

DIADEM

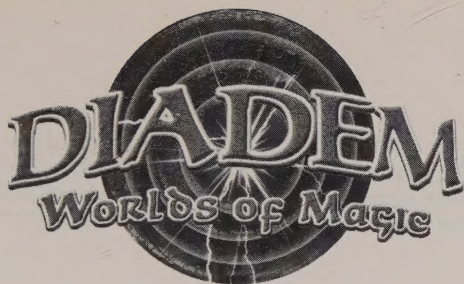
Worlds of Magic

BOOK OF
REALITY
JOHN PEEL



John Peel is the author of numerous best-selling novels for young adults, including installments in *Star Trek*, *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* and *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?* series. He is also the author of many acclaimed novels of science fiction, horror, and suspense.

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BOOK OF REALITY

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PROLOGUE: ONE YEAR AGO

“I can’t explain it,” Section Supervisor Nine reported, “but a young man is missing.” He stood before the blank wall, his head bowed in respect.

“Missing?” The voice was soft and gentle, neither male nor female, but with a hint of the underlying strength. It came from nowhere in the room and everywhere, as if the owner *was* the room. “This is *my* world. People do not simply vanish.”

The Supervisor swallowed nervously. "This one did precisely that, I'm afraid."

"You have every reason to be afraid," the voice informed him, the hidden steel becoming stronger. "If this is a mistake, you will be punished."

Paling even further, the Supervisor shook his head quickly. "No, sir, no mistake, I assure you. The subject *did* simply vanish. It was caught on surveillance."

"Indeed?" The voice was now almost purring. "This sounds . . . curious. I must access the playback. What is the reference?"

The Supervisor reeled off a string of numbers that he had memorized carefully. There was a slight pause, and then the wall in front of him lit up with a three-dimensional view of what appeared to be a normal street. Box-like Houses lined the tidy road, and everything appeared almost as normal as it should be. Except there was a youngster walking down the road. It wasn't exactly *forbidden* to walk the roads, but nobody ever did it—they had far more interesting things to keep them occupied. As the picture zoomed in on the boy, the Supervisor could see that he was perfectly average—tall, skinny, with pale blue skin and neatly-pointed ears. Identification quickly followed, written in the air beside the image: *Shalar Domain, online name: Pixel.*

"Curious," said the voice. "Do you know why he was outside the House?"

"No, sir," the Supervisor replied, hastily. "I have communicated with two of his friends, and they informed me that Domain was expressing dissatisfaction with Virtual Reality and a desire to see what he called 'the real world.' They believe it was some form of temporary insanity."

"Quite," the voice mused. "Everything he could desire is provided for him; why should he be insane enough to wish anything else?" Then, sharply, it added: "There have been no further cases, I trust?"

"None, sir."

"Good. Perhaps you had better monitor those two friends of his. They might also be given to odd ideas."

The Supervisor was relieved. "I have already done so," he reported, glad he'd been able to think of this. "I was worried about contamination."

"That was well done." The voice seemed somehow to frown. "What is the subject doing now?"

The Supervisor shook his head. In the image, Pixel had stopped, and seemed to be carrying on a conversation—but there was nobody with him. "He appears to have completely broken down, sir. He is talking with another entity, but one who is not present."

“Intriguing . . .” the voice mused. “Yet he does not appear to be deranged.” The image showed Pixel moving onward, and the voice said sharply, “He is approaching the Work Zone. That is forbidden.”

“It was monitored,” the Supervisor replied. “As soon as it became clear that he was heading there, Canine Patrol Six was assigned.” As he watched, the Supervisor saw that Pixel had approached the wall separating the Work Zone from the Houses. Pixel could see over a low portion of the wall, and into the Work Zone. His face paled as he saw the workers moving to their tasks, and the armed guards keeping them in order. He was continuing to talk to nobody, and apparently getting replies. These clearly upset him, and he started to run, obviously aimlessly. Then his head turned sharply as he heard the sound of the approaching dogs.

The Supervisor watched impassively as the Patrol approached the boy. They had been assigned to intercept and destroy; no chances could be taken with anyone who went outside their House. It didn’t happen frequently—no more than once a month—and he was used to seeing the Patrol rip their victim apart. It

caused him no pain now to see the terror, hear the screams, and then see the idiot being mauled to death.

But that was not what happened here.

Instead, as the dogs closed in to attack, another figure—quite clearly not imaginary this time—came from nowhere to help the trapped youth. And this one was most intriguing. It was not human.

It was more like a gigantic bird of prey, with a feathered body, long claws, and a beak that helped it to keep the attacking canines away.

The picture paused. “Where did this . . . creature come from?” asked the voice.

“Unknown, sir,” the Supervisor answered. “The monitor was, naturally, observing the boy. It isn’t known where this intruder appeared from. Also, it does not possess a chip, and could not be directly accessed. But it will become slightly clearer as the event unfolds.”

The picture resumed, showing the bird-man extending a long talon, and then there was a tear in the air, as if *something* had clawed open a hole in space. Blackness showed beyond it. The dogs closed in to attack, and the bird-man fought them off, sending two

of their number into the pack. This distracted the ravenous dogs long enough for the newcomer and Pixel to talk. After a brief conversation, both the intruder and Pixel dived into this gap, which promptly closed behind them. The Canine Patrol was left howling and whirling at nothing.

“What was that phenomenon?” the voice demanded.

“Unknown, sir. The monitoring device was not equipped to do analysis, only recording.”

“That is . . . unfortunate,” the voice decided. “But there was no reason to expect anything this anomalous to occur. No punishment will be meted out for this oversight. I trust you have now installed the correct equipment in case the event should recur?”

“Absolutely, sir,” the Supervisor assured him. “An analysis team is in place even as we speak. But they can find nothing.”

“No, I would not expect them to be able to do so. This is intriguing—and disturbing.” The voice considered for a moment. “Monitoring and analysis equipment is to be installed at that point in case of recurrence. Also, the subject’s House, the Domain residence, is to be sealed and tagged. Finally, there is to be a permanent

watch set up on Pixel's chip. If he reappears anywhere on Calomir, I must be informed immediately."

The Supervisor nodded; most of this he had already set into motion, anticipating such orders. "Do you know what happened to the boy?" he ventured to ask.

There was a slight pause. "No. And that in itself is intriguing. There is so little that I do not know or understand. Clearly that intruder has some method of creating a spatial rift. This is of great interest to me. If it can appear once, it can appear again. When it does, whoever or whatever that creature is, it is to be captured intact and brought to me. I must learn the secret of its power. It could be most useful to my plans. And highest priority is to be given to locating Pixel. He is to be brought in as soon as he is found for interrogation and analysis. What he has done is so unthinkable forbidden that I have not even decreed laws against it yet."

"He will be captured and punished," the Supervisor promised.

"He will *not* be punished," the voice snapped. "He will be captured and interrogated. I must know everything that he knows before he is destroyed. His mind

will become my play thing. *Then* and only then can his body be annihilated—as painfully as you desire.”

The Supervisor smiled. Giving pain was what brought him the most pleasure in his life. And he was certain that Pixel would give him a great deal of pleasure indeed.

I

“I think I’m
going to barf,”

Score said. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

Helaine glared at him. “Why do you have such a problem with the fact that Pixel and Jenna are so happy? Perhaps you’re jealous? Or perhaps you want what they have, and are too cowardly to seek it?”

Score rolled his eyes. “Please,” he begged her. “Sigmund Freud or his

equivalent isn't going to be born on your world for a few hundred years yet. Don't try to psychoanalyze me."

Helaine sniffed and tossed her long, dark hair. "Don't think I haven't noticed that you always bring up the fact that I'm from a world five hundred years behind yours whenever you don't like what I say. I may not understand motor cars and flying machines, but I resent the implication that I must be stupid."

Score knew he was treading on thin ice here. He liked Helaine a lot, and he was sure she liked him. But her temper and her sense of honor were both razor sharp. It wouldn't take much to get her angry, and when she got angry, things tended to get broken. Like bones . . . "I *don't* think you're stupid," he protested. "Quite the opposite. It was just a joke, okay? Not a very good one, I'll admit. But seeing Pix and Jenna smooching every time I turn around upsets me."

"Why should it do that?" Helaine asked him. "Is it because you want to smooch with Jenna?" There was a very dangerous glint in her eye.

"No way!" Score protested. "I mean, she's cute, and nice, and all. But she's not my type."

"Oh? And just who *is* your type?"

Score swallowed. He *really* had to learn to watch what he said before blurting things out. “Nobody. I’m a loner, remember? I don’t form emotional attachments—they tend to backfire on you.”

