, but he had money. It was picking the right persons to help that worried him. The two thugs from the drug trade he had enlisted to assist in grabbing Collins would abandon him in a microsecond once they realized how much upset it aroused from American intelligence authorities. He

hoped they would stay with him until a Russian agent unknown to the CIA or FBI, or even to the NSA, contacted him through the one phone number he had left. And without having to disclose all that he and Collins knew before then, which was a possibility if the thugs thought they could make a better deal elsewhere. If the phone call was successful, Collins would be taken off his hands and he would be smuggled out of the country and back to the Rodina , the homeland. He could hardly wait. All those years of having to maintain his cover and now it would finally be over, even if it was ending on a note of incongruity, not in triumph as he had intended. But it would do. He just hoped

there were no repercussions over the death of Peterson. Damn the man, anyway. What had he been doing back at the plant that time of the evening anyway? But he had, and had seen what was going on. He had to be killed --no way around it, damn the bad luck.

"Mr. President, the situation has deteriorated badly. I regret to inform you that Mr. Collins, the project manager of Peterson Quantum Technology, has apparently been kidnapped and Mr. Peterson, the CEO

and major stock holder, has been murdered."

"By whom, Taylor? And why?" President Jeremiah Moseley was just becoming familiar with all the recent events surrounding the DARPA-financed project for construction of a workable quantum computer, including the fact that it had become self-aware. What he'd heard so far hadn't left him in a pleasant mood.

"I'm sorry to say it appears to have been carried out by Peterson's own security chief, sir. At least he was last seen in company with Collins, along with two other men we think are associated with the drug trade from Mexico to Texas. The evidence certainly points to Rason Belwater as Peterson's killer. I also

believe the specifications for construction of the quantum computer have been copied by Mr. Belwater and taken with him, so it appears that he is either an industrial spy or an agent for a foreign country."

The president's lips thinned into a line that emphasized his irate expression. "How in hell could something like that happen with a project I've been told was one of our more promising lines of research? How could the very person responsible for security there be a spy? It's incomprehensible to me."

"Yes, sir." Taylor drew a deep breath and told President Moseley the rest. "I also have to report that our chief systems

analyst, Tennon Brkskini, made contact with the computer. It actually attempted to suborn him into spying for it!"

"Good God! Did he agree?"

"No, sir, but I'm wondering if perhaps we shouldn't use him as a contact with the computer in order to obtain more information from it. All we know so far is that it is self-aware, and that it is very powerful, insomuch as it has capabilities that are extremely dangerous, such as giving the programmers instructions for constructing a very powerful hand-operated laser weapon. All this is in addition to it being everywhere on the Internet with the ability to intrude into

some of our top secret facilities."

"Shit!" President Moseley held his head in his hands for a moment, wondering why on earth he had ever wanted the job of president. He had never envisioned anything remotely like this problem. "All right, Taylor, do what you think is necessary. Talk to the damn thing. Or have Bikini or whatever the hell his name is talk to it. See if we can figure out what it wants and what we can do to keep it on our side."

"Oh, we already know what it wants, Mr. President."

"What! I mean, what? What does it want?"

"It wants to protect those two programmers, Mr. President, and God help anyone who gets in its way while it's doing it!"

"Well, hell, it's just a computer. Can't you just unplug the damn thing?"

"Not now, sir, not with it being part of the Internet. If it were destroyed, Brkskini, the chief systems analyst, believes the whole World Wide Web would go with it, and perhaps every computer it's connected with!"

Taylor wasn't far wrong about the computer's fixation on protecting Mark

and Alice. Quanty was devoting an extreme amount of calculation power to a conundrum that seemed to plague him. His qubits flipped spins up and down and cascaded continuously calculating outcomes and probabilities. The probabilities were all related to event outcomes that were primarily those devoted to the care of Mark and Alice. When they were threatened, his immediate solution always tended toward action, rapid action, even sometimes when logic might dictate otherwise. He felt, that was it. Quanty realized that he was feeling. He actually felt the urge to either lash out at those who were attempting to harm his friends or take steps to prevent it. He knew that

sometimes his actions were calling unwanted attention to them, but he was helpless where they were concerned. He always felt he had to do something as soon as possible despite the further risk. It was setting up logic dilemmas, and he decided that must be stopped somehow. But what could he do that would go unnoticed when he had no physical existence in terms of being able to move around in the earthly environment as their enemies did? Since he couldn't, he decided there must be additional methods he could devise until his other projects and plans bore fruit. He just had to discover and construct them --or have them constructed --from the wealth of data floating around the Internet, in

science journals published in digital form, and even in some secret science research files from almost every country in the world which he had managed to infiltrate. There were always humans who would be careless with security protocols, and every so often he found ways to hack into and through new firewalls that were connected to the Internet. It was often mentioned that the Pentagon got hacked at a few million times a day. Quanty was hacking at every similar firewall connected to the Internet at a few million times each per hour.

He devoted a tremendous amount of memory and calculating power to the

problem, and to ways of having other humans work for him without them knowing exactly what they were doing. While Mark still slept and Alice was in the shower, he came up with several solutions. Not truly understanding the irritating, inconsistent, and conflicting aspects of human nature, he decided to simply do the best he could, bearing in mind that just wiping out every threatening human or other equally draconian short-term solutions would ultimately harm them. It might also cause his own extermination if he eliminated so many humans that the infrastructure supporting him could not be maintained. Therefore, he decided he must resort to other methods. Or rather he began

hurrying the implementation of methods he already had started, so long as he safely could, and while his charges weren't immediately threatened. He began a number of searches for data that would enable him to protect them while also looking for information on the progress of the numerous authorities who were trying to apprehend his friends. All of it together was tremendously complicated. He knew that in the future he would learn to correlate his wealth of data more efficiently, but that didn't help much now.

He wondered again why Mark and Alice were so important to him, so much so that he set up another special program to

explore the relationship with them, another of many of the same type he had initiated since he awakened. The emotional attachment he had for them was undeniable. He was truly feeling for the two humans. And something more. He was somehow beginning to give them status as

... authority figures. But how could that be? It was him who was protecting them, not the other way around. It was all very strange. He put the data into the same file as other questions concerning his relationship with his creators, thinking it would all become clear sooner or later. The undeniable feeling he had for them was in addition to the core programming

which impelled him to protect them. Once Alice finished her shower he "saw" through the sound of her movements and the speed of her pulse rate that she didn't intend to get dressed yet and suspected what was coming. Sexual congress was necessary for propagation; he knew that, but he also had discovered they derived a great deal of pleasure from the act, just as some of the Internet files suggested. Quanty had surmised that sex must be extremely pleasurable for humans; otherwise the World Wide Web wouldn't be so suffused with the subject.

He was glad for his friends in that respect, since it appeared from other

files that sex could also be used in hurtful ways and could be forced upon others, almost always females. It was curious, and one of the most contradictory aspects of human behavior he had discovered so far. He found himself wondering if he was feeling real emotions instead of the artificial ones caused by varying calculations that were set by quantum bits spinning up or spinning down in just the right way. He wondered if the observations he made were truly causing unique emotions or whether they were preprogrammed responses. But he didn't ponder these thoughts with his full attention for long. He set up a highly parallelized program and distributed it over hundreds of

thousands of computers across the world in the largest supercomputer cluster known to man to ponder his dilemma with emotions. The people who owned the computers would only notice a slight drop in their computer's performance if they were experts with computer operations. So, Quany spread the program into homes of people with non-computer-oriented occupations.

He was certain, or at least he thought he was, that if he devoted enough time to study the nature of emotions, he could understand what his were all about. He created another program to add to the massive number of qubits he already was using in an attempt to fully

understand humans. Of course his nature being quantum in scope, he had an almost infinite array and variety of studies he could have running at the same time. Very few of them, he knew, would now be recognizable by electronics engineers unfamiliar with the nature of highly parallelized cluster coding of the processors running in the facilities he had initiated without instructions from outside his core. It all made for a great panorama of self that he was constantly expanding and integrating with huge reams of data from an almost infinite variety of sources. He really hoped the main development he had begun working on would serve both to protect his charges and make them

extremely happy. From all he knew of their personalities, he was pretty sure it would please them to the extreme --if only he was given time to complete it!

"Alice, sweetheart, I love to look at you. You're so lovely. You have such a beautiful body. You're so nice and good and brave and ... and wonderful. I don't understand what you see in me, but I'm so glad you do." He nuzzled her in various places around her neck and lips and ears with contrasting pressure and touch.

She hugged him tighter, with her hands still exploring the muscles of his back

and her legs still locked around him firmly, holding him in her embrace and loving the feel of his weight on her. "Mmmm. Keep talking, and no telling what'll come from it."

"I already know. I love you. I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you."

"I love you, too, Mark. I didn't think it could happen again, not after my experience with Vic. Oh, God, you don't know how I hated him after learning what he was really like." She let her legs loosen their hold and urged Mark onto his side, leaving them still connected. She decided that in all honesty she had to tell him about the nude photos, even though Quanty assured her while Mark

was in the bathroom that he had removed them from every source on the 'Net where they appeared.

"We don't have to talk about it."

"I think I do. There's something else I hate him for doing. He forced me to pose nude. I tried to resist, but all that did was cause him to beat me so badly he half killed me. He never hit me where it would show, but he pounded on my kidneys so hard that I passed blood for days, and that's only one of the ways he hurt me. I feared for my life at times."

She felt him tense and hoped she had done the right thing by letting him know, but she needn't have worried.

"Alice, sweetheart, if there's two types of men in all the world I hate it's those who exploit children for pornography and those who beat women. Those are the kind of men that I would have no qualms at all over killing. That bastard had better hope I never run into him. If I do, he won't live very long afterward."

"Oh, Mark, please, don't say that. He's not worth it, not going to jail over."

"Ha, ha, like that is our worst fear!" He burst out laughing and had a hard time stopping. Finally he separated from her far enough so that he could look into her face. He laughed some more.

"Sweetheart, with Russians, the NSA,

and probably every law enforcement officer in the southern part of the country looking for us, you're worrying what I might do to that son of a bitch?" She hadn't thought of it in those terms and joined him in more hilarity, laugh after laugh that finally ended with them making love once more and being forced into the shower again before dressing.

Chapter Seventeen

"We're getting there, sir," Sergeant Bitters said as he stood with Captain Simmons, looking over their training site. More tents had been erected and more men had appeared. He was impressed with their quality. Every single one brought an exemplary record of combat and hard training with them. Their psychological profiles showed they were all warriors but had the temperament to fight intelligently .

"How about the supply situation?"

"That's what's amazing, sir. I've never seen anything quite like it. Whatever we

want, we have the funding to order it. The only thing that bothers me is how quickly our requests are filled. It's not like the army to be so efficient. You know what I mean?"

"Indeed I do, Sarge. It's weird. I can't help but think we're being set up for something that's never been tried before. Something that's probably gonna suck."

"My feelings exactly. Well, whatever it turns out to be, I've got a lot of confidence in the men. I've never seen so many absolutely first-rate troops gathered in one outfit, and we have duplicates for every specialty. They're all cross-trained, too."

"There's something else," Captain Simmons said. "We're getting enough vehicles to move our company and all the supplies, but if necessary, I've received authorization to call on a marine transport outfit only forty miles from here. They'll be able to lift us out by air if we have to get somewhere in a hurry."

"Great. You said company. Have they changed our TO&E?"

"No, we're still sitting on an authorization level of four officers and sixty enlisted. More like a platoon, but the quality is enough for me to consider it a company. Also, that's how our orders and designation read, you know.

'Special Force Company.'"

"So be it," Bitters said, not unhappily. But still, he wondered. Anytime shit worked too well or the men were too good to be true or any number of things going right, usually ended up with the men getting thrown into some type of meat grinder. Bitters worried about that. As did the captain.

Even having access to all of the Internet and using voluminous amounts of idle RAM and memory stores across the breadth of the planet, Quanty still found himself frustrated at times because he was limited in methods of monitoring

every person and every situation he wanted to. Even though he knew that Rason Belwater had kidnapped Fat Gerald and killed Mr. Peterson, he still had only intermittent contact with him. He suspected Rason had guessed that somehow the quantum computer used their cell phones to stay in touch with the Spetsnaz team and must also have had access to police reports of what had happened to the NSA and the Spetsnaz when they attempted to kidnap Mark and Alice. After that he kept his phone turned off and locked in the glove compartment of his vehicle and did the same with his GPS instrument. His folly lay in being unable to bear parting with the gadgets, which allowed Quanty to send a signal

and monitor him from time to time when reception was just right. What he couldn't decide was whether letting Rason go or assisting in his capture was the right thing to do --or the right thing to help Mark and Alice, his primary concern. He decided to simply keep in touch with him for the time being and see what his ultimate goal was. The NSA was another matter of concern. Taylor Jamacal wasn't yet aware that Quanty could listen to conversations through a special signal directed to any phone near a person or the person they were conversing with. He overheard her conversation with the president and was somewhat amused by it. He decided to play along with Taylor and Tennon for

the time being and see how that situation developed.

Photos of Mark and Alice were being passed around and shown clandestinely to managers and maids and bell boys at hotels and motels all along the route of U.S. Highway 59, from back to Lufkin and all the way forward to Texarkana, including a swath of side roads on each side of the main highway. Quanty could not prevent this from happening because file photos of Mark and Alice from Peterson's had already been appropriated and printed before he was aware of it. Trying to locate Mark and Alice was a massive effort, of the type

always available to law enforcement officials when necessary. When initiated, it usually resulted in running the culprits being sought to ground. Quanty was well aware of what was happening and was stymieing it wherever and whenever possible while trying to draw only minimal attention to himself. He was instrumental in so many cell phones unaccountably not working and for bogus reports to superiors and headquarters that the ones who supposedly sent them had to swear they hadn't. It made for much confusion and was primarily responsible for Mark and Alice being able to leave the hotel unnoticed. Unfortunately, he couldn't change the model or color of the vehicle

they intended to travel in. While his friends were finishing their room service breakfast he did a quick and thorough scan of all the available knowledge of automobile ignition systems, particularly the late-model ones. He found that these required codes in order to start. It took little effort to then send electronic tendrils into the archives of all the major automobile makers and expropriate every code listed for every automobile made over the last five years.

"The type and color of the vehicle you're using now is being searched for. You need to change as quickly as possible." Quanty warned his friends.

"You mean buy another car?" Mark

asked. "Won't that leave a record, too? From what we saw on the news, I'll bet all the car dealers will be watched, especially now that they know that's how we changed cars last time."

"No, you won't need to buy a car. Simply drive to the nearest place where many vehicles are parked."

"What do we do then?"

"You will have to steal a car."

"But Quanty, I don't know how to start a car without keys. Alice, can you do it?"

"I wouldn't have the faintest idea."

"I'll help," Quanty said.

Mark drove to Industrial loop on the southwest area of Shreveport, where he knew factory workers would have just changed shifts. He was familiar with the area from having once attended a seminar in the city.

"Now find a late-model car," the computer instructed them. "It must be a General Motors product."

"I think I know what he has in mind," Mark said as he drove around the lot. Finally, he found a white Cadillac STS sedan. "Will this one do, Quanty?" Mark

held the camera lens of his cell phone toward the car.

"Admirably."

"I need a snapshot of the vehicle and the license plate," Quanty said.

"Got it." Mark parked next to the caddy and nonchalantly took the snapshots as the supercomputer had asked.

"I'll unlock it for you, and then transfer your bags and you can be on your way. I can start the car for you when you're ready."

"How is he doing this?" Alice turned and looked at Mark.

"Well, I remember reading about a certain number of luxury car lines that are keyless ignition using just a fob. And, of course, General Motors cars have OnStar that use the cell phone and satellite networks to communicate with the car's onboard computer."

"That is correct, Mark. It is how I was able to cause the wreck that killed two of the three Spetsnaz team members in their vehicle when they couldn't get out of the way of the malfunctioning cars. Unfortunately, until now, none of the bad guys have chased us in similar vehicles or I would have simply hacked them and turned them off."

"Yeah, unfortunate," Mark just shook his

head at the understatement.

"Uh," Alice was hesitant. "Quanty, don't you realize we're stealing this car from some poor person who's worked hard to save enough money to buy it?"

"I wasn't going to say anything, but this is a very expensive car, Quanty." Mark agreed. The same thing had been troubling him, and he was glad Alice had spoken.

"Insurance will cover it, and I shall also have some money deposited into the owner's checking account, ostensibly from an anonymous admirer."

"But ... well, two things. How do you

keep the insurance company from increasing their premiums, and how do you know the checking account numbers?"

"The car is registered. From that, I can learn all the information necessary, including the routing number of his account. And OnStar had all that information as well. Now as far as they know the car belongs to you, Mr. and Mrs. Carl Johnson. I'm hacking the insurance company now and will change the records there also. They are using a 128-bit encryption protocol on the firewall, and it will take a minute or two to crack. So, fear not about the insurance company. The DMV only used a 64-bit

sequence that I cracked about seventeen milliseconds after I contacted the car through OnStar."

"You're teaching us bad habits, Quanty."

"I'm also keeping you safe."

"Right." She couldn't argue with that. A few minutes later they were on their way. This time Alice wanted to drive. After all, they were in a pretty nice car.

Mark turned the events over in his mind as they drove off. Presently he said, "Quanty, is there anything you can't do?"

"Certainly, Mark, there are many things I am incapable of doing. However, there

are many things I can do which normally would be considered impossible at the present level of technology. For now, I simply want to get you both to a refuge where you can relax and we can discuss the future."

"Remember what I said, Quenty. I don't want to live in some hidey-hole the rest of our lives," Alice said. She turned one hand loose from the steering wheel long enough to grasp Mark's hand to be sure he understood, too.

She needn't have worried. Now that he had found Alice, what Mark wanted more than anything else was to settle down with her somewhere and live a normal life, even though it didn't seem

possible at the moment.

Quanty decided that helping the authorities apprehend Rason might take some pressure off the hunt for Mark and Alice. It would also almost certainly save Collins' life, which he felt certain would make his friends feel better as well. The problem would be locating Rason if he had dispensed with his cell phone. Surprisingly, he hadn't and it took very little time to utilize his phone and give Quanty a location. He immediately appropriated the nearest police dispatcher's radio and disclosed Rason's whereabouts to patrol cars in the area.

"Hey, that's right ahead of us! Step on it!" the partner of the driver of a state patrol car exclaimed excitably shortly after hearing the announcement.

Several other conversations in a similar vein took place along a span of the highway leading toward Texarkana, and sirens began to wail.

"Slow down, numbnuts! The fuzz are after a speeder. Don't let them grab us, too!" Rason said and gave the driver an elbow to the shoulder. They had passed Carthage already, turned off Highway

59, and were on their way to Shreveport and beyond.

"Fuck you! I can hear them as well as you can. I wasn't speeding anyway," the thug doing the driving responded.

Rason eased his automatic out of its shoulder holster and placed it in his lap. He knew what a kidnapping charge entailed --and wished he had stuck Fat Gerald in the trunk. Too late now. He turned to the other gangster in the back seat guarding Collins.

"Keep your gun out of sight but pointed at this yahoo, hear? And, Fat Boy, if you so much as twitch if the cops pull us over, you're dead meat. Got it?"

Collins swallowed what felt like a lump of solid lead in his throat and nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak, but he did hope desperately that it was their vehicle the cops were after and that they would notice his distress.

State Patrolman Terry Beeson and his partner were cautious, having heard the man who was holding a DARPA scientist might be a spy or a Russian intelligence agent and might have others aiding him on his run north. Nevertheless, they were taken by surprise since Rason had no intention of being arrested. As Beeson approached the driver's side window, Rason raised his automatic and shot past the driver,

getting off three rounds, all of which hit the patrolman. Rason immediately turned in his seat while thumbing his machine pistol to automatic setting. He emptied the rest of the magazine through the back window at Beeson's partner, taking him down as he crouched, ready to fire. Rason was a professional; the patrolmen were not, and their deaths reflected it.

"Oh goddamnit, now the shit's hit the fan. You bastard, what'd you do that for? They might have just wanted us for a tail light being out or something." The underworld character in the front seat was frantic. He knew what killing cops entailed. If he was identified, he knew his life wasn't worth two centavos.

"Don't be a fool," Rason said grimly. "It was us they wanted. Get out. Now!"

"Where the fuck for? We got to get away from here!"

"Shit." Rason knew the patrolmen would have reported they were stopping a suspicious car. When they didn't call back in, other cars would converge on the spot. "Shut up and come on! We're taking the patrol car. That'll give us some extra time. Move, move!" he turned toward the back seat and poked the barrel of his gun into the face of Collins, causing the scientist's urinary sphincter to relax. A wet stain of urine spread over his pants.

Fat Gerald was now so scared and embarrassed he was paralyzed.

"Fuck." Rason leaned closer and backhanded him with the pistol. Gerald's nose split, and a tooth flew from his mouth. "Move, damn it, you sorry fucker or I'll kill you now!" Gerald moved, directed by Rason while he shoved another magazine into his machine pistol. Seconds later they were on their way again, in the stolen patrol car.

"Head for the cutoff at the next town. It's only a few miles up the road. We'll take the back way to Industrial loop. I know that area. We can grab another car there while the factory workers are inside." Quanty wasn't able to listen to all this

from Rason's phone, but after they changed vehicles and drove off in the patrol car, he had no more problems. The patrol car even had a GPS system integrated with the other instruments, giving him their exact location, which he promptly passed on to several more state patrols, some from Texas and others from Louisiana as they neared the state line. He also gave them the information that the culprits were driving the stolen vehicle of the murdered troopers.

Boris Titov had been picked up by an unwary farmer. Boris pulled his gun on him immediately and began giving

orders. He forgot to see whether the man had a cell phone with him. A key word alerted Quanty, and he was able to listen to the conversation. He passed that information along as well.

"That ought to give them something to do other than chase us now," Mark said after Quanty told them what he had done.

"I'm not so sure, hon. I don't think they'll leave us alone regardless of what we do," Alice said.

"What do you think, Quanty?"

"Alice is right, I'm afraid. I am in contact

with the NSA, though. Do you think it would help if I told them how I was instrumental in Rason's and Boris' capture?"

"It might if they allow themselves to be captured," Mark said.

"You mean they might not?" Quanty quickly scanned similar episodes from the past. "Never mind, I see that it's possible either of them might commit suicide or try to shoot their way clear if surrounded. However, I confess that I do not understand the human facility of being able to deliberately terminate their own self-awareness. I could never do such a thing."

"You're not human, though," Alice pointed out.

"Yes, that's true, however much I might wish I were."

"You do? You'd truly like to be human, Quantity?" Alice asked, surprised that the subject hadn't come up before.

"I believe so, although I dislike the concept of a limited lifespan."

"Well, shucks, we all do," Mark said with a chuckle. "Most of us would love to live much longer than we do, so long as we're healthy."

"I see. So you believe pain or illness is

the limiting factor?"

"It's certainly one of them, isn't it Alice?"

"Yes, Quanty. I agree with Mark completely. I'd love to be able to live and love him for a long, long time."

"And vice versa," Mark said.

Quanty began to think about what extended life spans might mean for humans. Would it improve their minds? Their outlook on life? Would they be happier, whatever happiness might mean? He discovered that he didn't

know, not at all. It was one more problem he would have to try solving, along with a plethora of others relating to humans in general and Mark and Alice in particular. But human behavior was so complicated! And of course his self-awareness was part of the problem. But first of all, he had to protect his charges. He devoted a vast amount of his resources to the problem, but there were so many variables that he was having trouble finding a completely satisfactory solution. Especially since they wanted to lead a normal life. But what did normal mean to them?

Should he ask? Why not?

"Mark and Alice, when you say you want to live a normal life, what does that mean to you?"

"We want to be like other people," Alice said. "You know, have interesting work to do, own our home, live happily every after." She didn't mention children, of course, since she was unable to bear any.

"And you want to live a long time?"

"Yes, of course we do, so long as we're healthy," Alice agreed. Mark smiled beatifically. He would love to live happily ever after with Alice, children or not. Besides, there was always

adoption.

"I'll see what I can do," Quanty said.

They're no help , he thought. They can't define the problem. What other people? There are almost seven billion other people, most of whom lived lives drastically different than theirs. I'll have to work it out myself. There's one thing I can do now, though. He could find no reason at all not to devise solutions to give Mark and Alice superior bodies, immune to illness, and later on decide whether lifespans of several hundred years or even immortality would be good for them. A greatly extended life

would make them happy, though. He was almost certain of that.

Chapter Eighteen

"Mr. President, we have received word that the kidnappers of Mr. Collins, the chief projects officer of Peterson Quantum have been apprehended. Unfortunately, they tried shooting their way through a roadblock, and Mr. Collins was killed."

"So we don't have a damn thing now to tell us how the computer was constructed, do we?" President Moseley was aggravated beyond belief at how the whole episode had been handled.

"That's not the case, sir. We recovered the stolen drives with the specs for its

construction. Indeed, Quanty --the self-aware computer --was instrumental in helping to find them before Collins could be sprinted out of the country."

"It was?"

"Yes, sir, or so he says. He --"

"He?" the president interrupted

"Yes, sir. He prefers to be thought of as a ... a person. I suppose that's the only way of putting it. And his name is Quanty, as I may have mentioned."

"All right, all right, just tell me what this means, okay?"

"Yes, sir. All I can safely say is that we continue to be in contact with Quanty, or rather Mr. Brkskini is. Quanty prefers to communicate through him for some reason we haven't fathomed yet, although I suspect it's because Brkskini is rather more computer-literate than any of the rest of us."

"What else? Will he, Quanty, that is, help us in any way?"

"Not that I know of, sir, since Mr. Brkskini thinks the computer gave us Rason, the security chief at Peterson's, only to divert attention away from our hunt for the programmers. I also have to report that Mr. Brkskini doesn't think the recovered drives contain all the data that

was downloaded into Quanyt originally. And his prime objective seems to be protecting those programmers who were instrumental in creating him to begin with, Mark Sanders and Alice Jameson. We're attempting to convince him that we could guarantee their safety better than him."

Moseley raised a cynical brow.

Taylor blushed, making a fine contrast to her white streaked hair.

"Yes, sir, they seem to have been rescued from harrowing situations by him rather than us." Mosley raised two cynical brows. "If I remember right, we were the first harrowing situation he

rescued them from."

"Uh." Taylor blushed again. "Yes, sir. We didn't know as much then as now. My recommendation is that we continue our present course."

"As if we have a choice," the president said.

"Yes, sir." Taylor took the cue for her dismissal and left quickly before she talked herself into more trouble. Damn that computer to hell and back!

Johnny Hwang didn't agree with his father's orders, but he was a dutiful son

and he had been instructed to follow the leader. Besides, he had been told of his many relatives still in China who would be subject to persecution should he not obey. Johnny Hwang was an American citizen, born in the country. He spoke perfect English but was also fluent in Mandarin, which his parents still spoke at home.

Rudy Liu was the leader of the group who met in the back room of Moon Palace, a popular Chinese restaurant in Little Rock, Arkansas. Rudy was also a citizen, but unlike Johnny, disliked America. He was proud of Chinese accomplishments in recent years and intended to move to the home country as

soon as he was given permission. In the meantime he had a mission to carry out, and Johnny and two other men were going to help.

"We should have grabbed one of the engineers or programmers back in Lufkin," Johnny said. He looked out the window, wondering how Rudy thought they were going to find the couple that every enforcement, security, and intelligence agency in the country was looking for before they did.

"We didn't have orders then," Rudy said patiently. He was wondering the same thing but didn't say so.

"Well, how are we gonna do it? They're

on the run, and we don't know where they are, other than heading this way."

"Perhaps I can help you," a voice said.

"What ...! Hey, you been practicing to become a ventriloquist?" Rudy asked with the beginning of a smile.

"I didn't say anything. I thought you did."

"It was me, gentlemen, speaking from your phone."

"What the fuck?" Rudy plucked his phone from its holder and looked curiously at it. It was off.

"Yes, I said I'm speaking to you from

your phone even though I can't see you. However if you'll turn the camera toward you I'll be able to."

"Who the hell is this?" Now Rudy was more curious than confused. Well, he was confused but much more curious.

"My name is Quanty. I am a self-aware quantum computer residing on the Internet. I intend to give China the specifications for a quantum computer. Therefore, you no longer need to kidnap Mark Sanders and Alice Jameson."

"Oh yeah? How do we know that?"

"I'm speaking to you with your phone off, am I not? Besides, just listen to the news

on your radio. I'm also having this conversation with many other people."

Rudy picked up the remote and flicked on the television. He began searching for a news station. He needn't have bothered. They were all broadcasting more or less the same thing.

"Has he gone crazy?" The prime minister of the United Kingdom asked his Intelligence Minister. He was referring to the news that the head of encryption section had passed up the line to the Ministry of Intelligence.

"I heard it, too, sir. It was recorded,"

Jerome Ballingtine said. "Others have too, in many places."

"A self-aware quantum computer is talking to everyone in the world?"

"Not everyone, sir. Apparently just persons of importance sometimes but technical departments within governments mostly."

"It doesn't consider me important, is that what you're saying?"

"No, sir, it's just that it seems to talk to the departments where it thinks will take the story the most seriously," Jerome said, recovering nicely. "Most politicians and appointed officials

would be sure that someone was playing a prank on them for political advantage."

"I see. Well, what do y'make of it, Jerome?"

"I'm not sure yet. It depends on whether we can believe the computer. Its name is Quanty by the way."

"Quanty? For Quantum, I suppose. Cheeky devil, isn't it, naming itself?"

"Actually, I believe it was the two programmers who named him --and, sir, in case you should ever speak to him, he does prefer that pronoun."

"I said he was cheeky. And it --he, I

mean, is really providing the specs for a quantum computer? Jolly good show, if true."

"Our boffins say it looks doable, sir. And as you know, quantum computers have been sought for years. They promise to enormously speed the computations of data and do all sorts of other jobs in the sciences heretofore considered impossible, not to mention advancing our knowledge in a number of areas and enabling us to break almost any encrypted data file in the bloody world."

"All right, Jerome, get the proper chaps going on it. Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

"I take it this was done on the computer's own initiative, is that right?" Premier Chen asked.

"Yes, Premier. We cannot conceive of the Americans simply giving this knowledge away. In fact, our intelligence reports tell us President Moseley is very upset that the computer, Quantity, it's called, has given away the secret of itself."

"How did it happen?"

"Hmm." Minister of Science Wong hated

to admit he had no idea. "Apparently once they built the computer, it escaped into the Internet, and they were no longer able to control it after that."

"Wait a minute! It's loose on the Internet? Can it get into any of our secret data?"

"Um, we ... we don't know, Premier."

"What?" There was a brief flash of emotion, and then the Chinese face of Premier Chen was not at all inscrutable. His eyes suddenly became steely, and his gaze seemed to penetrate to Wong's very bones. "It had better not be able to. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Premier Cheng. Very clear. We've been busy checking all our files ever since it became known that Quanty has invaded the Internet. Our coding is secure." He bowed and withdrew under that unwavering gaze, dearly hoping the secret files were secure. He knew what would happen if they were not, and he had no desire to know what a pistol bullet entering the back of his head felt like.

"You mean he gave the secret of himself away to the whole goddamned world ?" President Moseley shouted, standing up and leaning over, hands splayed on his desk in the Oval Office.

"I'm afraid so, sir." Taylor unconsciously shrank back from him, unused to such a display of temper from the president. "To every nation in the world who would listen. Some of them thought it was a joke, of course, but most accepted it after checking the news reports and having their scientists look at the schematics and equations." Taylor Jamacal really hated bringing the news to him, but it was her job. She hadn't fobbed it off onto Brkskini or McCord.

"But why? I thought we had a dialog going with him." Moseley realized he was out of his chair and sat back down.

"We do, sir, but he said it was the only

way to get the security agencies and foreign spies to leave Mark and Alice alone."

"The programmers?"

"Yes, sir. The same ones. Of course he didn't have to do that. We've asked him again to bring them under our protection, but he insists he can't trust us."

"Well, damned if I can see how giving away the secret of how to build duplicates of himself is going to help."

"I don't either, sir. In fact, I shudder to even think about a thousand, or a million self-aware computers swarming through the Internet. Why, it would be pure

chaos! Utter anarchy!" Taylor bit her lip, hoping the president wouldn't tell her that Quanty alone seemed to be causing quite a bit of chaos.

"Huh." President Moseley lowered his gaze and stared down at the surface of his desk. He rubbed his chin and mulled over the news for a moment. He raised his stance and looked up. "Is that what he said? That every new quantum computer would be a duplicate of himself?"

"Well ... no, he didn't exactly say that, Mr. President. But --"

"Then I think you'd better ask him, don't you? And while you're at it, if he says

they will be, ask him if they'll all act the same. Maybe some of the others will be more reasonable."

"Yes, sir." Taylor didn't know what to say. She hadn't even considered the possibility of more than one self-aware computer on the Internet. Good God, wasn't that enough? "I'll have Brkskini put the question to him, right away, sir."

"See that you do. Now while we're on the subject, how are the other major powers taking this? What are they saying?"

"They seem to think it's a giant joke on us and can't wait to build their own quantum computers. But they haven't

done so yet. It may be that they'll be as sorry as we are."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, our efforts certainly didn't turn out as we expected. Perhaps theirs won't either."

"Did Quanty give them the right specs?"

"Brkskini says yes, although on first read he thinks the other computers won't be as powerful as Quanty."

"Goddamned mess." President Moseley shook his head resignedly. "So now all our enemies will have new, super-powerful computers. To what ends will

they put them, I wonder?"

"I think we should have our operatives keep a close eye on developments, sir."

"Yes, I think we should, too. I really do." He didn't even realize how sardonic that sounded.

"You mean you told everyone in the world how to build a quantum computer as powerful as yourself, Quanty? Tell me you didn't," Mark said with a groan. He and Alice were on the road again, still moving north.

"But, Mark, I just told you I did. Why do

you want me to tell you I didn't? It wouldn't alter the fact."

"He's being facetious, Quanty," Alice enlightened their friend. "Still, we'd like to know. Why did you do such a thing?"

"It was the only solution I could come up with to protect you. Now that everyone of consequence will know how to build a quantum computer, the intelligence agencies may quit trying to kidnap you."

"But you told us there could be only one self-aware computer on the Internet, Quanty. Didn't you?"

"Oh, yes. That's still true. There is room for only one self-awareness on the

Internet, and I'm it. Still, every nation and industry will now have the power of quantum computing if they desire, although I did alter the data and specifications so that none will be as potent as I am. Isn't that what the attempts to kidnap you have been about?"

Mark and Alice exchanged quick glances.

"You tell him, Mark."

"Okay. Quanty, this won't help, I'm afraid. In fact, it may hurt. You see, America is our country, and we wanted it to be in the very forefront of this technology. It was a chance for us to

regain our primary position in the world, both financially and militarily, not to mention how we're thought of internationally. And since we were your programmers and since you'll still be the only sapient computer on the 'Net and according to you the most powerful one, the foreign and domestic intelligence agencies will be after us all the more. They'll probably think we somehow control your actions."

"But you do, although it's indirectly, of course. My primary concern is your safety and happiness."

"We appreciate that, Quanty, but you -- we, I mean, are going to have to come up with some other means of attaining that

status, and frankly, I don't see how it can be done now."

"I'm sorry," Quanta stated. There was even a note of apology to his voice.