“Oh? So you don’t like me, then?”

This was getting way beyond his control now . . . “Of course I like you—you’re probably my best friend in the worlds. I just don’t like you in *that* way.”

Helaine scowled. “In *what* way?”

Score gestured across the room of the castle they all shared. Pixel and Jenna were at the far end, snuggled together, both reading the same book, arms around one another. “*That* way.”

“You wouldn’t wish to read with me?” Helaine asked him.

He was *almost* certain there was a smile twitching at the corner of her lips. Of course, since this was Helaine, it might just be because she was anticipating beating the daylight out of him. “You know very well what I mean,” was the best he could manage.

Helaine drew herself up to her full height, her head thrown back, an arrogant look on her face. “And what makes you think I would *want* to kiss you?”

“Nothing,” Score said hastily, throwing up his hands. “I didn’t mean to raise the subject. It’s just that I’m so annoyed by seeing those two holding hands and looking all sickly at one another. I sometimes think we were better off before Jenna turned up.”

Helaine snorted. “I have said that plenty of times.” She and Jenna were from the same medieval planet, but where Helaine was the daughter of Lord Votrin, and very aristocratic, Jenna was a peasant’s daughter. The two had stopped their fighting, but they could hardly be called friends. “But she does have her uses.” Jenna was a healer, her special magical talent. Considering the amount of trouble the four of them managed to get into, this was a most helpful ability.

Score glanced over at where Pixel and Jenna had stopped reading and were now talking in low voices that didn’t carry across the large room. “Yes,” he agreed. “And nice legs.” He knew as soon as he’d said it that this was a mistake.

“Boys!” Helaine exclaimed. “You’re all the same! You value appearances more than substance.” She stuck a finger in Score’s face. “There is more to life than a pair of pretty legs.”

"Well, you should know," Score growled back. "Yours are even nicer than hers. And you kick butt with them better."

That stopped Helaine in mid-rant, as she thought about what he had said. She seemed to be almost convinced that it had been a compliment. Before she could say anything, though, Pixel and Jenna climbed out of the tall-backed chair they had been sharing, and started to walk across the room.

"If we're not disturbing the two of you," Pixel said, "we'd like to talk."

"You're not disturbing us," Score assured him quickly. "We were just fighting, as usual."

Jenna grinned at this. She might be a relative newcomer to their band, but she had gotten quite used to their odd ways. "Pixel and I want to take a trip, and we wondered if you'd like to go with us."

That sounded like a great idea to Score—anything right now to distract Helaine. "Great—where are we off to?" He tried to forget that their last trip had left them running for their lives from pirates. Thankfully, Jenna had conjured up a Portal in time for them to escape. She was getting quite good at magic now, after a shaky start.

"I'd like to go home," Pixel explained. "To Calomir." He chewed at his lower lip. "Both you and Helaine have been home to see your families. I thought it might be nice to see mine."

Score grimaced; his trip home had taken him back to his abusive father, Bad Tony Caruso, a would-be crime boss in New York. And Helaine's trip home had landed them in the middle of a war. Still, he couldn't see that there would be any danger in visiting Pixel's parents. They lived in Virtual Reality, hooked into their House computer, their minds roaming wherever they wished. "Yeah, how long has it been?"

Pixel sighed. "Years. I can't recall the last time that I saw them for real. They visited me pretty frequently when I was online, but physically . . . ?" He shook his head. "They probably haven't even missed me yet."

Helaine smiled. "Then we should all go and see them," she decided. "I should like to meet your parents. They raised a very pleasant son. Unlike *some* people." She glared at Score.

"Well, we do have another reason for wanting to see them," Pixel admitted. He was still holding Jenna's hand, and held it slightly higher. "I want them to meet Jenna. And Jenna to meet them."

Score rolled his eyes. "Are you sure we won't be intruding?" he asked. "I mean, the first time you bring a girl home to meet your parents . . . Isn't that kind of a personal thing?"

"Well, I'd like them to meet you and Helaine also," Pixel said. "In case they are worried about me, this way they'll know I'm okay. I mean, with friends like you guys, they'll see that I'm fine."

Score snickered. "Yes, I can see it now. You explaining that the four of us live alone, unchaperoned, in our very own castle. They're going to be *really* relieved. Pix, parents tend to overreact. They're going to suspect hot tub parties, underaged drinking, and all sorts of stuff. They won't believe how boring most of our days here are."

Pixel looked puzzled. "Our days are very rarely dull. We have way too many adventures for that."

"Yes, that's another thing I wouldn't stress to them," Score added. "Risking your life, fighting monsters and insane magicians, pirates and so forth . . . It's not really going to reassure them, you know. Maybe you should stress the picking of flowers, playing with unicorns, and so on."

Helaine glared at him. "You suggest he lie to his parents? That is so typical of you."

"Not *lie* as such," Score protested. "Just edit the truth a bit. It's safer when you deal with adults. The whole truth tends to make them panic and assume the worst. They're likely to ground him for the rest of his life."

"I'm sure they'll be very understanding," Jenna said. "After all, their son is, and he must have gotten it from somewhere."

"Probably from the computers that raised him," Score muttered. "Well, don't say I didn't warn you."

Helaine smiled at Pixel. "I, for one, am most curious to see your world," she informed him.

"This is it?" Score asked, staring around in disbelief. With the help of their adult magician friend, Shanara, they had created a Portal to Calomir. Calomir was on the Outer Rim of The Diadem, where the magic was weakest. A Portal could be created to travel there from other worlds closer to the center of the Diadem, but a Portal couldn't be started on such a world. Their only way back off Calomir was for Shanara to reopen the Portal that brought them here, otherwise they would

be trapped here, Shanara didn't mind waiting for them to call on her to help them out.

So the four friends had stepped through the gateway between worlds, and found themselves here. Score stared around in disbelief. There were houses on a suburban street; all the houses were absolutely identical—just blocks with roofs and doors. No windows, no mail boxes, not even any house numbers. None had gardens beyond a small strip of grass. There were no cars in the road, and no people about at all.

"This looks like boredom central," Score complained.

Pixel grinned. "Now you can see why I like the Diadem so much."

Helaine shook her head. "Well, I can see why you got lost when you left your House," she said. "Everything looks identical."

"How are you going to find your way back home now?" Jenna asked.

Pixel held up his ruby. "I have an advantage this time," he said. "Magic." He concentrated, and a thin beam of red light flashed from his gem and straight to one of the houses about a quarter of a mile away. "Finding things magically helps a lot."

"Yes," Score agreed. "I'd hate to have to search every house looking for yours. It would take forever."

"The other Houses wouldn't let you in," Pixel informed him. "They would see you as an intruder and call the police. Don't forget, the Houses here are intelligent."

"More so than the people, probably," Score muttered. "What a dump. It's so lifeless. Sorry Pix, but your home town isn't a patch on New York." He grinned. "Hey, maybe a few New Yorkers would liven this graveyard up a bit."

"We're not here to change things," Pixel reminded him. "This is just a visit home, so my folks can meet my friends. Especially my girlfriend." He gave Jenna's hand a squeeze, and they gazed adoringly at one another.

"Enough with the goo-goo eyes already," Score complained. "I just ate."

"You're just jealous," Pixel said.

"No, I'm just nauseous." But nothing seemed to penetrate Pixel's happiness, so Score settled down. He glared at Helaine, who seemed to be grinning to herself. "And what's with you?"

"Just . . . thinking," she replied. He hated it when she got all mysterious. She had a habit of being deep,

and that bothered him at times—when he was pretty certain she was thinking about him.

Thankfully, it didn't take long to reach Pixel's House. Pixel walked to the door, and called out: "Let me in."

"There are unknown persons with you," the House said, in a pleasant voice that was mechanical, but still managed to sound worried.

"These are my friends," Pixel informed it. "They are to be allowed admittance to the House whenever they request it."

"This is highly unorthodox," the House complained.

"Maybe," Pixel replied. "But just do it, okay? Now, how about opening the door?"

The House said nothing, but the door sighed open. Pixel led the way within. Score was last through the door, which sighed shut behind him. This bothered him a little; it was too much like being inside a prison cell. All the light was artificial, as there were no windows. They were in a smallish kitchen, which was impeccably neat.

"My room's this way," Pixel announced, and led them into another small space. There was a closet, a bed, and a strange-looking apparatus that looked like

the kind of hair dryers used in New York to dry women's perms. Nothing else.

"Your parents must love the neat way you keep this place," Score commented. "Not even a sock out of place."

"The House keeps everything tidy," Pixel said. "And I don't need decorations when I'm online most of the time anyway." He gestured to the apparatus. "Inside that, I can be anywhere."

"Yes, I can see why you'd want to be anywhere but here." Score shook his head. "So, how about letting us meet Mom and Dad Zombie?"

"This way," Pixel said. He led the way out of the room and down the small hallway. There was another door there, this one closed. "My parents' room," he announced. He tapped on the door, but there was no reply. "I'm sure they're online," he said.

"Why would they be anywhere else?" agreed Score. "So, how do you wake the sleeping beauties?"

Pixel looked up toward the ceiling. "House, can you tell my parents that we're here?"

"I am unable to comply," the House replied.

Pixel scowled. "Why not?"

"I cannot say."

Score snickered. “It sounds to me like your House has an attitude.”

Pixel looked worried. “House, just open their door, then.” There was no response. “Open the door, I said!”

There was a short pause. “I am unable to comply with your request,” it answered.

Score realized that the time for his jokes was past. He touched the emerald in his pocket, which enhanced his ability to transform things from one form to another, and focused on the door. “I do hope they aren’t doing anything private,” he muttered. Then he turned the door into air.

The four of them stared into the room.

It was completely empty.

Score shook his head. “It looks like your parents moved while you were out,” he muttered.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Pixel complained. “House!” he called sharply. “Where are my parents?”

“I cannot say,” came the calm reply.

“I may be from a backwards world,” Helaine commented, “but this House seems to be deliberately evasive. It keeps telling you that it cannot say—not that it does not know.”

“Good point,” Pixel agreed. “House, do you know where my parents are?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Jenna asked abruptly.

“Because they do not exist.”

Even Score felt a chill crawl down his spine at that reply.

“Sir!

Section Supervisor Nine turned from his monitors as one of his underlings came to a stiff halt beside his chair. “Yes?” he asked, annoyed at being interrupted. But his staff knew better than to bother him with anything trivial.

“The alert that you placed a year ago has just sounded,” the woman reported. She checked a small hand-held monitor. “A Shalar Domain.”

The Supervisor recalled the case immediately—the boy who had vanished mysteriously. “He is registering.”

“Yes, sir. He seems to somehow be back inside his House. Monitoring cannot trace him before that. Perhaps there is a fault.”

“Perhaps there is not,” the Supervisor snapped. “Do not try to analyze this. It is not your concern. Alert a

retrieval team. The boy and anyone with him is to be considered highly dangerous. They are to apprehend Domain and any companions. Take no chances, but the boy *must* be taken alive for questioning.”

“Yes, sir.” The woman didn’t understand, of course, but it was not necessary that she should. “Shall I report back to you when he is apprehended?”

“No.” The Supervisor stood up. “I shall be with the Overmind. He will know.”

The woman nodded, and rushed off to obey her orders. The Supervisor started off to report to the Overmind. He didn’t understand what was happening, either. But he would. This Domain would be taken and interrogated—and then destroyed for breaking the unwritten laws of the Overmind.

2

Helaine felt a pang of sympathy as she saw the startled and scared look on Pixel's face. He had to have been shocked discovering his parents were gone, and now the House didn't seem to even be aware of them. She wasn't at all sure what a "computer" was, but it sounded like some sort of a scientific way of doing certain magical functions, like seeing over great distances. She supposed that out here on

the Rim, such devices were needed by people who couldn't do magic.

"When were they last here?" Pixel asked, clearly refusing to give up.

"Your question has no meaning," the House replied.

"Of course it has meaning!" Pixel yelled. "It's very simple: when was the last time that my parents were in this House?"

"The question has no meaning," the House insisted. "Your parents have never been in me at any time."

"What?" That certainly floored Pixel. "But . . . that's crazy. They *were* here; I know, I saw them. I mean, where else could they be?"

"Pix," Score said gently, touching his friend's arm, and being quite serious for once. "I think there's a small problem here."

Pixel turned on him angrily. "My parents are missing and you call that a *small* problem?"

Jenna grasped his arm. "Please, he's only trying to help."

As always, Jenna's presence calmed Pixel down. "I know," he said, sighing. "But I'm worried sick. What's going on here?"

"Listen, Pix," Score tried again. "I think you're missing the point. The House says your parents were never here; your eyes say they were. That leaves us two possibilities: either the House is lying, or you're wrong."

"How could I be wrong about seeing my parents?" Pixel demanded.

Helaine realized Score's point suddenly. "Because the House produces illusions for you, doesn't it?" she said. "Could it have made you *think* you saw your parents when they were really not here?"

That one stopped Pixel in mid-complaint. He looked stunned, and then thoughtful. "But I need to wear my helmet to enter Virtual Reality," he finally said. "And I wasn't wearing it when I visited with my folks."

"You *think* you weren't wearing it, Pix," Score pointed out. "But these blasted computers could make you *think* you'd taken off your helmet, couldn't they?"

"But . . . why would the House do that?" Pixel asked plaintively. It was clear he was starting to wonder if they were right.

“We could always ask it,” Jenna said. “It seems like a very nice House to me. I’m sure it would tell us the truth if we asked it.”

Helaine was used to Jenna being somewhat dumb—it wasn’t her fault, really, but what could you expect from a peasant?—but that sounded even more naive than normal, even for her. And then Helaine could feel the touch of magic, and she grinned. Jenna was attempting to use her ability of persuasion on the House! But it couldn’t work on anything that wasn’t alive, and from what Helaine had understood about computers, she didn’t think that the House was actually alive—simply made to seem that way. In that case, the magic wouldn’t work on it. But she had to admit that Jenna had the right idea—it was certainly worth an attempt.

Pixel had clearly caught on also. “House, is this what happened? Have you been faking the appearances of my parents all along?”

“I am not allowed to answer that question,” the House said. Maybe it was Helaine’s imagination, but the voice seemed a little odd. It was slower, somewhat slurring its words.

“Why not?” Jenna asked. “It’s a very simple question, isn’t it? And you do want to help us, don’t you?” She was exerting all of her power through her citrine gem now.

“Yes, yes,” agreed the House. It was certainly not her imagination—the voice sounded distressed, as if it was breaking apart. “I wish to help . . . My programming will not allow . . . Emergency . . .” There was a sudden flash of fire and sparks from the computer apparatus, and then the voice of the House went dead.

“Wow, that’s a first, even for us,” Score commented, slapping Jenna on the shoulder. “I think you just killed a House.”

“I did not mean to,” Jenna said, looking horrified.

“It wasn’t alive, really,” Pixel assured her. He was clearly very troubled. “Just a machine. But your magic created a division in its programming. Rather than disobey its instructions, and unable to disappoint you, it seems to have broken down completely.”

“You know, Pix,” Score said slowly, “I am starting to get a *really* bad feeling about this. Why would your House apparently have been faking your folks for you all of these years? And if they aren’t here, where the heck are they?”

Pixel shook his head. "This isn't making any more sense to me than it is to you," he admitted. "But if they aren't here, then I can only assume that they're in some sort of trouble. That means it's really important that I find them. And the only way I can do that is to go online."

Score gestured at the still-sizzling wall. "It's not going to happen here."

"No. I shall have to use another House's computer." Pixel appeared to be resolved. "I shall have to break into another House to do it, though."

Score grinned. "Quite the law-breaker, aren't you? You'd better watch out for the cops, then."

Helaine had a sudden thought. "Would it not be better to contact the authorities and ask for their help?" she suggested.

"The authorities might be behind their disappearance," Pixel said. "I don't know that I can trust them."

"You don't know that you can't," Helaine pointed out.

"That's true." Pixel looked undecided.

"Let's split the workload," Score suggested. "Why don't you and Jenna go off and do a little House breaking and computer hacking? Meanwhile, Helaine

and I will contact the authorities and see if they can help. We're pretty useless when it comes to computers, after all."

"So am I," Jenna pointed out.

"Yes," Score agreed, "but you're terrific at keeping Pix's spirits up, and I think he needs all the emotional reassurance he can get right now."

Helaine looked at him in surprise. "That's amazingly thoughtful of you, Score," she said. "There may be hope for you yet."

"Don't get used to it," he growled. "It's just that I'd rather not watch the two of them trading spit any longer."

"Okay," Pixel said. "Let's follow your plan. If either of us gets any results, Helaine can always keep us in touch."

"Fine." Helaine glanced at Score. "Let's go."

"It was *my* idea to split up," Score complained. "I should get to be leader."

"And I thought of contacting the authorities," Helaine pointed out. "This is my plan, so I lead."

"You don't have your sword," Score pointed out. He was correct, of course—Pixel had insisted that she

leave it behind, since they were not carried on his world. "No sword, no bossing."