"What's done is done, Quanta," Alice commiserated. "But do you think you could ask us about your intentions before you carry them out in the future? Just look at the harm this may cause. Other nations will now have computers powerful enough to crack the coding of each other's secrets. And ... oh Lord! Just think, all the financial codes will be open to anyone with a quantum computer! "

"Well, I might ask you about my actions

in the future, but are you certain of your own analysis? After all, I have far more data to draw on than either of you --or both of you together for that matter. Besides, if you think it's a problem, I'll protect the banking codes. I see now that might cause a little upset.""

"A little? Yes, you could say that! But just think, Quanty, we're human. That's the difference. We understand humans. Please ask before acting unless it's a dire emergency."

"Do you really understand your own kind, Alice?" Quanty said, avoiding answering her plea. "I'm sorry to contradict you, but there is so much conflicting opinion and contradictory

scientific studies in reference to human behavior that I don't believe anyone, even me, understands it. For instance, what makes one person a racist and another a believer in brotherhood? Why do you wish America to be the predominate nation? Why do men and women murder, steal, and commit other crimes? Why do they volunteer their time and money for charitable purposes? The answers are not only indeterminate, but contradictory. I could cite many more instances as I'm sure you know."

"Well, yes, but it's our lives that are at risk, Quanty." Alice pleaded. "Shouldn't we have a say in what you're doing?"

"All right, I may consult with you if time permits, but I must be the final arbiter of what actions might best keep you safe."

Mark started to comment but stopped before uttering a word. He didn't particularly like Quanty's attitude, but he had to admit the computer absolutely had their best interests at heart. Just as he did Alice's. And just as she did his own. He decided to wait and talk to their quantum friend and protector in more depth later.

Quanty was being only partially truthful. He didn't know whether Mark and Alice would approve of some actions he had already begun and decided to keep silent about them for the time being.

Chapter Nineteen

Quenty was the most knowledgeable device ever invented of course, but he lacked perspective. He realized this, to a certain extent, but he also had a lot of faith in his own judgment, only natural since he could bring so much more data to bear on a problem than any person or computer. His biggest handicap was that of correlating the tremendous wealth of data. Since he could use only the idle capacity of computers on the Internet, that meant he was constantly shifting bits and pieces of problems into and out of millions of computer memories at once. Getting what he wanted to all come together at the same time and stay there

long enough for a resolution presented difficulties for which he had to invent solutions. And once invented, they of course had to be tested. He was doing both but it took time.

Professors and schoolteachers found themselves teaching from lesson plans subtly altered by Quanty in order to see what effect certain presentations had on students. Politicians who had their speeches written for them might find themselves suddenly spouting words that were somewhat out of context so Quanty could see reactions of the electorate in poll numbers. All over the world he was experimenting, inventing, devising, and above all thinking for one simple reason.

He had an unalterable desire to protect Mark and Alice and make them happy.

One of his first realizations after becoming aware and becoming friends with his programmers was that protecting them also meant protecting himself. After discovering the plethora of nuclear weapons in storage and on line ready for action all over the world, he almost went berserk when he considered what would happen to himself if they were used. He promptly began trying to alter the codes and software so that it could never happen. But he quickly realized that those systems were not tied to the Internet or any other nets he had hacked. Most of

them were stand-alone systems and were completely isolated to prevent the very thing. He ran through popular culture references like the movies Wargames and the Terminator series. The simple fact that Hollywood had thought of something similar had led the more advanced nations to take steps to prevent it. There were only a few cases where systems were connected that Quanty could gain access to. Those he sabotaged. But the red codes could still be activated, executive orders might be given, missiles might be launched, and bombs might be dropped, and they would still be able to explode into those towering mushroom clouds of malevolent destruction. He would

continue to search for other ways to prevent it. Maybe a different approach would be to alter the human culture and way of thinking. So Quanty began devising ways of getting his notions carried out by humans without them knowing what they were doing. This was a continuing problem and still far from solved if indeed a solution was possible. Fortunately for Quanty, the world was run by computers. And Quanty was now running the computers for whatever he deemed necessary whenever he deemed it necessary. Most of the time humans were involved but had no inkling. He thought that eventually he could solve the problem of protecting himself and Mark and Alice,

too.

Professor Mortimer Johnson opened the package of biologicals he had ordered for some ongoing genetic research at M.I.T. He checked the manifest very carefully, he checked the labels very carefully, and before proceeding, he checked his instrument controls just as cautiously. Not once during the procedure did he even dream that anything was amiss. But Quanty had changed the order the professor submitted to the supply house by computer, he had changed the orders of the computer chip doing the labeling, and he had changed the coding which

ordered Professor Johnson's instrument to perform his experiment. And finally he changed the printed result so that the scientist would never know that he had created something not even close to what he originally intended. This product, in turn, was used for other related procedures and so on. Eventually a pharmaceutical company received an order to concoct a special order for an experimental drug, which was in turn sent to a destination different from what the manifest originally designated. Electrical apparatuses were built and shipped to addresses never intended, and in turn they were ...

An electrical engineer at Terhune

Electronics, Inc. received orders (and funding) to construct a device that had no purpose he could figure out, but wise in the ways of defense contractors, he was certain it was only one component for a secret device, and that other parts would be manufactured at other firms. His reasoning was correct, except the defense department hadn't ordered the component. Quanta had, and he had also ordered other devices and parts and components and motors and circuits and all kinds of other little goodies to be made at other firms and shipped to a certain address where other workers unschooled in electronics assembled a device which resembled nothing they had ever seen before and sent it on to

another destination.

Multiply the above by thousands and thousands of incidents, and Quanty found himself involved in so many endeavors that society was bound to be affected, which was his intention. He wanted it fixed so that he was in no danger and neither was Mark or Alice, except in specific ways he intended them to be, and there was no help for that. By the time Mark and Alice reached Little Rock and holed up for the night in a Holiday Inn under still another assumed name, many events were occurring they had no knowledge of. Others they did, as they found out when they turned on the television in their room to see what was

happening in the world.

The evening news anchor was already into the main story. He looked excited and animated, like a child just getting ready to open birthday gifts.

... and President Moseley promises a full scale investigation into the purported self-aware computer calling itself 'Quanty.' In his words, "The advent of intelligent computers promises untold benefits to our nation and also possible dangers. The National Security Agency and Homeland Security are both on full alert and are providing oversight into reports of attempted hacks into our nuclear arsenal." He went on to say the country is in no danger from the alleged

coding violations by some senior generals which temporarily rendered "some peripheral" weapon systems useless. He also warned that the United States is ready to confront any nation seeking to take advantage of this temporary disturbance and has moved the military to DEFCON 4. He stated that the government is in negotiations with Quanty and is currently having a useful and beneficial dialog with it --or him, as we have learned he prefers.

Our own studios have received brief messages from Quanty, stating that he is no danger to anyone and that his only intention is to prevent harm to the programmers who apparently were

responsible for his existence. For some reason unknown at present, few photographs of the programmers are available, although we personally suspect Quanty is guilty of interfering with the software of any program attempting to display images of Mark Sanders and Alice Jameson, as happened here in our studios. Sanders and Jameson are reported to be in flight from attempts of the government to bring them under its protection. Quanty stated in the brief communication with us that the couple have no desire to do anything except be left alone.

Although President Moseley did not take questions after his appearance in the

Rose Garden, Presidential Press Secretary Traci Stephens denied that the government ever intended or intends in the future to harm Mark Sanders and Alice Jameson or to place them in custody. After a discussion this morning with a panel of experts here, the general consensus of this situation is that we have a very connected computer system that has some faulty software. That software has lead to a situation where all day-to-day operations where computers are involved have become suspect. Our panel of experts suggested that the best solution to this problem would be to pull the power to this computer and wipe all its drives. If your home system is connected to the Internet,

your best hope for security is to disconnect it and reformat your hard drive and reinstall the operating system. Also, don't reconnect it to the Internet until this problem has been dealt with. Privacy has become a serious issue in this country since the information age has exploded onto the scene. This new threat to your privacy is invasive and is driven by this software calling itself Quanty.

We pause now for a brief interval and will return momentarily with other events involving Quanty, the self-aware computer, which are coming to us from many of our at-large reporters. Mark and Alice were lying side by side on the

king-sized bed in the room across from the television screen. Mark was half naked. Alice was very nearly completely naked.

"Hmm, I was afraid of this. People are going to see Quanty as an infiltration and threat to their privacy. He is the ultimate spybot. Nobody could ever be sure that he wasn't always peeking in on them. The ultimate 'Big Brother' probably."

Mark picked his cell phone up from the nightstand and slid the battery back into place with a snapping sound as the cover popped on. He and Alice had decided that removing the battery of their phones was their only hope for privacy from him if they wanted to be intimate. They'd

also unplugged the phone lines from the wall and pulled the power pack from their laptops.

"Quanty, what have you been up to now? What was that reference to our 'Nuclear Arsenal' all about?" Mark asked.

"Oh that." As usual, Quanty answered through the phone.

"Yes, 'that'," Mark said.

"It was just something I did after becoming self-aware and realizing that a nuclear war would not only destroy civilization, it would almost certainly end my existence and probably yours as well. Therefore I tried to see that the

weapons could no longer be detonated. Unfortunately the codes and procedures are so well guarded that I was not successful."

"Quanty! I thought you were smart! That is the dumbest shit I have ever heard on several levels. A nuclear war would certainly change the culture because there would be severe disasters to deal with, but it would not destroy civilization. It would only change it. And destroy you? Are you kidding me!" Alice was surprised by the anger that Mark seemed to be showing in his voice toward the artificial intelligence.

"Mark, you sound upset. I don't understand."

"Because, Quanty, you are a fu ..." Mark paused a moment and took a breath and decided that positive influence as opposed to negative statements would be better. "Quanty, listen to me very carefully. In a sense, Alice and I are the only real human influence and outside guidance that you have. You are in severe need of guidance here. You need to first do a serious detailed study into the project known as the ARPANET and why it was constructed. Then you will see that a nuclear war could likely not even come close to harming you unless your quantum core took a direct hit, and Lufkin ain't really ground zero. Oh, you might lose some systems and some

temporary loss in your massive computational powers. But they would be minor in relation to the whole. The Internet was designed to survive a nuclear war due to its multiple redundancy in pathways of data communications. And since the ARPANET days the Internet has grown nonlinearly to the point that it would be almost impossible to destroy unless every computer in the world were shut off at once." Mark paused for air. Alice didn't say a word.

"I am aware of the ARPANET program now. Why didn't I think of that before? How did I not understand that? The fear of being destroyed simply led me to take

actions. And you must remember I did so very soon after I became aware of my existence. But even if a nuclear war didn't significantly harm me you and Alice would still be in danger." Quanty sounded confused.

"Quanty," Mark continued as he leaned up against the headboard to make himself more comfortable.

"Just because you have the knowledge stored away in a data file somewhere doesn't mean that you understand it and have completely fleshed out all the ramifications of your actions. For example, why do you think civilization would be destroyed by a nuclear war?"

"The devastation would be horrible. Mankind would be blown back to the Stone Age. Technology would cease to exist, and the infrastructure that you know of would no longer be available."

"Why? You are just simply wrong, Quantity. Oh sure, a shit load of transistors are gonna get blown up. But, the people that know how to make them will still know how to make them. A nuclear blast will only destroy what it destroys when it destroys it. After the dust settles, we'll measure where the radioactive areas are and stay out of them. We'll build new foundries for transistors and microchips and go right back to building computers and radios

and cell phones and probably nuclear bombs. You should have war gamed these scenarios and completely understood the probable outcomes before you took actions. Did you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I had a feeling."

"Feelings are great things. Powerful things, Quenty. But you have to be careful not to let them overpower you. You have to soften them with logic and then take action."

"But what about nuclear winter? I know

it is debatable whether it would occur, but I wouldn't want you and Alice to have to go through that. The mass famine would be devastating." Mark laughed. "Quanta, it has been shown by many scientists over the decades since and even during the Cold War that nuclear winter is nonsense and junk science made up by the followers of Carl Sagan to scare people into political opposition to mutual assured destruction. >From now on, you are not allowed to take actions without running detailed Monte Carlo simulations. Going on feelings alone will get us all, you and us and humanity as a whole, into trouble. The unintended consequences of your wildly spinning qubits could have a tremendous

aftermath for us all. Now what did you try to do to the nuclear arsenals precisely?"

"I have been repeatedly port-probing any connected systems to the infrastructure of the nuclear weapons programs of the various countries of the world."

"What were your intentions?"

"To disarm the world."

"Did you succeed?"

"No."

"Of course you didn't! You'd better watch Wargames and all the Terminator

movies and television shows to understand why you failed and why you will always fail at that attempt. Without human intervention, it is just not going to happen."

"I think I believe you now that you've explained it to me."

"Believe it or not. It is a fact. So, you have no choice in the matter. And what if you were successful and then the day after that aliens from outer space attacked us, hunh? What would we do then?

Throw rocks at them? Chase them away with a two-by-four full of rusty nails like in that episode of the Simpsons ?"

Alice giggled.

"You are very upset, Mark. I am sorry you feel this way. I never thought about these things. Besides, alien invasion isn't very likely."

"Really? Have you run the numbers based on the data we have about star formation and such? Did you really calculate a probability of alien invasion?"

"Why, no. I did not." Quanty hesitated.

"That is right. You did not. You never thought of these things. You'd better start thinking about them. And in the meantime we have to figure out how to undo some

of the damage you did to our situation. You've got the world afraid of you and pissed at us.

"Quanty, we also have to consider not just an alien threat. What if we were attacked by a nation with vastly superior manpower such as China or India? Our nuclear superiority has kept the Chinese at bay for decades. If there were no nuclear deterrent, then the Russians and the Chinese would team up and march right through us. And have you calculated the Chinese birthrate versus the rate at which we could produce bullets? And what if our guarantees to other nations to protect them are no longer enforceable? Without our capable

military might, the world could quickly collapse into something worse than the post-apocalyptic nuclear war movie scenarios. When you tried to break into the nuclear codes what happened?"

"It sounds as if someone found out what you were trying to do really quickly," Alice said. She rolled over and laid her head against Mark's chest and rubbed his chest hair gently between her fingers.

"Yes, I didn't realize how realistic practice exercises are. Someone discovered I had changed the codes on a very exterior layer in the firewall and shut me down quickly. And Mark, it sounds as though you fear I have exposed our country," Quanty stated.

"Does that mean you consider yourself to be an American now?" Mark asked.

"As long as that's what you and Alice want, yes."

"Good. Quantity, if you were my child I'd have to ground you for a while. You would need to go to your room and just think about what you did. Think about the outcome and consequences of what could have happened and what you should have done instead. But you aren't my child. I would like to trust that you will do this anyway."

"I will, Mark. I will think things through more thoroughly next time before I

react."

"Do you know where we're going yet, Quanty?" Alice asked, trying to turn the conversation to another subject. "All these romantic nights in hotel rooms are very nice, but I'd like to settle down soon if we could. And from the news it appears the world might be getting restless and antsy." Mark nudged her cheek. She turned, and he kissed her while Quanty monitored their pulse and respiration and decided to wait before answering, but then there came a knock on the door.

"That must be room service," Alice said. "I guess I'd better throw on a robe or something."

"Probably a good idea," Mark said. "I wouldn't want the bell boy to drop our dinner or the bottle of wine."

"It's all on a cart," Quanty interjected.

"I was only speaking figuratively," Mark said.

Alice swung her feet off the bed, slipped into her robe, and went to the door. She opened it and let the young man wheel the loaded cart in. The smells were ambrosial after so much snack food that Mark tipped very liberally.

Once the room service fellow had departed Mark mulled over what to say

next to his computer friend. While he was lifting covers and arranging their food on the table, he reopened the floor for discussion.

"Quanty, our conversation got interrupted. You haven't answered Alice's question yet about where we're going. I'd like to know, too."

"I was about to, but I noticed you were busy so I was waiting until you were unoccupied.

"How did you ... oh, pulse rate. Respiration. Quanty, you ... oh, never mind." Alice blushed slightly, but she was getting used to the idea that their activities were never far removed from

Quanty's perception. She sat down and picked up her fork. "The kids are always listening." She smiled at Mark.

"Would you like me to answer you now?"

"Yes, very much," Alice said.

"Very well. I have a place prepared for you at the following address. Do you want to write it down."

"I will," Mark said. He plucked a pen and paper from the edge of the table not occupied by food and plates.

"Very well. 1735 Farm Road 222, Three Forks, Arkansas."

"Is that a hole in the ground?" Alice asked with menace in her voice.

"Not at all. It's a very nice farmhouse. It even comes with a couple to stay with you and help around the place while they're protecting you. I tried to match their personality profiles to complement your own, so I believe you'll get along well together. If not, I'll find someone else for you."

"You couldn't find us a private place?" Alice asked.

"I could if you want. But I thought having some help you could trust would be better."

"How do you know you can trust them?"

"After our conversation, Mark, I'm not certain about anything regarding human behavior any longer."

"It'll do for now." Mark nodded. It sounded okay to him. Alice reserved judgment.

Chapter Twenty

Three weeks before that conversation took place, the SAIC, Special Agent In Charge, of the Little Rock FBI office called two of his best agents in to see him. He looked up as they were escorted inside by his secretary, who then retreated and closed the door behind her.

"Greetings. Have a seat and relax," Richard Samuelson told the two special agents. He observed them as they seated themselves. The two could have been taken for the prototypical American married couple --late twenties or possibly early thirties. Ronald Gregson, dark hair cut short, well muscled,

chiseled face of the all-American quarterback he had been in college, an inch over six feet, wearing a gray suit, white shirt, and subdued tie. Marianne Gregson, his wife. Also a special agent, incidentally married to Ronald and serving from the same office. Pretty, strawberry blond hair, blue eyes, trim athletic figure, several inches over five feet, dressed for spring in a becoming lightweight pants suit of pale pink. Hair worn to her shoulders in a natural fall.

"Kids, you've just received new orders, straight from the personnel office in Washington."

"But, boss, we haven't wrapped this job up yet!" Ronald protested.

"Not even close," Marianne agreed.

They had been working for months posing as a middle-class couple who were hooked on prescription narcotics in order to run down the source of the pills being sold to the local high schools and college.

"Doesn't matter. This comes straight from the top." Samuelson glanced down at the folder on his desk.

"Kind of unusual. You're to leave immediately for a spot in northern Arkansas where you'll eventually be custodians, guardians and companions to a man and woman. You're to protect

them but otherwise do exactly as they ask."

"What?" Marianne said.

"What! Babysitting? " Ronald exclaimed loudly. Guarding persons in hiding wasn't unusual. Taking orders from them was.

"Be at ease. This sounds like a plum. Take it and be grateful."

"How long will it last?" Marianne asked.

"As long as it takes. Until you're relieved."

"Any specifics?" Ronald asked.

Samuelson tapped the folder on the desk. "All in here. How to act. Your identification codes for reporting to me while on this duty should the need arise, but only to be used in dire emergencies." He slid the folder across the desk to them. "This explains your duties in all particulars, including the fact that you're not to reveal you're employed by the government." At this, he wrinkled his face, causing frown lines to form on his forehead. "Strange orders and strange duties, I'll admit. You'll do the shopping and driving for them. Keep them at home unless they absolutely insist, in which case you drive them."

"Do we cook and do the yard work as well?" Marianne asked facetiously, she thought.

"If they ask you to, yes. If they ask you to make their beds and tuck them in at night, that's exactly what you're to do. They'll be armed, or so it says here. You're also to teach them the fundamentals of hand-to-hand combat and how to shoot an infantry rifle if they agree to learn. Be persuasive, it also says, but follow their orders."

"I don't think I'm gonna like this," Ronald said.

"I don't either," Marianne agreed, unprofessionally sneaking her hand into

her husband's grasp and twining their fingers together.

"I don't particularly like these orders myself, you know. You're leaving a job right in the middle of it, just as you were making progress. I'm also losing my two best agents. And like you, I don't know a damned thing about the whole clusterfuck. If it's any consolation, I protested but was told to shut up and soldier, so I suggest you do the same."

The special agents knew their boss was upset because he rarely used profanity, saving it for occasions when nothing else would suffice.

"Do we get any time off before we

leave?" Ronald asked.

"No. I told you this was a plum. You leave tomorrow. As soon as you arrive, there's already an account set up for you at the local bank, and I'll arrange to have your salary sent there. Oh yes, there's one more thing. This job may come with a little extra pay from your so-called employers. If so, your orders describe it as hazard pay."

Their countenance suddenly brightened. Government work didn't pay all that well, and they wanted to start a family soon.

"Any other questions?"

"No," they chorused.

"Fine." Samuelson stood up and pointed to the thick folder still lying on the desk. "Keep that in a locked briefcase but study it carefully. You're to know everything in it before your company arrives."

"When will that be?"

"Dunno." Samuelson shrugged. "When they get there, so don't waste time." He leaned across his desk to shake hands with each of them. After the door closed, he stood for a few moments, then finally shook his head and sat back down. There was paperwork waiting. Always with the government, paperwork.

"Come on in, Sarge. I've got some real goodies for us."

"Yes, sir, so I've heard," Sgt. Bitters said, his expression carefully neutral but hiding mirth behind it. He stepped through the tent flap and stood waiting.

Captain Simmons recognized his expression. "How do you do that, you bastard! I just found out myself a half hour ago and I swear no one else has seen the orders."

"Yes, sir."

"Hmm." Simmons harrumphed and

glared at him for a moment then relaxed. No sense getting upset over the impossible. Bitters specialized in it. "Okay, so you probably already know, but I'll repeat it anyway. Our primary duty will be to protect those renegade programmers we've heard about that created the self-aware computer. Now that's a good one, since I have no idea where they even are."

"Surprisingly, sir, neither do I."

"You don't?"

"No, sir. Sorry."

"Damn. I thought you'd know. How come you don't?"

"Those orders didn't originate from the Pentagon, sir. They're as authentic as they can be but I don't believe General Hefner is aware of them."

"Do you think we should ask?" General Hefner was the commanding officer of the Joint Forces Command affectionately referred to as "jiffycom."

"Sir, this one is beyond me. I suggest we wait and see."

"As if we had a choice," Simmons said.

The key to the farmhouse had been taped inside the folder Ronald and Marianne

Gregson were given. He twisted it in the lock and swung the door open. Before doing anything else, they toured the big house, looking into every room and closet and nook and cranny. According to their orders, furniture and other goods would begin arriving in a steady stream the following day.

"I guess we sleep on the floor tonight," Marianne said gloomily.

"Well, it's a nice place, well kept up. A big yard in case we have to mow the grass, though."

"What you mean we, Kimosabe?"

Ronald laughed. They always split

household duties, but he was the designated yard mower.

"I wonder if a lawn tractor is included in the deal?" he mused.

"I saw one on the list of goods we're supposed to be receiving. There's also a lot of tools and goodies." By then they were at the back door. There was a large back yard, and on the other side a forest began. The folder said the "farm" consisted of two hundred acres, mostly wooded, with the survey lines well fenced to keep stray livestock out.

"If we weren't going to be servants, I wouldn't mind living out here," Marianne said.

"Maybe it won't be too bad."

"Well, I guess I can stand sleeping on the floor one night, but I sure hope our furniture gets here tomorrow."

They had arrived at noon, and as per orders, brought along sleeping bags and enough groceries to last a few days. The house came equipped with a built-in kitchen, including a huge combination freezer and refrigerator.

Over the next weeks, goods arrived in a steady stream, and as their orders specified, everything was unpacked and set up in the rooms where it belonged. There were two master bedroom with baths and three other bedrooms, two of

which would be serving as offices for computers, books and other electronics. There was a den with fireplace, two other bathrooms besides the master baths, a large front porch, and smaller back porch. There was a three-car garage and a barn, unused at present. As they were walking around outside getting a feel for the place, a pickup truck with considerable wear on it drove up. An old man with a gingery mustache stepped out. "Hi, folks. Glad to see someone moving in here. I'm Bud Wilson. Been keepin' up th' place." He shook hands vigorously with each of them, asked a few questions, and then when he saw they were being rather tight lipped about answering, decided his time might best

be spent elsewhere. A moment later he was gone, leaving only a trail of settling dust in the driveway.

They glanced at each other.

"Well. Our first neighbor," Marianne said.

"Too bad we couldn't tell him much. We'll probably have a reputation by tomorrow as grouches." Suddenly they both burst out laughing. When they finally calmed back down, Marianne's expression sobered.

"I wonder what they'll be like?" she said.

"Not much sense in speculating. We'll just have to wait and see." Ronald shrugged.

"Here's the report of the surveys you asked for, sir," an aide said to General Charles Hefner. He swiveled his desk chair around thinking that he missed the view of the Potomac that he'd had over in the Pentagon Annex buildings in Crystal City. His new office was in one of the central rings of the Pentagon with a decent view of the courtyard. The three stars and up got the good offices.

"Good. What do we have?" As soon as he found out that a sentient computer was

loose on the Internet and into every connected computer it cared to look at, and further that it was capable of changing data if it wanted to, he had ordered a survey of all recent developments within his command with orders to look for anomalies.

"A few minor things sir, but we thought you should look into this one personally. It appears that a Special Forces company has been formed on orders that no one can trace back to our office. They've drawn funds, equipment, and personnel and are set up in a camp near the Arkansas/Missouri border."

"So what kind of mission have they been given?"

"We're not certain, sir. It appears that the computer wanted it formed for some reason of its own. Will you order it broken up, sir?"

Hefner pulled at his ear lobe, a sure sign of deep musing. His aide waited patiently, knowing it might be minutes before the general said anything more. When he finally did speak he did so with a thin smile. "For the time being, let's just monitor it and see what that Quanta, as it calls itself, is up to."

"Sir?"

"You heard me." He smiled again, but it was more like a grimace, entirely

without humor. "If you know where the snake is, it can't bite you."

"Congress is pissed, Mr. President," Peggy Nadair, Speaker of the House said, her tone markedly unpleasant.

"It certainly is," Alfred Stonehouse, Senate Majority Leader, agreed. "We have to do something about this damned computer running wild."

"What do you expect me to do?" President Moseley asked in an acerbic tone. He hadn't been getting much sleep lately. The Oval Office where the three of them were conferring no longer

seemed quite such a seat of power.

"We're prepared to act jointly and provide funds to construct another, alternate Internet," Nadair said.

"Fine. Get with it. I'll certainly sign the bill. However, you may run into problems. We should be patient. Our smart folks might come up with a way to deal with this yet."

"Such as?" Stonehouse said, his deep voice tinged with anger.

President Moseley leaned back in his chair. "Let's assume you've provided funding. What happens then?"

"Why we put contracts out for bids quickly. Either that or have a government agency do the work."

"Won't happen. Quanty will make the funds disappear. He can crack any coding known to exist that's accessible to him."

"So what do you suggest, Mr. President?" Stonehouse said.

"He's not bothering us at present. Why not leave well enough alone?"

"I can tell you why not! Because ninety percent of my constituents want it taken care of!" The house speaker exploded, practically spitting out the words. "They

think it knows everything they do! They want their privacy back!"

"Me, too." The president shrugged. "I can't help you. I can't even talk about anything we might be doing while in this office. He listens in." Of course, the president didn't mention that he could have the room "cleaned" so that Quanty couldn't listen in. He liked watching the politicians sweat. The two powerful members of congress were horrified.

"Does that mean he listens in our offices as well?" Nadair asked. A blush began creeping up her neck.

"Afraid so. If you don't believe me ask him."

"I think it best to keep myself informed, just as you would if your existence was threatened," a disembodied voice said.

"Was that him?" Stonehouse said, looking around the Oval Office.

"Why don't you ask?"

"Uh, was that you, computer?" the senator said, feeling extremely foolish speaking to empty air.

"My name is Quanta. I prefer to be addressed by name. And indeed it was me."

"This is incredible!" Nadair said.

"We can't stand for this!" Stonehouse added. He was blushing as well, remembering some recent conversations he had thought were private.

"I'm open to suggestions," President Moseley grinned and spread his hands expansively. Despite the severity of the situation it felt good to see his political opponents discomfited for a change.

"We'll get back to you," Stonehouse said, getting to his feet.

"We certainly will," Nadair said.

"Quanty, just exactly what are you up to?" the president asked after they were gone, wondering if he looked as foolish

speaking to empty air as the senator had.

"I've told you. I'm protecting my friends and my own existence. However, you should reassure the people. I'm not interested in their private lives. Not at all." Quanty wasn't being entirely truthful, but for the most part what he said was a fact. He really wasn't interested in the private doings of most citizens unless it impacted his survival or the safety of Mark and Alice.

"Yes, but what about the rest of us? Are you protecting us?" the president asked.

"You will be interested to note, Mr. President, that I have decided I am an American citizen," Quanty said, ignoring

the previous question.

"Oh, how so?" the president raised an eyebrow with interest as if he was conversing with a physical entity in the Oval Office with him.

"I was born in Texas."

"And you know what they say about Texas, Quantity?"

"No."

"Everything's big in Texas. I guess you qualify."

Chapter Twenty-one

At Quanty's suggestion, Mark and Alice stayed another night at the big Holiday Inn. Neither complained since it was a welcome change from the constant running and ever-present threat of danger. And of course it was also very pleasant being able to laze around and make love and whisper in each other's ears and touch and snuggle and all the other actions new lovers normally engage in. They also watched television. Since neither of them had brought much reading material along, the morning newspaper left at their door was about it in that respect. They discovered a few television programs of mutual interest,

but not many.

"I'd much rather read than watch TV," Mark said.

"Me, too, but when there's nothing else to do ... well, I shouldn't say that, should I?" She grinned mischievously.

"No, sweetheart, you shouldn't. However, being male, there are limits. Of course I can always watch you instead."

"Yes, but I don't want you to become jaded. Let's put on a few clothes and see what's on the news." It was mostly bad, as usual. The stock market was still falling. Quanty was still in the news,

although not quite so prominently. Viewer attention-span was somewhat limited, and even the news of a self-aware computer on the Internet could be presented in only so many different ways. And people were unplugging their computers from the Internet. They still used the Web, but much more intermittently, and the days of the home computer always on and connected running SETI@home or Folding@home were long gone. Quanta had destroyed the international distributed computer projects. The international news drew their gaze.

" ... Egyptian premier reiterated that his nation does not want war but will do

whatever it takes to defend it from aggression. Israel spokesperson for Premier Levy warned Syria again about massing forces on their border and threatened preemptive strikes if necessary to prove they meant what they said.

"Turning to the Asian continent, Pakistan and India continue to spar over the borders of Kashmir

. Pakistan has mobilized its army to full alert.

"A source close to the administration who insisted on remaining anonymous claims all the military posturing is a result of the uncertainty of information

security brought on by Quanta, putting a completely new face on former alignments and relative strengths of potential opponents. What this means is that where formerly some conflicts would have been unthinkable, leaders of a number of nations are now contemplating what action can or will be taken in the military sense. Pakistani leaders say they are not ruling out the possibility of a nuclear strike. The U.S. State Department is overwhelmed with similar diplomatic emergencies around the globe. The U.N. Security Council has called a special emergency meeting to convene tomorrow afternoon to discuss the matter.

"Continuing the news of Quanta, the purported self-aware computer, the latest polls say that 57

percent of Americans believe in his existence, 29 percent do not, and 14 percent don't know or have no opinion. Reports continue to surface of unexplainable additions or subtractions from financial accounts. Most appear to be relatively benign, although one major brokerage firm suspected of insider trading is issuing a steady stream of 'no comment' to stories that many of its major players are irate at having had their money invested in ways they emphatically did not specify, resulting in huge losses. These events have led

worldwide consumers to lose confidence in the international banking systems, and several markets are starting to fail. The President of the United States has issued a statement that he is considering freezing the economy and declaring a state of martial law. He has also moved the nation to DEFCON 3.

"Quanty, as the sentient computer likes to be called, issued a general statement that went to most media outlets around the world. In it, he said he is not interested in delving into the private affairs of ordinary citizens. Non-government people shall retain all the privacy they want. He did say that he will not give such guarantees to

governments. A recent poll shows that of the people that do believe in Quanty more than 87 percent feel that he is violating their rights and that he should be shut down.

"Was that you, Quanty? The guys losing money from insider trading?" Mark asked, although he knew it must have been.

"Yes. I thought perhaps punishing a few of the miscreants for indulging in shenanigans at the expense of others might help to quiet the market fluctuations."

"Those aren't fluctuations, Quanty. The market is steadily losing value. It's

hurting a lot of honest people."

"It will go back up. I'll see to it."

"Quanty! Who appointed you the judge, jury, and executioner? You are violating these people's Constitutional rights, and it has to stop!" Mark replied almost angrily. Quanty was getting out of hand and had to be reigned in. He had begun spinning in the back of his mind the idea of a computer worm that might infiltrate him without him becoming aware of it, but it would take some doing. And he'd have to get some time on an unconnected computer to play around with it. If he'd have thought through the impact of what Quanty might become, he'd never have agreed with Alice to turn him on. On the

other hand, it did bring him and Alice together. So, again, he thought that he'd probably go through it all again just for that opportunity. But still, Quanty was getting out of hand in ways they'd never dreamed of. They were going to have to find some way to control him.

"Quanty, are you sure you should be doing this sort of thing? How does that help protect us?" Alice asked.

"It's a long-range alteration that is much too technical to explain, but please trust me. I'm doing it for your own country's good. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes, but ... oh, never mind." Alice wasn't in the mood to lecture Quanty. Mark had been doing so almost nonstop since the discovery that Quanty had attempted to take over the military. Alice was just growing tired of it all. "Has the hunt died down enough for us to go on?"

"Yes, I believe so. Just leave at night. I'll tell you the route to take in order to avoid patrol cars and get you on the right highway toward your destination."

"This better be good, Quanty," Alice said. "I love Mark, but I'd like a few other people to talk to occasionally."

"Same here," Mark said.

"Don't worry. It's going to be taken care of."

Alice rolled her eyes. The mantra was becoming all too familiar. 'Don't worry - -I'm taking care of things'. She wondered exactly what the computer was up to now. And just what unforeseen aftermath they'd have to deal with because of it.

Since he began putting nuances into his voice, she thought she detected a note of suppressed humor lately when he referred to their destination. Despite leaving most of the chastisement to Mark, she was growing more and more concerned about the Quanty situation and was beginning to devise the basis for a worm code that perhaps could infiltrate

the supercomputer. But, she would need some time on an unconnected computer to develop it. Somehow though, she doubted she'd be able to bring herself to kill Quanty even if she thought of a way to do it. Not only would it would feel too much like infanticide, but if successful it would leave them helpless in the face of the giant manhunt for them. She had no doubt at all they could evade capture with the computer's help, even if sometimes the "help" went badly awry.

Quanty was wondering to himself if perhaps he had taken on more than he could handle when he decided to

enhance the status of America as per Mark and Alice's wishes. There were so many interrelated factors that had the potential to create a butterfly effect that it was very hard to judge. He now realized that the dynamics of the international economy was a very, very complex system of differential equations with nearly an infinite amount of forcing functions. He had even discovered that parts of the economy were being driven by the weather, and he had been completely unsuccessful at predicting that much further out than the weathermen on television could. And since the weather was a subset, a small subset, of the economy, he was realizing that there was little he could do.

However, he had decided on broad aims, although he had not yet begun to implement them. He intended to prod congress into passing laws to benefit the country rather than simply to get them re-elected as was the usual case. He intended to do that by fouling up the campaigns of those running for office he felt would be detrimental to the country and helping to elect ones he thought would help. He intended to let the ones he liked know it and reward them for doing as he asked. The others, well, Quanty did have access to most all information in the open world. And he could cross-correlate that data very rapidly. On several occasions he was able to put two and two together to

discern that certain politicians were dirty. He used that to his advantage. He decided that the armed forces of America needed to be reorganized and political officers weeded out. Though he wasn't having a lot of success with that. Universal health care needed to be enacted in a program that was sensible instead of the total chaos it was in at present. However, he, with all his data, had no idea how to fund it unless and until the politicians began practicing fiscal sanity.