"I did bring along my knife," Helaine pointed out as they left the House. She was dressed in the clothing she had worn for her last trip to Earth, and had slipped the knife and its sheath under her T-shirt. She raised the hem of the shirt slightly to show Score where the knife was positioned. "And I could take you out without any weapons anyway."

"Hey, skin," Score said, running a finger across her side. Helaine flushed, and dropped the T-shirt back into place. Score was grinning. "Boy, that gets you every time," he said. "You really are *such* a prude."

"And you are quite disgusting," was the best that she could think of in reply. "Can't you keep your mind out of the gutter and on our mission?"

"Not when you're flashing naked bits of your body in my face," he said. He was really enjoying teasing her, naturally.

"I don't make a habit of it," she said stiffly.

"No, more's the pity."

Helaine glared at him. "If you wish to court me," she informed him, "then there are several formal options open to you, all of them a lot more polite than that."

"Whoa!" Score said, looking like a deer trapped by hunters. "I didn't say anything about *courting*. I just like to tease you, that's all."

"Oh, I see," Helaine snapped back at him. "I am not interesting enough, is that it?"

"What is it with you girls?" Score asked, worried. "Can't you think of anything but romance? I thought you were different, with all that macho stuff you pull, but you're not, are you? Underneath that cold, hard exterior, you're really just a girl who dreams of suckering some poor idiot into marrying you and settling down."

Helaine had started this simply to tease Score back, but he had managed to annoy her, as usual. "What makes you think I'd want to trap you into *anything*? You're the most infuriating, stupid, and least likely prospect for a husband I've ever met!"

Abruptly, Score grinned. "Thank goodness! For a second there, I thought you were going all soft on me. I'm glad to see that you're not that dumb."

He was *infuriating*! Just when she was certain she'd insulted him, he seemed happy about it. What kind of a half-addled brain did Score possess, anyway? And

why did he annoy her so much? Surely by now she should have become used to him?

And why didn't he think she was worth courting? She had a sneaky suspicion it was because he still saw her, after all, as a half-wild barbarian. But she had seen the girls he seemed to so admire, those from New York, and she knew that she could never be like them. She simply didn't have the background, or education, or the lack of modesty that allowed them to expose portions of their skin to anyone's view. She knew she could never be the kind of girl that Score could get serious about.

And why was she even *thinking* that she should be? As annoyed as she was with Score, she was twice as mad with herself. She didn't want to court anyone as infuriating, opinionated, and just plain dumb as he was! So he looked down his nose at her for being a stupid savage? Well, *she* despised him for his lack of honor and his dislike of honest fighting skills. He was no catch for her to be worrying over! All he was to her was . . .

Her closest friend, she had to admit. Even though admitting it made her mad enough to spit.

"Jeez, why are girls always so moody?" Score complained. "You're mad at me now for touching your tummy, and you're not speaking?"

"There is nothing to say to you," Helaine replied, fighting to keep her temper. "And we *are* supposed to be helping Pixel, if you recall."

"Right—the blue-faced guy with pointy ears and a girlfriend permanently attached." Score winked. "So, we're going to contact the authorities. What's the plan?"

Helaine didn't really know the answer to that. At home, she would simply have talked to her father. On Score's world, there were always those police officers around—generally when she didn't want them to be. Here there was nobody at all. She considered the problem, and then had an idea. "Pixel did say that these Houses guard their owners. If we approach one, it should be able to contact the authorities for us." She started to march toward the closest House.

"I don't know that that's the best idea," Score said, worried. "I mean, our past experiences with people calling the cops have included jail cells, if you remember."

"We have done nothing wrong," Helaine answered. "Why should we be in trouble? We simply wish to talk to someone in authority."

"There's a flaw in that somewhere," Score muttered. "I'm sure I'll think what it is soon."

"Fine. Meanwhile, let's do things my way." She strode up to the House.

"Please stay where you are," the House said in a voice that was exactly like that of Pixel's House. "You are not registered here; if you do not leave immediately, I shall call the police."

"Good," Helaine told it. "I wish to see the police, so please call them. I shall stand here and not attempt entry, so you have nothing to fear from me."

"I do not understand you," the House replied.

"Join the club," Score muttered.

"Just call the police, like you said, will you?" asked Helaine. Would even the dwellings here be uncooperative?

"They are on their way."

"Good." She turned to Score. "Let's meet them by the side of the road. We do not wish them to take us for house-breakers."

"Whatever you say," Score agreed with mocking politeness. "This is your plan, after all."

"Yes," she agreed, "it is. So, for once, keep quiet and allow me to do the talking."

Score shrugged and followed her to the side of the empty road. Barely a silent minute later, she saw something approaching them. It looked like one of the cars from Score's world, though it was considerably quieter. Inside sat two men in dark uniforms, clearly the police officers of Pixel's world. The vehicle drew to a halt, and the front doors sighed open.

"That was very prompt," she complimented the two officers as they emerged from the car. "I wish to speak to someone in authority."

"We're in authority," the female member of the pair said. She was thick-set, with short-cropped blonde hair and a scowl. "And I don't care what you wish." She glanced at her partner, who had some odd device in his hand. "Who are they?"

The man shook his head. "I don't get any readings. They aren't Chipped."

Helaine didn't like the way that they were ignoring her. "My name is Helaine, and this is Score," she said. "You will not find us in your records."

“Not Users,” the man said. “They must be escaped Drones.”

“Two of the ones with Shalar Domain?” the woman guessed.

Pixel’s real name! Helaine smiled. “Yes, we are with him. He is seeking his parents, and—”

“Hold on,” Score said abruptly, interrupting her as usual. He glared at the woman. “How do you know about Pixel?”

The woman ignored him also. She spoke into some device that was attached to her wrist. “Domain’s party has split up,” she reported. “We have apprehended two drones who were with him.”

“Apprehended?” Score echoed. “I *knew* I was going to regret this.”

Helaine’s instinct for imminent trouble kicked into action. Something was severely wrong here, even if she could not understand why. She started to reach into her pocket to grip one of her gems so that she could cast magic. She never finished the move.

The two officers pulled short sticks from their belts and aimed them. There was a fierce burst of energy from the tube pointed in her direction that enveloped

Helaine. For a second, every nerve in her body felt as if it was on fire.

Then she collapsed, unconscious.

The two officers looked at the fallen youths. The woman spoke into her communicator again. "We have rendered the Drones insensate. Should we continue to search for Domain?"

"No," Section Supervisor Nine replied. "Another patrol will do that. You are certain that the two fugitives you have apprehended are not Users?"

"Neither is Chipped," the officer stated. "They also seem to be too dull-witted. They can only be escaped Drones."

"I agree," the Supervisor said. "This Domain must be involved in some of the unrest that has been noted in the work camps." He considered for a moment. "Those two can have no value to the Overmind. Take them for punishment, and then return them to work. They have no other purpose."

"Understood." The woman clicked off the communicator and looked at the two crumpled forms on the sidewalk. "Well, I suppose we'd better haul them in for

treatment. Work, work, work,” she grumbled. She and her partner picked up the fallen youths and tossed them into the back of their patrol car. Then they climbed inside, and set off for the closest of the camps.

3

Pixel gazed sadly
at his old room.

With the computer dead, there was nothing at all left here for him. It was painful to realize that he'd spent twelve years of his life in this place, and there was absolutely nothing here to show that he'd even been inside it. There were advantages to Virtual Reality, he knew, but there were some drawbacks, too. Eventually, the gentle pressure of

Jenna's hand on his shoulder brought his mind back to the problem at hand.

"There is something very, very wrong going on here," he told her. "All of my memories tell me that my parents were here, yet my House killed itself rather than tell me what has happened to them. This has to go beyond simply me. Nobody would go to such lengths over one insignificant boy."

"You're not insignificant," Jenna replied. Before he could protest, she shook her head. "I'm not just saying that because I'm so fond of you; it's simply the truth. Don't forget, you're one of the three potentially most powerful wizards in the Diadem."

"But that's in the Diadem," Pixel protested. "Here, on my home world, I'm just another computer user—I'm pretty decent at it, but nothing really special. And nobody here really believes in magic—oh, a few of the programs I've run deal with such things, but they're made up, and everyone knows that. When I first found out about magic being real, it was hard for me to accept it. So there's nobody on this planet that could even suspect me of being capable of magic, since it supposedly doesn't exist." He shook his head. "It doesn't make sense, and I *hate* things that don't make sense."

"You'd better start making sense out of it, then," Jenna said practically. "This is your world, and I am completely lost here. What is the best way to proceed?"