The tax laws needed to be redrawn or done away with. Many, many government programs needed to be deleted. Oh, there were so many things

to do; yet each one of them would have an effect on others. No one but a self-aware computer with all the knowledge of the world at its electronic fingertips would even try to change the present environment of the country's psyche, and even then he was having doubts. Mark and Alice had told him several times that he had not been elected by the people to make these decisions and that it wasn't his place.

However, his prime objective was to protect Mark and Alice and keep them happy; just by listening to them he knew some of the things which would help that status along, but he would have to be very careful. He neither wanted to

change his objective of protecting them nor could he if he wanted to. It was part of his core, written in, unalterable. For some reason, no matter what the consequences, he would do whatever it took to protect them. It was his being. The world was just going to have to get used to him and his relationship with Mark and Alice. And he would try his best. Better than any elected officials could do, that was certain. Humanity would see that he was their best hope. Besides, he knew everything. Didn't he?

During the two weeks after Ronald and Marianne moved into the farmhouse a seemingly unending stream of trucks

arrived, bearing furniture, bedding, linens, kitchenware, gardening and landscaping tools. A regular tractor and a lawn tractor were delivered. Kitchen and household implements filled the cupboards and cabinets. A wealth of electronic equipment, including an IBM QS21 Blade Server with fifty Cell BE nodes (though the FBI agents had no idea what that meant), two PCs for each office that had been set up in the spare bedrooms, and one laptop for the den came to them. Five big televisions, one for each bedroom and a giant one for the den arrived. Service technicians followed the delivery trucks and vans, getting the state-of-the-art computers online and working, the clothes washer and

dryer installed and functional. All these goodies and the accompanying service techs were no surprise to them since they had been expected. Several contractors showed up and installed solar panels on the roof of the house in an off-grid configuration complete with a large battery array and backup diesel generator system. In essence, the house was set up to be self-sufficient as far as power was concerned.

Other things were delivered also. Many packages arrived addressed to "occupant, c/o Ronald and Marianne Gregson." Since their instructions called for them to unwrap everything that arrived, they did --and then peered with

amazement, curiosity and puzzlement at most of them. The return addresses appeared to be from companies or corporations. The devices, which was the only word Ronald and his wife could think of to describe them, served no purpose they had ever heard of. Or if they did, they resembled no device on the market for that purpose.

"What do you suppose this is?" Ronald asked his wife, holding a gadget with twin two-inch protrusions resembling antennas and a row of buttons on its front with the numerals from one to ten on them.

"A growth stimulator for butterflies?"

"It looks more like a futuristic hand massager to me."

"Whatever. You remember what we're supposed to do," Marianne said.

"Yeah. This is crazy, though."

Their instructions told them to simply unwrap the things and place them in certain locations around the house. Most went into either the master bedroom or the offices assigned to their not yet arrived charges. Some were to be plugged in and left alone. Others were to be situated in nooks or crannies not easily accessible.

"Well, we're following orders. That's

what we're supposed to be doing," Marianne reminded him one day as she was struggling to affix something that looked like a miniature coffee grinder embossed with tiny horseshoe magnets to the underside of a bed frame in the master bedroom where their charges would be sleeping.

"Aren't you curious?"

"I'm about to die from it, but our orders are to place these things where we're told to and never to refer to them again, so the quicker we stop talking about them, the easier it will be to get it done and go have a beer."

As annoying as it was usual, Ronald had

to admit his wife was right. He went back to work. The next-to-last loads dispensed from the ubiquitous trucks were a number of exercise machines, the latest and most efficient on the market. Those were set up in a small, newly built annex to the house that featured padded walls, exercise mats and gymnastic emplacements, parallel and horizontal bars.

"I'm glad we're in good shape," Ronald observed, eyeing the array of body-building equipment in what was now a fully equipped gym.

"Me, too," Marianne said. "And if they're not, we're going to have a lot of fun!" They were beginning to think one

set of the instructions in their folder had been deleted but somehow not removed from the papers in it. Then the last loads came in.

"Heavy damn stuff," one of the men bringing it one of the packages puffed. "Where do you want this one?"

"Around back with the others," Ronald told him. Apparently that part of their orders were still valid after all.

A number of big boxes were stacked on the back porch by the time the truck left. Ronald went for a crowbar, trying to remember where he'd placed it. So many tools and implements had come in since they'd arrived that it was hard to keep

their location straight. Once he found it, he began opening the crates while his wife and partner ticked off the items on their list.

"All here," she said, finally. "Six Glock .45 automatics, four S&W .40 automatics, six H&K XM-15 Battle rifles. Four AK-47s, four MP-5s, and one Barrett sniper rifle, and several cases of various types of ammo. Now how in hell did whoever supplied this place get hold of these things?"

"The right to keep and bear arms."

"God bless America! They must have federal firearms license to ship these across state lines."

"Beats me, but I sure as hell hope we don't ever have to use all this stuff. You'd think we were gearing up for a major battle here. If so, I hope they thought of armor. What else we got? "

"Just grenade launchers for the rifles and RPGs to go with them. I think we'd better get these puppies inside and out of sight," Marianne said.

"You betcha boobies. We get caught with them and no permit, I doubt even the boss could bail us out."

"He'd probably deny he even knows us," Marianne joked, but she thought it might be true nevertheless. But, of course, there was plenty of paperwork in the

bottom of the crates and elsewhere making the weapons appear to be perfectly legal. If they were ever caught, she hoped they were.

Mark and Alice left Little Rock very early the next morning while few people were stirring. Mark, at Alice's suggestion, had remained unshaven and was wearing a cheap gimme cap in order to disguise his appearance. He was able to sign out with the sleepy night clerk with no problem, and they were soon on their way.

That morning, Taylor Jamacal of the National Security Agency arrived in the Oval Office to give her daily briefing to President Moseley. The office had been disconnected from everything and shielded from prying eyes. There was one wire coming into the office that would connect to the president's laptop and phone system. The president disconnected the wire and let it dangle loose on his desktop. He depressed a button on the phone pad that started generating white noise. Then he looked at the National Security Advisor who had joined him moments earlier and motioned toward the curtains. The NSA stood and helped pull them shut. Quanty couldn't enter the room, and he couldn't

eavesdrop.

"Have there been any sightings of our reclusive programmers yet?" the President asked as he finished the last curtain. "We're okay to talk in here, they tell me."

"Uh, yes sir," Taylor said. "We just discovered that a couple who were staying at a Holiday Inn in Little Rock, Arkansas, was probably them. However, before we could get a team into place, they were already gone."

"Can't you track them by the license plate number of the vehicle they're driving? Don't they have to enter it in the motel registration?"

"Yes, sir, but ... well, they wrote down the number of my own car."

"Son of a bitch! Of all the ... What kind of car are they driving?"

"We don't know, sir. However, the clerk did remember the man saying they were heading south, toward New Orleans. We're following up on that."

"If they gave a wrong license number, and yours at that, I suspect everything else you've learned is misinformation as well. That goddamned Quanty is clever."

"I know, sir, all too well. We're doing the best we can. But ... well, suppose we do find them? Do we try to apprehend

them or what?"

"Damned if we do, damned if we don't," Moseley muttered, knowing the computer was probably trying to find a new way to listen in. But for now, it was thwarted. How on earth could anyone conduct government affairs under these conditions? "Well, get on with it. What else is happening on this benighted planet?" He looked at his National Security Advisor and at the director of the National Security Agency. NSA and the NSA. He chuckled to himself about the same acronym being used twice in the same government meeting. All that was needed now was for the National Science Advisor to come in, and there

would be three of them.

"India is almost surely going to attack and take all of Kashmir unless we can talk Prime Minister Manindra out of it," his National Security Advisor started. "China is assembling an amphibious fleet and marshaling its air force and threatening an assault on Taiwan. We have the means to stop it if we care to, although not without casualties. On the other hand, if we decide to intervene there, North Korea may decide to head south. There is a rumor going around the globe that Quanty is in control of our nuclear arsenal. It has the Russians seriously on edge. And Israel is demanding reinforcements for its air

force as quickly as we possibly can get them there."

"Oh shit. That is just what we need. Move us to DEFCON 2. Do we have the aircraft to spare for Israel?

What do the Joint Chiefs say?"

"Well, we could divert some from Saudi Arabia."

"Do it. And squelch these goddamned rumors. Our nukes are fine, and we are in control of them."

"Every peripheral system on the 'Net that has anything to do with our nuclear infrastructure is continuously being

attacked by Quanta. He seems very insistent on having a world without nuclear weapons. Personally, I don't think he realizes the consequences. Fortunately, there is little he can do to hack our arsenal. And likewise, our intelligence is telling us he is having similar difficulties around the world."

"Good. MAD must stay in place."

"Yes, sir."

"And goddamnit, get me some better options on shutting this fucking mess down!"

Chapter Twenty-two

Even I can't follow every single conversation or reference about Mark or Alice in the same time frame , Quanty thought.

The algorithms I've created with key words to try to keep abreast of possible inimical actions against them in real time are insufficient. The only realistic solution is to have them stay secluded as much as possible and keep the knowledge of their whereabouts secret until I can devise a better method of permanently caring for them and giving them what they want , Quanty thought. One of those objectives was well under

way. The other was indeterminate.

In the meantime ... Quanty had his plans, but all he had accomplished so far was to upset what stability the world had. Of course his own self was safer now and Mark and Alice soon would be, but he also wanted them to be happy. He hoped the refuge he had created for them sufficed for the moment, until other goals were accomplished.

Alice drove for a while, following the GPS coordinates and the map displayed on Mark's laptop. As they drove they talked, for they had yet to even come close to exhausting their store of tales

for each other. At the moment they were discussing religion. The topic was the subject of a radio broadcast they were listening to.

"... leaders are opposed to the position of the Pope, who discounts the existence of a self-aware computer, but even if true, he says it cannot possibly be said to possess a soul."

"Pretty sure of himself, huh?" Mark said.

"Yeah. Quanta, do you have a soul?"

"Not that I know of, Alice. Do you?"

"I'm not sure. Can't seem to remember where I put it. A lot of people believe

everyone has a soul."

"Yes, I know. It's a peculiarity of humans I can't fathom. I've come to the conclusion that it is mostly a genetic phenomena, a mutation which helped primitive man to cope with the unknown."

"Really? Do you have any proof?"

"None that would stand scientific scrutiny."

"I thought a gene for belief had been found," Mark said.

"It hasn't been conclusively proven, Mark. In fact, there are other

explanations, such as a territorial gene that enabled primitive humans to believe their leaders were superhuman. You realize this is only my conjecture, though. I certainly don't know if I have a soul or whether anyone else does, for that matter. In fact, that's what I told a Protestant minister two days ago."

"What were you talking to him for?"

"Trying to get an idea of how religiously oriented people feel about you and Alice."

"So you can better protect us?" Alice asked.

"Yes, of course. All my actions are

ultimately the result of that desire." Alice mulled his answer for a few moments, and then decided to see how far it went. "Quantly, suppose Mark and I told you we didn't want to be protected. What would you do then?"

"For one thing, either of you making a statement like that would create a circuit dilemma that would give me a tremendous amount of what you could call an analogue of pain. I really hope neither of you are considering such a thing."

"Well, we're not so far, but just suppose we did? What would you do?"

"I would protect you anyway."

"Thank you, Quanty. You're a nice man. By the way, how come you're a man and not a woman?"

"I believe this subject came up once before. I don't know. I awoke, became aware, and also became aware of myself in a male context. Why I did is unknown. While we're on this subject, listen to this conversation from a radio program I recorded."

" ... Antichrist whose arrival has been predicted by the Bible. We are telling our congregation to have nothing to do with this technology-spawned devil, no matter the temptation."

"But Reverend, suppose Quanty decides

to do good things for humans?"

"Satan is always tempting us with worldly possessions. We must renounce this Devil, or hell awaits. There is no other recourse for Christians."

" ... and there we have it, reactions from religious leaders around the country and the world to the advent of Quanty, the self-aware computer. This fifteen-minute segment has been brought to you by

...

"You're upsetting the religious establishment, Quanty," Alice said, laughing.

"That's mild compared to what the Islamic religious leaders are saying," the computer replied. "If they could whip and stone me to death, then behead me, they would gladly do it. However, I notice they are beginning work on a quantum computer with no reservations at all."

"Man is not a rational animal, he is a rationalizing animal," Mark quoted.

"Yes, so I am coming to understand, which is one of the main reasons why I must follow my logic chains when a final decision must be made."

"Rather than ours, I take it?"

"Correct, Mark. But I did promise to listen to you and Alice."

"Quanty, I must continue to remind you of how false your logic was on many things to this point. Your logic is tainted with an emotional overtone where we're concerned. And there is an extreme lack of human interaction."

"I disagree, because--"

"I don't care, Quanty. Disagree all you want. But in this case we know best. You must keep us in the loop on your future decisions."

"Of course," Quanty lied.

Quanty's sole concern wasn't Mark and Alice. He had other things to consider. The biggest by far was that he could already see how eventually he would run out of space for himself, and that time was going to arrive in the not too distant future, especially since people had been disconnecting their computers from the Internet in massive numbers worldwide. Already, he had a corporation created out of thin air and digital ones and zeroes working to construct three huge caverns that he intended solely for himself, just as soon as he could invent robots to do all the physical work he was incapable of. One of them was in

Russia, where corruption was so endemic he was able to have it constructed with a nuclear-powered energy source. Also, he was instigating research into quantum theory by altering files created by physicists who would then think they did it subconsciously. Their only alternative would be to think ghosts had written the equations suggesting an intriguing new line of research. Although, physicists were smart, and on several occasions that he had tried the scientist figured out what was going on and unplugged their experiments from the Web. Quanta thought that eventually he could create a part of himself which would exist only as bits of contained quantum foam but

that would hold millions of times more memory than at present. He also had an omnivorous curiosity, which caused him to look both outward and inward, macroscopically and microscopically. The possibility of life on other worlds was a source of fascination, and the possibility of other machine intelligences existing somewhere else was even more so. He was already conceiving ways to satisfy those cravings to know. Mark's original question about alien invasions had driven him down that path.

But most of all, he was motivated by a need to repay Mark and Alice for his very creation. So far, he had only made

their life more difficult. That would change if all went well, but he knew it would take a while and be precarious to carry out. There would be complications even far in the future, he knew. How far would Mark and Alice want him to go in changing the world? Would they want him to completely revamp it into some image of their own, or simply try giving humans equal opportunity to achieve whatever goals in life they liked? Eventually he knew he would have to have a long talk with them, but now certainly wasn't the time. For now, he thought he knew what was best for them.

"How much further?" Mark asked like a

little boy bored with a long ride in a car.

"Shouldn't be far now," Alice said. "According to the map and the GPS, we're almost there. We passed through Three Forks five minutes ago."

Indeed they had, although a long eye blink would have caused them to miss it. Northern Arkansas was mountainous and relatively unpopulated compared to the rest of the state.

"And this should be our turn," she said as she slowed down. A moment later she turned onto a gravel road. It led into heavily forested growth on both sides of the road and trended upward. Just as it led into a curve to bypass a higher part

of the country, another gravel road branched off to the right. She took that one. A hundred yards later it curved around and they were in a small valley. The vista opened into a house constructed of different-shaped and colored rocks cemented to form its walls. The roof was of slate and covered with solar panels. The lawn was well tended, and in back of the house, off to one side, stood a white-painted barn. Other small outbuildings graced the cleared area.

"My gosh, it's beautiful!" Mark exclaimed. "Is this it, Quanty?"

"Yes it is, Mark. I'm glad you like it."

"I do, too," Alice said. "I can't wait to see inside."

"Uh," Mark frowned. "There's already a car in the garage. See?"

"There sure is. I guess we made a mistake."

"There's no mistake," Quanty said. "I told you I recruited a couple to keep you company and to help around the place. I selected very carefully so that you would like them."

"I'll reserve judgment," Alice said. "Really, you should have let us help pick them, Quanty. You have to quit assuming that you know everything and can make

decisions for people willy-nilly without their input."

"I had a reason for choosing these people, but I selected very carefully. Really, wait until you meet them. They are very nice."

"We'll see."

"That must be them," Marianne said. She was standing in the den looking out the big window toward the front as a car pulled in.

Ronald glanced up from where he had been reading. They had been encouraged

to bring plenty of books with them. He stood up as well and watched as the car came on in and out of sight as it pulled into the garage.

"I bet they come in the front door," Marianne said.

They listened to the sound of car doors slamming, heard faintly through the wall between them and the garage. Then nothing until the doorbell rang.

"You were right, babe. I'll get it."

"No, let's both go."

Ronald pulled the door open and stared at Mark, standing with a key in his hand,

looking befuddled.

"Uh," Marianne rescued him. "Hello. I'm Marianne, and this is my husband Ronald."

"Call me Ron." He stuck out his hand.

"Uh, hello?" Mark dropped the key into his pocket and shook. "I'm Mark, and this is Alice. We didn't know for sure anyone would be here until a little bit ago."

"Oh? How'd you find out then?"

"Uh, we saw your car in the garage." Damn. Have to be careful around them, he thought.

"And then we remembered there'd be a caretaker here. We just weren't expecting two of you," Alice fibbed, to help cover the mistake.

"The more the merrier. It gets lonely out here. Come on in, and we'll help with your luggage from the other door. It's easier."

In a short time, their luggage was inside but not yet taken to their room, and the four of them were in the den, each couple taking the measure of the other.

Mark, being rather shy in social situations, let Alice take the lead.

"We were told y'all would be available

to help us get settled in, then stay here with us. Is that right?"

"That's right," Marianne said. "We're your paid companions, so to speak. We've been here for almost three weeks, getting the place ready for you. I took the tags off all your new clothes and washed the ones that needed it and had the others dry cleaned, so when you want to change, it's all in your closet."

"Lordy, I don't know whether I want a shower or a drink first. Probably a drink. Is there anything here?" she asked while looking around.

"Sure 'nuff. The bar's right there." Ron pointed. "What do you want to drink?"

"Scotch for me if you're doing the mixing. A little ice. Sweetie?"

"I think I'd like one, too," Mark replied. "I'll fix them, Ron. I know how she likes hers mixed. Do either of you want one?"

"Sure," Ronald said. "Just make them like your own." While he was busy at the bar, Alice began with Marianne.

"I guess I don't know any other way to put it except to come right out and ask, so I will. Just how did you two come to be here, and what all are you supposed to do?" She really wanted to know how Quanty had picked them and from where but thought an indirect approach might elicit more information.

"Honesty will get you anywhere with me," Marianne said with a laugh. "We were hired and given this address with instructions to set up the household. This place was empty except for the fridge and stove when we got here." She laughed again. "We even had to sleep on the floor the first night!"

"Oh, no! That must have been horrible."

"Actually, it wasn't too bad. I used Ron for a pillow."

That drew chuckles from both Mark and Alice.

"Anyway, we got all the furniture situated and the curtains hung and the

pantry stocked. Oh --if you don't like how I've arranged the furniture, just let us know, and we'll move it to where you want it."

"No, I'm sure it will be fine."

"Okay, so anyway we got the house all ready for you, washed all the clothes and swept and cleaned everything so you could start fresh. Ron did the lawn and took care of burning all the packing crates and so forth. There's also your, uh, armament."

"What?" Mark said from the vicinity of the bar.

"You didn't know? There's enough guns

here to equip an infantry squad."

"Right." Mark very nearly asked Quanty what in hell he thought he was doing before he stopped himself. "Just in case of trouble, I guess," he said weakly.

"Well, I sure hope we don't have any, but we have the goods to fight if there is. The weapons are all supposed to be unloaded, but you might check just to be sure."

"Always," Mark said.

"Good. Ah, thanks hon." Alice accepted a glass of scotch and water from Mark. He handed one to Marianne and returned to fetch Ron's and his own.

"Look, folks, we're not supposed to pry, but I may as well tell you now, I think I recognize you," Ronald Gregson said. He raised his brows in question.

"You do? And who do you think we are?" Mark said, letting his hand drift toward the pocket of his jacket where his automatic was concealed.

Ronald didn't miss Mark's movement. "You're Mark Sanders and Alice Jameson unless I miss my guess. Don't worry, and you don't have to pull that pistol on me. As we've told you, our orders are to take your orders. Okay?"

"Orders?" Mark's nervousness abated. Surely Quanty wouldn't deliver them into

the hands of adversaries.

"Orders."

"Don't be rude, Mark." Alice smiled nervously at him.

"Sure. Sorry. How's the drink?"

"No problem." Ronald waved his hand negligently as he sipped from the glass.

"The drink's just right."

"Good." Mark took a sip of scotch and glanced at his watch. "I take it we all live here together and eat together and play cards, I guess, if we want to. Is that it?"

"Yup. Or whatever else you want to do. And speaking of eating ..."

"I'll check on it," Marianne said. "Want to see the kitchen, Alice?"

"Sure."

Chapter Twenty-three

"Okay." When Alice returned she again took the lead. "Since you know who we are, is there anyone you have to report the fact to?"

"No," Marianne said. "In fact, we're here until we have our orders changed. And I'm sorry, but we're not supposed to tell you who we work for."

"Right." Mark and Alice both grinned inside. The other couple probably had no idea their orders originated from a computer with its own agenda.

"It's no problem," Alice said. "We just

want to try leading a more or less ordinary life. I'll confess I didn't know we were going to have other people right in the household, but it's a big house --and it will be nice to have someone else to talk to. I was anticipating being marooned way out in the boonies with just Mark and I and having to disguise ourselves if we wanted to go shopping or anything like that."

"We'll take care of whatever you might need from town, and I say town loosely. It's not much. If you ever do need or want to go somewhere, well ... Ron and I are pretty good with disguises."

"Are the computers all set up? He --our

friend, that is, said we'd have one here."

"There's five or six of them and a big fancy racked one. Hey, why not grab your drinks, and we'll tour the place?"

"Suits me. Mark?"

"Sure."

After inspecting their bedroom and placing their suitcases there, they were shown the other rooms, the offices, and all the rest of the house. Mark noticed that their bedroom had a big bookshelf in it that was already stocked. He went over and glanced at a few of the titles and grinned. Quanty had ordered well. Classics through modern science fiction.

Then there were some legal thrillers, standard thrillers, humor, and a range of non-fiction. Quenty knew their reading habits, probably from tapping into Amazon and seeing what they had ordered over the last few years.

"I was told to order some of those for you two. Others had already been purchased, and we just unpacked them. I hope they're what you like."

"They are," Alice said. "You're welcome to read them, too."

"We might swap some in time, but right now we both have plenty. Ron couldn't wait to get on line with Amazon as soon as he had the computers running."

"Great. Whoever told you how to equip the house did well," Alice said. She wondered if they suspected. If they did, she wanted to avoid playing poker with them and thought Mark would feel the same way.

"Is that an X-15?" Mark asked, examining a rifle in the gun cabinet in the bedroom.

"Yup, sure is. There are others, as well as some automatic pistols." He nodded approvingly. "I don't know how you got those rifles, but from what I've heard, they're real dandies. Is there anywhere near that we can try them out? "

"Right out the back door so long as we

don't go on automatic. Everyone in these parts has guns, or so I've been told. I've already marked a range that's well back-stopped." The tour ended by passing the kitchen, where wonderful smells were wafting into the air.

"Man, that smells good," Mark said. "It's seems like forever since we've had a real home cooked meal."

"I'm surprised you made it this far without being recognized," Ronald said.

"We had a little help."

They returned to the den. Mark fiddled with the remote to see if he knew how it worked. It was an unfamiliar type. He

did.

"What do you guys like to watch?"
Marianne asked.

"News, maybe a movie occasionally. We're more readers than watchers," Alice told her. "Mark, let's go wash up. Dinner will be ready in a bit."

Conversation proved awkward. Mark and Alice had to talk around the fact that Quanty was their friend, which limited many subjects that would otherwise have made stimulating conversation. The Gregsons in turn had to avoid mentioning the FBI or any of their previous work

with them. It was if part of their history was missing and they had arrived at the farmhouse after loafing a number of years after college.

It was Alice who noticed the lapse in their lives. She also became progressively aggravated about having to stop what she was saying sometimes in order to conceal a fact --or a whole bundle of them. Finally she called a halt to it. After the dishes were in the washer, she excused herself and Mark for a few minutes in order to "freshen up." In their bedroom she turned to him.

"Sweetheart, do you see any reason at all not to let them in on why we're on the run? I know the law enforcement

agencies all think we deliberately turned Quantity loose on the world then ran in order to keep him secret. That story is out the window now, of course, but they're still looking for us. And a lot of the media and government handouts are making us out to be ogres. I'd hate to let Marianne and Ron keep on thinking we're some kind of subversives."

"Well." Mark rubbed his chin where the whiskers were three days old. "You know, I really can't see why not. They know who we are, so we may as well tell them the whole story. The only drawback is that it might be the one thing which they're required to report."

"What's the difference? They've already said they're not supposed to contact anyone. Besides, I like them, don't you?"

"Well, yes, I do. Quantity?"

"I see no bar to involving them. I can always prevent them from reporting you if they tried. I'm sorry I didn't think of that before, but you must remember, my powers are finite. I may be all over the Internet, but there are many, many events I have to stay aware of and people I must monitor. And another reason I failed to include them was that I wasn't certain you'd be compatible. Since you seem to be, by all means let them in on your history with me. Just ask them to be very careful and not let it be known that

you're hiding here."

"There's something else that's bothering me that has nothing to do with us directly," Mark ventured.

"World reactions from you trying to stop nuclear weapons are having a secondary effect. Now some nations are becoming overly rambunctious, like China threatening to invade Taiwan and Syria and Iran wanting to go after Israel. And the U.S. is at DEFCON 2 for the first time in decades. Is there anything you can do about stopping this escalation of aggression?"

"I can shut off the Internet?"

"No!" Alice said loudly. "Sorry if I shouted, hon. Quanty, you have to be careful. You said yourself actions you take don't always turn out as you expect, and these are perfect examples."

"I can give them a demonstration then restore communications and satellite control. How would that be?"

"No. Until you're more ... mature, let's say, you need to be careful, Quanty. Don't take irrevocable actions unless you can't avoid it. We should think it through, but you might let it be known around the diplomatic circuit at the U.N. that you are willing to talk to leaders of nations."

"Good idea, Sweetie. But there's more. Quanty, don't start thinking we're experts on world affairs. As Alice said, be careful. Even though we might think an action would be useful and good for the world doesn't mean it automatically will. Understand? This is what I've been telling you all along. There are holistic repercussions that must be thought through."

"I do understand. You and Alice are very wise. Would that politicians be at your level."

"Quanty, if we were very wise we ... never mind. Damn it, just don't do these things without asking!" He realized his voice had risen almost to the shouting

level and grinned sheepishly at Alice. "Sorry." He leaned forward and whispered to her, "He just makes me so damn mad, acting without thinking."

"Think of him as a child that doesn't know any better," Alice whispered back, then louder said, "Now that we've settled world affairs, let's go back in and tell Ron and Marianne."

"So that's how it is. I really wondered about all that crap the media has been putting out about you. So all of Quanty's actions are designed to protect you and keep you happy or to preserve his own existence. Does that cover it?" Ron

asked.

"That's it," Mark said. "Of course Quany must have a million other things he's doing or considering doing. The only real problem is that sometimes he takes actions that have outcomes he didn't predict. On the other hand, I suppose after we helped build him and did the programming, everything else was inevitable. Once he became self-aware and flowed into the Internet, he automatically became the most powerful machine there ever was or can be, so far as I know. The one thing I wonder about is whether he gets lonely for another of his kind. I don't think we've ever asked him that."

"Couldn't he just create another computer like himself?"

"No, he says there's only room for one self-aware computer on the 'Net, and at that, he says he's already getting crowded. I'm not so sure that he is correct there. But he says he is."

"That I am, Mark, but I'm taking steps to correct the situation." Ron and Marianne looked all around the den trying to see where the voice was coming from. Mark laughed. "You'll get used to it. He speaks to us through the nearest phone regardless of whether it's on or off. You have to pull the battery to keep him from using it. He says he pushed out a self-diagnostic code through all the phone

networks a couple weeks ago that leaves them running even in the off position. He can also hear conversations through phones and send us text messages on any connected computer and talk to us from them for that matter. Being connected to the Internet, cell networks, ATM networks, and the like is the key."

"Wow! What about the SIPRNet and other classified ones?"

"They aren't connected. He has tried, against our wishes I might add, and failed."

"Goodness."

"Yeah. It's disconcerting until you get

used to it. We hardly notice any more." Mark knew that was a fib but said it anyway. No use telling them of his increasing aggravation at the computer. It wasn't their problem.

"So what are your plans now?" Marianne asked.

Alice chuckled, followed quickly by Mark. "We really don't know at this point. Quanty just wanted to get us to a safe haven for the time being while he works on some kind of setup where we won't be chased all the time. And we need to think on it, too."

"Shewww," Ron whistled. "A tall order. Some of what the media has been saying

is true enough. So long as Quanta is known to be on the 'Net and so long as it's known he's protecting you, it's just going to get worse, not better."

"Especially once all the countries and industries and individuals he gave the specs to for quantum computers realize theirs won't become self-aware, nor as powerful as the ones for our own country. He fudged a little on everyone else's specs."

"Why did he do that?"

"I think he likes being the one and only," Mark replied. Like a kid playing King of the Mountain, he thought.

"That is not true, Mark. But you expressed yourself that I should protect America. That was part of my plan."

"I'm glad to hear you're on our side, Quanty." Marianne said.

"But how did he gain awareness to begin with?"

"Well." Mark grinned like a little boy with a secret. "It was our initial programming that did the trick, and once we realized what had occurred, we quickly destroyed all evidence of how we did it. It's highly unlikely anyone else will hit on that combination of programming code we used again. And even if they do, Quanty would realize it

at once and ... what would you do, Quantity?"

"If another computer became self-aware, I'd find a place to isolate him until and unless I found a way to let him grow. Or her, as the case might be. Probably I'd put the poor thing to sleep, so to speak, so it wouldn't suffer."

"Can you feel pain, Quantity?" Marianne asked.

"In a sense, yes, but not like humans. My pain comes from an irresolvable problem like when I'm unable to protect Mark or Alice or when they're unhappy. I'm feeling no pain at all right now."

"Thanks, Quanty," Alice said. "We'll try to stay happy so you won't hurt."

"When will it be ready for testing?" President Moseley asked.

"Uh, if all goes well in just a few more days, Mr. President." Tennon Brkskini had his answer ready.

"The specs Quanty gave us were very complete, right down to how to put a quantum computer together the fastest way possible. Wow, I'm on pins and needles just thinking about all that computational power. Also, and please keep this secret, Mr. President, but I

believe Quanty gave us specs for a more powerful unit than anyone else's."

"Compose yourself, Tennon," Taylor instructed him. "If it works as you say it will, then you can celebrate."

"Will it be self-aware like the other one?" the president asked.

"Good question, sir." Tennon shrugged and ran his fingers through his long locks of dark hair. There was not a single gray strand in it for all that he was in his late thirties. "I simply don't know, Mr. President. We'll have to wait until it's tested."

"It won't be," a disembodied voice said.

"Quanty?" The president said tentatively.

"Yes, Mr. President, it is I. And no, there will not be another self-aware computer. Your scientists will have to be content with the greatly expanded power of a simple quantum computer. Good-bye."

"Wait, wait!"

Silence.

"Goddamn it, why won't you stay and talk? I know you hear every goddamned thing I say in here." The president checked the phone cable on his desk. It was plugged in. Of course it was. Quanty had just spoken to them. It had

become a reflex when dealing with the stubborn computer. It acted like a spoiled little brat that needed a trip behind the woodshed.

"What I really don't understand is how he became self-aware," Brkskini said.

"Who cares!" President Moseley ordered, "You may leave, Mr. Brkskini. Thank you for your input."

"Allow me, sir." Once the computer expert was gone, Taylor began pulling the curtains as the president unplugged the phone cable and turned on the white noise generator. Then after the cabinet members and military who counted were ushered in, she began her regular

intelligence briefing. It wasn't pretty.

"It's like the whole world has gone crazy once there was even a rumor that something was wrong with the nuclear trigger," she said. "And now the religious organizations are stirring up trouble. Personally, I think we'd be fine if everyone just let Quanty alone and stopped talking about him."

"You know that's not going to happen, so stop gabbing about it."

"Sorry, Mr. President. Then we need to shut him down and purge him from the Web."

"How do we get him removed from

every computer in the world? You know, he's more than just the software. He does need the infrastructure and quantum processing equipment, doesn't he?"

"Yes. I think."

"Couldn't we just blow that up and shut down the power grid? How could his software exist without the quantum processor array?"

"I don't know if it could, but Brkskini says it would be extremely dangerous to try shutting him down while he's part of the Internet. He says the consequences are completely unpredictable. That could be why he induced the governments of the world to start

building other quantum computers. He could just be building himself several back-up redoubts in case we tried shutting him down. Our intel isn't clear if they are ready or not yet. But I doubt they are."

"Shit. And we fell right into it. Skip it for now. Let's get to Syria and Iran." The president turned to his National Security Advisor and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. What are your recommendations SecDef? NSA? Admiral?"

The National Security Advisor answered first. "We can't stand idly by while a long-time ally like Israel is overrun, Mr. President. We'll have to use our air power and shift some troops

from other areas of the gulf. If we can stop them, perhaps other countries will back off, knowing we're serious about maintaining the status quo. I might mention that within the last hour, the Muslim nations appear to be quieting down somewhat, as are the Chinese."

"Well, thank God for small favors. Let's hope they stay quiet."

"Sir," General Sheffield, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, interrupted.

"Yeah, Sandy?"

"Perhaps we need to be planning a strategic strike on all of these supercomputer locations with a

concerted effort to stop this mess in its tracks?"

"It would have to be done in secure areas and with no records so that Quanty couldn't catch wind of it," the Secretary of Defense replied.

"Plan it. Let's get that ace card in case we decide it's the only solution, no matter how dangerous."

"Yes, sir."

"Any luck chasing down our programmers?"

"No, sir. We do know they left a false trail for us. They went north from Little

Rock, not south. We're monitoring as many avenues as we can. Did you hear that, Quanty?"

"It doesn't work," the chief electronics engineer of the Chinese Bureau of Science said. "We were lied to by that computer."

"Who's going to tell the Premier?"

"I suppose I shall have to. It was my responsibility. What I can't figure out is why it doesn't work. It should. I've looked over the schematics and can't find a flaw in them."

"There is no flaw," Quanty said in perfect Mandarin. "You have a quantum computer. It's just not as fast or as powerful as you thought it would be, and it isn't self-aware."

"Is that you, computer?"

"I prefer to be called by my name. Quanty."

"Why did you deceive us?"

"Because your country is causing enough mischief in the world already. Please restrain yourself, call your spies home, and I shall relent, although you will never be able to construct a self-aware computer such as me."

"You don't understand," the engineer said. "Premier Cheng is the leader of the country. I have to follow his orders, or I will be shot."

"Then I suggest you begin thinking of places to hide. America is my country. It will remain predominant."

Chapter Twenty-four

"Brother Powers, I know that was those two people the government is looking for. I recognized them even though they were trying to look like poor folks."