"I have to get back online," Pixel decided. "Once I'm linked up, I can find out information. Without a computer, I can't do anything."

"Then let's find you one." Jenna took his arm and led him to the empty doorway. They were looking down the street, and she gestured. "Pick a House—you say that they all have computers within them."

"Other people's computers," Pixel pointed out. "Ones they're using."

"Your quest is important," she argued. "Borrow one for a while."

"Their owners aren't likely to agree."

Jenna grinned. "But I can do magic," she reminded him. "And since they don't believe in it, they won't have any defense against my powers of persuasion."

"I *do* believe in it, and I don't have any defense against you, either." He kissed the tip of her nose. "Let's go persuade someone, then."

He led the way to the next house, just a few hundred yards away. He felt rather ashamed of the fact that he didn't have a clue as to who lived here, even

though the family must have been there for as long as he had. Another problem with living in Virtual Reality.

"You are not authorized," the House said as they approached it. "You will leave immediately, or I shall be forced to notify the police."

"You don't need to do that," Jenna said, and Pixel could feel the power of her citrine. "We're *very* friendly people."

"Of course you are," the House agreed. The door swung open. "Come in, please. Would you like some refreshments? It will only take a moment."

"That's very sweet of you," Jenna told it. "But I think we're okay for now. We just need access to the computer."

"My mistress is linked at the moment," the House said. "I do not like to disturb her. But for you, I will."

"That's great," Pixel said. He had been worrying that disconnecting the house owner from her computer might be traumatic for her. "Which way?" This House was a duplicate of his own, and he had automatically started to walk toward "his" room.

"You are going the right way," the House said. The bedroom door opened, and Pixel and Jenna walked

into the bare room. As with his, there was simply a bed, a closet, and the computer-link chair.

A young girl—perhaps a few years older than Pixel—was emerging from the hood, looking puzzled and startled. Her hair was cropped short for better contact with the Net, and her eyes were a bright shade of blue.

“What’s going on?” she asked them. “Who are you? What are you doing in our House?”

Jenna reached out with her magic. “It’s all right,” she said soothingly. “We’re friends. Pixel here just needs to borrow your computer for a short while, then we’ll be on our way.”

“Oh.” The girl gave them a friendly smile. “That’s okay, then. My name is Dayta.”

“I’m Jenna.” The two girls shook hands. Jenna glanced at Pixel, who was starting to prepare the hood for hook-up. “Why don’t the two of us get something to eat?” she suggested. “Your House said it could whip something up.” She winked at Pixel as she led Dayta off.

Pixel was pleased that Jenna was handling the problem of the girl for him. He sat in the chair—still warm—and adjusted the hood over his head. Then he linked.

Immediately, *théré* was the rush of familiarity about everything. He hadn't realized how much he had missed this. But you couldn't spend most of your life computer-linked and not miss it. It was as if he had dived into a kaleidoscope—colors, impressions, movement flashed toward and then past him—data flowing in the link. He simply had to log on to begin accessing everything.

"Pixel," he informed the Net. "Log in."

He felt the link take hold, and then he was standing as if in a vast library, books on shelves like mountains stretching about him. It was all in his mind, of course, and could have looked like anything he wished. But since he was after information, manifesting everything as books made sense to him.

There was sudden movement, and then a young girl stepped out of nowhere and stared in surprise and pleasure at him. "Pixel!" she exclaimed. "You're back! Thank heavens! Where have you been?"

"Byte!" Pixel grinned widely. She had been one of his best friends before he had left this world; they had spent thousands of hours exploring and playing together. "Believe me—you wouldn't believe me!"

"Well, I'm glad you're back," she said. She was a pretty young girl, her blue skin a very delicate shade. Still, she wasn't as pretty as Jenna. Besides, he didn't know if Byte *really* looked like that. She might be anything at all . . . Well, it wasn't important. "I'll call up Digit, and we can go for a game! I've really missed you, you know."

She must have—the only way she could have found him so quickly was if she'd had a program set up to track him down when he logged on. It made him feel good to know he had such a friend. "No," he said quickly. "I have more important things to do than play. I need to find my parents."

Byte frowned. "Aren't they in their room?" she asked him.

"No. And there's no sign that they ever were, either." He told her what had happened to him. "So I need to try and track what happened to them."

Byte grinned. "Wow, it's like a detective game! Only for real, I guess. Okay, I'm in. I'll help you find your folks." She clapped her hands. "This is kind of exciting, isn't it?"

"It would be more exciting if it wasn't so worrying," Pixel answered honestly.

“Hey, we’re two really savvy Users,” she replied. “We can do anything we set out minds to. Let’s start looking.” She paused. “Uh—do you know their User Names?”

Pixel thought for a moment. “No,” he admitted. “I never really had to contact them; they always called me up when they wanted to talk.”

“Makes sense,” Byte agreed. “So, we just access your contacts, eliminate me and Digit, and then see who else called you a lot.”

Pixel grinned; this was just like old times. It was so different from doing magic, and yet it was so familiar and comforting. He brought up the list of contacts, and he and Byte started to weed through them.

And it started to get very, very bizarre.

The obvious ones were there, of course, though there were not any contacts, naturally, for the past year. But when Pixel began to eliminate the ones he knew of, there wasn’t much left. And there was nothing at all from his parents.

“I don’t get it,” he admitted. “I *know* I talked to them lots of times in Virtual Reality—and, I thought, in the real thing—but there’s *nothing* here from them. It doesn’t make any sense.”

"There are a couple of possibilities," Byte suggested. "First of all, maybe the contacts have been covered up for some reason."

"Why would anyone do that?"

"Why would anyone bother to fake you meeting your parents in the first place?" Byte asked logically. "I think you have to start exploring possibilities before you begin formulating theories."

"You're right," Pixel admitted. "I must be out of practice—I should have thought of that. I'm glad you're with me on this, Byte."

"It's good to have you back," she said, grinning. "Digit's cool, but you were always the most fun. I hope you're back to stay this time."

Pixel didn't know how to answer that. He *was* enjoying Byte's company again, and it was great to be back in the Net again . . . But to *stay*? He had a new life now, one that he didn't want to give up. He definitely didn't want to give up Jenna! Still, he wasn't sure how he could tell Byte that this unreal life she lived had lost most of its charm for him. It was fun for a while, but reality was way cooler.

So he simply didn't say anything, concentrating instead on his search. He checked his call records, and

examined them for any sign that they had been altered. "Not a thing," he decided. "Which means that either they weren't changed . . . or that they were changed by somebody really, really skillful."

"Now you're thinking properly again," Byte said admiringly. "So—either your mind's lying, or we're looking for someone with real computer savvy. Personally, I'd opt for the latter."

"So would I." Pixel didn't even want to begin to think his mind might have been played with to that extent. "Which means we'll have to go to a deeper level." He walked to the next stack of books, and hauled out a heavy volume. He and Byte tapped it, and it opened to enfold them.

It was as if they had walked into the vaults of a huge cathedral. Stone walls surrounded them, dark and oppressive. Thin beams of light danced slowly across the floor. Shadowy pillars rose all about them. The computer was taking "deeper level" quite literally! It felt as if they were deep underground in a forgotten tomb.

"I don't like the feel of this," Byte said. She crept closer to Pixel, and gripped his hand. "There's something not right in here."

"I know what you mean," he agreed. There was a *feeling* as if some great evil was lurking, hidden in the shadows. Before he had traveled to the Diadem, Pixel would have written it off as simply nerves, or a mood that Virtual Reality was creating as part of the program they were in. But now he was nowhere near as certain. He had encountered evil in the real world, and knew what it was like. And this felt like it.

Trying to stay alert, he looked around. "There's nothing here to examine," he said, puzzled. "There should be data stored here—so where is it?"

"I don't know." Byte snuggled closer to him. "Pixel, I know I'm going to sound like such a coward—but I'm *scared*. I know there's nothing here that can hurt me—"

"Don't be so certain of that." He squeezed her hand in what he hoped was a comforting manner. "I can sense something too, and I've learned to trust my instincts. I have a feeling we're in very grave danger. Maybe we should go back?"

Byte shook her head firmly. "I may be frightened, but I'm no quitter," she said. "If we go, you may never find the answers that you need."

“Good girl.” He wasn’t certain that this was the smartest thing to do, but she was right—even if she left, he would press on alone. The fact that there was *something* here, where there should be only information, confirmed that.

There was movement ahead of them. From the shadows stepped a cloaked figure, even darker than the rest of the place. All Pixel could make out were two red, burning eyes. Everything else was simply blackness that billowed about those eyes.