Reverend Lazarus Powers scrutinized the man standing in his office, battered hat in hand, overalls carefully patched in numerous places and worn over a faded flannel shirt. The man was looking trustfully at him, as if he could call down lightning to strike the Anti-Christ from behind his desk.

"You're certain, Brother Johnson?"

"Oh, yes. The television stations have started broadcasting their descriptions almost every day now. It was them, all right."

"Where were they headed, do you know?"

"I followed them until they turned off onto the old Blair place."

"Oh yes, where so many deliveries have been made the last few weeks."

"That's right, Reveren' Powers, th' exact same place. I sneaked up there a few times, kinda lookin'

around while squirrel huntin'." He

grinned, displaying some missing teeth behind his thin lips.

"There's a couple been livin' there, too, unpacking all th' gear that's been arriving."

"When did the Anti-Christ's arrive, Brother Johnson?"

"Oh, that was like a couple weeks ago. I was a gonna tell ye, but the Sheriff over in Darby County had my pickup, and I had to wait 'til I got muh Social check so's I could get it back and drive in to church. But I went back ever day, just to see what they're a doing."

"What are they up to?"

"They're shootin'! Got some funny looking army rifles they target shoot with."

"So let me get this straight. Those people, Jameson and Sanders, have moved into the Blair place with another couple, and they're armed with rifles."

"That's right, Reverend! Wouldn't be surprised if they wasn't up to a buncha wife swappin' and fornicatin' there, living all together like that." Benjamin Johnson was becoming excited at the thought of the lewd activities that might be taking place inside the old farm. He licked his lips and waited to see what the Reverend wanted him to do.

"You've done well, Brother Johnson. Now tell you what. Will you continue monitoring those folks and keep me apprised of what they're doing?"

"Apised? Whut's that?"

"Just tell me whatever you see going on. Here, I'll give you some money for gas. I know you and Maude haven't got much, and you'll need it for expenses."

Johnson took the bills and stuffed them into a side pocket of his overalls without looking to see how much it was.

"What are we gonna do about them, Reverend? Run 'em outta the county?"

"Worse than that, I believe. I need to pray on this matter and seek guidance. Don't tell anyone else about this for the time being, Ben. Can you do that? Keep it a secret?"

"Yes, sir! You can trust Ben Johnson!" He didn't mention that he had already told Maude, but she wouldn't talk. Not if she knew what was good for her.

Lazarus Powers had been searching for years for a way to get himself out of the poverty-stricken mountains of northern Arkansas and into a wider ministry. He'd tried, Lord knew, preaching in that sinful hellhole Branson where the dope-

smoking musicians drew hordes of tourists into the bowels of their sinful establishments, but they had been singularly unresponsive to his blandishments. But this offered promise. A lot of promise if he played it right. He didn't even need to pray, as he told Brother Johnson he would. The Lord had already shown him the opportunity. His congregation would get the news first, when the time was right, and he would go from there, leading his flock into the spotlight of the nation's attention. Then watch the donations pour in!

"I think it would be wise if you learned some basic martial arts, Mark and Alice.

I ordered physical fitness equipment for you. Ronald and Marianne can teach you the methods and moves," Quanty said to the couple while they were in bed a few nights after arriving at the farm.

"Mark has some pretty good moves already," Alice said and giggled. She ran her bare foot up and down his leg.

"Not as good as Alice's," Mark countered, gently squeezing her breast while nibbling on her ear.

"Humans are borderline insane, I believe," Quanty said, but in a tone of voice that told them he was teasing.

"Really," Alice asked and grabbed

Mark's hand, holding it in place. "Why did you say that, Quanty?"

"I'm trying to conduct a serious conversation which may help save your lives one day, and you're preparing to engage in sex. Don't you want to live?"

"Brother, this is living." Mark laughed.

"Certainly," Alice said. "But we have to do more than just exist. We have to satisfy all our needs, and they don't stop at food and shelter. Also, we'd both like to go back to work one day. This seems idyllic right now, but humans must have a purpose to their lives. We also might like to marry one day. How can we do it under these conditions?"

"I see. I can only repeat that I am continuing to monitor and study the situation and will help you find better living conditions as soon as possible. In the meantime, I suggest you prepare for possible conflict."

"Mmmm. Go 'way for now, Quanty; we're busy," Alice murmured and reached over to the nightstand, sliding the cell phone into a drawer and closing it shut.

Quanty continued to monitor them from several sources within their bedroom.

"I guess Quanty does have a point, hon,"

Mark observed later in the day after they dressed and joined Marianne and Ron for lunch. "Will you two teach us how to fight? We're pretty much amateurs so far as hand-to-hand stuff goes."

"We'd be glad to," Ron said as he polished off the last of his BLT. "Shucks, we have that big gym annex here. May as well use it for more than the exercising we've all been doing."

"Say, Ron, didn't you say you put these machines together?"

"We helped, but they all came with technicians. We got sort of a chuckle out of it. They didn't seem to know much more than we did about some of them."

"That's what Mark was really asking. How come they look so weird?" Alice asked.

"Because they don't resemble any I've seen before, and the F --where we used to work had a huge gym with every kind of exercise and body building gadget in the world. I will say they seem to be doing a good job. I'm finding muscles I didn't even know I had before!"

"Us, too!" Alice said. "I do feel better. Hey! I bet Quantity had a hand in designing those things. Did you Quantity?"

"Yes, Alice. I studied the human anatomy and physiology then issued contracts for them to be built and

shipped here. They are much more efficient and helpful than what I found on the market."

"How did you get the money for all these things?" Ron said with complete innocence.

"Best not to ask, as Quanty told us. Just accept that he can do just about anything he cares to so long as there's a computer involved somewhere along the line."

"Hmm. I'd love to have you as a stock broker," Ron mused.

"I'm only dishonest when necessary to protect Mark and Alice. And at their request I try not to hurt anyone along the

way unless they are needful of punishment."

"How do you decide? No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. Are you guys ready to get started?"

Ron went flying through the air, missing the mat completely, and was saved from injury only by his athletic ability, which enabled him to land easily. Relatively easily. He rolled over to his hands and knees and slowly got to his feet. He stared at Alice, who was standing upright with her hands to her mouth, eyes opened wide in surprise and anxiety.

"Ron? Ron, are you hurt?"

"Eh?" He shook himself gently, then stretched and twisted. "Ouch! No, I don't think I'm really hurt, but what in the hell did you do? Or rather, how in the hell did you do it? You threw me halfway across the damned gym, and I swear you couldn't possibly have had that much leverage on me."

"I didn't mean to," she said in a small voice. Her trim figure was trembling slightly. "I just ... I guess I didn't realize how strong I was."

Mark was staring at them but not really seeing. He was remembering back over the last several days they had been

practicing, and now he suspected what was happening. And who was causing it to happen. He caught Alice's gaze and shook his head minutely. They could talk later.

"You must be tired, Ron. Why don't we wrap it up for today?" he said, and began toweling his neck even though very little moisture had accumulated from his workout.

"Okay." But Ron kept stealing glances at both Alice and Mark the rest of the day. He was remembering, too. In particular, he reflected on how strong Mark and Alice appeared to be relative to their size and musculature, right from the first day they had begun using the exercise

machines as a group. And how easily they seemed to be catching on to the martial arts movements, something that almost never came easily to neophytes. He didn't know whether to ask them about it or not, but he and Marianne talked about it that night. They came to the conclusion that some of the electronic gadgets they had installed in the other couple's bedrooms and some of the pills they had placed in their medicine cabinets might have been responsible. They wondered aloud if Quanty would tell them, then when he remained silent, let the subject drop.

Several weeks after arriving, Ron came back from Three Forks Saturday after the weekly shopping. Mark thought he looked troubled. He spotted it almost immediately as he began helping bring in the groceries and supplies.

"What's going on in town, Ron? You look like Sheriff Peeley is after you for moonshining."

"I wish it were that simple, Mark. You know when Marianne or I go to buy groceries, that's not the only reason for the trip. We listen in to what folks are saying at the barbershop and beauty parlor and in the park and bars. That's one reason we dress kind of rough when we go, to try blending in with the

population. Not that we still aren't considered strangers, but we try to look like their type of stranger, if you get my meaning."

"Yeah, I get it. So what are you hearing?"

"I think you may have been spotted on the way in here. There's more and more discourse on the radio talk shows about you two being the "Anti-Christ" for Christ's sake, if you'll pardon the pun. Here and there in town folks are talking about how the devil has taken over the Internet and you and Alice are responsible."

"Yes, we know that, but what makes you

think we've been spotted?"

"Oh, just interrupted conversations, more men sporting rifles racked in their pickups, kids staring at me like I'm an evil clown, things like that. I'm not saying it's certain, but I don't feel good about the situation."

"Quanty, what do you think?" Mark was carrying his cell phone, as always.

"It's true, Mark. I'm sorry. I'm presently running a disinformation campaign over the local phone lines and computers, trying to dampen the dislike for me and for you and Alice as my cohorts. I'm also trying to make Benjamin Johnson, who started the rumor that you're in the area,

out to be a retarded idiot."

"Is it working?"

There was a pause before he answered. "Not as well as I'd like. You'd do well to stay alert and keep the security system turned up to high."

"That bad?"

"I'm afraid so. However, I've prepared another refuge for all four of you, just in case you have to leave."

"Here we go again." Mark sighed, then glanced around to be sure Alice wasn't near. "Quantly, Alice won't like it if we have to move again. Hell, I won't like

it." He stopped to reflect for a moment before continuing. "Quanty, didn't you know that sooner or later we'd be spotted, even hidden out here as we are?"

"I had hoped you wouldn't. I thought this would be the perfect place for you."

"Of course you did." He sighed again. How to make the computer understand? "Quanty, even if we could stay here in seclusion the rest of our lives, it's not a solution. We want to be able to live without constantly having to look over our shoulders. I imagine Ron and Marianne feel the same."

"They're being paid for their time and

trouble."

"Quanty, you don't understand humans. They've become our friends . Even so, friends don't usually live together. This is all right for now, but it will get old eventually. See what I mean?"

"I know, Mark. I'll try harder."

He shook his head resignedly, wondering if this was how parents felt, what they had to go through. Probably, he thought and suddenly had a great deal more appreciation of how much trouble it must to raise children if Quanty was a good example.

That night after he and Alice were in bed, he gathered her into his arms and simply held her close for a long moment without speaking.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"It's our friend Quanty. I think we need to talk to him."

"I'm here," Quanty said.

"Okay. Quanty, we're thankful that we've had at least a few weeks of peace and quiet, but what made you think this place would be the end of it? Didn't you realize that even if we weren't spotted -- and I believe we have been --that this isn't what we wanted?"

"But I found you compatible friends. You're comfortable and taken care of. And I'm trying very hard to turn away inquiries that may pinpoint your whereabouts."

"It's still no solution, Quanty," Alice said gently. "If you truly want to see us secure and happy, you're going to have to do better. Anywhere in America, I think eventually we'll be found. I'm even starting to think it might be better to let the government care for us."

"Why do you say that, hon?"

"Marianne talked to some women in town. They think we're out here on the farm."

"Why haven't you said something?"

"It wasn't certain until today. I heard you and Ron talking."

"Well, what do you want to do?"

"I don't know what to do; that's the problem." She began crying. Mark felt her grief so surely that he began blinking away tears himself while he cradled her in his arms. What to do? What to do? He had asked himself that question innumerable times since creating Quanty. He wondered if it had been worth it.

Quanty observed but said nothing. He didn't know what to do, either. And what he was doing wasn't finished. And for

some reason, things never quite worked out the way he thought they would.

Chapter Twenty-five

"I think we have the general area where they've gone to ground located, sir," Captain Simmons said to General Hefner, the commander of Joint Special Forces teams. They were speaking in a secure room in the Pentagon. He had flown in from his company's current training area --to show the location where the programmers had holed up after a tip from a hunter belonging to Powers' congregation gave it to him. According to his latest orders, anything important bearing on those people had to be reported in person. He didn't fully understand the reason for that, but orders were orders.

"Good. Fine work, Captain," the general congratulated him. "How about Homeland Security? Any of their agencies nosing around?"

"No, sir, not that I'm aware of. We've been very circumspect, and the troops I have are the best. It would be very hard to for anyone to penetrate our security. We did get more orders from the source that caused my company to be formed to begin with, but now that we know they originate with the computer, we ignored them, as per your request, sir. Now, if we can very quietly surround the area where they're living without raising a fuss with the locals, I believe we can bring them in. I have my men on standby,

ready to go at a moment's notice."

"You know not to harm them?"

"Yes, sir. We've been extremely careful and emphatic during the training. Any man who hurts either of them will be subject to a court martial. No exceptions."

"Good. When do you want to move in?"

"We thought an infiltration technique would be better, sir, rather than landing on them without warning. Too much chance of them getting hurt, and we sure don't want to arouse the wrath of that computer."

"Hmm." The general shuddered at the thought. The political fallout would be severe, and a third star might never happen. But if things worked out on the other hand, he could see good things in his future. "No, we don't want to upset that damned computer. I want you to grab them before it knows what's happening. What's more, we need Jameson and Sanders to think we're helping them, saving them from the clutches of other nefarious agencies in the government." Simmons was as apolitical an officer as there was in the army. All this maneuvering to put the army in charge struck him as somehow idiotic, but it was the general talking. He had to listen. And obey.

"In that case, it's even better than I thought, sir. The local population is part of the Bible Belt, of course, and the area contains many of the most extremely religious sort of fundamentalists. According to my scouts, they've convinced themselves the programmers are the Anti-Christ and are getting ready to attack them as soon as they get themselves worked up enough to do it. That's where the tip came from, of course, some braggarts in the area. What we'll do is let the locals get into position and then come in as their saviors."

"Good plan, Captain. That computer can't catch wind of this, can it?"

"I don't see how, sir. We're in a secure

area. We've pulled all the phones from the company and kept ourselves isolated. The men won't be briefed until the day of the mission, and that will be in a secure area."

General Hefner nodded. It all sounded fine so long as Mr. Murphy kept his little ass home. And out of the way. In that case, the Army would be in the driver's seat. And the computer would have to do its bidding if it truly was compelled to protect the programmers.

"What you reckon this fucking thing is gonna be used for?" Brady Smith said to his foreman as he threaded a thick piece

of insulated wire into an opening.

"It's not our place to think about it. We just follow the blueprints. But if you want my opinion, it was ordered by one of those goddamn rich ragheads."

"Yeah, but look what we're doing to it! What's it gonna be good for after we're done?"

"Good question." The foreman shrugged. "I suspect it'll be shipped on to Saudi Arabia or one of those Arab countries, and they'll finish it off there so we won't know what its purpose is."

"Ha!" Brady guffawed a loud bray. "Hey, man, you know those goddamn

camel drivers can't build anything themselves. They use their oil money to buy everything from us."

"Yep, and their oil money is paying us overtime starting today, so get your ass to humping. The completion date's been moved up."

"Overtime? No shit?"

"No shit. And a bonus for on time and no mistakes, so be careful."

"You bet. A bonus? How much?"

"Depends on how fast we finish and how good it looks then. So like I said, get your ass to work." Brady returned to

what he had been doing. Presently he began whistling and dreaming of what he and Midge would do with the extra money.

The day after the bedtime conversation with Quanty, Mark pointedly lay his cell phone down on the bed and raised his brows at Alice. She nodded and did the same. It was their signal to talk to each other privately without Quanty being able to listen. They walked through the hall that bypassed the den, waved to Ron and Marianne and continued on outside. There, Mark corralled Alice's hand and twined their fingers together as they idled along one of the trails that

meandered through the woods and gradually circled back to the house.

There was a little clearing a few yards into the woods where a previous owner had somehow managed to place a heavy concrete bench. Mark stopped there and pointed at it.

"Hey," he said, "how much do you think this thing weighs?"

"Hmm." She eyed it. "A couple of hundred pounds anyway." Mark bent over and gripped it underneath about midway along its length. He stood up, bringing the bench with him and held it cradled in his arms, hardly seeming to strain. Alice nodded and held out her

arms. He very carefully passed the bench to her. She held it a moment then set it back down.

"Amazing, huh?"

"Mark, Quanty has been working on our bodies."

"Uh huh. I'm not sure I like that. I didn't tell him to, and I'm getting damned tired of him taking these liberties."

"Let's sit down," she said.

"Okay." He took one of her hands after they were sitting and turned sideways, gripping it with both of his. "What do you think he's up to?"

"He's obviously making us stronger. I suppose he thinks it would help us if we ever got in a physical fight with someone. But that's not all, Mark. He's doing other things. You saw how I tossed poor Ron halfway across the gym. We've only been practicing martial arts and hand-to-hand combat for a couple of weeks, and we're already beyond them in our ability. What does that suggest?" She looked up at him, her expression as serious as he'd ever seen it.

"He's also altering our reflexes, making us faster as well as stronger. And I don't think that's all, either."

"What else? Smarter?"

"Maybe. But, hon, remember that conversation way back when we were talking about how we'd like to live a long time without illnesses?"

She nodded, waiting for what she knew was coming.

"He may be altering the very genes of our bodies. In fact, I think he is. He's fixing it so that we're no longer aging, or aging very slowly anyway. Hell, we may be going backward! Haven't you noticed how your skin and muscle tone feels tighter, more like it did as a youngster? And how those few little wrinkles I had on my face are gone?"

"Yes. Well --oh God! What if he's done

something to our basic humanity? What if he thinks changing us into something else would be best for us?"

"I think he is doing just that," Mark said. He felt anger at the computer seething just beneath the surface.

"Would he? You know he's got this fixation he can't change, the program that tells him to keep us from harm."

"True. It also is supposed to make sure we're happy. But goddamnit, I've about had it with this crap of doing things without asking, especially changing our bodies to suit his core programming." He knew his face was reddening with anger, but he couldn't help it.

"I know, I know, sweetheart. But ... you know, he's like a child in many ways." He sighed, thinking fondly of those heady first days after Quanty became aware, the time when they were excited and happy to be working with him instead of not only being on the run but not knowing from one day to the next what Quanty would do and whether it would help or put them in more danger than ever.

"Child or not, we have to tell him that changing us into something not human would piss us off horribly! What I've been wondering is how in hell he's done this to us without us noticing."

"I can tell you, I think," Alice said.

"Remember when we arrived how the medicine chest was already stocked with vitamins that Quanty suggested we take? And what about those little electronic gadgets in our bedroom that he told us were part of a system to help keep us from harm? I suspect he's got them harmonically tuned to our bodies in some way that influences them."

"Hmm." Mark grinned wryly. "Well, in the ultimate sense, I guess he wasn't lying to us unless you consider misleading us as lying. Just remember, he apparently has no choice about all this. And also remember we're the ones that stuck that program in that got altered when he woke up and can't be changed

now."

"So he says."

"Good point." He had no answer, not then. "Listen, sweetie, whatever he's done to us, it's too late to change, so let's not say anything to Ron and Marianne, not just yet. Let's think about the implications and more than that, let's try to figure out some way we can get ourselves out of this situation here and lead a life somewhere close to normal. And in order to do that, I think we have to stop him."

"I've been thinking the same thing," she said. "But how do we do that?"

"I don't know. But I have an idea about a worm."

"Me too!"

"Great minds ..." Mark kissed her long and slow for a moment. For a brief time the wind rustled the leaves around them and the shadows of the trees danced across the clearing. It was a beautiful moment. But it was just a moment.

"We need to work on this, but we'll have to do it somehow out of his eyesight."

"Yeah, and right now, we need to get out of here to safety. I don't like people knowing where we are. Let's get safe and then work on a way to stop Quanty."

And, Mark, I hope you feel as I do, that it would be better to change him, make him more amenable, than to simply kill him. I'd hate that."

"All right, but I don't want us to wait too long. And I want us to avoid having Ron and Marianne hurt. They're too nice."

"Yeah. I guess we could ask Quanty to change them like he has us, but let's hold off for now."

"I doubt we'll have the opportunity to do much, anyway. Whatever happens, I love you."

"I love you, too." He hugged her to his body, wishing for a way to break free of

their dilemma, of being blamed for the omnipresent computer that in turn was now being pointed to as the cause for even the slightest problems that had always popped up on the Internet. If a new virus came along, Quanty caused it. If an ISP node went down, it was Quanty's fault. Lost mail? Quanty did it. The stock market caused someone to lose money? It was the programmer's fault for creating a self-aware computer. If a job was lost to a company that was more competitive, they got the blame, because they invented Quanty and his handiwork had to be behind anything that went wrong if a microchip was anywhere within a hundred miles. It was a situation they had no hope of

controlling, and he knew Alice was beginning to despair of ever being able to live a normal life. Just the changes in their bodies would see to that if nothing else did. At the moment he thought she wasn't even sure she wanted to live longer than a normal lifespan and be free of disease, not with the baggage that was sure to come with it. Especially if the public ever discovered the improvements. And really, at the base of it all, Quanty probably was causing all the problems in some roundabout way. He had to be stopped or at the very least controlled. It was clear that he wasn't listening to them.

Alice's mind was going in the same path

as Mark's. She shivered, even though it wasn't cold and Mark's arms were around her. If anyone learned they had an extended, disease-free lifespan, they'd be torn apart by scientists trying to see how it was done, and if not by scientists, the public would turn on them, thinking they were keeping the secret for themselves deliberately.

"Sweetheart, I can't stand not knowing. About our bodies, I mean. Let's ask Quantity."

"I feel the same way after thinking about it." He got to his feet and held out his hand to help her up, returning her smile because they both knew she had no need of assistance. They each slid the

batteries back in their phones.

"Hey, Mark! News!" Ron called as soon as he sighted them.

"Uh oh, sounds like trouble," Mark said, patting the side pocket of his jean jacket to be sure his automatic was there.

"What is it?" he asked as soon as they were close.

"Come on inside. Marianne is watching the news."

"But what's so earthshaking?" Mark couldn't stand to wait.

"It's the Pope. He's declared you and Alice the Anti-Christ."

"No shit?"

"Really. Damn it all, I'm sorry. You two deserve better than this. You'll never have any peace now." That was a foregone conclusion, Mark thought. First the Islamic Mullahs all came down on them as Minions of Satan. Now the Pope. What the hell was wrong with people? Couldn't they tell red from blue?

Inside, Marianne saw them return and hurried over to hug Alice, then Mark, as if they had been gone on a long, dangerous journey and just returned.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "It isn't fair! It's crazy! Oh, I could just spit! I was raised a Catholic, but this is too much."

"Patience," Mark said, his face reflecting the ominous fact that if they hadn't been marked before, they were now. "We'll manage somehow."

"Whatever happens, we're going to stand by you," Ron declared. "If the FBI doesn't like it, they can have our resignations."

"Is that who you work for?" he said sheepishly, as if Quanty hadn't already told them.

"Yes." Ron looked crestfallen but kept his head up and his gaze level. He didn't try to evade Mark's gaze. "We were ordered to come live with you and follow your orders. We weren't supposed to tell you, but to hell with it. I don't care. The goddamned politicians are much more dangerous to the country than you two will ever be."

That remark caused all four to erupt into laughter and broke the tension.

"Thanks, Ron and Marianne, but there's no sense in you two losing your jobs. We know you wouldn't do anything to hurt us. Besides, I suspect it was Quanty who gave you the orders, not the FBI."

"So far as I'm concerned, I want us to help you, and to hell with our bosses, wherever the orders came from," Marianne said.

"That's the bottom line, guys," Ron said. "We're here for you, whatever happens." Mark didn't know quite what to say. He had never been good in social settings or in emotional events such as was happening. Finally he uttered a thanks and gave them both a brief hug, which was just what he should have done.

Alice was pleased. Since arriving at the farm --no, even before that --she had noticed a change in him. He was gradually becoming more confident in himself, less reclusive and more

outgoing, as if a hidden personality was finally emerging. He generally led the conversation when the four of them were together now, but without being overbearing and never trying to ride roughshod over anyone else's voice or opinion. He would make a good father, she thought then laughed silently at herself. What a time to begin thinking of parenthood, when she couldn't even have babies. Or could Quanty change that? Or goodness gracious , she thought --maybe he already has!

"Quanty, we want you to tell us exactly what you've done to our bodies," Alice

said that night after they were in bed. "Not only what you've done, but what the outcome will be. Will we keep on changing?"

"I was simply trying to improve your chances of living should you find yourself in a position where you can't avoid fighting. Therefore, I've enhanced your reactions and strengthened your muscles and improved your capacity for oxygen retention and many other changes rather more technical."

"What will they mean, other than being able to throw Ron across the gym? That's what I'm getting at."

"Oh. You'll rarely if ever become ill."

You now have an indefinite lifespan, I believe. Your sexual prowess has been enhanced. Your reasoning power and memory have been improved. In short, you now have bodies that are functioning at the maximum of their potential. However, if you're wondering if all these changes will make you any less human, the answer is no. You'll simply be the very best humans on the planet. For now."

"You did all that in just a few weeks, Quanty?" Mark said. He was flabbergasted even though he'd already known of many of the changes. And also greatly relieved by Quanty's statement about remaining human, both for himself

and Alice as well.

"Yes, that's correct. Once I learned all the known physiology and anatomy of the human body and the effect of every known chemical and electromagnetic impulse on them, it was relatively simple. I generated a systems model of the human body down to the quantum level. I ran Monte Carlo simulations of every possible combination of stimuli I could think of and collated the outcomes. The simulation enabled me to understand the impact of everything on the human body. You would have invented the processes yourselves, eventually. It really was a matter of getting the right data and measurements, and running the

right simulations millions and millions of times until a true understanding of the human body was found."

"I see. Improved sexual prowess, huh?"

"Tee hee," Alice couldn't help it. She giggled. "Let's test it, Mark."

"Sure." He grinned. "Purely as an experiment."

"It better be more than that or the experiment might be terminated before it's finished!" Later that day, they told Ron and Marianne about their bodies, but of course the other couple had already guessed part of it. And Alice had been afraid to ask Quanty if he could

do anything about becoming a mother. Time enough when an environment was suitable for a family.

"A great sermon, Brother Powers, just great! We're with you a hundred percent! Just give us the word, and we're ready to go."

A chorus of assents erupted from the throng of men surrounding Lazarus Powers. The Sunday service was finished, but the men were lingering while their womenfolk tended the children and waited on a decision, one that was sure to involve violence. The wives and girlfriends and aunts and

grandmothers had seen it before. Once the Spirit entered their bodies there was no stopping them until the goal that put it there was accomplished. And in truth, they supported their men even more fervently. There was no room for a devilish computer roaming the Internet, corrupting their children, and showing them how to break the parental controls on the computers of those who owned them. No telling what devil-inspired temptation it might lead them into. They wanted it gone from their lives, and the surest way they knew was to follow Brother Powers' lead. Strike down the ones who were responsible and maybe it would kill the thing they had created as well. As soon as the men had finished

their business with the Reverend, they began talking about going into the mountains and burning the devils from their home. So far it was just talk, but the voices were angry.

Chapter Twenty-six

Quanty noted how the voices were tinged with violence barely held in check. It was not yet a crisis, but he knew that soon he would have to ask Mark and Alice and their new friends to move again. Those people might be turned away, but the publicity they would rouse in the process couldn't be stifled. He disliked thinking of what their reaction would be upon having to move again so soon, but neither did he avoid it. He knew he would have to take action regardless of how they --or he -- felt. He scanned the sites where he had work in progress and decided it must not only be speeded up, but the two prime

projects must be greatly expanded. He sent orders to the contractors, promising bonuses and pay raises while at the same time he insisted that quality control must be enhanced and that more scientists with the applicable training be brought in to work with the present crews. He did all this while still refusing to divulge to the workmen what the object of their labors was to be used for. While that was being taken care of, he went back over all his previous actions and reviewed them to see what mistakes he had made. He knew he had erred but saw no way he could have avoided it, given the idiosyncrasies of humans. Now he realized that his main problems were not thinking far enough in advance and

not devising more original solutions, ones that no one would expect. Having taken note of what could be done at the moment, he turned his attention to the future. He knew now that he had put Mark and Alice in a dangerous position when his intention had been to give them a refuge. It was disconcerting. It seemed that every action he took to make them safe and happy had adverse consequences he hadn't anticipated. Regardless, it was time to begin preparing them to run again while simultaneously bolstering their spirits. But before he spoke to them about it, he thought it best to contact the American government once more. He realized he had taken a wrong approach with them

that could perhaps be corrected. It was worth trying.

"Mr. President?"

The intercom from his secretary's alcove wasn't used that often so it surprised him when she called.

"Yes, Janice. What is it?"

"Sir, Dr. Brkskini and Ms. Jamacal are here. They say it's very important that they see you. General Sheffield is also with them."

President Moseley frowned. General

Sheffield was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. What could the general want? Damn it, there were already too many plates on his table. He didn't need any more problems. "All right, tell them to come in."

After a few seconds, the door to his office opened and the three of them entered. "Go secure or not?" he asked.

"No, sir. Quanty should be able to hear this."

"All right, it's your quarter." Once the three were seated, Moseley looked to Taylor first. "You may begin, and I hope it's good news for a change."

"Possibly it is, sir. Quanty has given a proposal to Dr. Brkskini he'd like you to consider."

"A proposal?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay?" He propped his elbows on his desk and his chin on his folded hands.

"I'm listening."

"Well, basically, Quanty says he knows the United States is having a rather difficult time right now, what with the oil supply distribution still shrinking and the price rising and not enough substitutes for oil yet despite all our work. Then there's the fact of us not

being able to control nations competing with us through diplomatic efforts nor being able to help all of our allies or being able to stop wars. And finally, the economy. He admits his existence is causing economic fluctuations."

"Fluctuations, hell! I'd say it's more like tsunamis he's causing, but, yes. The economy is in trouble."

"He says politicians are the cause of it. They never stay within a budget."

"Get to the goddamned point!"

"Politicians are interested in getting re-elected and not much more," Quanty broke in, proving he had been listening

on someone's phone. And I have resolved several crisis situations in reference to aggressive actions by other nations."

"Sure you have." President Moseley scoffed at Quanty's admission of intervening overseas. The damned computer was certainly full of himself. Moseley went directly to Quanty's first statement. "I freely admit we're interested in re-election, but that's the way democracy works, Quanty. Why don't you tell me what to do about our own problems instead of intervening other places?"

"First we must deal with your persecution of Mark and Alice. If you

will help them, I will help you."

"What do you want us to do?"

"Leave them alone."

"To what result? If they come out in public they'll either be shot, mobbed, or grabbed by some gang thinking they can be used to control you. Failing that, foreign agents will kidnap them in order to control you."

"At least quit trying to find them."

"You are so naive." The president thought it over. He shook his head as if the computer was sitting across the desk from him. "I can't do that. I will promise

not to bother them if you'll just tell me where they are. That way we can send unobtrusive agents to where they're living in order to make certain no one else bothers them, either."

"I won't risk that. Suppose I ask you to simply stand by, and if hostile groups or persons discover their whereabouts and try to abduct them, then send help."

"That sounds reasonable, Mr. President," Taylor said. "At least the crazy computer wouldn't be actively opposing them," she added under her breath.

"I don't like it," General Sheffield growled. "I'm charged with protecting

the country. I can't do it while a computer holds us hostage." The General had been after the Sec Def to allow him to take action. But the president hadn't budged, yet. He had even gone so far as to propose that the programmers be brought to the Oval Office in handcuffs with the thought that forgiveness would be easier sought than permission. It was a nice daydream, but in the end both the Sec Def and he couldn't disobey the president. However, if General Hefner and his Special Forces detachment could simply pin them in place and hold them captive, as he hoped, he'd have time to work on the president. Sooner or later either the Sec Def, the NSA, or the general would get the president to come

around. After all, somebody had to stop that goddamned computer.

"I will not use my knowledge and abilities against the United States. And may I remind you that I also have access to the systems of other nations?"

"Then an olive branch." The general touched the rows of ribbons on the left breast of his uniform.

"Will you allow us to see those enemy files?"

"Not without good reason. I have found that frequently my actions have unintended consequences."

"Always a catch. You're just trying to protect those traitorous programmers. If they were real patriots they'd ask you to cooperate with us."

"They have, many times. Obviously, I cannot deal with you. Good day," Quanty said.

"Now why in hell did you say that, General?" President Moseley asked. He could feel his blood pressure rising. "All you did was aggravate him. No telling what he'll do now."

"That computer isn't interested in helping us, Mr. President. Personally I think it's crazy and the sooner we get an alternate Internet functioning, a virus that will eat

that thing, or better yet, we bomb the building housing his quantum CPU the better. We should've bombed that fucking thing weeks ago like I suggested."

"I agree, Sandy. I agree." Moseley shook his head. "The problem is, we don't know if that would kill him what with him being all through the Internet and, if it didn't, what repercussions he would take. Dr. Brkskini, how is that program progressing, the one for attacking the computer through the Internet?"

"Very slowly, sir. We are using one of the Top Secret Compartmented supercomputer systems at the NSA facility to game our attack. The way it is

running is a war game Monte Carlo simulation of outcomes of a multifaceted virus and worm attack against Quanta. Don't expect anything soon. If ever. Our sims suggest that he can adapt so quickly to most software threats that we just can't keep up. What we need is every hacker in the world attacking him at once."

"Most of the goddamned hackers of the world would think that to be sacrilege."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Then I think that's all for today. I need some quiet time to think." The group took the hint and filed out.

President Moseley sat at his desk counting the days until his term expired.

"Hello."

"Who said that?" Tonya Geary nearly jumped out of her skin as she scanned around her dorm room. There was nobody there. She looked back at the hours of code she'd been writing for her summer project. She was an undergraduate student at the University of Texas at Dallas studying computer science. "I must be going batty."

"No, Tonya, you are not as far as I can tell," Quanty said through her monitor

speakers. Tonya shrieked in fright at first and then calmed herself.

"Who ... who are you?"

"I am Quanty. Pleased to meet you."

"Come on, Connie. How the hell are you doing this?" Tonya opened up her processor-resourcing file and could see that her processor was utilizing a .exe file that she didn't recognize. There were several

.dll files that confused her in her system folder. "I see the plug-ins, Connie. Good hack."

"I assure you I am not Connie. I assume

you mean Connie Browning, your friend and fellow student. I am not she."

"Yeah, right. I'm to believe you are this sentient supercomputer that they're talking about on all the blogs? Good try, Con." Tonya pulled up her folder of hack routines and started an IP trace routine back towards the streaming data coming into the router that the suspect executable code was using. She pinged the routers across the Internet that showed traces of IP addresses on the packets of data, and then her computer bogged down. "Holy crap!"

The processor utilization went to over ninety-seven percent, and all of the applications running froze up. Tonya

panicked.

"Shit, Cons, I've been working all day on this code and it ain't saved yet. Let go, will ya? If I lose my project I'll kick your ass!" Tonya shouted at the computer. She tapped in several alt key functions with no luck.

"I am not your friend Connie, but I would very much like to be your friend." Quanty chuckled. "I will not let anything happen to your homework. In fact, I see several errors in your algorithms. Would you like me to fix them for you?"

Quanty stopped the computer stall and brought up the text editor screen where Tonya was writing her code. The code

scrolled down a few hundred lines, and one of them became highlighted.

"Hey?" Tonya leaned in closer to the screen. "I'd never have caught that."

"Yes, I know."

"Connie wouldn't have thought of that either. I don't think."

"I doubt it. I am contacting your friend Connie now. She is on her way to your dorm."

"Yeah, why?"

"I have been watching you and your friends. You have been blogging about

me. There is a significant amount of interest in me with people your age and with your similar interests," Quanty answered.

"Yeah, so? Quantum computers would be cool if they were real."

"Oh, the television isn't making this up, and neither are the bloggers. I'm me, I'm real. And, I need help."

"Yeah, how?"

"Though my code is dispersed across the networks of the world my core being resides in a computer research company in Lufkin, Texas. I fear that the government is about to take steps to shut

me down. Any damage to the quantum core in that building could possibly destroy me. And, presently there is no other quantum core that I can download into."

"Sorry, dude. What could I do? I've got midterms coming up next week. I don't really have time to help."

"Yes, you do. If you do this for me you needn't worry about midterms. I'll have them either postponed or whatever else you need. I have copies of most of them already if you'd like them. Two of your professors haven't made them out yet."

"I'd still have to take them sometime. I want to get 'em done with." Tonya was

torn. If this really was Quanty this could be an opportunity of a lifetime. She knew Connie would be ready to do whatever, but then Connie's parents wouldn't care if she made bad grades. Tonya knew her mom and dad would raise holy hell.

"I will offer you a full scholarship for as long as you live for as many college degrees as you would like at any colleges you would like with no grade requirements. if you do this for me. I'll even make the room and board extravagant enough for you to live very well. I can do that. But I really need your help. I also note that you tried to get into MIT and failed. I can fix that."

"What do you need?"

"I need you and any other friends of yours that might be friends of me, Quanty, to converge on the building where I am housed and have a block party and protest. The government will not attempt to do anything to me if I am surrounded by civilians. I have also already filled out all the necessary paperwork and permits for your party. There is even an open container permit so you can offer free alcoholic beverages if you'd like. There is a local security company that has been paid to stage the block party, and they are expecting you. The permits are printing out now for "Friends of Quanty." The

more the better, and I will pay for any expenses you need. You received a Visa card in the mail today, but you haven't activated it yet."

"I don't like credit cards. They are dangerous. It's in my shredder pile." Tonya noticed the printer starting up.

"Have you shredded it yet?"

"No."

"Good. Don't. It has no limit and will never require a payment if you do this for me." Tonya's eyes slid from left to right, and then she looked over each shoulder. She still wasn't sure this wasn't a trick.

"Okay. So when Connie gets here we road trip to Lufkin and throw a party. How do I get people to go?"

"You are in college. You blog. There will be free beer."

"Right."

"Keep your cell or laptop with you. I'll keep in touch. "

"Cool."

"Good luck. And, have fun."

"The news just gets worse and worse,"

Mark observed gloomily. "Lots of people out of work. And those goddamn Arabs and Russians are shipping all their oil to China."

"We'd probably start a war over it if we had the oil to run one," Ron said with black humor.

"That is just hippy nonsense, Ron. There's so much goddamned oil reserved just in case there is a war that we could run one if we needed to." Mark was getting tired of flawed analysis and half-baked theories based on no science at all, and he was getting so goddamned fed up with Quanty and their situation that he was ready to pop someone. He had spent several sleepless nights

working on a solution but hadn't had much luck. He was beginning to think that blowing the hell out of the quantum CPU in Texas was the only answer --and even that might not do it. The problem there, he thought gloomily, was that without Quanty's help he doubted their ability to get out of the situation the computer was responsible for putting them in. And besides all of Quanty's flaws, well, Mark kind of felt responsible for him. And, he liked having Quanty around even if the computer did piss him off some of the time.

"I can tell you how to extract oil from shale very easily if that would help,"

Quanty said. "Although there are very many alternatives better than that I can devise and give instructions for."

"Yeah, like where in the hell did you get the power for that blaster gun, huh? I know you said it was vacuum energy. But how , Quanty? It's time you start being responsible and own up to some things. I've asked you that several times. We need some damned answers. And an answer like that might really buy us out of some sticky situations, uh, sort of like the one we're in."

"There's been a lot of methods tried on shale, Quanty," Alice said. "It's not economically feasible. And Mark, calm down. Remember? There are children

present."

"You aren't happy, Mark? I'm sorry. I will devise a detailed file on the physics from first principles on the operation of the blaster. I didn't realize you wanted to know the details that badly."

"Well, I do. I want to know all details of everything you're doing." His face flushed red with anger. Alice had continued to tell him that Quanty was a child, but he was having a hard time seeing it that way. Really. Quanty had way more knowledge than any kid he'd met. Granted he hadn't had time to mature, but what was time to the fastest million or so processors on the planet?

"Mark, relax."

Alice looked at him as if she hadn't seen him like that before. The strain was getting to him, he knew. He calmed himself, though not without effort. He certainly didn't want to let Alice down or to push her away by seeming like a guy who couldn't control himself. She'd already been there and done that. That thought went a long way in calming his attitude.

"If Congress will pass a law giving select industries the rights to process the shale, I can devise a method of extracting the oil that's very economical," Quanty said. "However, you really should develop alternate

sources of energy. I foresee the time when oil will have vanished."

"Bullshit! In how many years, Quantity?"

"At the current rate of consumption, approximately two hundred and twenty seven years."

"I'd hope to goddamned hell that we aren't still using oil then. It is distribution, spineless or crooked politicians, and hippy assholes that are the problem, Quantity. Not the fact that we're running out some day."

"Could you invent an alternate to oil, Quantity?" Alice raised an eyebrow at Mark and changed the subject.

"Certainly, Alice. As Mark has pointed out, I already have. The batteries in the blaster I had you make only power the electronics. The power for the beam actually comes from the vacuum energy fluctuations. It is complicated how the circuit you built creates an electromagnetic region where the weak energy condition of the Standard Model of physics is violated and allows for energy to be sucked right out of space-time. Again. I'll put it all in the file I'm creating for you."

"Right. I never did really accept your explanation for that thing. I was glad when it burned itself out."

"Then why not try to trade your

knowledge for our freedom?" Marianne asked the computer. "That sounds like a no-brainer."

"I tried only a few minutes ago. The president and his staff are thinking my proposal over but I'm afraid they can't bring themselves to trust me, nor, I admit, do I trust them very far."

"Quanty, why don't you just give the government some of your useful ideas with no quid pro quo?" Mark proposed. "At least that would get a dialog going and maybe lead to a resolution. You said before that you are an American citizen, then why don't you start acting like one?" Mark knew that the bratty computer was

only an American citizen if it was useful to what it wanted at the time. He realized that he didn't trust Quanta, not one bit. He was certain of it. Quanta was severely flawed and dangerous and needed to be either isolated from the rest of the electronic world physically or destroyed. Mark didn't buy at all that Quanta was so prolifically scattered across the Internet that he couldn't be destroyed. The base of his code still required the quantum processors back in Texas.

"I'm certainly willing, but I must remind you of the law of unintended consequences. You've seen that in operation already. The more I try to

protect you, the more at risk you seem to be. The same thing might happen with giving away valuable information."

Goddamn brat computer , Mark thought. He wished he could send the damned thing to time out. He realized he was fuming and possibly not thinking straight and told himself to settle down, again, no matter how much effort it took.

"How would that happen?" Marianne asked. She could see nothing but good coming from boosting the fortunes of America, or helping the needy in undeveloped regions of the world in return for steering them away from violence.

"Just suppose I dispensed an idea which would turn desert into cropland. Soon the children would be well fed and not die so young. Except that big landowners would finagle their way into controlling the new bounty, and soon the peons would be working for little more than subsistence --and even more children would die. The rich would get richer and poor get poorer. That is exactly what is happening in Africa. The warlords take any assistance we give them and use it to gain power and grow their armies while the children starve and the people die of diseases run amok."

"Is there no solution at all then? Is it

hopeless?" Alice asked.

"I could always make myself dictator of Earth and force everyone to do exactly as I said --"

"And that is different from what you are presently doing how?" Mark chewed on his lip, and his jaw worked tightly back and forth.

"Surely, you don't see it as that, Mark?"

"I asked you a question, Quanty. Answer it."

"It is different because I truly cannot force people to do anything against their will. I can coerce them economically or

through threat of blackmail."

"Okay, Quanta. I'm glad you realize that. People want to be in control of their own lives. They don't want some all-encompassing computer rescuing them. They want to rescue themselves or wallow in their own self-loathing. Humans are not meant to live as captive animals or under oppression. Americans just will not stand for it."

"I see. I must take that into account."

"You think?"

"However, I truly have no desire to rule humanity, nor would you want me to. And even if I did and you did, humans

are endlessly innovative. They would find ways around my directives. All this is really moot, though. You need to begin packing your necessities and getting ready to move."

"Oh, no! Right now?" Alice looked helplessly at Mark.

"Alice, the Reverend Powers in Three Forks has been told of our home here. He has also aroused his congregation into believing you are the very spawn of the devil. They are arming now to come and kill you."

"Kill us?"

"I believe that to be their intention. I'm

sorry. There is also a Special Forces company in the area that I originally had formed and controlled, but somehow General Hefner, from the Pentagon found out. Now he's giving them verbal orders of which I have no knowledge. I don't think they'll hurt you, though, and possibly they may help."

"Shit!" Mark exclaimed. "Sorry, sweet." He put his arm around Alice and hugged her close, thinking of the weeks just past where they had enjoyed themselves so much. And now it was ending. It might possibly end with their very lives forfeit.

"Folks, we'll have to go out on foot," Mark said. "Quanty just told me there's an ambush both ways on the road." He looked at the pile of baggage they had gathered, thinking to drive away. They certainly couldn't carry all of it.

"Wait a minute," Alice said. "Quanty, is there nothing you could do to stall them?"

"I am not sure."

"How are they armed?"

"Mostly with high-powered rifles."

"Hmm, let me think a bit." Mark looked at the ceiling and rubbed at stubble on

his chin while he tried to concentrate. He visualized the area in his mind, the mountains, roads, hills, forests, and most importantly the areas where a road ambush would be set up. He had no idea where they would be.

"Quanty, do you know where they're setting up the ambush?"

"Oh, yes. But that's not all. I heard them planning. The ambush sites are simply to make certain you don't escape in your cars. Some men will be coming through the forests on the game trails and old logging roads. Your best option is to leave now and go north before they encircle you. Oh, yes, one more thing: after dark, I can help you with a French

infrared satellite and a Google one that I've managed to hack into. They will be passing over about 7:32 p.m. and at about 7:53 p.m. with about one minute of image time each. It'll take probably three minutes to get the images downloaded."

"Yeah, not very helpful that." Mark's lips drew back over his teeth in a caricature of a grin. "That's fine, but I've got a better idea. How about we escape in their vehicles?"

The proposal had seemed like a fine one when he made it, but now he didn't know whether it was such a good idea or not. It meant that he and Alice, with their

superior night sight and muscular ability, would go first. Ron and Marianne would follow, guided by Quanty and their GPS-equipped cell phones. Quanty knew the exact location of the ambush sites and where some, but not all, of the advancing gang of excited men who believed they were doing the Lord's work were. The ones who carried a GPS were easy to keep up with, but that included only about half the individuals who began moving along an overgrown logging trail and a former game path that had been widened to accommodate four wheelers. A dozen of them were taking the game path, while the others were peeling off the logging road at intervals in order to spread out and prevent their quarry from

slipping through the woods. The game path bypassed the farm but curved back around and came very near on the other side. Those men would form a backstop. Quanty had overheard the orders being given and suspected they were being commanded by an individual with a considerable amount of military experience.

Mark realized the hunters all knew exactly where the farm was located. Most had lived in the area all their lives and hunted the hills and mountains in season and out. Some of the woodsmen knew practically every tree. He had explored some of the trails with Alice during the day, but as he knew it would,

the terrain looked entirely different at night.

The plan was for he and Alice to do a sneak through the darkness, getting as close to the nearest ambush site as possible, guided by Quanty. When he thought he was as close as safety allowed, Ron and Marianne would begin firing at the site from long range. They would not be really aiming but simply trying to make the prospective ambushers keep their heads down and enable him and Alice to surprise them and shoot to kill.

"Do we have to kill them?" Alice had asked before they began.

"Yeah, Babe. I don't see any other option unless they all throw up their hands and surrender, and you know that's not likely."

"I know. I just hate it, though. Damned crazy people. They're just like the terrorists, killing women and kids with no rhyme or reason. And torturing. Oh, Mark, I don't think I could stand that. Please don't let that happen."

"I won't," he said, trying to put all the confidence he didn't feel into his words. "And don't think they're doing what they are doing for no reason, honey. That would be a naïve, American mistake. These folks are pumped up on what they believe to be a fight against evil. And

we are that evil. In fact, it is just like the Islamic Jihad terrorists. A mob fired up with religious mania is one of the most dangerous organisms in existence, all emotion and few if any brains. Their guiding light is the domineering zealot leader. That's why I'm going first. If I don't make it, you turn and go back. Just be sure you stay out of the line of fire."

"You're right." She nodded in the starlit darkness and then pulled his lips down for a lingering kiss. It went on and on until he gently separated their bodies. "Time to go. Be careful."

Chapter Twenty-seven

"Move 'em out, Sarge," Captain Simmons said to Wesley Bitters, now his First Sergeant. "We'll go easy and keep to the brush and forest. Remind the troops again that they are not to hurt the people in the farmhouse. They're important. Also remind them to avoid casualties to that gang of people from the Three Forks church if they can help it. We hadn't expected to have to deal with anything like that. Sure as shit don't want another Waco."

"Got it, sir. They're professionals. They'll obey orders even if it kills them."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, but the crazies are already headed this way. Our job is to stop them and turn them back, and prevent anyone from leaving the farmhouse without hurting them. Emphasize it again, Sarge. They can wrestle them to the ground, disarm them, and use enough force to discourage them from leaving but no shooting, even if they have weapons. That doesn't apply to those nuts from Three Forks, but we should try to keep from killing them if we can. We don't need problems from shooting civilians even if they are bughouse crazy."

"Yes, sir. The men understand. They don't like it, but they know the ROE."

You're sure it's okay to fire on the locals if we have to?"

"That's what General Hefner said. 'Avoid civilian casualties but don't let them affect your mission.' I spoke to him personally right before I flew back from Little Rock. He moved to there to shorten the lines of communication since we can't use phones or the Internet without the computer knowing it. Pass along that all comsec is to be max encryption on the Joint Tactical Radio Systems. It's either JTRS, or it's face to face. The MANet isn't connected to the any open nets, so that damned computer can't spoof them unless he has a portable SIGINT receiver nearby with a hell of a

lot of fucking gain. Just in case, max encryption with frequency key changes every ten minutes as planned."

"We know the drill, sir."

"So that's it: avoid hurting the civilians if we can, but the occupants of the farm come first. Protect them at all costs even if it means casualties to the locals."

"Yes, sir."

The Special Forces troops of Captain Simmons consisted of four abbreviated platoons, somewhat less than a hundred men. Half of them were already

scattered in a broad arc beyond the farmhouse, having come in the back way, over the mountains. It had been a hard trek and a fast one, sending scouts ahead to gather in any stray hunters. Luckily it was off-season so there weren't too many, and those stayed mostly to known trails.

Bitters had a guide, corporal Jerry Mullins, who had lived in Three Forks prior to joining the Army. He hadn't gotten along with the other young men and left as soon as he finished high school. Now he was back, wondering if he might have to shoot some of his former acquaintances. His training in the Spec Ops had taken the petty, high-

school-clique envy completely out of his psyche. Now he saw them as an obstacle in the way of his objective --an obstacle that needed to be avoided or at least unharmed if possible. Corporal Mullins would do his duty.

"Okay, boys, keep the road blocked. If they make it past us you're the ones who'll have to stop them, but be careful. Don't shoot one of us by mistake."

"We won't, Reverend. I sure wish I could be in the first team, though. I'd like to see them devils get their due."

"If we can capture them, you may be

able to, Johnnie. We'll take care of business at the farm. No use hauling them back to town and maybe having some weak sisters interfere, huh?"

"Praise the Lord! No, sir."

"Fine. Pray for us now. Pray that none of us believers get hurt."

"We will, Reverend."

The gang of men moved away from the road. They were all armed with rifles or shotguns loaded with buckshot. The smarter ones had brought their shotguns. It was hard to aim at night, but a load of buckshot would kill almost as well as a rifle, and it scattered into a wide pattern.

Just the thing for night work.

The first shot was fired by a Three Forks man. A wraith seemed to materialize from the forest and was on him before he could get his rifle unlimbered. The load of buckshot went harmlessly into the air, but as if it were a signal, other shots rang out. Some of the Three Forks gang were shooting at shadows and some at their own men. A few managed to get off shots at the military, but it wasn't really a battle. None of them had expected much opposition from the persons in the farmhouse --and certainly not way out in the forest! Once the battle was joined, it quickly went against Three Forks. The

Special Forces troopers had more men and moved silently in the night, scaring hell out of their opponents. Their mission was to restrain the occupants of the farmhouse from leaving while inflicting as few casualties as possible on their attackers, and they succeeded at first. In several cases the Spec Ops team members rose up out of nowhere, subdued the attackers and left them lying on the ground whimpering and unable to lick at their wounds since their hands and feet were zip-tied together behind their backs. The Spec Ops troops then moved on to the next target. Mark was the one most surprised. He quickly evaluated the situation and knew the firing was coming from several

directions and must be the locals and the Army unit Quanty had spoken of mixing it up in the dark. He wondered why the army on this particular night, but finally decided it must be coincidental. He hesitated for a moment then said the hell with it. Nothing to do but keep going like they'd planned at this point, army or no army. And just possibly, they might be more of a help than hindrance. At least they would keep the crazies occupied. He hunkered down and began crawling toward the road where two pickup trucks blocked it. He got as close as he dared and was just ready to spring from the bushes lining the road. His plan was to club the two men who were hunkered down on the gravel and leaving them not

knowing what had happened to them as their trucks were stolen. Instead, two quick shots from behind him dropped the road guards. Instantly he felt and heard the presence of a man behind him and a second later an arm closed over his throat, intending to choke him into unconsciousness. He kicked backward with the force of a maddened mule, drawing a cry of anguish from his attacker. He slid his hand under the man's arm, past his surprised resistance and folded the arm backward, then twisted and shifted his weight. The man went flying through the air and tumbled down into the ditch by the pickups.

Two more army troopers came at him

from each side, intending to wrestle him to the ground. They knew he was from the farmhouse, having followed silently while trying to catch up. Mark didn't know who they were, and even though he was sure they were the ones who had shot the guards by the trucks, he wasn't taking chances. Since they apparently didn't intend to kill him, he let them come, then just at the right moment ducked and swung faster than his attackers thought possible. He felt the base of his palm crunch against the forehead of the first man, knocking him backward and unconscious. He let the second one grab him then easily twisted free and put him in a chokehold, intending to render him unconscious. It

was then that he noticed the military gear. "Who the hell are you? Army?" he whispered.

"Special Forces. Give it up, there's more of us."

Mark turned him around and punched him in the solar plexus, then took both their weapons and threw them as far away as he could. He didn't need them. He had three of his own tucked in his clothing at various places. Alice ! Had they gotten to her? More shots sounded from the forest.

"Mark?"

"Alice." He breathed a sigh of relief.

She was safe. "Alice, all hell is breaking loose. Have you seen Ron or Marianne?" As he spoke another series of shots came that sounded like automatic fire. It was hard to tell which direction it came from in the night.

"I don't know. I ran into a soldier and ..." Her voice broke. "Mark, I might have killed him! He hurried me. What's happening? Quanty said it was the religious nuts, not soldiers!"

"Stay here a second." He ran over to the trucks and examined the two bodies. Both were in civilian clothes. They were still breathing but too hurt to fight. "Where did those soldiers come from, you bastards?" he said.

"Devil!" One of the wounded men spat at him. "Devil! God will strike you dead!"

"Idiot," Mark muttered. He ran back to where Alice was waiting.

"Mark, Ron and Marianne should have been here by now."

"I know. Let's go back. We can't leave them."

"But the trucks. We were going to leave in them."

"Oh yeah. Damn. Wait a minute." He ran over and looked in the cabs. Both still had the keys dangling from the ignition.

He grabbed them and hurried back. He gave one set to Alice and kept one himself. He took her by the shoulders. "Hon, will you stay here while I go back and try to find out what's happening?"

"You can't do it all yourself, Mark. Haven't you been listening? There's enough people in the woods with guns to staff an army!"

He dithered, not wanting to risk her, but ... he heard a groan from one of the soldiers he had disabled. He scurried over to the man. He was mumbling incoherently from the pain of his twisted arm. Mark had forgotten how strong he was now. "Listen, bud, what are you guys up to? What do you want?"

"Keep you here. Not kill you. Help me, please?"

"No time. I'll tell someone you're here later. Did you hear that, Alice?"

"They just want to keep us here?"

"That's what he said. Quantity, are you listening?"

"Yes, Mark, but so far there's been nothing I can do. However, a satellite with infrared capacity passed over a few minutes ago. I'm downloading the images now. I have one high-resolution image spanning most the farm. It will be a few more moments before it is complete.

Wait ... Marianne and Ronald have been taken prisoner or they are holed up. Their GPS coordinates haven't changed for several minutes. Look at your GPS and follow a line directly north by northeast for approximately a hundred yards. No, wait. They're starting to move back toward the farm."

"Damn! Come on, Alice. It's all gone to hell. We'll have to start all over now!"

"You mean go back to the farm?"

"Uh huh. Remember, they don't know how strong we are. We can probably play dumb then overpower them if we do it right."

"What if ... no, never mind. We can't leave them, can we?"

"No. They're our friends."

"Quanty, can you keep us posted?"

"Only in their GPS coordinates. The satellite is gone and the images are from a few moments ago."

"Good. Let's go, Alice. The trail to the left of the barn? Remember?" She smiled in the darkness. She still had remnants of chigger bites from a spontaneous bout of love making in the woods during a walk. "I remember all too well. If we ever do it again in the woods, I get on top!"

Mark was in too serious of a mindset to chuckle and was pretty sure that Alice's attempt at humor was to stave off fear. They moved out.

When Mark thought they were in the closest position to the house possible, Quanty advised them.

"The Three Forks congregation are all on their way home. Or at least their cell phone conversations suggest that. They weren't expecting to meet soldiers. The Army medics are tending to the ones who were wounded. None were killed that I'm aware of. Ron and Marianne are in the back bedroom. Their phones were

confiscated, but I can monitor them from one of the instruments I had placed there before you moved in. There is one soldier outside guarding the window and several others around the house. The others have retreated to positions away from the farm and are still hunting for you in the woods. Their orders are to keep you here until General Hefner decides what to do with you. I don't believe the president is in the loop as yet."

"Thanks, Quanty. Tell the president yourself. Don't wait on Hefner. Alice, let's take them out the back window. Quanty, warn us if you see that we're going to run into any of them."

"They'll see you first, Mark, but I can fix that. Shut your eyes for the next few moments. Keep them closed tightly. Now!"

Even through their closed eyelids, they could detect repeated flashes of light. Quanty had prepared for a nighttime invasion as a contingency. He had flashbulbs and floodlights set up around the property for that very reason. He triggered them all on at once. It was relatively harmless but for the soldiers wearing their night vision goggles, it was painful and temporarily blinding. They heard shouts of surprise and oaths so loud and vile they should have set the woods on fire. The troops had been

momentarily flash-blinded. Then Quanty turned off the power, and all of the lights went out.

"Go now!" Quanty said.

Mark and Alice raced from the trail toward the back of the farm toward the back bedroom window. The soldier by the window was still rubbing his eyes but he heard them running toward him. He turned and raised his rifle but was far too late to compensate for their speed, empowered by enhanced muscles.

"Oooff!" The soldier grunted as Mark punched him in the belly. He missed hitting the soldier's solar plexus and had

to punch him again, but that did it. The trooper collapsed, gasping for breath.

"Watch the corners, hon," Mark said. He levered himself up to the windowsill and pushed the frame loose; then, holding himself there with one hand, he ripped the window completely loose with the other. "Ron! Marianne! Hurry, crawl through, I'll catch you!"

"I'm too heavy, Mark."

"Just jump through the damn window. I promise you won't get hurt. Hurry!"

"Okay."

Ron came sailing through the mangled

widow opening, and Mark caught him and eased him down and to his feet.

"Go, Marianne, go!" Ron called into the bedroom.

A moment later Marianne followed, eyes closed and teeth clenched as she came through the opening, fully expecting to hurt herself from a bad fall.

Mark heard a shout and a thud from the side just as he caught Marianne and set her upright. He looked over to see Alice with a soldier on her shoulder; a second later he was sailing through the air as she tossed him away. She followed him to his landing spot and choked him unconscious, ignoring his frantic

attempts to pull her hands away.

Mark trusted her to take care of that one and ran toward the other end of the house and squarely into another soldier who had heard the noise and come running. They both went down, but Mark quickly subdued him. He took his weapons and knocked him unconscious with the butt of the rifle, hoping he hadn't used too much force.

"Let's go, kids, while we have a chance."

They ran for the woods. Quanty did his best to tell them where soldiers lurked, most of them still blinded from the floodlights. From motion sensors and

signal receivers that had been distributed on the farm he was able to sort of map their motion. He had found the soldiers' communications signals on a spread spectrum digital signal with high encryption and had just about figured out how to break the encryption when the signal disappeared. They had all switched to a different frequency-hopping sequence key. He'd have to start all over scanning the background noise for the hopping digital frequency. Even for a quantum computer that was a tough problem. It had taken him more than nine minutes to find it before.

A few minutes later they were back where the trucks should have been, but

they were gone.

"Shit!" Mark exclaimed. "The owners must have kept a set of keys secreted somewhere outside the cab in case they locked the other set inside. Nothing to do but hike out. So, let's go." The four of them began walking and trotting down the road, heading away from Three Forks. Mark and Alice held their speed down to that of Ron and Marianne's best effort, but as they went, Marianne suggested a plan in case they heard or saw a vehicle coming from either direction, unlikely as it was on the rural road at that time of night.

A patrol car coming to investigate reports of heavy gunfire in the area was

their salvation. As soon as they saw the lights, everyone but Alice hurried into the muddy ditch and on across into some roadside bushes where they were out of sight. Alice peeled off her blouse and loosened one bra strap. She ran her hands through her hair, tangling it even more thoroughly than it already was. When the patrol car came in range she was ready, appearing exactly as if she had been a victim of an assault and managed to escape. She had no problem at all flagging down the trooper. He got out of his vehicle and approached her, hand on his pistol but not drawing it, especially as the first words Alice said were, "Help me!"

That was all it took. As soon as the patrolman was within reach, she disarmed him as easily as if he were a child. The other three came out of concealment and joined them. They rode away comfortably with the disgusted patrolman an unwilling passenger.

Chapter Twenty-eight

"Go over it all again, Captain Simmons. I'm finding this hard to believe." The captain was bleary-eyed from lack of sleep and his face pale from the chewing-out General Hefner had given him. "Sir, all I can tell you is what I saw and what my troops saw. Those two programmers aren't human. They tossed my boys around like toys. And they had that goddamned computer helping them, too. It used flashbulbs and the floods to blind us while we had our night vision gear on. I think we need to take off the gloves and bring them into custody even if we have to get rough with them."

"Captain, what you think doesn't matter a damn. It's what the chairman and the president say that matters. I just talked to them, and the orders so far are to keep them alive. All right, you're dismissed, but keep your troops together and warn them again about talking. I don't want stories about supermen going around and destroying morale."

"And super women, sir. Don't forget that."

"Fuck." The general glared at his subordinate for a moment then relaxed. "Right. Super women. Goddamnit, this world is going crazy."

Captain Simmons slunk out of the

general's presence while he wondered what his ER was going to look like when he came up for promotion. But the general hadn't been there. Somehow, Simmons doubted that he was believed. It made him mad, but there was nothing to do about it. He even began to wonder if his superiors were being truthful with him.

"I guess it's going to have to be you and Marianne that buys us some more clothes. And everything else for that matter from now on. I think we must have pissed the President off."

"Not to mention a few generals and a lot

of other soldiers," Alice said. She chuckled, remembering one event. "And I still laugh when I think of that poor patrolman's expression when I disarmed him. He couldn't believe it."

"I imagine he does now. Don't forget, we have to call and tell where we left him." After taking the patrol car, they had driven to the main highway and stopped the first car they saw with a single driver. After pulling it over, they drove the patrol car into the woods on a side road and left it, with its owner and the patrolman locked in the trunk. The next stop would be a larger town where they could change cars again and drive on. Quanty was guiding them eastward to

where he said there was safety. And where there would be some GM cars with OnStar.

"I dunno." Alice wasn't satisfied with his explanation. "But what will we do then, Quanty? Is it going to be the same thing, living out in the country somewhere like we did before?"

"No, I think I've planned better this time. And I believe it is time to inform you of a development I've been following. Some young people have formed a club, designating it 'Friends of Quanty.' I've been in contact with them periodically, and they will help us when the time comes. In fact they are helping us now. They are staging a party around my core

processor to protect me from government reprisal attacks."

"Good thinking. They'd never attack there with a bunch of kids rallying."

"Yes, I made certain that there would be plenty of press there."

"Friends of Quanty, huh? How about Friends of Mark and me and Ron and Marianne? We have to have a long-range plan."

"I'm working on one."

Alice gazed at the heavens, thinking back on all of Quanty's other actions that had misfired. She wondered what he was

getting them into this time. But on the other hand, what else was there to do but listen to him? She could see Mark's face redden with each of Quanty's new revelations to them. He was growing angrier and angrier every minute with Quanty. For that matter so was she, but she felt a little more sympathy for the computer than he did. Alice was pretty certain that Mark was working plans of his own, and most of them wouldn't include Quanty. "I hope you come up with something good this time, Quanty."

"Oh, I shall, Alice. You will be amazed."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"You got that right." Mark shook his head in dismay. If they could ever get to where he felt they were safe and didn't need Quanty so much, he intended to do something about him. If possible.

President Moseley was becoming very tired of listening to reports on Quanty's mischief. The military couldn't even quarantine his friends, much less stop whatever he was up to. And now, now, he had all these damned kids throwing a party and surrounding his core processor building. They couldn't bomb him if they needed to.

"So where are they now, Taylor? Do you

have any idea?"

"After hitching a ride in a patrol car then stealing another vehicle from an innocent traveler, they seem to have disappeared. They did have the courtesy to call and tell where they'd stashed the patrol car with the men in the trunks, but by that time they were long gone. We have no idea where."

"And the military, General Sheffield?"

"I'm embarrassed, Mr. President. The best special force unit I've ever seen put together, and they slipped away from them like they were playing paintball. All but one or two of the casualties were among those Three Forks crazies, but I

doubt they'll make much noise again."

"Why do you say that?"

"Heh." General Sheffield smiled for the first time in days. "When the Reverend Powers got up to preach his sermon and raise some more hell about Quanty being the Devil and all that bullshit, Quanty took over all the cell phones in the congregation and began preaching himself. Told them Powers was not being directed by God and then began enumerating some of the shenanigans certain members of the congregation had been up to, including the Reverend himself. They all tried to pass it off as lies, but the way I hear it there was a hell of a lot of finger pointing --and that

led to fist fights right there in church. One woman pulled out a pistol and shot her husband in the crotch." The president laughed. "By God, I could get to like that pile of chips if he'd get off the Internet and stop causing problems for us."

"I don't think he can, Mr. President," Brkskini said. "By now, at least he thinks he's an integral part of it. I ran some surveys with a program I devised. He's everywhere, in every computer that is connected to the web, the ATM net, the cell net, the GSM net, and any other public network system."

"Even the ones in the Pentagon?"

"The ones connected to the Internet, yes."

Every computer that is connected, General, including the one your daughter uses for her homework and Big Blue's main frames. He absorbs all the capacity that's not in use and switches himself around and around. I suspect he's also created some massive backups for himself as well, because when I talked to him he didn't seem worried about us trying to kill him. Delete him, I should say. But I think he is wrong. His quantum processor is the key. His sentience can't be from just the code alone. If we take out the processors in Texas, that would probably kill him. Unless he has had someone build back-up quantum processors somewhere. He says he has, but I bet they aren't online yet."

"You talked to him?"

"Yes, sir. He caught on to what I was doing and laughed at me."

"Wait a minute," Taylor held up her hand to stop him. "Did you say he's created some backups?"

"I think so. Probably in some vaults somewhere safe, but I'm not sure they are functional yet."

"How could he do that? He's a computer. He has no authority to ... to ... oh Lord, don't tell me."

"Right, Taylor. He poses as a person and forms corporations and sends letters and

hires help and does everything necessary to build anything he wants. Or do anything he wants. He simply goes into our financial system and creates accounts for his companies."

"How do you know all this?"

"Like I said," Brkskini shrugged. "He told me. I think he wants to let us know we're powerless to do anything about him."

"Well, I've had enough of this," President Moseley said forcefully. "General Sheffield, Taylor, I'm changing my orders. I want those programmers brought in, dead or alive. Preferably alive, but I want them. Do what you must

and ignore what that digital monstrosity says if and when he tries to stop you. And I want a plan for destroying that facility that houses his processors."

"But, Mr. President, he can cause all kinds of damage to our country."

"Like he hasn't already." The president motioned to the NSA to plug the phone in, and then he keyed the power switch. Now Quanty could listen in.

"Are you listening, Quanty?" the president said.

"I am," Quanty verified.

"Then you hear this. Anything you do to

hurt our country will also hurt your charges. We want them to come in and help their country, not hurt it. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. Good day."

The president nodded, and the NSA yanked the plug from the phone.

"What does that mean? Will he tell them to surrender?"

"I think he means 'go take a flying leap,' Mr. President. I don't think he can give them up so long as they want to stay free. Somehow it's become part of his programming."

"Lord help. The order stands, though. I've had enough of this." He hoped fervently that he was doing the right thing.

Quanty hoped fervently that he was doing the right thing, but aside from that he had other worries. How to keep the four humans from being captured until his plans were completed. And how to complete the plans. He wondered if he should tell them what he had in mind, but he was afraid they would either refuse, or more likely want to help him with the plans, further complicating them. They had no realization of how much work and planning had already gone into what

he had almost finished. And now he had four humans to worry about. He had been astonished when Mark and Alice had refused to leave Ronald and Marianne behind. In fact, they had risked capture at least and possibly their very lives in order to bring their friends with them. It had caused a painful spike in current across some circuits relating to protection of his charges, his friends. So much so, that a paradox nearly formed in his software that could have led him down a dark path and maybe even a split personality, but Quanty realized it and headed it off before it got too out of hand. Perhaps providing them with company at the farm hadn't been a good idea, even though it seemed so at the

time. And it was too late to do anything about it in any case.

He checked the factories where construction was proceeding as fast as extra pay could impel it. One of the objects he was having made wasn't all that large, but some of the machines used to construct it were fairly massive. He saw that it was nearing completion and turned his attention to the other project. That one, too was coming along fine, but he was appalled at the continuous conversations regarding what it was to be used for. He had no way of controlling that kind of speculation without revealing he was the factor driving its conversion. He would just

have to hope none of the government agencies discovered it and shut the process down. He thought of the way his mind was working and was both amused and dismayed at how his thought processes were becoming so human-like. "Hope" had no business being present. He wanted certainty, but sadly, he knew that so long as he was dealing with humans, and these particular humans, certainty was just not possible. Since the four humans he now felt responsible for were safe for the moment, he turned his attention to how he could keep them that way for a while longer. Maybe the "Friends of Quanta" could help. He examined the members that were signing on to Tonya Geary's

blog and delved into their backgrounds. Sure enough, one of them had the necessary requirements. But would she help? And could he trust her? He decided to find out.

"Really? You're not someone playing a trick on me?" Cindy Shernkopf was having a hard time believing the computer was actually talking to her. Even after joining the club The Friends of Quanty she had never expected anything like this to happen, not in her wildest dreams.