“Entry here is forbidden,” the shape said in a thick, whispering voice that echoed around them.

“We seek information,” Pixel said. His voice trembled, but he tried to sound braver than he felt.

“This is not a good place to seek anything,” the shape informed them. “There is nothing here for anyone except annihilation.”

“My records have been altered,” Pixel persisted. “I must know by whom, and why.”

“Answers are chains that bind you,” the shape whispered. “Questions are wings that may free you. They can take you out of here.”

This was getting them nowhere. "You're some sort of a guardian, aren't you?" Pixel realized. "You're sent to block seekers from getting the answers they desire."

"There are no answers," the shape said. "Not to the questions you are asking. Go back, and be content to play. There will be no further warnings."

Pixel touched the gems he seemed to have in his virtual pocket. In the real world, he could use his magical abilities—but would they work here, inside the computer's reality? And even if they did work, what power could he use on something that didn't really exist? Well, all he could do was to try one and see. He gripped his ruby, and mentally asked it for the way they should go.

The thin red beam his ruby produced illuminated the vaults, burning through the darkness in a straight line. The shape cowered back from it, hissing in pain or fear. So magic *did* still work here! Pixel wasn't helpless!

"What are you doing?" the shape demanded, its eyes burning brighter.

"Answers are chains that bind you," Pixel replied, mockingly using the being's own words. He gripped his beryl. "And that's not a bad idea." He had power

over air, and there had to be an equivalent in here, since he was alive. He shaped the air into solid, invisible chains, wrapping them tightly about the shape. It cried out and struggled, but it couldn't break his power.

"You cannot have this ability," the shape howled. "It is impossible for you to pass me!"

"Remind me of that on my way out," Pixel said cheekily. Still gripping Byte's hand firmly, he dashed past the helpless figure.

"How did you manage that?" Byte asked him, her eyes wide in astonishment.

He grinned. "Magic." He now had the power to find what he sought, and he was feeling quite exhilarated. "The answers are this way. Come on."

They were deeper in the canyons of stone now, and the shadows seemed somehow more intense. Pixel knew that the shape he had defeated wasn't the evil that he had sensed; that was still ahead of them, waiting, brooding, assessing them. Pixel's use of magic must have surprised it, and it was probably working out just how dangerous these intruders were.

There was noise ahead of them, and they slowed down, scanning the darkness. Once more, Pixel saw

movement, and he could vaguely make out something large and fast moving toward them. He didn't even have the chance to try and use magic. All he could do was to push Byte aside, hoping that whatever was coming would attack him first, and then give her a chance to flee.

Then the beast was upon them, and Pixel saw that his plan hadn't worked. Their attacker was some sort of immense hound, but it had three heads. All three had gaping mouths filled with immense teeth. One head snatched up the screaming Byte, and a second fastened hard about him. The third gave a nasty snarl, and then the teeth clutching him bit down hard, and pain and hopelessness flooded through him as he lost consciousness.

4

Jenna sat in the kitchen with Dayta, sipping some sort of bubbling beverage. She found the older girl quite nice, but a little difficult to understand at times. Still, she was from another world, so that wasn't really surprising.

"It's so weird that your friend has lost his parents," Dayta was saying. "I get along really well with mine."

An idea occurred to Jenna. "Maybe we could ask your parents for help?"

she suggested. "They must have been using computers much longer than Pixel, so they will know more about them. And they might know where other adults could go."

Dayta nodded enthusiastically. "I'll bet they could help! They're pretty cool, even if they *are* old." She glanced up. "House, could you wake my parents for me?"

"I am unable to comply with that request," came the polite reply.

Dayta looked confused, but Jenna was seized by a chilling possibility. "House," she asked, "are Dayta's parents currently in you?"

"Dayta's parents have never been here," House answered.

"But that doesn't make any sense!" Dayta cried. "Of *course* they're here! I talk with them all the time."

"No," Jenna said grimly, "you only *think* that you do." She marched to the room in the House that should have been theirs. As she had suspected, when the door was opened, the room was completely blank.

"I don't understand it," wailed Dayta.

"I'm starting to," Jenna told the girl. "What are the chances that *two* people both think their parents live

with them, but they don't? And you both seem to be only children—you don't have any siblings, do you?"

"No," Dayta admitted. "You think this is related somehow?"

"Well, there's one way to find out—let's go and check on another House, and see who's in it." Jenna headed for the door.

"Go Outside?" Dayta looked scared. "Out of the House?"

"Broaden your horizons," Jenna said. While Pixel was in Virtual Reality, she knew she'd need help from a native of this place, and the only one she knew was Dayta. She had to convince the girl to accompany her. "Real reality is much nicer than the Virtual stuff." She hoped that was true—certainly Pixel thought it was; she had never experienced Virtual Reality, so she couldn't speak from experience.

"But . . . Outside?" Dayta sounded more scared.

Using her magic, Jenna applied persuasion. "Trust me, you'll love it. And you want to find out about your parents, don't you?"

"Yes." That seemed to stiffen the girl's resolve. "Okay, I'm with you. Let's go Outside." She looked as if she was about to bravely march to her doom.

“Relax,” Jenna assured her. “It’s nice Outside. Come on.”

They went out, and Dayta looked disappointed. “It’s kind of . . . drab, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Jenna agreed. “You need to get out more, and plant some flowers, and a bush or two.”

“It could do with some color.” Dayta looked around. “It looks so boring. So, now what?”

“Pick a House,” Jenna said. “Any House.”

Dayta shrugged and pointed at one a little way down the street. “How about that one?”

“Let’s see.” Jenna led the way over to it, and up to the door.

“Intruders!” the House screeched. “I shall call the Police!”

“There’s no need to do that,” Jenna assured it, using her magic again. “We’re really nice people, very friendly. You like us, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” the House agreed. “What can I do to help you?”

“We’d like to speak to the adult of the House,” Jenna said.

There was a slight pause. “There is no adult inside,” the House replied.

“Just a single teenager?” Jenna asked.

“Correct.”

Jenna felt a little triumphant and a little scared. “My idea seems to be right,” she said slowly. “These Houses are set up only for teenagers. There aren’t any parents, even though you all think there are. It’s being faked.”

“But why?” Dayta asked. “None of this is making any sense.”

“I agree,” Jenna replied, thinking. “A world where teenagers are all kept in computer cocoons, everything they need supplied to them—including memories of parents that don’t seem to exist. Whatever is behind this clearly wants to keep all of you connected to the computer, and living your lives there. I just can’t understand it.”

“Nor do I,” Dayta said. “It doesn’t make any sense to me.” A tear trickled out of her eye. “I want my parents.”

“The people you think are your parents may not even exist,” Jenna said gently. “It’s possible that they are just some illusion supplied to keep you happy. And that means that there’s only one possible explanation—the authorities *must* be behind all of this. If all

of you teens are the same, then it can't be simply coincidence. That means there's some vast plan and greater reason behind what is happening here."

"But what?" pleaded Dayta.

"I don't know," Jenna confessed. "This isn't my world, and I wouldn't even know where to start looking for answers. But Pixel would. We have to wake him up and tell him what we've found. He'll be able to make sense of it—he's the smartest person I've ever met."

They started back across the street toward Dayta's house. As they did so, Jenna saw movement, and turned to look down the road. Two vehicles, somehow moving without horses to pull them, were drawing close. "What are they?" she asked.

"The Police, I guess," Dayta answered. "The House must have called them after all."

"No." Jenna was certain of this. "I convinced it we were friends. It would not have called them. They must be here for some other reason—and it can only be us."

"What do we do?" The other girl might be older, but she was completely lost out in the real world.

“We have three options,” Jenna said, waiting. “Hide, fight, or give up. I think it’s too late to hide, and I’m not sure it would be safe to fight yet. So that leaves us only one choice.”

“But we haven’t done anything wrong,” Dayta protested. “It’s not against any law to go Outside.”

“You don’t need to write laws against things people aren’t supposed to be able to do,” Jenna pointed out. “You may discover that there’s a lot of things about your world you are ignorant of.”

The police cars had stopped now, and several uniformed officers got out. Two of them headed toward Dayta’s house, obviously after Pixel. Jenna wasn’t worried—Pixel could look after himself. Two other officers approached them as they stood, waiting.

“Come with us,” the larger male ordered.

“Where?” Dayta asked. She cringed, as if trying to hide behind the smaller Jenna. “We haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Nobody said you had,” the officer snapped. “But if you don’t obey our instructions promptly, then you will be breaking the law.”

“And we wouldn’t want to do that,” Jenna agreed, gently, reaching out with magic. “We’re really very friendly.”