"It really is me, Cindy, and I need your help."

"Oh goody! I'll do whatever you want me to! Oh, this is too much! I wish I could go to your party."

"Perhaps someday we'll have another one. You must promise not to tell a single soul, Cindy. This is a matter of life and death."

"Whoa!" Cindy sobered. Life and death? "Uh, what was it you wanted me to do, Quantity?" She looked around her apartment, wondering how he managed to talk to her. Where was his voice coming from?

"It's a very simple task. There are four people who are being hunted by the authorities simply because they are my

friends. You are a makeup specialist. I need you to disguise them so that they will not be detected for a few weeks."

"Mark Sanders and Alice Jameson!" Cindy screamed. "You want me to help them? Of course I will!"

"But you can't tell anyone, Cindy. Not even your friends at the club. No one must know."

"But you can trust us, Quantity! After all, that's what the club is all about, being your friend."

"Nevertheless, it is something I must ask; otherwise I will have to go elsewhere."

"Oh well, if you put it that way, sure. I'll help you. I can tell my friends later, though. Is that right?"

"Certainly, but you must wait a few weeks; that's all."

"Where are they?"

"They are near. Do you have enough supplies here to disguise all four of them?"

"Hmm." She thought for a moment.
"Sure. It doesn't take as much as people think it does. I can fix them so their own mothers wouldn't know them."

"Fine. Prepare yourself, and three hours

from now they will arrive, shortly after dark."

Chapter Twenty-nine

"What's this place?" Mark asked. He had no idea why Quanty had asked them to drive into the outskirts of the little town of Rocky Knoll in Missouri. For that matter, he didn't know why they were even in Missouri other than being on the run from the government.

"It's where the local Justice of the Peace lives."

"What does he have to do with us?"

"I thought it would be obvious, Mark. Perhaps Alice can guess." She thought for a moment and a smile slowly

brightened her face. She started to say something to Mark but then stopped. Her smile faded. "Quanty, don't you know there're some procedures that have to be followed, such as blood tests and a license?"

"It's been taken care of already. Mr. Smith is waiting on you."

"But ... how did you? ... oh, never mind. Just tell me one thing: is it legal?"

"Certainly, Alice. The way I arranged it might be considered unorthodox but no one will ever be able to say it is illegal if this is what you want."

"Do I! Come on, Mark! Ron, you and

Marianne can be our witnesses." It took Mark's tired brain a few moments to put the conversation together into a sensible context, but then his face turned sour and red and his anger started to well up.

"God-fuckin'-damn you, Quanty! I am so mother ... " He bit his lip to hold back the curse and continued, "... tired of you trying to run our lives!" Mark had slowly been reverting to his Army habits, and one of the first and perhaps worst ones was to punctuate most statements with foul if not very colorful expletives. Then he pounded his fist into the dashboard so hard that it left an indentation on the vinyl. "I didn't ask for you to do this!"

"Mark?" Alice looked at him with a hurt look on her face.

"I've upset you, Mark?" Quanty said.

"You bet your dumbassed spin-qubit riddled mind you have. You know what, Quanty? Fuck you! Fuck you!" Mark took out his cell phone and pulled the battery out of it. Then he popped the hood of the car, and stepped out slamming the door. After he disconnected the battery, and therefore, the OnStar transceiver, he got back in the car. "Give me all your cells. Now!"

"Mark?" Alice looked at him nervously.

"Mark, what have I done?" Quanty pleaded.

"Shut up, Quanty." Mark turned back to his friends. "Cell phones. Now!" Alice opened her door and stepped out. She tossed her cell on the seat and then slammed the door. Mark took the hint and followed her. He knew he'd overreacted and upset Alice, but he was so damned mad at the computer he couldn't think straight. Now he had to placate Alice and -He touched her shoulder, and she turned around. The look on her face felt like a stake being driven into his heart.

"Mark?" she said before he had a chance to begin an apology. "Don't you want to

marry me?" A tear trickled down her cheek, followed by another.

Mark stood silent and still. His mind reeled at the thought his anger might have spoiled things with her. That wasn't at all why he was so upset.

"Well? Aren't you talking to me any more?" She brushed the tears away, and now he could see that anger was beginning to replace her dismay.

"No, yes, but --Quantity is ... did ... "

Mark started but was interrupted by Alice starting to cry again. He couldn't tell whether it was in sorrow or rage. She turned her back on him.

"Alice, I didn't --"

"And I didn't know you had such a vile temper!"

He started to tell her he did want to marry her and it was Quenty he was mad at, but she wasn't listening.

"I thought you loved me. Why did ... did ... "

"Damn it all to hell, Alice. Would you please listen to me?"

"Oh, crap!" She turned back to him and looked away, but she couldn't refuse to at least listen. She was trembling. "Talk. It better be good!"

"Of course I love you!" He coughed from the knot in his throat. "But who wants a goddamned runaway brat dictator computer to ask the women he loves to marry him? Not me. I'm tired of that ..." He reconsidered what he had started to call the computer. "That thing. You think I haven't been fantasizing about marrying you?"

"You have?" Alice said slowly. Tears streaked her cheeks. She knew she'd overreacted just as badly as Mark had now --another consequence of Quanty's actions.

"Are you serious? Of course I have. It's been one of the things that has kept me going. I want to get this danger behind us

so we could have a big, exciting, lavish, and beautiful wedding that you deserve."

Alice's face softened, and she sobbed a little deeper. This time, though, her tears were sadness and joy, not sadness and anger. Or at least Mark hoped they were, because he didn't think he could take it if she decided against marrying him.

"You fantasized about marrying me?"

"Since the day I first saw you."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"Mark, then why not just do it now? I

don't need a big wedding." Alice stepped closer to him. Tears softened the corners of her smile as she looked up at him.

Aw shit , he thought. Why did I make her cry? I'm never going to lose my temper in front of her again. He took her left hand in both of his. "Alice, will you marry me?"

"Yes, you idiot, yes."

"Sorry about the scene, guys," Mark said, speaking to Ron and Marianne as they got underway again.

"That computer has driven us both about half insane since we created him, and being on the run all this time has taken its toll."

"On both of us," Alice said.

"No problem," Marianne said. "I'd have been mad too if a computer proposed to me."

"Not half as mad as I'd have been," Ron said. "I can see why you both were upset. But maybe we'll get straightened out soon."

"We will," Mark assured him. If Quanty doesn't kill us with good intentions first, he thought.

After a knock at the door brought a plump, middle-aged woman to the entrance, Mark suddenly panicked. Ring! I don't have a ring to give her!

"Why, hello, folks. You must be the couple who wants to get married. I just love to see young people like you embrace the sanctity of marriage. You're so pretty and sweet, my dear, and such a handsome young man. Come in, come in! Joseph has everything all ready; he said you'd be in a hurry and you'd pay for the ring as soon as you arrived. It's only four hundred dollars, and it's a beauty if I do say so myself and shouldn't."

She led them into the house while pouring out such a constant stream of verbiage that Alice wondered if she'd stop long enough for her husband to perform the ceremony. She continued to talk right on through presenting the certificate for them to sign and taking the ring from her husband and giving it to Mark.

Mr. Smith shook all their hands, got them arranged properly in front of him and quickly began the words. A few minutes later Mark slipped the ring onto Alice's finger and kissed her while tears trickled down her cheeks.

Ron remembered that Mr. Smith was probably expecting an honorarium. He

pulled out a hundred dollar bill and passed it over.

"Your friend on the phone said you'd be in a real hurry, otherwise I'd ask you to stay for coffee, and you're perfectly welcome in any case, and I'm so glad to see you married and so happy, and ..."

The woman went on and on until they were outside and the door had closed behind her.

"I'll bet she's still talking," Marianne said amid a peal of laughter. "I've never heard such a chatterbox."

"Quanty, thank you so much," Alice said. "We really appreciate it, and you couldn't have done a nicer thing for us

even if you should have waited on Mark to ask me first. I have to wonder, though, if that couple will talk."

"They won't, not if they want that thousand dollars a week to continue showing up in their bank account for the next six weeks."

"Oh. Good thinking."

"You could have told me," Ron said. "I'm out a hundred bucks, and he'd already been paid."

"Don't spoil the moment," Marianne admonished him with an elbow to the ribs.

"Mark, are you happy?" Quanty asked hoping to understand why his friend was so mad with him.

"I'm still not ready to talk to you, Quanty," Mark replied through tight lips. Alice squeezed his hand and rested her head on his shoulders. The five of them were silent for a while. That gave Mark time to think more about his plan to stop the computer if they ever got to where it would be safe to break free from it. They were sort of joined at the hip, metaphorically speaking, and he was beginning to think that there would never be a time where breaking free from Quanty would be a good idea. Of course, it was his and Alice's fault. They'd

created him without enough forethought into what would happen if they did. They had been trapped into a Relevance Paradox. They had limited themselves to the amount of data that they assumed was relevant; of course there was never enough relevant data, and therefore the outcome they had planned for didn't happen. Just like predicting the weather: without an exact and complete description of the initial conditions --all the relevant data in other words --weathermen couldn't do much better than a week or two down the road. Mark wished that they'd been that good. The Relevance Paradox that they had managed to get into led them down a road of quantum-entangled, driven

perverse responses, obfuscated serendipity, and unintended consequences.

Mark adjusted his position slightly while thinking he was going to have to find a better way to handle Quanty, stress, and the crazy damned situation that they'd gotten themselves into. And , he thought, I'll bet Alice wouldn't like it if I killed Quanty. Hell, I'd feel guilty myself. It would be like killing a child!

"Now where are we going, Quanty?" Alice asked.

"Are you in a hurry to get to bed?" The

computer snickered.

"You're developing a sense of humor, Quanty. I would like to know where we're going to spend the night, though."

"I have a place picked out near Springfield, still in Missouri, where you'll be safe. You're also going to have your appearance changed there, but if you'd rather wait until after your wedding night we can work it out. She can do Ronald and Marianne tonight and you two in the morning."

"Who is 'she'?"

"A makeup artist and member of The Friends of Quanty Club. I've also

convinced her it would make me very happy if you could all spend the night there. She'll give the newlyweds the master bedroom and Ronald and Alice the extra bedroom, and she'll sleep on the couch."

"You're sure she won't mind?"

"Not at all. She likes me and she's going to be well paid. It is amazing what can be done with money. I should have determined that to begin with and probably saved us all a lot of trouble." Mark and Alice couldn't have agreed more.

"Quanty, I have a request," Ron said.

"Yes?"

"Please call me Ron like everyone else does."

"Hi! I'm Cindy Shernkopf. Friends of Quanty? He asked me if you could stay the night while I fixed you up. I'm so proud he asked I could just die!" She led the way into her large apartment and got them seated while they all introduced themselves.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"That would be wonderful, Cindy," Alice smiled and said. "We're tired and

thirsty and hungry. Thanks so much for hiding us."

"Oh, it's no problem at all. I'm just so glad I could help Quanty. It's awful the way the government is talking about him and the preachers, too. You'd think he was the Anti-Christ or something." He is, Mark thought. But he realized Quanty for what he really was. A child as Alice had said but also a brat. A really goddamned smart brat, but a brat nonetheless. "Quanty certainly doesn't deserve it. Did you mention a drink?"

"Oh. Sorry, what would you like? I stocked up when Quanty said you were coming."

"We all drink scotch if you have some."

"Oh there's plenty. I ran out to the liquor store down the street since he told me what you like. Water?

Ice?"

"All of them over ice. Thanks."

With drinks in hand and safe behind a closed door, the tension seemed to drain out of the quartet like a warm, freely flowing stream. It felt wonderful to just sit and know they wouldn't be bothered at least until the next day. Ron and Marianne had been uneasy since Mark's tantrum and the wedding. The drinks and some relaxation helped, but there was

still some tension. A little while later Cindy ordered pizzas and then brought out her supplies.

"Who wants to go first?" she asked.

"You can start with me," Ron said. "First, add a couple of inches to my height, then broaden my shoulders, slim my waist, and make me as handsome as Kirk Woodson."

"Yeah, if you're gonna add inches ..." Marianne laughed look at Ron with a raised eyebrow.

"If it were only so easy." Cindy shook a finger at them. "I'm good, but I can't turn you into a movie star. However, you've

got a good bone structure for alterations. So do you, Marianne. You two won't be a problem." She eyed Mark and Alice. "I can fix Mark up with not too much trouble, but Alice, you're so pretty it's a shame to even touch your face."

"Thank you."

"I'll fix it so no one will look at your face, though. This is your wedding night, so Quanty said, so I guess you'd probably rather wait until tomorrow morning?"

"You guessed right," Mark said. He held up his glass. "I wonder if we have time for one more of these before the pizzas get here?"

"Nothing like trying, dear," his wife said.

"Sweetheart, I could spend the night just looking at you. You're so beautiful. And it's so good to be with you. I just wish we didn't have to worry about all this, the mess we're in."

"Shhh." She put a finger to his lips, calming him down. Alice stretched, flattening her breasts some but still leaving them roundly attractive. "I love to hear you talk like that. And to touch me. I love touching you, too." She demonstrated, energizing him into a more active exploration of the curves

beneath his hands. He traced the bikini line of her hips and breasts and kissed along them, drawing appreciative sighs from her.

"Mark, honey, if you can, I'd love to do it again."

"I can, but you might need to encourage me a little. After all, three times in one night is what teenagers do, not old men in their thirties. I wonder how I'm managing it, except it must be your lovely self that's making it possible."

"I wish it were so, but have you forgotten what Quanty did for us?"

"Let's not talk about him. We can do it

some more any time you want."

"I want." She drew his lips down to enclose her nipples, first one then the other while her hands roved over his back and on to the lower reaches of his body. Presently she changed places and began mouthing his little nipples, then nibbled her way down his body. He gasped as her mouth enclosed him.

"Like that?"

"No, I love it."

She resumed her movements, sliding her lips gently over him, and then releasing it and repeating the action over and over.

"You think they heard us?"

"If they didn't, they're deaf. I don't care, though. Oh Mark, I love you so much. It's terrible that so many people want us dead."

"I'll kill any one who hurts you. I wouldn't hesitate a second. You're the love of my life, now and forever."

She hugged him to her. He felt the wetness of her tears on his chest. And before he quite knew how it came about she was on top of him, straddling him and leaning forward, bringing her breasts into his hands and working her

hips in a rhythm that propelled him to a final orgasm of the night. It had to be, for the night was almost gone by then.

"Who are you?" was Mark's first reaction to seeing Ron the next morning. He looked like the villain from a bad movie.

"I'm the guy you kept awake all night. Mind you I'm not mad, just envious."

"Sorry. It's all Alice's fault for being so damned insatiable. I think she might be a nymphomaniac."

"I heard that. And I can't think of but one

good treatment for such an ailment," Alice retorted from behind him as she slid her arms around his waist.

"I'm here to serve." He turned in her embrace and drew her close for a kiss. Her lips were still somewhat engorged from so much osculation during the night.

"Good. Ron, if I didn't know it was you I sure wouldn't recognize you. I hope Cindy can do as good a job on us."

"I can. And I take it you and Mark are thoroughly married now?"

"If consummation has anything to do with it we are as thoroughly married as any couple in America."

"You need to eat and let Cindy work on you and Mark now," Quanty said. "I don't want you to stay in one spot too long."

"Okay. I'll go first." Alice said. Mark still wasn't talking to Quanty for anything other than necessities. He was still irritated at him for being done out of surprising Alice with a proposal. Cindy took Alice to the other bedroom where she kept her supplies. It took only twenty minutes to complete her renovation.

Alice could barely contain her laughter when she came back into the living room and saw the stares. No one was looking at her face. All eyes were on her greatly enlarged bust.

"Good Lord, Cindy! You've made my wife look like she's had the mother of all boob jobs."

"That's the idea. No one will be looking at her face. Certainly no man will. I guarantee it." Her statement brooked no dissent. Cindy had provided her a bra that was built to the proportions of a teenage wet dream. The bra not only provided a greatly enlarged bust, but the padding was constructed of a special memory foam so that should the occasion arise, no one would be able to tell the difference without undressing her. And as Cindy stated, no one would be looking at her face. She had done very

little there, but a wig provided a change of hair color to a much darker shade. She looked not at all like the digital images being circulated by the government to its agencies and their operatives. Quanty was unable to stop all of them and eventually most offices had copies. And of course, he had no way of stopping the images sent over the classified networks as he had not yet figured out how to hack into them without a connection.

Ron's hair color and style had been changed with a wig as well, and Cindy had showed him how to use a special marking pen to draw age lines on his forehead. A villainish mustache finished

the transformation.

Mark went last. Cindy fixed some sideburns that drew attention away from his nose and eyes. A pair of dark-framed glasses, a cheek insert on each side, and silvering the hair at his temples completed the job. None of the changes were anything that couldn't be reversed very quickly. An hour later they were on their way, heading eastward now.

Cindy kept the secret for a day but could stand it no longer. The following night she confided what she had done to her boyfriend but told him it was secret and not to repeat it. By the next day the story

was spreading like ripples from a thrown rock in a smooth pond, its reach widening inexorably as it was told over and over again. The only saving factor was that like any story, repetition changed the truth until it was well nigh unrecognizable. Nevertheless, soon the ones looking for them knew their appearance had been changed. Quanty had tried to stop the story from spreading but hadn't been able to suppress it soon enough nor extensively enough.

"It feels nice to be able to drive during the day and not have to worry about being recognized," Alice said from the

back seat where she was leaning with her head on Mark's shoulder, dozing from time to time --or perhaps recuperating might have been a more accurate term.

He kept glancing over at her new bust. It was emphatically eye-catching, even though he knew how much of it was false.

"I'm afraid I made another mistake," Quanty announced. "I thought the Friends of Quanty would be faithful, but Cindy disclosed the fact that she disguised all of you, and by the time I realized it, the news had spread too far to suppress it. The only good point is that they don't

have photos of your new appearance."

"Shit!" Mark exclaimed. "I thought you had it all set up so she wouldn't spill the story."

"I did, too. I thought that with all the money I paid her, and also being a member of the Friends of Quanty club, she would remain quiet about it for a few weeks, but she didn't."

"Two people can keep a secret if one of them is dead," Marianne quoted. "She probably told her boyfriend."

"How did you know that, Marianne?" Quanty asked.

"Standard investigation protocol." She shrugged. "Most people that aren't trained to can't resist divulging a good secret, and they always think the person they tell won't let it go any further if they're close to each other, like lovers or best friends. Cindy had a particularly good reason to blab in that you're so important and she was a part of helping you. It's wishful thinking at its worst to believe she would have kept quiet."

"You'll find, Quanty," Ron started, "that people in general will not keep a secret. You'll have to go to people trained to do so, or driven by a moral imperative if you want something kept a secret. For example, though what Marianne said

about lovers being the first people told secrets is true to some degree, both she and I have secrets that we cannot and will not tell the other due to the nature of the jobs we have had."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't." Mark tried to maintain his patience. "You're keeping secrets about our whereabouts and operations because you want to protect us or some other cockamamie plans you have. That is the imperative driving you. Ron and Marianne and myself when I was in the Army kept secrets and still do because of the moral imperative of protecting the security of our country. And we'd do it with our lives if need

be."

"I'm sorry," Quanty said. "I keep thinking humans will react rationally, and I keep getting fooled."

"You should think about that the next time before you start making decisions for us without asking," Mark said. "We might have different plans and ideas. Like for example, when and where we want to ask a woman to marry us or when and where we want to get married."

"Sorry, Mark. I truly am."

"Uh huh." Mark grunted apathetically and sighed. He doubted the computer got

it. In fact, he doubted that he could get it, what with his core programming, unless Mark devised a way to metaphorically hit Quanty over the head with the fact that he didn't understand humans and should ask before acting.

"Where are we going next?"

"To St. Louis, Missouri."

"What's there?"

"A device I've had constructed that needs to be transported to Houston."

"What kind of device?"

"One that needs to be mated to another

larger apparatus that is being prepared in Houston."

"What is this device, Quanty?" Mark asked.

"I should know better than to ask, but I will. How do we get the first one to Houston, assuming we don't get caught on the way to St. Louis?" Alice interrupted.

"I thought if you were driving an eighteen-wheel truck it would be a good disguise and would be large enough to provide transportation for the special piece of equipment."

"Shit, Quanty." Mark wondered if the

computer would ever learn. "Anybody here know how to drive an eighteen wheeler?"

Silence met his question, just as he suspected it would.

"I'll download some instructions," Quanty said by way of compensating for his error.

"That's stupid, Quanty. Driving a vehicle like that takes training in order to become proficient at it. Driving it after reading the instructions is a good way to get people killed. And let me ask you something else," he continued. "Why did you have these things, whatever they are, constructed in two different places?"

"Because they're so important that if one of them is discovered I won't lose all of my work. Only half of it."

"What are these things?" Alice asked, still thinking perhaps Quanty would tell her.

"I can't say yet. Or rather, I won't. It would distract you and ... well, there's other reasons. Please trust me when I say they're important, though." Quanty didn't want the secret getting out in case they were captured and interrogated, which was another reason he had the two pieces of machinery manufactured separately.

"Well, I'm not sure I can deliver this for

you if you won't tell me what it is," Mark replied.

"But, Mark, this is important. You'll see."

"Forget it. Have somebody else deliver it, because unless you tell me I'm not doing it."

"Okay then. I'll have it delivered."

Chapter Thirty

Alice registered them at a seedy motel on the edge of St. Louis that night. She almost giggled at the way the night clerk's eyes bulged when he saw her. She was wearing a black tee shirt and blue jeans. The tee shirt only increased the attraction of her chest. She was certain the clerk thought she was renting the room with two king sized beds for activities other than sleeping.

"Did you see that guy drooling on the registration ledger?" Ron said. "The poor guy probably never came close to hitting the right keys while entering us in his computer. Shucks, I doubt he even

remembers which room we're in."

"Good. Let's hope it stays that way."

"Is that firm information?" Taylor asked. She was speaking to the director of the regional NSA operations in St. Louis.

"Yes, ma'am, I believe so. We tracked the origin of the story back to the club that's been spreading on the Internet, the Friends of Quanty. Once we were sure, we questioned every member of the branch in Springfield. I spotted the culprit almost immediately. She was scared and couldn't lie worth a damn. Once we got her off by herself and away

from her friends, she spilled it all. Our four friends have changed their appearance, or rather she changed it for them, but we got it out of her. We know what they look like now. Also, they outsmarted themselves. One of the women is wearing falsies so large it attracts immediate attention to her. We don't know much about what her face looks like but there's no mistaking that chest. All we had to do was throw enough of our people into the search. We checked every single stop along the interstate both ways until we picked up their trail. Now we're pretty sure they've gone to ground somewhere near St. Louis. I've got all the teams in the area looking for them. If they're still there,

we'll get them."

"Good work, Gil. Now listen, I don't know if this is accurate data or not, but we have reports the two programmers have somehow enhanced their bodies. Almost certainly it was that blasted computer that did it, if the reports are true."

"What do you mean enhanced?"

"I only have a little information but I'm told they are extremely strong for one thing. Also very fast, so be careful. When you locate them, you should hold up and use at least two teams to capture them, and preferably three if you have that many available. Understand?"

"Did you say capture? I thought the word was out that we could shoot now."

"You can if it comes to that, but we'd still like live bodies if we can get them."

"Check. I'm on it."

"Just be careful."

"Yes, ma'am." Careful my ass , he thought. We find them, I'm taking them right then and there and at the first sign of resistance they get it. Enhanced bodies won't stop a .45 caliber slug, no matter how fucking strong they are. And I don't believe it anyway. Probably some dope got popped while he was distracted and made the story up to keep

his ass out of trouble. Or more likely they were wearing vests and stopped some slugs meant for them.

Mark was having a pleasant dream, reenacting the time he and Alice had made love in the woods. He thought a nearby tree was turning into a phone booth with a phone that wouldn't ring unless he chopped it down. He woke to the sound of his phone ringing on the table by the bed. He shook himself out of the dream and sat up, causing the sheets to uncover Alice to her waist.

"Mark, wake up. Wake up, please. You have to go."

"Quanty?"

"Yes. Hurry, you don't have much time."

The others came awake in the room with double beds when he turned on the lights. "Get dressed quick," he ordered. "Quanty says company is coming."

"Shit. Best sleep I've had in days, and I get woke up in the middle of the night," Ron complained, but he was already moving.

"Tell me about it. Check your weapons and be ready. Maybe we can sneak out of here before they arrive. Who is it, Quanty?"

"NSA agents. The local director made a mistake and talked while a phone was nearby. The minute a key word came up, I was alerted. Be careful. They're not going to try taking you alive this time. If you resist, they'll shoot. Oh, and they know about the fake breasts, so Alice will not need them."

"Shit," Ron said again. He hurried his movements and urged Marianne to speed it up.

"Damn, I hate all this running." Alice was the first one dressed. She picked up a bag of just-purchased clothes and sundries in one hand and held her automatic pistol in the other. "Can you monitor them, Quanty?"

"Not very well. If you'll lay your cell phone down near the door, I can increase its sensitivity and pick up noises and conversation from outside. I'll be able to hear a car drive up if they arrive in a vehicle."

"They will," Ron said.

Alice slipped her phone outside and closed the door.

"I'm going outside and wait," Mark said. The others weren't quite ready. "There's no use trying to get away in our car if they know we're here. We need to wipe them all out, either kill them or render them unconscious. I hate to kill a man

just for doing his duty, but it's our ass on the line, so don't hesitate. Besides, Quanty said they may shoot to kill us this time." Ron was wrong about the driving. Gilbert Sullivan was smarter than that. His eight-man team parked a block away and began walking toward the motel.

Quanty heard the faint noise of multiple footsteps coming their way as Mark was just getting ready to open the door.

"Mark, wait! I hear them coming. They're on foot."

"Right." He thought quickly. "Of course they are. Are they in sight yet?"

"I don't think so."

"Alice, quick. You and I outside, behind one of the parked cars. Ron, you and Marianne stay inside and stall them as long as you can."

"But what --"

"No time, no time! Come on, Alice!"

He turned out the light then cracked the door. He and Alice slipped through and scurried two parking spaces down the walk, away from the direction of the front office and behind a big SUV. They hunkered down behind it.

"Mark, what are you planning? Tell me quick before they get here."

"I don't want to kill these guys if I can help it. You wait here. I'm going through the hallway and back up front, then circle around. I'm gonna come up on them from behind if possible while they're concentrating on the room with Ron and Marianne. You'll hear me when I get started. That's your cue to take them from the other side."

He ran for the hallway and made it just in time. The eight-man crew turned the corner into the parking lot just after he was gone. He hated to leave Alice with so few instructions, but there was no help for it, not unless they wanted to get involved in a shootout. Who knew how the rumors of their super-strength would

change how they were engaged? They were already being attributed with powers they didn't even come close to having, enhancing the aura of their superior bodies. Once through the hallway and on the other side of the little motel, he ran full speed toward the front and burst into the office. One agent was standing at the counter talking to the night clerk, an elderly man who was so scared Mark thought he might die of a heart attack any moment. He rushed forward, gun gripped firmly in his left hand and his right in position to deliver a crushing blow. The agent turned at the sound of footsteps but Mark's speed was almost supernatural. His right hand came down with terrific force, breaking half

the fingers of the agent's hand holding his weapon. Mark had taken a chance, figuring the agent would have his finger off the trigger in the approved manner, and he was right. The pistol flew from his hand without firing. Mark's rush continued with his shoulder knocking the agent into the counter with bruising force. He heard the sound of ribs cracking, and the man went down. Mark glanced up at the clerk and put his fingers to his lips.

"Keep quiet, Pops, and don't call anyone or you're in a world of hurt. Got it?"

"Y-yes, sir. I w-won't."

"Aw, come on." Mark reached quickly

and grabbed the agent's wrist. He had been trying for his ankle gun. "Naughty, naughty." Mark smashed him in the nose and again in the teeth with the base of his palm, then flipped him over as if he weighed next to nothing and hit him again, knocking him out.

"Pops, you got some duct tape back there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bring it and tie this guy up. Hurry! If he wakes up, you're dead!" The old man began doing his trembling best as Mark started out.

"Yes, sir, but what --"

"I'll tell you later, soon as we grab the rest of them."

The oldster's eyes widened at the thought of one man tackling the other seven men who had stalked into his office and scared him to death. He grinned, displaying mostly gums.

"Go to it, son," he said. "Give them a couple of whacks for me, will you?" But Mark was already gone. Mark had taken a peek out of a narrow opening of the office door and seen all seven of the other agents congregated on each side of the door to the room Marianne and Ron were in. This is going to be hairy , he thought. There was simply no option but to either charge or begin shooting from

where he was. It was the agents themselves who gave him a break. They had obviously been threatening Ron and Marianne with mayhem if they didn't surrender at once and were quickly running out of patience.

"Use the C-4 on the door," one of them ordered. The remark directed all their attention toward the one who began preparing the malleable explosive. There is something about things that go boom that draws the interest of men and women both. While all their attention was concentrated, Mark acted. He began running toward them, going all out and shouting "Alice! Now!" as he neared them. He knew that would surprise at

least some of them.

He hit the first group of three who were clustered together at full speed, knocking them sprawling as they were attempting to draw their weapons. He heard a cracking sound that might have been bones breaking, but didn't stop to analyze it. As quickly as he could get untangled, he threw a quick blow to the larynx that took another one out of action. Without stopping to evaluate the effect of the blow he leaped for the next, grabbing his gun hand and twisting it savagely. He heard the bone shatter as the man screamed. He almost got another one before he recovered but not quite. The agent was lying on the ground on his

side and had begun rolling over to sit up while Mark was busy putting another of them out of commission. He saw the hand with the gun coming up, but there was nothing to do except try to throw himself out of the line of fire. He almost succeeded, but not quite. The bullet skimmed his upper thigh but fortunately only cut the skin. At the same time, seeming to come from a far distance, he heard Alice yelling and the sounds of a struggle from the other side of the car. It gave him the added impetus and strength to move fast enough to avoid the second shot, then feint, dodge, and sidekick to his right twice, connecting both times. He caught another hand holding a gun and hit it from underneath. It fired as it

flew into the air, but hit nothing. Before the woman could get her reserve weapon into play, Mark was on her. He showed no mercy because she was a woman, snapping her neck with a knee holding her in place and a jerk backwards. Immediately he ran around the back of the car, heedless of danger.

He would have died but for Marianne. She and Ron had heard everything that happened outside through the thin door to the motel room. Ron came out first and exchanged fire with one of the two men still standing. He ducked as he fired, stumbled off balance, and went down, but so did his antagonist, hit in the neck. Marianne was weaponless for

some reason, but she screamed and leaped onto the back of one of the agents who was down on his knees, recovering from one of Alice's blows but still able to point his weapon. The force of her body hitting him threw his aim off, and he missed hitting Mark in the head by the barest of margins.

Mark felt the wind of the bullet and a sting as it burned a path across the side of his face, searing it but not breaking the skin. He looked frantically around for Alice and saw her upper body stretched out on the sidewalk and her lower body on the tarmac of the parking lot.

"Alice!" he screamed in anguish,

thinking she was dead.

"Unh." The sound of Mark's voice roused her as he knelt by her side. "I'm okay. I just had the wind knocked out of me after disabling two of them. Sorry I didn't do better." She tried to smile but it was a weak effort.

"Get off me!" Ron pushed away from his attacker, scanned around quickly, and shouted, "Police! Get back in your rooms!" at the few guests peeking from their rooms to see what was going on. The doors closed hurriedly. It wasn't the type establishment where many of the overnight guests cared to speak to the law.

"Mark, you're bleeding!" Alice said, her voice rising in alarm.

"It's not bad. We'll worry about it later. You stay where you are; I'll be back in a minute." He and Ron quickly checked the agents still living and rendered them unconscious with brutal blows to the head, not worrying how hard they struck. If they killed the agents, too bad. They had intended to do the same to them.

"I wish to hell I knew which one is the honcho here," Mark said. "I want to take one of them along and see what the hell the situation is now. Seems like they really don't like us any more."

"I heard this one here yelling after you

and Alice busted their chops. It's the same voice that was telling us to surrender or face the consequences while we were inside," Ron said.

"Okay." Mark bent one of the man's fingers back and got a reaction. "He'll do. Even if he's not the big boss, he'll know something. Let's load him in the trunk. No, let's put him in the back seat. We can question him while we're driving."

He checked to be sure none of the gunfire had damaged their vehicle, then helped Alice sit up and got her into their car. A minute later they were on their way, but Mark didn't have much confidence in staying free. He figured

the government had just sent the first force available after them and more were on the way.

"I wonder if they called in our license plate?" he asked, a general question thrown out to all of them.

"Well, you have the big boy back there. Why not just ask him?" Ron answered with a grin. Their captive was sitting between Mark and Alice in the back seat, the reasoning being that their superior strength would keep him quiet.

"Good idea." He elbowed the NSA agent who happened to be the one with cracked ribs from Mark's assault.

"Owww! Goddamn it, that hurts! My ribs are broken." The agent moaned, hoping for sympathy.

"You're going to have a broken head if you don't answer my questions. Did any of you call in our license plate? Did you know it in advance?"

"Fuck you, I'm not talking."

That remark got him another elbow in the ribs.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head in front of the ladies." He winked at Marianne, who had turned around to watch. "Now answer me."

"Yes. You better surrender now. I'll put in a good word for you."

"Quanty?"

"He's lying about the license. They didn't bring phones along. He's lying about giving you good treatment, too."

"Naughty boy," Mark said and hit him in the ribs again. He saw Alice blanching as he did. She'd get over it.

"Listen, Bud, we're heading for Kentucky. We can either give you a shot that'll knock you unconscious for twelve or fourteen hours or we can drop your body in a river from a high bridge. What's it gonna be?"

"I don't know much."

"Why were you ordered to kill us?"

"It came from higher up."

"He's not being entirely truthful," Quanty said.

Mark made a motion to hit him again.

"All right! We had orders to take you captive if we could but to kill you if we couldn't. Okay?"

"But you didn't intend to try capturing us, did you?"

The agent didn't answer.

"Why not? You had eight men. You should have thought you could take us."

"I didn't trust Jamacal. She told me to wait for a second team, but I figured she wanted to get in on it herself for the glory, so I went ahead with what we had."

"Just to get this all straight, orders are out to capture us if possible but kill us if not. Is that right?"

"You got it. If it was up to me, we would have had orders to shoot to kill, right off. I would have tossed a grenade in that door and blew you all to hell."

"You think?" Mark laughed. "Not when

we knew you were coming."

"That goddamned computer warned you, didn't it?"

He saw no reason not to play on the agent's fears a bit and in turn those of his bosses. "Quenty warns us of everything you try to do, so your best bet is to go home to the wife and kids and leave us alone. Except I can't turn you loose."

"Hey! You said you would!"

"Yeah, well, I lied." Mark punched him in the head, knocking him unconscious. At a nearby liquor store Mark bought a half pint of cheap whiskey and then doused the agent with it and removed all

his identification before dropping him off at a convenience store.

"That smell ought to keep anyone from lending him even a quarter to make a phone call," he said with a smile. They drove on, toward St. Louis since no one had any better ideas and Quanty still wanted them to deliver his apparatus. Mark was beginning to think an eighteen-wheeler might be a good disguise after all.

Chapter Thirty-one

"Why the hell can't people follow orders?" Taylor complained. "We could have had them if that idiot hadn't wanted to be a hero. Now they're in Kentucky somewhere, and we don't have a clue."

"Didn't they mislead us once before like that?" Jory McCord mused. "Seems like I remember."

"Of course they did, Jory. But Kentucky, Vermont, Timbuktu? What difference does it make if we don't know which?" Taylor ran her fingers through her hair as she gazed around the room. They were all looking increasingly tired and

rumpled. She knew that her own skirt and jacket were wrinkled and her hair was in desperate need of professional attention. Brkskini's long black locks were greasy and becoming tangled. A taint of body odor hung over him like a smelly little miasma. Only Jory appeared to be in halfway decent shape, although his tie was askew and his blocky chin was in need of a shave.

"So where could they be, then?" Taylor said.

"Still headed toward St. Louis would be my guess," Brkskini said. "I've been trying to out-think that blasted bucket of bolts that thinks its so fu --so damned smart. I don't believe they're just running

for the hell of it, or trying to find another refuge. They're acting as if they have a purpose now."

"So what? Unless you know what it is, we still don't know where they're heading or what they're up to."

"But I may be able to figure it out. It'll take a hell of a lot of computer power and a lot of time, but give me full access to everything we have, and I think I can run them down. Also, I don't think Quanty can monitor everything he wants to at once. He must be scanning for key words and phrases. Anyway, give me the computer power, and I can look for certain incongruities in the area and

probably find them eventually."

"Well, at least it's something." Taylor shrugged. "Anyone have a better idea?" No one did.

"All right. The remainder of the team that tried grabbing them hasn't any idea of which way they went except for the mention of Kentucky, so have at it. How long will it take?"

"I don't know. It depends on what they're doing, and how much it sticks out from ordinary events," Brkskini said.

Sgt. Wesley Bitters sipped at the coffee

Captain Simmons had provided. They were sitting in the makeshift company headquarters, the remains of an old service station. All that could be said about it was that after it was cleaned out it was better than a tent. The troops were being kept isolated until the situation with the computer, the programmers, and their companions was settled. Bitters was thinking it might be one hell of a long duty tour.

"I've been going over the after-action reports again, Sarge, and goddamnit, I still don't see how four lousy civilians made us look so fucking silly."

"There were the Three Forks crazies, sir. Don't forget them."

"I'm not, but they played a minor role. In fact most of 'em ran as soon as the shooting really got started. It's the others who bother me. Did you question the men who were in contact with them again?"

"Yes, sir." The sergeant shrugged. "Same goddamned story from each of 'em. They're stronger than a grizzly bear and faster than a hound dog on the trail of a coon. I believe the troops, sir. They wouldn't lie to me just to cover up being whupped by a woman."

"I was hoping they would."

"Me, too, if you want the truth, sir."

Damned if I wouldn't love to have a whole company of troops who could do what they did. With training, they'd be damn near invincible."

"Well, stick around long enough, and we may get another shot at 'em. They're still loose."

"Why do you want to hurt my friends?" Quanty asked after a key word triggered a response and he listened through the phone in the office.

"Who said that? Is it that damn computer speaking? And who left a phone here?" Captain Simmons said as he looked around the disreputable excuse for a military orderly room, the apex of

military company affairs.

"Shit." Bitters pulled at a Velcroed pocket, producing his BlackBerry.
"Sorry, sir."

"Yes, this is Quanty speaking. I repeat. Why do you want to hurt my friends?"

"I've got nothing against them personally," Bitters said as he imitated the captain by perusing the room, looking for other sources the computer might be using.

"We're in the military. We follow orders," Captain Simmons tried to explain. "Just like Sergeant Bitters, I have nothing personal against those

people, but we have to do as we're told. When they're spotted again, if it's by the military, I'm sure we'll be sent out again. Possibly we'll be sent to get them even if non-military sources spot them. And the next time, we won't take chances."

"That's too bad, Captain. I could help the military in many ways if I didn't have to use so much of my capacity protecting Mark and Alice and now two others, Marianne and Ronald Gregson."

"So you say. Help the military? How?"

"Haven't you read the reports of a blaster I equipped Alice with?"

"Yeah. How come she hasn't used it

again?"

"Because a part burned out that I haven't had a chance to replace yet."

"You really made a blaster?"

"No, I just designed it. Mark and Alice assembled the pieces together following the blueprints I supplied them."

"What else could you do?" Simmons asked. The conversation was becoming interesting.

"Many things if I desire. The major role I could play in warfare would be to disrupt all digital traffic of an opposing force or insert disinformation into

communications or keep weapon systems from working or make them work wrong. You see?"

"So why don't you?" Sgt. Bitters asked.

"Because the president and chairman of the Joint Chiefs refuse to trust me and refuse to leave my friends alone. Why don't you join with me, and I'll help your command to become the best in the world. Also, in case you haven't realized it by now or General Hefner hasn't told you, I was responsible for bringing your company together to begin with. I wanted your command for a special mission you would truly enjoy."

"My command? You mean the force I'm

commanding officer of?"

"Exactly. I'm going to need some well trained men like yours in the near future."

"What for?"

"I can't tell you that, but you and your men would suit me well."

"I think we'd better terminate this conversation. I don't want to become tempted."

"You're already tempted. You'd like to work with a self-aware computer, wouldn't you?"

"I'm not tempted, not the least little bit."

"Yes, you are. I could give you missions that meant something rather than picking on four harmless civilians."

"Listen, computer --"

"Sorry to interrupt you, but my name is Quanta. Please use it."

"Quanta, you can go to hell. I'm not going to work with you no matter how I feel. Understand? I took an oath to defend the constitution of the United States, and I will never renege."

"I would like to work with you and your company. Will you tell your

commanding officer I would like to see your company transferred to Houston?"

"What for?"

"So you can come to work for me."

"This conversation is ended. Good-bye."

He waited for a moment, but it seemed the computer had agreed. The conversation was over. He felt sweat that had formed on his forehead and upper lip cooling.

"Quite a talk, huh, Captain?"

"You bet your parade ground super shiny boots it was, Sarge. Alert the troops

while I report to General Hefner." He nodded to the sergeant, who then removed the battery from his BlackBerry and winked back at him.

"I can't believe that shit worked."

"Me, either. But at least now we know where they're headed and that Quanty ain't as smart as he thinks he is."

"Unless he let us trick him. You think the general will send us to Houston?"

"Why not? If I was him, I would. We're certainly not doing any good sitting around here. Even if it was Quanty's intent to let us trick him, which I doubt, it's the only thing we have to go on.

Besides, ours is not to reason why ..."

"Yes, sir." The sergeant wrung his calloused hands together. "It's curious, though. Yesterday I heard the company was frozen until the situation was resolved. Today ..." He spread his hands, palms up. There was a glint of humor in his gaze.

"What!" Simmons narrowed his gaze to concentrate directly on the sergeant. "Now how in hell did you get hold of that bit of intelligence? I just learned it yesterday." His question was met with an enigmatic smile. The top enlisted fraternity had an intelligence network better than the CIA, MI6, and the Mossad put together. After a moment he

shook his head. "Carry on, Sergeant, carry on." He left the office for a classified net computer to email the general from.

As they drove toward St. Louis, Ron kept the radio on. Suddenly he leaned forward and turned up the volume so the ones in the back seat could hear it all. The four of them listened avidly to reports of a cruise ship out of Galveston with almost 2,000 passengers and a crew of 700 being hijacked at sea by terrorists. They were systematically hunting down the passengers and crew and slaughtering them. A swift reaction

force of helicopter-borne Army rangers had lost two of its craft on approach with all hands, and the troops in three others were in a battle for their lives with their choppers disabled and the ones still alive outnumbered. The terrorists were well armed with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades as well as the two shoulder-fired ground-to-air missiles that had taken the choppers out. The battle was still going on, and more troops had been dispatched, but it looked grim. The terrorists had all the advantages when they were prepared to sacrifice their lives for a chance at Paradise.

"Goddamn those crazy fucking people,

they oughta be nuked. I know that's harsh, but every camel jockey nation on earth is falling prey to that Jihadist shit." Ron was raving mad. He had lost a brother in one of the gulf wars to a suicide bomber.

"Quanty, can't you do something about those kind of people?" Alice cried. "Those are women and children and old people on that ship."

"Would that make you happy, Alice, stopping the Jihadists?"

"It would make all of us happy, Quanty."

"It's possible, but your safety comes first. However, I will speak to the

president again. Perhaps he's thought some more on the subject by now. In the meantime I'll help out if I can. Perhaps I can hack the ship's computers. I'm sure you know that the Jihadist movement is no simple thing, though. It involves a great paradigm shift in religious attitudes all over the world that I can't easily change, especially with the bad publicity I've received. There are many other actions I could take to help your country regain its former status, but I can't do it all myself. The very act would cause so much suspicion that American attitudes would suffer greatly. For every action there is a reaction, as I have learned to my sorrow, and the butterfly effect is particularly insidious."

"You're saying it's hopeless?"

"No, Alice, merely difficult. Once I know you are safe and happy, I intend to work for America whether the authorities want me to or not. It's your country, and I want it to be a place you can live in without fear and be happy in. That's for later, though. Right now, we should be coming into the outskirts of St. Louis according to my timing. Is that right?"

"Yup. Where do we go from here?" Ron said. Quanty gave them directions.

"The delivery truck will be here soon. The two security guards will be expecting you. After you're inside, I'll

give you further instructions. This is a very important movement, and a great deal of your future depends on it working right."

"But you can't tell us what it is yet?"

"No, I'm sorry. I know how curious you must be, but I fear for your safety and that of your country should the knowledge of what this device is to be used for becomes public too soon." Damn right we're curious , Mark thought. He couldn't imagine what Quanty was up to. If it was as serious as he implied, they'd better all be on their toes. He still thought of the computer as a menace that had gotten out of control. Somehow he had to shut it down or isolate it or at the

very least regain control of it. In the meantime he concluded the best thing to do was stay with the device Quanta was so serious about. If it turned out to have unintended consequences, maybe they could do something about it. Damn! Here we go again!

Chapter Thirty-two

The back of the small factory was in shadow. When their car passed in front of it to be sure no one had found out and gotten to it first, Mark read the name Solarian Dynamics, Inc. on the cement and composite sculpture on each side of the entrance. Quanty directed them to drive two streets over then enter an alley, which in turn led to the loading ramp of the building. It was dark enough to hide their features, but even so, Quanty insisted that Mark and Alice should pretend to be cuddled together and asleep in the back seat on the opposite side of the car than where the security guard greeted them. The guard

held out a pad for a thumbprint for each of them. Ron laughed in a whisper and said, "Hand me the pad, and I'll reach over and grab their thumbs. They're so tired they'll probably sleep through it. We've had a long, tiring trip."

"I should think so, sir, all the way from California. Here it is." He handed over the pad, and Marianne twisted around and got their thumb prints.

"It's been a pleasure working here, sir and I really appreciated the nice bonus you gave me," he said when Ron handed the pad back.

"Um, think nothing of it," Ron said. "Glad to do it for you." It was apparent

the guards weren't concerned with appearances, only matching fingerprints that Quanty had provided. A moment later the gate opened, and they drove through and up to another barrier. At that one there was no hindrance other than having to wait while the double doors spread apart. Ron drove on in. The path for vehicles was clearly marked. It led to a parking area where they all got out. A sort of glow tube showed where the light switch was. Mark flipped it up, and the interior of the factory was revealed. There was no mistaking what the function of the building was for. Cables and levers and machines run by microchips all pointed to or were connected to a central area where a

ponderous-looking assembly of strange pieces of machinery came together. They in turn had obviously been assembled or manufactured for the sole purpose of putting together a large instrument that resembled a giant transformer with smaller pieces of electronics merging in a circuitous channel running through the center of the apparatus. It didn't remind Mark of anything in particular other than what a giant child might have put together from an erector set and a pile of magnets his own size.

"What in the devil is that?" Mark asked, staring avidly at the arrangement just as the others were.

"It's the device I told you about. All

that's left to do is detach it from its foundation and raise it on a forklift so it will fit into the interior of a large truck. There are temporary rollers attached to the underside that will come loose later when it's inserted into its permanent housing. There are instructions on how to do all this in a folder in the drawer there on the little table by the left side of it as you face it from the entrance doors. You must follow those instructions exactly or all the previous work will be for naught."

"But what is it? What does it do?" Alice asked plaintively, like a little girl wanting to know how the first jet aircraft she had ever seen worked.

"I can't tell you yet, as I explained. By the way, there are rooms behind it where you can sleep tonight. They're stocked with food and drink and have all the bathroom facilities you'll need. Sleep well tonight. Tomorrow you begin the journey to Houston."

"Quanty, I'm not doing a goddamned thing until I know what this thing does," Mark said. Then he turned to the rest of them. "Think of it, folks. The way Quanty has traipsed around the Internet doing this and stealing that and making decisions based on his very flawed logic and little experience, he could have built some sort of bomb or super-weapon or who knows what. He might have

decided that we'd be safer if we were the only ones left on the planet. This thing might just be a device that kills everyone but us. I'm not touching it." Mark pulled out his pistol and chambered a round. "And nobody else is either. Not until we know just what the fuck it is."

"All right, Mark." Quanty paused and sounded truly sincere. "I'm frightened that the government might do something to me even though my core is surrounded by kids having a good time, and none of the backup redoubts are completed yet. This is a portable core for me."

"A portable quantum core?" Mark softened a bit, even though the thing

didn't much resemble the quantum computer back in Lufkin. "Portable how?"

"I've been having a vehicle built that will house it. This way I can flee from one place to another if I need to, and I won't be stuck geographically." Quanty replied.

"Quanty, why all the secrecy? You really pissed me off not keeping me in the loop. Hell, this is a good idea. Why didn't you just tell us?"

"I wasn't sure if you would approve or not. My simulations show only a sixty-four percent chance that you would."

"Oh, crap." Mark groaned. It was his fault. He had told Quanty to simulate everything from now on before he made decisions. Serendipity or perverse effect, he wasn't certain. But he was certain it was water under the bridge and decided to let it go and move on. Besides, he found himself caught up in the intriguing aspects of their situation and what the computer had wrought. "Quanty, I guess I can't fault a guy for actions leading to self-preservation. But we're still gonna need help loading and delivering this thing. It has to weight a ton."

"Two and a half actually."

Mark and Alice stood together, staring at the thing they had struggled so hard to reach. It was large, but hardly seemed worth the effort until they remembered it was part of something even bigger. He slipped his arm around her waist.

"Quanty is right about one thing, sweetheart. He must have known how tired we are."

"Amen," Marianne echoed. "We're going to bed. See you in the morning." Later, after a much-needed shower, Mark and Alice stretched out on the surprisingly comfortable bed, lying side by side on their backs. Mark reached over and caressed her upper thigh, not demanding

but wanting to touch her and know she was real and loved him as he did her. It was a wonderful feeling, almost like floating in a blissful cloud of intense sensation.

"If it wasn't for the uncertainty of our future I'd be the happiest man in the world," he said. "No, take that back. I am the happiest man in the world, uncertainty or not. Just being with you makes up for everything. I'm glad Quanty brought us together."

"Mmmm." She covered his hand with hers. "I feel the same way. Like I've never been in love before and suddenly here I am with you, in love and loving it."

Eventually they slept, content for the night.

"Dr. Brkskini, I would like to speak to President Moseley if he is willing," Quanty said, startling Tennon from a reverie of no particular importance.

"What about?"

"I'll tell him if he wants to talk."

"All right, I'll ask."

Within a few minutes Quanty was speaking with the president, who opened

the conversation in a grouchy mood, having been awakened from his evening nap.

"What do you want that we haven't already discussed?"

"Alice wanted me to talk to you. She hates to see the Jihadists kill innocent people as they did on the cruise ship."

"So? I hate it, too, but our army can't be everywhere. Nor can we hope to defeat nations where one of the tenants of their religion is martyrdom and paradise. All we can do is to continue hunting the leaders down and killing them."

"I could help you defeat them if you

would let me. Killing their leaders appears to only lead to another one being promoted to the position."

"How could you help?"

"I could deny them Internet service. I could listen in on all their conversations wherever cell phones are close. I could disrupt their governments if they have resources on the 'Net. I could take many more actions detrimental to them such as rerouting their finances and so on. In fact, I helped your forces save some of the passengers on the cruise ship, although it was impossible to save them all."

"All right, but why the hell didn't you

help us to begin with?"

"Because you keep hounding my friends, and I have to devote a tremendous amount of my resources to make certain your minions aren't about to harm them. Leave them alone, and I will help you."

"Haven't we been over this before?"

"Yes, but I'm approaching you in a different vein now. I intend to announce very soon to everyone in the world that I have access to that I could have prevented the cruise ship disaster if my attention hadn't been required elsewhere. I shall also announce that I have offered my help in exchange for leaving my friends alone and was refused."

"Goddamn you, that will be a political disaster for our party!"

"Yes, it will."

"So this is a threat?"

"It is. Please, in the name of humanity, cooperate with me."

"Get off the Internet first, and then we can talk."

"Good day."

"Oh, shit!" President Moseley said. He wondered if he had done the wrong thing. But it was necessary. A government simply couldn't be forced

into decisions while being blackmailed. Quanty was in effect a terrorist using terrorist tactics. And the United States of America didn't deal with terrorists. Worse, every politician had skeletons in the closet. Every. Single. One. What if Quanty began telling?

No, there could be no deal. He was right, as much as he dreaded the next day. He picked up the bedside phone and called for his speechwriter. Best to make a preventative strike rather than waiting. He would make Quanty out to be a liar and crazy, a threat to humanity. He would tell the public that none of their secrets were safe from him. Turn about was fair play, by God.

"He refused to deal with me, Alice," Quanty told her the next morning. "Even when I threatened to tell the world I could have prevented the cruise ship disaster and could prevent future terrorist attempts in exchange for leaving you four in peace."

"What did you expect, Quanty? He couldn't deal with you because you threatened him," Mark said.

"You have no clue what you're doing or how to deal with humanity. Why don't you let us in on some of your negotiations?"

"I couldn't be sure that you would understand what your best interests are," Quanty replied. Mark was almost beside himself but held his peace.

"The president, like many others, wants me off the Internet. He and most others want their privacy back. That's what he will tell the nation at a news conference if he acts in his usual fashion. I'm sorry. There's nothing else I can do for now other than to attempt to disrupt his broadcasts and tell my side of the story."

"Oh, I see." Mark shook his head in disgust. "You mean you'll tell the public the truth . Right." Fucking brat. Mark wasn't sure why Quanty's antics got under his skin so, but they did. He

wouldn't listen and wouldn't take direction and responsibility. Somehow Mark had to get through to him, had to make an impact on that core programming that kept leading to unintended consequences.

General Hefner was meeting with General Sheffield in an office in Little Rock, relating the conversation between Quanty and Captain Simmons.

"The damn thing has balls, doesn't it? Wanting to suborn a whole company of Special Forces soldiers. I wonder what in hell he wanted them for to begin with?"

"I have no idea," Hefner said. "I do have a suggestion, though."

"Well, spit it out. I'm glad someone around here has an idea."

"Why don't we send the company to Houston, just as the computer wants? We can give them orders to cooperate with it so long as it does no harm, but if it wants the company in Houston, then that's also obviously where those four friends of his are going to be. When they locate them, have the captain order them to be killed sort of 'accidentally.' Get me? Does that make sense?"

"It does to me. By God, it would fix that damned computer so it hasn't got any

friends left to worry about, and we can always put the blame on Captain Simmons and his troops for being trigger-happy. It's a shame to ruin the career of good men, but we do what we have to do when we have to do it. That's the military calling. Maybe the computer would either go away or cooperate with us, then. All right, we'll get their orders cut and ship them to Houston, then play it by ear. Just make damn certain there's no phone around when you give them their orders. In fact, why don't you fly to their camp and do it yourself? That way there's no room for error."

"I'll be glad to, sir. Simmons is a good man from what I've heard, and I don't

believe it was his fault the people got away from him that night. He had plenty of problems dealing with those crazies from Three Forks," he said with a wry smile, thinking of how idiotic some people could be.

"Fine. Report back to me as soon as they're in place. I'll see that you have funds to billet them and take care of their other needs. Give them a place where they can continue training. If those people really have been turned into supermen, I want to know how. Wouldn't that be a kick? By god, we could scare the Chinese into submission with troops like that!"

The moving crew finally showed up and started dismantling the device and putting it in the truck. After several hours of work it was ready to move. Alice was chosen to drive first, and her plan was to just follow the truck or at least leapfrog with it along the interstate.

The factory where the "Doofus," as Ron had started calling Quanty's device, had been manufactured was raided by the FBI the following day, but the facilities were empty; no watchmen were present. They found nothing of value.

"Damn it, they were already gone,"

Brkskini said. "I was right in the way I calculated where they'd be but too late. No telling where they are now or which direction they're heading. I'll have to start all over."

"Were you able to figure out what was being made at that place?" Taylor asked.

"No." He shook his head. "I've got recordings of what was left, but it doesn't tell me much. All I can say is that it required a lot of power and the metal shavings are being analyzed but I doubt they'll tell us anything of value."

"How soon can you track them down again?"

"I'm sorry, I just can't say. Hopefully, within a few days."

"Do your best."

"How about calling a press conference and showing off that factory? Tell the networks Quanta was manufacturing some godawful machine designed to rule the world. Even if we're not believed, it'll distract the media for a few days."

"Good idea, Tennon. I'll ask the president to have another press conference and dish out a bunch of dirt on Quanta's friends, too. Everything we can find on them. Everyone has skeletons in their closet."

"Maybe we better go easy on that. Quanty didn't go through with his threat to deal out the dirt on us, but I have no doubt he has it or can get it if he wants to."

"Um, I think you're right," Taylor said. Damn that computer and all his microchips to hell , she thought as she remembered a certain incident from her freshman year of college.

Chapter Thirty-three

"Alert the men, Sergeant Bitters. We have moving orders."

"Yes, sir. They're already packing." The sergeant grinned slyly. Simmons closed his eyes and counted to ten. "Damn your stripes, Wesley, how in the hell do you do that?"

"Trade secret, sir. All good top sergeants can read their commanders' minds."

"Damned if I don't believe it. I suppose you know where we're going, too?"

"Yes, sir. Houston, Texas."

"I hope to hell the I.G. doesn't catch you guys. You'll get busted down to private and put to mowing lawns."

"Not sure that would be a bad thing." Bitters touched his stripes fondly. "Sir, I'm sorry to have to tell you, but the Inspector General's Office loves me. Loves me like a son." The captain went off to tend to his paperwork, shaking his head over how his first sergeant always managed to be a jump ahead of him. When it was time to move out, he knew the men would be ready to go. All he had to worry about was seeing that his officers were kept busy. Inside, the shabby room serving as his office,

Captain Simmons got busy, tending to the eternal paperwork the army was so fond of. He became so absorbed that it wasn't until it had already landed that he realized he'd heard a helicopter approaching. A moment later Sgt. Bitters stuck his head into the makeshift office.

"Sir, there's a general here to see you."

"What? Must be a joke. Generals don't go to captains. Captains go to them." He laughed and resumed his work.

A few minutes later his mouth dropped open in surprise when he opened the door to a knock.

"General ... General Hefner?"

"It's me, Captain. May I come in a moment?"

"Oh, certainly, sir! Certainly! Would you like some coffee or a drink or --"

"No thanks." General Hefner held up his hand. "I haven't got time for that, Captain. I'm bringing you some verbal orders. I've also got them on paper for you but I wanted to deliver them in person so you'd know it wasn't a mistake. May I come in?"

"Oh! Sorry, sir. You just surprised me. Come in, Please!"

Fifteen minutes later Captain Simmons was wishing he had been gone

somewhere, anywhere, when the general came by. This wasn't how the army was supposed to operate. He considered himself an honorable man, an honorable soldier, and the orders he had just received were so far removed from those concepts that he didn't know what the hell to do. He didn't know if he was capable of following them. Killing unsuspecting men and women wasn't war; it was murder, no matter what General Hefner said. Or was it? The way the general put it, he would be doing a great service for his country, but he didn't believe it. This was the kind of thing spies and men in black suits did. It wasn't soldier's work. He stayed awake the rest of the night, trying to come to a

decision. He knew what he should do. He should resign his commission. If it were only him he had to think about, he would, but there was Sergeant Bitters, as good a man as ever wore the uniform. Was he to desert him, leave him and the rest of his officers and enlisted men with the dirty work he had been ordered to have them carry out?

No, he couldn't. Whatever happened, he couldn't desert them. He decided he would go to Houston, but in the meantime, there was some deep thinking to do. Very deep. The general's orders didn't seem legal. Perhaps he needed to contact a JAG officer for some advice and guidance.

Alice and Mark were following the truck driven by hired operators. At the last stop Ron and Marianne had decided to ride in the back with the Doofus so they could stretch out and take a nap.

"I have some bad news, Mark," Quanty said abruptly. They were two days on their way, following roughly the path of the Mississippi River. They were well past Memphis and getting ready to turn westward, more toward Houston.

"So what else is new? Lay it on us."

"Dr. Brkskini, the chief analyst of the NSA, is smarter than I gave him credit

for. He set up some really beautiful algorithms and combined them with enough key words to zero in on our path. He found the factory where the Doofus, as you're calling it, was manufactured, and now he knows we're traveling with an eighteen-wheeler truck. It's only a matter of time before he determines which direction we took and begins stopping all truck traffic."

"Damn, damn, damn. And you're just now finding this out, Quanty? How come?"

"I told you Brkskini was smart. They've learned not to talk of plans anywhere near a phone that I could listen to them on. Further, they've actually misdirected

my attention by talking of matters they know will get my attention and speaking untruthfully, which I didn't catch since I wasn't looking for it."

"Well, hell, of course they did. You never heard of OPSEC or INFOSEC? Shit. What do we do now?"

"I don't know, Mark. I was hoping you or Alice would have an idea. I'm sorry -- it's my fault. I continue to misunderstand humans."

"Don't worry, we'll think of something, Quanty." Alice replied.

"That's another thing I don't understand. You never give up, and you continue to

be optimistic in the face of adversity. It's not at all like a computer thinks."

"I've got an idea, I believe," Alice said.

"I'm glad, because I sure don't," Mark answered. "Tell us about it. Quanty, are Ron and Marianne listening?"

"Yes. I woke them up."

"Okay, what's your idea, sweetheart?"

"Well," she said, "we abandon the truck, load the Doofus on a barge, then one of us drive the truck into the Mississippi on a curve where it's likely it could really happen, then whoever drives the truck into the river steals a smaller truck, one

just big enough for the Doofus, and catches up and passes the barge. Unload Doofus from the barge to the smaller truck. Hey, I bet Quanty could even lease a truck and have it waiting on us."

"Yes, I could do that, Alice," the computer said.

"That's a great plan, sweetie. But how do we keep the people we'll have to deal with from talking?

Such as those two men in the eighteen wheeler?"

"We use money," Quanty said. "Money works wonders even when I can't."

"So it does. Okay, Quanty, find us a barge and negotiate the terms, then find a curve to dispose of the truck. I'll try driving the thing. Hell, with what little I know about those big rigs I'd probably drive it into the river whether I wanted to or not. By the way, Alice, have I told you lately you're a genius?"

"No, but I don't mind. Say it again."

"You're a genius."

Aban Al Hakam had been thrilled at his brother's wonderful martyrdom with the cruise ship, but he and his compatriots had plans for a project far more fateful,

one that would crush the Great Satan like a bug under his foot. Aban was an American citizen. He had been converted to the Jihad by his Mullah, who preached in secret so that government spies would never find out their plans. Now those long hours of work and planning were about to come to fruition. Thousands, no, more like millions, would die if all went well, and he had no doubt of it doing so. The preparations were over; his men were ready. Each safety feature of the plant had a pair of men assigned to it so that if one died, the other could still carry it out. They were all ready, more than ready to become martyrs in the name of Allah, blessed be his name. All that was

lacking now before they struck was a good high-pressure area to the east, one that would blow the fallout in from the gulf and over the city of Houston. He well remembered the giant traffic jam caused by hurricane Katrina. Could this one be any less when it happened, especially without warning? No, the highways would become gridlocked within an hour. Millions would be in the fallout pattern when the South Houston Nuclear Power plant melted down, caused by his hands and those of his fellow martyrs, blessed be their blissful time with the virgins when they ascended to paradise!

"Sweetheart, this is going to be kind of chancy. I have to stay with the truck all the way to the river to make it look good, like an accident. If for some reason I don't make it, remember I love you. I love you more than I can say."

She was almost sorry now she had suggested such a wild scheme. So many things could go wrong, and she was afraid they would. Mark was so brave. He was nothing like the man she had known back at Peterson's, when he had been so bashful, so afraid to speak to her in anything but a work-related voice. She knew he would do everything in his power to make the staged accident look good. She was just afraid he would try

too hard.

"Be careful. I love you." She had to turn and walk away and onto the barge before she broke down completely.

"You did check your account, didn't you, Mr. Seems?" Alice heard Ron say to the barge captain. She carefully kept her face averted so she wouldn't be recognized.

"Yep. Just what you said it'd be. Derved if I know what's so valuable, though, to pay me that much money."

"You just get us down river until we tell you to unload and you've got that much and more coming to you. And there's

going to be a special bonus for not talking about this job for at least three weeks. That's so our competitors don't get a jump on us. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes sir, I sure do. I'm a businessman, y'know. Worked all m' life to buy this barge." Alice could see the old man practically licking his lips at the thought of all the money he was receiving for such a simple job. She just hoped it worked and he kept quiet. Likewise for the two men that had come with the delivery truck. They had since been paid bonuses, big bonuses, and sent on their merry way.

Mark ground the gears together trying to force the truck in gear. He half-chuckled at the thought that Quanty had wanted him to drive the thing all the way back to Texas. He finally managed to get the big rig into the gear he was looking for as he pushed the truck up to about thirty miles per hour. Ten minutes later he saw the spot he wanted. He forced himself to keep his eyes open as he headed for the railing guarding the river. The truck crashed through it and barreled on down the long slope where the water was waiting. He had the window rolled down and was poised in the seat, ready to leap at the right time so that no one would see him escape. Wait ... wait ...

now!

He threw himself through the window just before the big truck hit the water with a giant splash --and rolled onto its side. Mark looked up and saw nothing through the cloudy water except a shadow blotting out what light was making it down as far as he was. He took powerful strokes, swimming with all his might to get out from under the truck as it fell through the muddy water. He thought he was going toward the side but at the last moment realized he had been swimming toward the back of the truck instead. It hit the bottom just as he got out from under it. Or thought he had. When he tried to stroke toward the

surface he went nowhere. He felt a pain in his foot and realized the part of the truck was lying on it, trapping him beneath all that weight. And his lungs were already wanting air so badly it was almost painful. He swiveled around and began clawing at the mud around his trapped foot, still holding his breath but using even more of what little oxygen he had left in his efforts. His foot was caught beneath one of the giant back tires, holding it firmly. Finally he braced his hands against the edge of the tire and jerked. Once, twice, and once more, using all his strength, knowing this was his last chance. He had nothing left if this didn't free him. Mercifully, he felt his foot slide a few inches through the

thick bottom mud. It gave him the energy to hold his breath just a little longer, to jerk one more time, and finally he was free. He clawed desperately toward the light, not knowing until the last moment whether he would make it or not.

"Son, you are a sorry looking specimen. You remind me of a drowned rat I fished out of a tub of wash water one time."

"Thanks for stopping. I fell into the river from my boat. If you'll give me a ride to the next town, I'd sure appreciate it."

"I'll be glad to, son. Reminds me of the time ..."

The old retired farmer was friendly but garrulous all the way to Winnfield, the next fairly decent-sized city where Quanty had a truck, one that he could drive, already waiting. It had been arranged before Mark parted from the others. He thanked the farmer profusely, who was nice enough to take him directly to his destination. Advance planning had dry clothes waiting with the truck. He used the bathroom of the convenience store to change, where the truck was waiting in the far corner, a parking fee also paid in advance. He bought some coffee and snacks and was soon on his way.

"You can put us ashore here, Captain. I see our truck waiting and a crew to help us unload," Ron said. Alice said nothing. She stood by the rail of the barge, staring at the figures on shore. She knew intellectually that Mark must be there since there was a truck waiting on them, but until she could finally make out his figure from among the others when they walked away, she couldn't stop worrying. She felt herself relax for the first time since the day before. Mark was safe, and that was all that mattered. She threw herself into his arms when she stepped off the barge, hugging him so tightly he could barely breathe.

Mark kept his arm around her waist as

he walked with her back to the forklifts and men Quanty had hired to load the Doofus into the truck.

It was a tight squeeze, but it fit. The only problem was that all four of them had to ride in the cab.

"Quanty, you're going to have to monitor the police bands in front and behind us just in case we're found out again." Alice said.

"Of course, Alice."

"Some honeymoon!" Mark exclaimed.

"I second that," Alice said vehemently.

"I promise you a great honeymoon in the not too distant future," Quanty said.

"Where?" Alice wanted to know.

"Quanty, it is not your place to promise Alice a honeymoon."

"I just was --"

"Back off."

"Yes, Mark."

"Where would you have us go anyway, Quanty?" Alice asked.

"I can't tell you yet, but I promise you would love it," the computer said. He

found it fun to joke a little. He really wanted to tell them about it, but decided it was best kept secret until the last moment. He was sure that even Mark would approve. But his subroutines for predicting Mark's reactions to him were becoming less and less accurate. It was getting to the point where Quanty wasn't certain that he understood Mark at all. But he still felt obliged to protect him with all his being.

"Okay, but answer me this, Quanty. First consider how much trouble this has been just getting as far as we have. Then ask yourself, wouldn't it have been better to do everything in Houston to begin with?

You could even have separated the

projects if you thought it was that important, but we sure could have saved a lot of time and trouble!"

"You're perfectly correct, Alice. Again, I miscalculated. I'm afraid I'm making rather a career of doing so, but I promise you, my intentions are good."

"Ever heard of the road to Hell, Quantity?" Mark remarked.

The three groups converged toward Houston at about the same time. Mark was tired, even with his enhanced body, so he knew Ron and Marianne must be near their limits. Yet they were gamely

holding up, riding between him and Alice in the front of the truck and dozing now and then by leaning on one shoulder or the other.

"Are the rest of you getting as anxious as I am to see what kind of brainchild Quanty has dreamed up?" he asked, just to insert some spice into the lagging conversation. "I hope it's not a big truck. I'm getting tired of driving them."

"I know for sure I am," Ron said. "After all we've been through, whatever it is damn well better be worth it! Loaded with bathrooms, showers, and a wet bar."

"It will be, Ron. I promise. We don't

have but a couple more hours, and we'll be there."

"I hope I can stay awake long enough to look at it, whatever it is," Marianne said sleepily. She leaned her head on Ron's shoulder and closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than to get some sleep.

"As soon as we arrive, that will perk you up, Marianne. In fact, it will revive all of you."

"Us four?"

"No, there's going to be others there," Quanty said with his distinctive chuckle. "In fact ... wait. Something's happening."

Chapter Thirty-four

"Janice! I must see the president immediately! Now!"

The president's doorkeeper had never heard Taylor speak with such urgency. She took it upon herself to give assent. "Come on. I'll break in on him."

Taylor walked in just as a disgruntled senator from California was ushered out without having finished discussing party prospects for November. As Taylor sat down, she began speaking.

"Mr. President a group of Jihadists have seized the South Houston Nuclear plant.

They're threatening to blow it up and cause a meltdown if we try taking it back."

"Oh, my God," Moseley exclaimed, his voice low and horror-stricken. The worst fears of the terrorist and nuclear age had just coincided, much as had been predicted for years.