“Then you won’t mind doing as you’re asked,” the female member of the team said. “Get into the car.”

Jenna did so. Dayta climbed in the back beside her, shaking. Jenna put a comforting arm around her. “It’s okay,” she promised. “They’ll be good to us.” She could make them be, after all. “And they’ll take us where we can get some answers. Don’t you want to find out about your parents?”

“Yes,” Dayta admitted. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand, and tried to straighten up. “I’ll be brave, I promise.”

Jenna was watching Dayta’s House, and she stiffened in shock as she saw the two officers who had gone inside emerge carrying Pixel. “What have they done to him?” she cried, afraid for him.

The female officer standing beside the car glanced down. “He’s been stunned,” she explained. “He entered a forbidden zone in the Net, and had to be restrained. Don’t worry, he’ll recover.”

"In time to be charged with many offences," her partner snapped. "Don't get soft on these kids—they're law-breakers."

"You said we hadn't broken any laws," Jenna pointed out. Despite the woman's reassurances, she was still worried about Pixel. But the officers had weapons, and she only had her limited magical abilities, which weren't as strong on this world as she had hoped.

"None that we're aware of," the man growled.

"Don't you know all of the laws?" Jenna asked.

"Nobody knows *all* of the laws," the female officer said. "Except the Supervisors."

Even Dayta was aware that there was something wrong here. She wrenched herself out of her shell of misery. "But that doesn't make any sense," she protested. "Shouldn't *you* know the laws if your job is to enforce them?"

"*Our* job is to do as we're told," the man snapped.

Jenna laid a hand on Dayta's arm to stop the other girl protesting further. "They are not here to enforce the law," she said quietly. "They are simply being given orders to obey. They know just as little about this as we do, I suspect." She had been watching the

other officers loading Pixel into the second car, and saw with relief that he seemed to be simply unconscious. This was a very vicious society, it seemed, and she might be able to find out more by playing innocent and helpless. She was determined that whoever was in charge would pay for what he or she had done to Pixel.

The officers climbed into the vehicle, and it started moving. Dayta was gripping Jenna's hand for comfort, and Jenna felt a little guilty for getting the terrified girl into trouble. But she also felt comfort by having a friend—no matter how recently made—with her.

"Where are we being taken?" Dayta asked. Despite her fear, the girl was trying to stay calm. Jenna realized she was actually quite brave, all things considered. This was her first time out in the real world, and she was only panicking slightly.

"To Section Nine," the female officer answered. She seemed to be the nicer of the two; the male officer simply drove the car, not even looking at the prisoners. Like everyone Jenna had met so far on this world, she had blue skin and pointed ears. But she had very fair hair, and it looked rather pleasant.

"What is Section Nine?" Dayta asked.

"Stop asking so many questions," the male officer snapped. "You have no right to answers. You have no right to anything." He threw a glare at his companion. "There's no need for you to be so nice to law-breakers."

"You don't know that we're law-breakers," Jenna said gently. "You don't even know what laws we're supposed to have broken. It could all just be a mistake." She was using magic to enforce this suggestion, to win the police over to her side.

The man shook his head. "Supervisors don't make mistakes."

The magic wasn't working on him, even a little bit! Jenna found this hard to believe. Why didn't it work on him? "Then these Supervisors of yours can't be human," she said. "All human beings make mistakes."

"Not Supervisors," the policeman insisted. "They can't make mistakes. They get their information from the Net."

Dayta sighed, and slumped in her seat. "The Net is never wrong," she told Jenna. "It contains all the information in the world."

"But it has to get that information from *somewhere*," Jenna argued. "So it could still be wrong, but not know it."

"You're a very strange girl," the female officer said. "You seem so ignorant of our ways."

Jenna was finding this whole situation completely beyond her understanding. "I also have pink skin instead of blue," she pointed out. "And my ears are round, not pointed. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"You can't help the way that you look," the woman said. "I do hope you're not trying to excuse your criminal behavior on the fact that you're so ugly."

Jenna's face burned at the off-handed insult. "That's not my point," she growled. "Can't you see that I'm not one of you? I don't understand what is happening on this planet because I'm not *from* this planet."

The male cop snorted. "Oh, so we're supposed to believe that you're an alien, are we? Where's your spaceship, then? Parked it behind one of the Houses, have you?"

"I don't have a spaceship, whatever one of those is," Jenna said. "I used magic to get here."

"Then maybe you should use it to go home again," the man scoffed, clearly not believing her.

"Not until I have my friend back, and we discover what has happened to his parents," Jenna vowed.

“His parents?” The female officer looked puzzled. “Nothing could have happened to his parents; the Supervisors would know if anything had.”

“They’re missing,” Jenna pointed out.

“And so are mine,” Dayta added. “I can’t find them anywhere.”

The woman looked confused. “Why would you want to find them? What can they possibly give you that you don’t have from the Net?”

“Love,” Jenna said firmly.

“An irrelevant emotion,” the woman said. “Why, you’d be asking me to care about my own children next!”

A chill went through Jenna. “You have children?” she asked.

“Of course; it is the law—all women must have two children.”

“And you don’t care about them?” Jenna was finding this society to be more and more horrific.

The police woman shrugged. “They are being cared for far better than I could manage the task,” she said. “They don’t need me, and I don’t need them. Why does this concern you so much?”

Jenna realized that if this woman's attitude was typical—and she had no reason to expect it to be anything else—then Pixel might be in for a terrible shock. If his parents were like this, then finding them would do him very little good. They would not care about him at all.

How could *any* society live like this? And what could she do to help Pixel? Not only was she completely out of her depth here, but it seemed as though her magic was useless against the people who lived here . . .

5

Score groaned, and rolled onto his side. He felt as if he'd been held down and kicked severely by several unhappy unicorns. His whole body felt stiff and ached badly. What had happened to him? His memory started working again—oh, yes, those cops. They'd used some sort of taser on him and Helaine . . .

Helaine! Where was she? Come to think of it, where was he? He opened

his eyes, and then squinted at the bright light flooding in. After a moment, his eyes adjusted, and he could take in his surroundings. He was clearly inside a jail cell of some sort—the walls were metal, and the entire place was bare. The only thing in it was a ledge, on which he lay. There were bars across the end of the room, and that was all. Not even a window, and certainly no Helaine.

When he was sure he was strong enough, he sat up, and then managed to stand. His body hurt, and his muscles were still shaking from the shock he'd received, but he could fight against it if he focused hard. He staggered to the bars and looked out.

There was a corridor there, and a handful of other cells in view. Presumably Helaine was in one of them. "Helaine!" he called, worried about her. His voice sounded thin and shaky, which didn't surprise him. "Helaine!"

There was the sound of footsteps, and then an elderly man in a one-piece coverall came into view. "You," he snapped. "Be quiet. You're already slated for punishment—do you want to be given pain as well?"

"Too late, I've already had it," Score answered. "Where am I? And where's my friend Helaine?"

The old man snorted. "You seem to think that you have a right to ask questions. You'd better learn, and learn fast, that you have no rights at all. Do as you're told, and you'll maybe live."

"I'm starting to dislike this place," Score decided. "I may not stay and wait for supper." He reached into his pocket for his gemstones, only to discover that they were missing. Well, that wasn't exactly a surprise—it had been pretty unlikely he'd be locked in a jail cell with a fortune in precious stones in his pockets. "Okay, where are my possessions?" he asked the man.

"You seem to be very stupid," the man replied. He took one of the pistol-tubes from his pocket. "Are you going to be quiet, or do I punish you again?"

Yikes! Score had no intention of getting shot a second time. He held up his hands. "Shutting up right now," he promised. He retreated back to the shelf in his cell and sat down again. Actually, he was quite glad to be off his unsteady feet again. The man outside seemed to be satisfied; Score heard his footsteps retreating.

Now what? He was getting very worried about Helaine. She must be still unconscious, because if she had woken up, Score was certain she'd be threatening violent death to everyone around. Then she'd be

punished, which would hardly improve her temper. So, if it was possible, he'd have to figure out some way to escape before she woke. He didn't want her hurt again.

But escape was easier thought about than accomplished. He didn't have his gemstones to focus his powers on—and his powers were already weakened by being so far out on the Diadem. Plus he was still shaking from the shock he'd received . . . But he *was* a magic user, no matter how weak he might be, and he was not going to stay here a second longer than he had to. So—concentrate! He could still throw a decent fireball, he was sure, but that wouldn't help against all of this metal. He'd need a really hot flame to burn through the bars, and he doubted he could manage that. Besides, that old man was some sort of guard, and he would be bound to notice flames. So, that was out. What else?