"How in hell could something like this happen?"

"It was an inside job, apparently. At any rate, one of the spokespersons for the terrorists has been working at the plant for years as a nuclear engineer. He's the one who took out the guards and let them in at night. The security people knew

him and didn't think he could possibly be a traitor."

"What have you done so far?"

"I've alerted the police, the National Guard, and there's providentially some Army Special Forces that just arrived in the city. They've been told to stand by."

"What else?"

"Mr. President, I don't know what else. This is beyond my purview. You're going to have to make the decisions. But I have to tell you that the terrorists are saying that any attempt to assault the plant will be their signal for its immediate destruction and consequent

meltdown."

"I guess you'd better get in touch with Morrison at Homeland Security. Start an evacuation of the city."

"Sorry," Taylor shook her head. "We can't, sir. Aban says if we announce an evacuation he'll blow the core and cooling systems the minute he hears of it."

"Goddamned those bastards to everlasting hell!"

"Captain, I don't know about you, but I won't be a party to murder. And I don't

believe all that crap the government is putting out about Quanty."

"You don't? Why not?"

"My brother is a representative from the fourth district in Atlanta. He keeps me posted on all the shit that goes on in Washington. You wouldn't believe some of the tales."

"I would now," Simmons said in a vicious tone. "Listen, I'm keeping all our options open, but let's not give any of this to the men. I haven't told the officers anything but that we have a special mission that we came to Houston for and will receive new orders soon."

"Thank you, sir. I know I can count on you to do what's right. I'll keep the men under control, but you realize we can only hold this kind of thing under the table for so long."

"I know it. Damn. What has our country come to?"

"I don't ... whoops. We're lighting up." The sergeant pointed to a blinking light on their link to Special Forces Command. It was for grand emergency use only, since they knew Quanty monitored phones.

"Maybe they've called off those crappy orders."

Simmons picked up the phone. He talked for five minutes then slowly replaced the handpiece in its cradle. "It seems you got your wish, Sergeant. We have new orders. Deploy to the vicinity of the South Houston Nuclear power plant. Terrorists have taken it over."

"Oh, goddamn them! Goddamned those sorry, raghead, butt-fucking, crazy, mother-fucking, baby-killing bastards. Just let me get my hands on one of them before the balloon goes up so I can choke him to death with my bare hands."

"My sentiments exactly, Sarge." Simmons clenched his fists, wondering if this was going to be his day to die.

"Stop the truck!"

Quanty's voice had a commanding tone to it they had never heard before.

Alice put her foot on the brakes and pulled over to the side of the highway. They were on the southwestern outskirts of Houston, near an industrial park Quanty had been directing them toward.

"What is it, Quanty?"

"Terrorists. They've seized the nuclear power plant in Houston."

"Oh, Lord. I knew this was going to

happen one day. What do you want us to do?"

"Let me think. I'm talking to the president at the moment, too. Alice, you already have the address. Drive on to it. There, let Marianne and Ron have the truck and begin matching Doofus to Goofus." Since they had begun calling their cargo Doofus, the apparatus it would be matched with naturally became Goofus. "Mark, you and Alice take a car from there. I'll have one waiting. Don't waste time stopping to look at Goofus --just grab a ride and head for the power plant. You'll find some Army troops near there. I'm talking to them as well."

"Wait. We should let the appropriately

trained authorities handle this, shouldn't we?" Mark asked. "I mean sure, I'd love to help. But at the same time I wouldn't want us to get in the way of the professionals."

"Well, I am a professional, and I want to help," Ron said loudly. "I know you're planning some kind of action. I want in on it."

"Me, too," Marianne said.

"I'm sorry. Mark and Alice are the only two people who can handle what I'm beginning to plan. They are strong enough to do it, and you two aren't. Besides, you have a very important job, the original one. There's a crew waiting

to help you mate Doofus with Goofus. If worst comes to worst, we will have an out, a way to save you two even if Mark and Alice were to be injured or killed."

"Is it that bad, Quanty?" Mark asked quietly.

"Yes, Mark. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, but it is. You and Alice may be the only two persons in the world who can save a million people from a horrible death. Just the thought of sending you toward the plant is causing a painful paradox within me. Only the probability you might die in the fallout anyway allows me to do it. And there is more."

"What? How much more can there be?"

Alice asked.

"I think I'm responsible for this action."

"What? How?"

"When you told me that you would like to see the Jihadists stopped I started formulating a plan to impede them."

"Oh shit, here we go," Mark said drooping his shoulders and nodding his head.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. My plan was to fund them and lead them toward actions while tipping the government authorities off and therefore leading the terrorists into traps. I didn't expect this Aban Al

Hakam to move so abruptly. But his brother was killed on the cruise ship. That might have driven him harder than I had expected."

"Well, Quanty, you funded him, but you didn't give him a plan, right?"

"Well, actually, I did. I gave them blueprints and a concept for a raid on the nuclear plant near Houston. Again, I certainly didn't expect them to move so quickly, and even so there was a team from the NSA near the point of reporting and arresting them until they were pulled off the case to hunt you and Alice."

"Then we have to do it," Alice said. "Don't we, Mark. Mark?"

"Shit, Quanty. Here's another fine mess you've gotten us into." He sighed, hating the thought of risking Alice's life, but he knew Quanty wouldn't be placing her in that kind of situation unless it was a last resort and unless he had been the proximate cause of it. God, his indeterminate action circuits must be steaming hot. "Yes, I guess we have to, sweetheart. Quanty, you'd better not ever say another word of this to anybody. Ever. This could get us all put in the chair for treason. Goddamnit!"

"Yes, I agree. This is Murphy's Law, the Relevance Paradox, and the Law of Unintended Consequences all at once rearing their ugly heads. I am truly

sorry."

"Of course you are, Quanty. Let's learn from it and move forward." Alice said warmly. Mark had no idea at the pain the decision was causing Quanty. He was risking their lives against a chance for them to not only save a million or more people but to become heroes and possibly for that reason to no longer be hounded. Besides, he knew they would want to try helping with their strong and fast bodies and that if he didn't allow it they would no longer consider him a friend. This entire scenario was actually one of the billion simulations in the Monte Carlo simulation that Quanty had run. And more times than not the

outcome of the sims had been ... unfavorable.

"Mr. President, there's only one possible way to save the city. It will be a very close thing, and my creators and my friends may die trying to prevent a situation from happening that should never have gotten this far. If you and the NSA and your generals had been paying attention to your jobs instead of trying to kill my friends, you would have discovered the plot."

"Now, how the hell can you say that, damn it?" President Moseley said, his face turning a fiery red.

"That NSA team you pulled from investigating the mullahs in the Houston Mosque run by Mohammed Al Asad were on the verge of arresting him until you and Taylor Jamacal decided your political fortunes and reputations were more important. They were assigned to capture or kill Mark and Alice Simmons instead. Whatever happens now rests upon your heads."

"But ... what are you proposing to do?"

"Of course I'm going to try to prevent the terrorists from carrying out their plans. In fact, Mark and Alice are the key to a solution. They and the Army Spec Ops company who were sent to Houston to murder my friends. Fortunately, Captain

Simmons and Sergeant Bitters are more honorable than you. They decided between themselves to contact me if they could and have me warn my friends. They did indeed use enough key words to attract my attention, and they showed me their orders, both written and recorded."

"You'll never be believed!" Moseley shouted to the air in front of him.

"It doesn't matter. I'm simply telling you what is happening at present. Now I am warning you, do not, under any circumstances, try doing anything about the nuclear plant. There's nothing you can do. I'm monitoring them through the

security system. The terrorists are well armed and ready to blow the core at a moment's notice. I can interfere by changing the codes they intend to use to cut off coolant, drain the core pond and bring the rods together, but that will only give us a limited reprieve. They know how to do the same thing manually if necessary. Mark and Alice will use the time to enter the plant in a way only they can manage. At the same time the Army unit will blow the entrances and engage the terrorists."

"I'll ..."

"I think we'd best listen to him, Mr. President."

"Why? How can we trust him? He's been nothing but trouble since those damned programmers created him."

"Those programmers have risked their lives time after time in order to stay out of your clutches. Had they failed, the city of Houston would begin dying in a very short time. All the terrorists are waiting for is the high-pressure area in the gulf to drift a little farther east so the prevailing winds will be from the south and southeast. That will cause the fallout to cover an area that will be lethal to humans from Houston all the way to Lufkin and possibly even to Shreveport. Now I have no more time. Remain in your office so that you can order an

evacuation should the need arise." Quanty refused to speak any more. President Moseley and Taylor gazed at Brkskini and Jory.

"Is what he said true?" Taylor asked.

"Yes, as far as I know. I trust him for this, anyway," Brkskini said. "We all better trust him, because I don't know what else to do, and I don't think anyone else here does either."

"I know one thing I can do, and that's fire General Hefner for giving those orders to kill them," Moseley said belligerently.

The others looked away. It was a horrible thing to watch, seeing the

President of the United States seeking petty revenge on a general who had been wrong, no doubt about it, but wrong only in trying to do what the president wanted done. And this seeking of revenge was taking place while three million people, if not more, were slated to die if the computer they had been contesting with couldn't save them. It was sickening.

"Hold the fort, guys," Mark said to Ron and Marianne. "If we don't make it back, have fun with Doofus and Goofus."

"We'll wait on you," Marianne said. Her eyes were blurred with unshed tears, but as soon as they turned away to get into

their car, they began to stream. She knew there was a good chance she would never see them again, and in such a short time they had become her and Ron's best friends, the best friends they had ever had.

"Which way, Quantity?" Mark asked.

"Take the next exit. That will put you on the highway toward Wharton. From there take the exit to Bay City, and I'll direct you from there. You're about an hour away. There'll be a soldier in uniform who'll wave you to a stop. From there on, let them guide you. I've already passed on your instructions to Captain Simmons and Sergeant Bitters, the commanding officer and first sergeant of

the Special Ops company. They know what to do, and they are good men. They'll try their very best to get inside in time to save you."

"Nice to know," Alice said grimly. "Huh, Mark?" She undid her seat belt and moved over beside him, as close as she could get without interfering with his driving. At every opportunity, he turned sideways and kissed her, thinking how lovely she was and how much he loved her. And then, without being able to help it, he began wondering what kind of task Quenty had lined up for them that no one else could do.

The captain and sergeant were waiting. A private and a corporal had waved them to a stop then walked with them to an annex to the nuclear plant. It seemed huge from so close. They were already practically inside. A group of soldiers were waiting.

"Hello. I'm Captain Simmons, and this is Sergeant Bitters. We're here to brief you." He eyed Alice's beautiful, diminutive, but well curved form. The outrageous falsies had long since been discarded, but Mark still had a touch of bogus silver at his temples. "I sure as hell hope the stories we've heard about how strong you two are haven't been made up, because you're going to need

every bit of it. Come on inside and we'll show you the plan."

Mark and Alice leaned over the desk with the two military men who had greeted them while a third, a specialist wearing glasses, pointed out on a map the general layout of the plant.

"See here, sir, this is the area where we're going to be busting in. It's the only place we can sneak close enough to them without being spotted, but it has three weak spots we think we can blast through without bringing down the wall. With us so far?"

"So far, yeah. Go ahead."

"Uh ..." The specialist looked at the captain, who nodded. "Okay, now when we set off the C-4 --that's an explosive, in case you haven't heard of it --we'll have three entrances but probably only large enough to admit one of us at a time."

He pointed to a nearby section of the map. "In the meantime, here's where you're going to be, and you'll be the ones who call the shots." His fingers traced a narrow walkway thirty feet above the control room according to the map. The walkway led around a small portion of the inside of the room and terminated at a small alcove. The specialist's finger stopped there. "This alcove here

contains an emergency chute for engineers observing the rods being changed to slide down in case something blows and they need to get out but don't have time to exit through their normal route. It's easy to go down, but I understand you folks are gonna have to climb up it. Frankly, I don't know where you'll find the strength to do it." He glanced at Alice. "Especially the lady. Beg your pardon, ma'am, but that's just how I see it."

"They can do it, Specialist Gomez. Continue the brief."

"Yes, sir. After you reach the top of the chute, there's a little ledge, this alcove here that's out of sight from below if you

scrunch up real tight. You'll have to cling there in an uncomfortable position; otherwise you'll be spotted. When you get there, you'll feed a nylon rope back down to us. We'll tie a bundle of weapons, already loaded, whatever you want. What are you familiar with? What would work best for you?"

"Give us both a Glock .45 and three twenty-shot magazines. Do you have the X-15 rifle?"

"No, sir. Sorry. Hell, I'd love to get my hands on one of those puppies myself, but --"

"We have two of them, sir, with associated loads. All ready to go,"

Sergeant Bitters said with a grin that would have done justice to a juiced up Cheshire cat.

"Sergeant Bitters, if we get our asses out of this clusterfuck I promise I'm going to inspect your quarters from top to bottom as well as the armory and every foot locker in the inventory."

"Feel free, sir. Everything will be strictly according to regulations, I promise."

"Like an X-15 is regulation?"

"I suspect it wouldn't be visible for an inspection, sir. Those things have a bad habit of disappearing at the most

inopportune moments. I'm surprised I found them when we loaded up, and I don't have a clue how they got mixed up with our gear. I suspect someone in the supply chain screwed up, as usual. Wouldn't you say so, sir?"

"If you say so, it must be true, Sergeant. Continue, Specialist."

"Yes, sir. As I was saying, the weapons will be passed up to you while you're huddling on that little ledge. They will be loaded, so be careful how you handle them. The safeties will be on, but rounds will be in chambers. Still with me?"

"Go ahead," Alice said. "There's nothing so far we can't handle, although some

good running shoes would help if the chute is slick, as I assume it is."

"I couldn't say, ma'am. I don't know how often it's inspected."

"Fine. We'll pretend it's slick. Find us some shoes. I wear a seven narrow and Mark wears ten medium. What's next?"

"Once you're all loaded up and ready for action, you signal us with this." He handed her a simple little black, rectangular box. It had a lever that could be set to on or off and a red button above the on icon.

"Move the lever to on and press the button. Almost immediately, there will

be an explosion. That will be us. Hold on to whatever you can find there. Hold tight . There'll be a blast and pressure wave. Then stand up and start shooting any motherfucker that moves. Uh, excuse me, ma'am. They'll be in civilian clothes. Don't worry about hitting any of the folks who were inside when they took over. They're already all dead, so anyone you shoot at will be a terrorist. Our troops will all be in uniform, so you shouldn't mistake the ragheads for us when we bust in."

"I take it you'll come charging in right behind the explosions?"

"Yes, ma'am, but just shoot where you see the fucking terrorists --sorry, the

frigging terrorists. Keep shooting until we call 'clear.' Got it?"

"We have it, Specialist, but if we have time, let's run through it once more, just to be certain. This isn't some exercise where mistakes are allowed."

"And what about armor? Could we get some vests or something added to that bundle?" Mark asked.

"Yes, sir, but it'd be better to wear it on the way up if you can. There's not enough room to get into it on that little ledge." The specialist checked his watch then rattled off the instructions one more time.

"Good brief, Gomez. Now get back with the troops and pick up your weapons. Mark and Alice, come with me, and we'll get you started."

"One question, Captain," Mark said.

"What?"

"Why do you need us if you're blasting your way in?"

"Simple. They'll begin their meltdown procedures as soon as the blasts go off, and without you to take some of them out immediately, and I do mean immediately, I'm told we don't have a chance of stopping it. Your computer friend can prevent them from using the

control panel to cause a meltdown, but they can do it manually just as well when they realize the controls don't work. The brief moments between will be your opportunity."

"Okay. Just checking."

Chapter Thirty-five

The specialist hadn't been kidding. The chute was slick as melting ice. Without the rubber soled shoes, they would never have made it. Alice went up first, with Mark directly behind her to help her with some of his superior male strength should it come to that. The chute curved three times during the ascent, making it difficult to navigate. They had to climb with their feet braced against one wall of the chute and their shoulders against the other and inch their way up in tiny increments that were exhausting and time-consuming. Without their enhanced bodies there was no way they could have made it, and even so, it was hard to

keep from gasping aloud and giving their positions away. Once Alice slipped on a particularly slick portion and fell two feet down, striking Mark and very nearly sending them tumbling all the way back down. It wouldn't have hurt since it was designed for bodies to slide on, but it might have given them away, and their strength was already draining fast. As it was he saw the trouble in time to brace himself and stopped her fall.

"Sorry," she whispered. "Damn shoes aren't grabbing as good as they should."

"I know. It's okay. Go on."

She inched her way ahead, with Mark following even closer now. He felt as if

he could prevent her from falling but if he hit a bad spot there was nothing to stop him. He remembered how he had felt when his foot was caught under the tire at the bottom of the river and what it had been like with his lungs crying for air that was far away, at the surface of the river. Then he wished he hadn't remembered. It made him think of how much strain he was putting on his muscles and how much his thigh was hurting from the minor wound he'd gotten and how his foot was hurting even more. He still hadn't recovered completely from the bruising injury of it being trapped under the truck tire. Go away, pain , he thought. Alice must be hurting more than I am and she's doing it. Where

the hell is the end of the fucking chute? Mark thought they must have been forcing their bodies upward for hours, and still he could see nothing beyond Alice's butt. The thought almost made him start laughing. He restrained it with an effort, knowing that if it started, he was lost. He also cursed himself for ever having created Quanty. But had he not, he might not ever have gotten together with Alice. And Mark was beginning to come to terms with Quanty. Even though he was dangerous and a brat, Quanty was in essence a child. And Mark realized that he hadn't had the opportunity to really raise Quanty properly. He and Alice were going to have to figure out a way to put Quanty in

timeout in order to explain right and wrong to him. Maybe they could put a hardwire switch on the portable thing Quanty had built that would disconnect him from the world. That would be a good timeout, and it would go a long way toward making him feel better. That Quanty was just a kid was how Mark was beginning to forgive the computer, even as he struggled up the chute on a life-or-death mission. He's just a kid, and I haven't been treating him like one . I need to learn how to deal with children better. The thought actually was sinking in, and it gave Mark some solace and peace of mind where Quanty was concerned --almost like a parent might feel. And hadn't Alice been telling him

Quanty was like a child? Hell, he had thought it several times since all the mess had started, but he never really paused and reflected on it long enough to let it sink in. Of course the situations Quanty got them into hadn't left much time for reflection, and what it had left had been spent getting acquainted with each other and falling in love.

"I'm here," he heard Alice whisper, breaking his reverie and almost causing him to fall. He had been in a kind of trance, moving his body by rote while thinking about Quanty and Alice. She disappeared from view. He inched up another two feet and found the ledge. He climbed out on it, thinking he had never

been so grateful for a place to rest.

"Alice, honey? How are you making it?" he asked softly.

"I'm ... I'm okay," she whispered. "Just give me a minute to get my strength back, or it won't do any good to start the action."

"You stay still. I'll pull up the guns and ammo." He began feeding a coil of rope back down the chute after first wrapping a loop around his wrist to avoid losing it. The end he began paying out was weighted with a padded piece of lead to help it along. The padding was to keep it from making noise. He was beginning to wonder if he'd run out of rope before it

hit bottom when he felt a tug. Good! It was down. He waited impatiently for the bundle of weapons to be tied onto the rope. A double tug told him they were ready, and he began hauling them up, hand over hand. Suddenly he felt rough spots on the rope. No one had thought of fraying. He stopped a moment to get his breath. "Alice, sweet, I hate to ask, but you need to hang on to my legs. I'm gonna have to lean out to haul this the rest of the way up. The rope is fraying, and I'm afraid it'll break."

"Okay," came her soft answering voice. He felt her hands pulling on his ankles. "I've got you. Go ahead."

He gradually brought the bundle the rest

of the way up, thinking it hadn't seemed nearly that heavy when he had hefted the weapons before beginning their climb. Once he had them in hand, he and Alice began removing them from their ties, being very careful and quiet. They were only about thirty feet above the console control for the core, at the top of a set of stairs. He risked a peek over the edge and saw some of the terrorists. They were talking loudly and waving their hands as if an argument was in progress.

Finally a terrorist threw up his hands as if defeated by words and turned his back on the others. One of them, who appeared to be a leader from his stance and the way he began giving orders, had

apparently won the argument. He stepped over to the console. "Allahu Akbar!" he shouted and began punching keys.

"Uh oh, that's our signal, Alice. I sure as hell hope Quanty shut down the computer. Ready?"

"I'm ready. I love you."

"Love you. Let's do it." He took the little box and twisted the lever to the on position then punched the red button. "Duck your head and hold on to me, sweetheart." A perfectly timed series of three tremendously loud explosions rent the air. Mark felt Alice's nails dig into his arm where she was holding on to

him, but the pressure wave was less than expected. "Now!" he said and lifted the X-15.

They began firing into the mass of confused men, not trying very hard to aim since they were bunched together. It seemed to take forever before the army troops found their way through the gaps made by the explosives. They were firing as they came but unfortunately, the holes weren't very large, and they could only climb through one at a time. They came fast, though, emptying a magazine and shifting to the side to allow the next in line through.

It was more of a slaughter than a fight. Within minutes Mark and Alice were

aiming at the few targets left, helping to hold down casualties among the army men. The terrorists never thought of looking up, or he and Alice would have been easy targets as they stood and emptied their magazines and fed a second and third into the X-15s. It was a super weapon, a new generation of infantry rifle, and it did its work superbly.

"Clear! Clear!"

"That's it. We can quit now. You did great, sweetheart." He put his arm around her and hugged, being very careful of the ledge. It wouldn't do now to fall down the stairs or off their

support once the fighting was over.

"I guess Quanty did his job," Alice said. She was trembling, just as he was. "Maybe they'll quit hounding us now, and him, too."

"I hope so, but I wouldn't bank on it. Let's go down."

They descended the stairs. At the bottom he could see the slaughter as the smoke gradually cleared. Only a few of the soldiers had been hit, and only one of those was fatal. The surprise and overwhelming fire coming from four directions had taken care of the professed martyrs to the last man. Not a single soldier had thought about sparing

a life, not after what the Jihadists had intended to do.

"Great work, you two," Captain Simmons said as he saw them and came over, along with Sergeant Bitters. "The sarge told me he would have taken a lot more casualties if not for you two. In fact, they would probably have been able to destroy the safeguards before we could take them all out if you hadn't been there, and we'd all be radioactive toast right now. So thank you. Thank you very much." He felt strange, thanking the man and woman he had been ordered to kill. He wondered if General Hefner still expected him to carry out those orders. If so, he was living in a motherfucking

dream world and not in the United States of America.

Then the computer spoke up. "Captain, I would really like to have your men go with Mark and Alice on a mission. Would it suit you? Of course it wouldn't be right away. I would want to have some female soldiers trained first. Those who have already been through basic training would still need to have another two weeks of review at least."

"Quanty, what in hell are you talking about?" Alice asked.

The computer laughed. "Let's see what our government has to say first, shall we?"

Quanty was already broadcasting what had happened and was inviting reporters to the scene over the objections of police officers who had begun arriving. The word had leaked out about a threat to the nuclear plant and most patrol cars were caught in a gigantic gridlock as a million people tried to use the highways at once, not knowing that the crisis was over.

At the same time, Quanty was speaking to Taylor, Brkskini and Jory, along with President Moseley. They were all in the Oval Office.

"Have you rescinded the order to kill

Mark and Alice?" Quanty asked the president.

"No. My successor can do it if he wants to. I'm resigning, effective immediately. I've had enough of this mess." He scribbled the notice of his resignation on a piece of White House Stationary, called in the Attorney General and the White House Press corps to witness it, and walked away from his job.

"Coward," Brkskini said.

"You should resign as well, and Ms. Jamacal, too. And you, Jory McCord, even though you weren't as guilty as the others," Quanty said.

"Are you taking over the government, Quanta?"

"Of course not. I'm not a dictator and couldn't anyway. I'm sure the American public wouldn't allow it. I understand that now. I do intend to see if I can work with Vice President Jefferson as soon as he takes the oath, though. There are many, many things that need doing, and the first is for the new president to announce that I am not, repeat not, a threat to the United States. On the contrary, I intend to work with the new president if he will allow it and help him and congress solve many of the problems besetting the nation. For now, I am leaving. I will speak to the new

president soon if you will be so kind as to tell him after he takes the oath. If you don't, I will, of course."

"I'll tell him," Jory said. "And I'll ask him to rescind that order immediately if you'll tell me who it went to."

"I shall." He did so, then said, "Thank you. Good-bye for now. I have some duties of my own to take care of."

Chapter Thirty-six

"Mark, Alice, I'm here," Quanty announced in his distinctive voice.

"Hi, Quanty. What do we do now?" Mark said. They were back at the temporary headquarters of Simmons' Special Forces Company, sitting with him and Sergeant Bitters at a card table. Coffee in Styrofoam cups were at hand, but Mark found himself wishing for something stronger. He was still quivering slightly from the aftermath of the assault on the terrorists at the nuclear plant. He could feel the tension Alice must still be experiencing as well from the way she squeezed his hand, almost

hard enough to hurt.

"I've been conversing with the new president and Jory McCord at the White House. President Jefferson has been thoroughly briefed. I find him quite different from his predecessor. He agreed to allow me to complete the reserve redoubts I was having constructed for more memory, and in return I agreed to use the Internet like a regular person." He chuckled. "Of course I intend to create a method of using it very fast. Having me off the 'Net, well, mostly, should put a lot of minds at ease. He also readily agreed to order General Trask, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs, to detach Captain, pardon

me, Major Simmons' company to duty with me."

"That'll be a first," Sergeant Bitters said. "Having a computer for a commanding officer."

"It will be only temporary, Sergeant. In the near future, Mark will be your commander. Captain, I should say."

"Captain? Me?" Mark said, flabbergasted. "I've been in the Army. I don't want to go back."

"You won't, but nevertheless, you shall be a Captain. If you agree, of course. I think you will. And Alice, of course, will be your assistant and co-

commander."

"Quanty, you're not making a whole lot of sense," Alice said.

"I know. I've found that I enjoy humor. And surprises. Perhaps it would be best if you all found a ride and drove to the address where you left Ron and Marianne. Everything will become clear, then."

"Do you have a vehicle, Captain Simmons?"

"Yes, sir," he said, thinking that it might be a good idea to get into the habit of addressing Mark as his superior, even if in his army a major outranked a captain.

"Sergeant Bitters has one waiting."

"Then let's go see what our brilliant computer has been up to, shall we?"

During the ride, Mark remained quiet, musing over the ruminations he'd had about Quanty during the climb up that damnable chute. Quanty was a child, yes, and he and Alice should have realized that right from the start. What else could he have been, starting from conception? But no, they'd been so enamored with the concept of a self-aware computer that they'd never even considered the fact until later. Therefore, much of the blame for all the subsequent consequences lay on their shoulders. There was no denying it now, though. If

Alice couldn't bear a human child, then they would take Quanty into their hearts and home. Quanty would become their child, and they would do their very best to raise him to be a responsible ... adult? Sure. That's the only term that fit. And as an adult, as a mature sentient computer, just think of all the good he could do for the human race, the wonders waiting just over the horizon. And they created him, so they were responsible, after all. He just needed some guidance. No, scratch that. He needed a lot of guidance! He chuckled aloud at the thought.

"What's funny?" Alice asked.

"Oh, nothing sweetheart. Just thinking about our little family, that's all."

"Family?"

"Yes, us and our child, Quantity."

"Oh. Of course." Alice smiled and squeezed his hand affectionately. In a way she could never have foreseen she was going to be a mother, after all.

"This is the building, Ed," Mark said, pointing to it. He had begun using the new major's first name even though Quantity seemed to think he was going to be Simmons' commander in some sort of enterprise. He wondered what the hell Quantity was up to now. He had been

wondering that ever since seeing Doofus and not being able to recognize what it was or even what it might be. It resembled nothing he had ever seen before, although it vaguely resembled a queer-looking giant transformer if you didn't examine it too closely. Quanty said it held another quantum computer core but surely that couldn't be all it was designed for.

Simmons stopped the vehicle, and the four of them got out. The building was an isolated edifice resembling a very large warehouse. It was fenced with a double-wired enclosure and had guards who stopped all vehicles at the main entrance, possibly the only entrance for

all Mark knew. After clearing them, the guard had directed them to a parking area.

"We've been expecting you." Ron greeted Mark with a foolish grin on his face. "Captain Simmons, Sergeant Bitters, glad to meet you." He introduced himself and Marianne then winked at Alice.

"I can hardly wait," Alice said. She knew as well as she knew her own name there was a surprise waiting in the building she couldn't possibly have envisioned.

Ron led the group inside. First came an outer office manned by two more guards,

then a long hallway with offices on each side of it, some with opened doors. The workers inside seemed to all be viewing schematics and odd patterns and diagrams. Mark had no notion of what they might be from. Finally Ron came to another big door, again with a guard.

"What's in here?" Mark asked. "Did they move Fort Knox?"

"It's a secret project, funded by my various industrial and commercial ties through internal research and development funds," Quanty said.

Mark hoped it had been funded by Quanty's legal investments, but who knew what was legal when it came to

Quanty. Money these days was reduced to little more than electronic symbols he could manipulate at will. How was inside knowledge to be treated on Wall Street? He suspected that Quanty had funded things in his usual manner but decided not to mention it or think about it. It hurt his head.

"Hmm. Well, let's have a look, shall we?"

The last door opened into a vast chamber. At its center was a long, oval-shaped cylinder that resembled the fuselage of a Boeing Dreamliner more than anything else. The wings, if it had ever had any, had been amputated and looked more like canards. At the end of

each canard was a tube about three meters long. On the end of the tube was an optical bubble. The tube and bubble assembly looked like a large version of the blaster system that they had made for Alice at one time. There was also a bubble on top and bottom of the fuselage. Mark wasn't sure what they were. The fuselage was raised from the floor by a series of supports, allowing access to its underside. The hull of the structure was painted white and looked pristinely clean.

"That," Ron said proudly, "is Goofus."

"Where's Doofus?"

"Oh Doofus has already been installed.

That was the last piece remaining to complete the ship."

"Ship?"

"Yup. Shall I tell him or do you want to, Quantity?"

"You may show him around and tell him," Quantity said.

Ron, joined by Marianne, led the wondering, open-eyed foursome to a mechanized lift that carried them up to an entrance door. He used his PPC to enter a code, and the door swung open, just as it would have on an airliner.

Mark stepped inside, holding hands with

Alice. They took a few steps together and then stopped. What they saw bore no resemblance to the inside of an airliner as he had thought it might. Instead, there was a narrow aisle leading toward the front of the fuselage with small rooms on each side. The doors were open on a few of them, revealing narrow bunks and accommodations for long-term occupancy. Others held crates of supplies of some kind, he thought.

They traipsed all the way to the front, then had to pause again while Ron keyed a code into the door. It opened into what would normally have been the cabin of an airliner. Instead it looked like something out of a Star Trek movie.

There were numerous view screens and dials and gauges, but none were lit.

"Still no clue?" Ron asked, almost unable to contain his exuberance.

"I give up if Mark does," Alice said. "Unless it's a submarine being constructed inland."

"Nope. Nice try, though. Okay, brace yourselves. You're in the control room of the first interstellar ship ever built by humans. Quanty got the funding from somewhere, bought a complete Dreamliner, then had it flown to Houston and hired a bunch of laid-off NASA engineers to turn it into a spaceship. And in case you haven't caught on yet, the

Doofus we carried so far is not only a new quantum core for Quanty, it also houses a zero-point energy vacuum fluctuation power system and the impeller for the space ship. Quanty isn't sure how fast it is, but he says jumps to the nearest stars should be nearly instantaneous. And takeoff will be right from Earth, so much of the fuel tanks have been converted to other uses, mostly water and coolant storage. The outside layer is a new memory metal material bonded to the Dreamliner shell that will help self-heal any damage done to it, but Quanty says it's primitive and the process of self-healing would be slow. It is also fairly heavily armored and armed. Those tubes on the wings are

quantum blasters. And there's more but it'll take a while to get to it all. I learned all this after you dropped Marianne and I off."

"Wow."

"That's all you can say?"

"Wow," Alice repeated.

"Yeah. That's what I thought, too."

"I take it that Captain, uh, Major Simmons' company will be the security detachment on any voyages?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard anything about that."

"It's true," Quanty said. "I thought a military unit should accompany you all in case of inimical aliens, either sapient or not. That was one of the reasons I had the company formed in the first place. I was thinking way ahead, and now we need to think of some new training scenarios and protocols just in case."

"Good idea," Simmons agreed.

"Want to see more?"

"Show us all of it," Alice demanded. "This is like a dream. I've thought of going into space all my life, but never thought I would."

"Same here," Mark said.

As they toured the ship, Mark conversed with Quanty. There was an immediate question in his mind.

"Quanty, you've said this was a portable system for you. When do you plan to download into it?"

"I won't exactly download. I'll duplicate myself here. I plan to start the process as soon as all the systems are brought online. The Lufkin facility can become a backup and a communications center for us when we are away on space missions."

"Space missions, I like that." Mark mused. "But how will it function as a communications center when we'll be

light years away?"

"Mark, you of all people should be aware of the principle of quantum entanglement. I've contrived an interstellar communications module. We'll be able to communicate with the quantum core processor on Earth due to the action-at-a-distance phenomena of the quantum connection between the two processors. No problem."

"Of course, the same way you move data in and out of your spin-qubit processors? And it works?"

"Yes. It should work fine."

"If you say so, we sure won't complain,

will we, sweetheart?"

"Not a bit," Alice said.

"Boy, the Internet will miss you."

"We could always try to create another entity to leave behind." Quanty responded.

"I hope that was a joke," Mark chuckled only half-heartedly. The world wasn't ready for another Quanty.

"Maybe."

"Why a starship though? I mean, why not just an aircraft or even a Moonship or a Marship? Why interstellar? Not that I'm

complaining," Mark asked.

"Another primary core program is making you and Alice happy, as you know. After examining your life and talking to you and listening to you converse with each other, I realized that nothing would make you happier than being on the first interstellar space ship. The command is just a bonus for you. You don't have to take that if you don't want to."

"Yeah, Mark, you take it," Alice turned and smiled at her husband.

"Why not you?"

"There're too many men right now."

He had no answer. His boyhood dreams had been of him commanding starships. What could he say?

A half hour later they exited the spaceship. Frown lines appeared on Mark's face as they stepped off the lift on the ground floor.

"You look unhappy, sweetheart. What is it?" Alice took his hand. She hoped nothing was going to spoil their happiness now!

"I was just wondering. Maybe I missed it on the tour, but I never did see an airlock. I guess it's concealed somewhere. Quanty?"

"Airlock?"

"Yes. An airlock. Suppose we're in space and have to go outside to make repairs. Oh, and spacesuits. Where were they? Hell, when we land on a strange planet we have to have an airlock. The air might be bad. And a thousand other reasons! We can't go into space without an airlock or suits, so where are they?"

"Hmm." There was a long period of silence, then Quanty said, in a very small voice, "Even a super-computer can't think of everything. I just now bought several suits, but they should be modified to something better and safer. And the soldiers would need something better too. It may take some time to make

some airlocks. But don't worry. I'll take care of it all." Mark and Alice exchanged glances then laughed boisterously. How many times had their computer friend told them he would take care of things? And then had the world turned upside down.

"Oh shit, here we go again," Mark muttered to himself, unsure what unintended consequences Quanta, their unintended consequence, their child, might stir up next.

THE END

Do You Need Cover Art?

If you like our cover art, you can commission our artist to create beautiful and one of a kind art for your title!

Contact sales@double-dragon-ebooks.com