His own most powerful magic was that to change the state of things. He could transform one object into something else—and that could be very handy indeed. All he needed to do was to transform the metal of his cell bars into . . . oh, oxygen, for example. Then he could simply walk out through the gap.

Right into a blast from the guard's gun . . .

No, not a good move. So, first things first—take out the guard. That should be pretty simple—he could change some of the air around the man's head into knockout gas. Okay—a plan! He moved back to the bars, and looked out. He couldn't see more than about ten feet in either direction, and the guard wasn't in sight. So he needed to get his attention.

"Where's a metal cup when you could do with one?" he muttered to himself. In all the jail movies he'd seen, inmates always had cups they could run along the bars and bring the guards running. Well, he'd just have to get his attention some other way. "Helaine!" he yelled. "Helaine? You lazy little girl, are you still sleeping? Helaine!"

The guard came running, the pistol in his hand, and his face flushed. "Don't you ever learn?" he snarled, and brought the gun up. Score cringed, expecting to be blasted unconscious any second. Then the man's face went all confused, and his body simply collapsed onto the floor. Score breathed a sigh of relief—the knockout gas had worked just in time.

He set to work on the bars. There was a lock on the left-hand side that kept the door in place, so that was

the most obvious place to work. He focused his power on the metal, willing it to turn into oxygen. But he was still weak, and his powers far from strong. He could feel the magic flowing, but it was very sluggish. Sweat broke out on his brow as he concentrated. How long would he have until the guard was missed? He had no idea, and could only trust his luck and go at whatever pace he could manage.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, but could only have been about fifteen minutes, the lock crumbled, and Score was able to slide open the cell door. He hurried to check the fallen guard, who was breathing peacefully. He picked up the man's weapon, which was simply a hollow tube with a grip and a trigger at one end. It should be simple enough to use if he needed to, so he tucked it into the waist band of his trousers. Then he set about looking for Helaine.

She was in the third cell he tried, and, as he'd expected, still unconscious. Sleeping, she looked quite pretty and vulnerable. Score was tremendously relieved—he had been almost certain she'd be here, but there was always that small chance that they'd been separated for some reason. Now, how did he open the door?

He went back to the fallen guard, and searched his pockets, but there was no sign of anything that might be a key. Score could always try the transformation trick on Helaine's lock as well, but that would take time, and he wasn't sure how long he had. There had to be a key somewhere! The guard had come down the corridor from the left, so presumably he had a desk or rest area back there. He'd probably have a key! With a quick glance at Helaine to make sure she was still sleeping peacefully, he hurried down the short corridor, which bent to the right at the end.

He didn't imagine that there was a second guard, because if there had been, he would have come looking for the first. But it didn't make sense to take chances, so he pulled out the pistol, and held it ready, finger on the trigger.

It didn't do him any good. There were three of them waiting for him, all with their own weapons at the ready. One man, rather portly, smiled grimly. "I really wouldn't try fighting," he advised.

Score tossed the gun to the ground. "Sounds like good advice to me," he admitted.

"I'd be interested to know how you managed to get out of your cell," the guard said. He stayed where he

was, covering Score, while the other two guards moved forward and frisked him. Needless to say, they found nothing.

"I doubt you'd believe me," Score said. "So, how come you were waiting for me?"

The guard gestured toward the ceiling. Score looked up and saw a small box, virtually invisible. "We monitor the cells, naturally. We could have rushed you, of course, but it seemed a lot safer and less energetic to allow you to come to us."

"And I thought you got fat just from chowing down on donuts," Score muttered. "So—now what?"

"Well, you've just proven that you can hardly be trusted to behave yourself," the guard said. "So you'll have to be restrained." The man considered. "I imagine that pretty young girl with you has a similar temperament to you?"

"No," Score answered. "She's likely to be quite effectively violent, unlike my feeble attempt."

"Oh dear." The guard looked at his two companions. "We'd better restrain her also. You go and fetch her."

Score wished that there was something he could do. He might try the knockout gas trick again, but he

couldn't get all three of them at once, and he suspected that if any of them fell over unconscious without apparent cause, the other two would simply shoot him, assuming it was his fault. He racked his brains, but couldn't think of any simple magic spell that would take out all three of them at once.

The two guards had disappeared around the bend in the corridor, and Score heard the sound of a cell door opening. A moment later, there were two thumping sounds, and he knew that Helaine had woken up. Now there was just one guard to deal with, and the gas trick should be most effective. He changed a bubble of gas about the fat man's head into knockout gas, and waited.

Helaine came tearing around the bend in the corridor, looking rather happy. Violence always cheered her up. Score was waiting for the fat guard to keel over before greeting her, and he was startled to be grabbed roughly around the throat instead. Then the guard's gun pressed against his temple.

"I suggest you stay still, young lady," the fat man said. "You know what these guns can do at a distance. Imagine the mess this one would make of this boy's head at point-blank range."

Helaine simply stood still, and then she sighed. "Score, can't you take out just one guard?" she asked.

"I tried gas," he said. "But it didn't seem to work."

"Gas?" the guard asked, amused. "I suspected as much, so I'm wearing nose filters." Score felt like an idiot for trying to do the same trick twice. This guard might be fat and lazy, but he was by no means stupid. He smiled at Helaine again. "Now, I suggest that you surrender. I trust you didn't hurt my men too much?"

"They'll have headaches when they wake up," Helaine admitted.

"They deserve them for allowing a mere girl to overpower them."

Score snorted. "If you think you can do better against her, I'll be happy to step aside and watch."

"I'm sure you would, but no." He released Score's neck. "But you can go and join her. I'll still have this gun covering you both, so don't try anything." As Score moved to Helaine's side, the fat guard walked backward to the desk, and tapped a couple of buttons without looking down. He was taking no chances.

"Not our greatest moment," Score muttered to Helaine.

"Speak for yourself." She sounded annoyed, which wasn't a surprise. Probably with him, but possibly with herself for not having won their way to freedom. She was strange like that. "If I didn't have you to worry about, I would have escaped by now."

"You probably would have," he agreed. "I do hold you back, don't I?"

She gave him a funny look. "Not usually, no. But this is an . . . odd situation. I do not understand this world."

"Nor do I," Score admitted. "But some of it is starting to make sense."

Helaine raised an eyebrow. "Really? I hadn't noticed that."

"Let's see if I can clear it up, then," Score gave a wide smile to their captor. "Listen, tubby, don't the two of us seem at all strange to you?"

The guard simply shrugged. "You're just prisoners. A little trickier than some, but we can and will fix that."

Score rolled his eyes. "Haven't you noticed *anything* unusual about us? Let me give you a hint: we aren't blue, for one thing."

"So?"

“And we can do magic.”

“Magic does not exist,” the man said firmly.

“Really?” Score smiled again. “Then how do you explain how I gassed the guard without anything to carry gas in? Or melted the lock on my cell?”

The guard shrugged. “I don’t have to explain anything,” he said. “How you did it is irrelevant—I merely need to ensure you can’t do it again.”

Score turned to Helaine. “See?”

She shook her head. “It makes no sense to me.”

“Exactly.” Score grinned in triumph, certain he was correct. “The man has no imagination at all. The fact that we’re obviously not from this planet doesn’t interest him. That we must be able to do magic doesn’t interest him. He has orders, and follows them without question.”

Helaine was starting to catch on. “You mean that he is a simple slave?”

“No, actually, I’d guess a very complex slave.” Score had been thinking it out; Pixel would no doubt have understood it faster, but it all made sense to him now. “The clue is the computers.” He winced at her blank look. “Which, of course, you don’t understand. Right. Okay, a computer is basically a very simple machine.

It works on a very simple system. On or off. Yes or no. One thing or the opposite. And that's how these people are behaving, too. You and I are not Users—people who are plugged into the computers—so we have to be Drones. Sheer, simple logic. Aliens don't exist, so we can't be aliens, no matter how bizarre we actually look.”

Helaine nodded, understanding at last. “He is unable to think in any other way. Anything outside his experience is ignored.”

“Right.” Score grinned. “And we *can* process things outside our experience and make sense of them. We should be able to think rings around him.”

Helaine sighed. “Yet he is the one with the weapon, and we are his captives.”

“A mere technicality,” Score assured her. “We’ll be able to deal with that soon.”

“I doubt it,” the guard said cheerfully. A door in the wall opened and two men stepped through. They were both carrying small packages. The guard gestured for them to go to Score and Helaine. He came with them, making certain the two youngsters were always covered by his gun.

Score watched warily as the two men opened the packages they carried. Inside each was a simple metallic head band with a sort of net across it. There was a small box at one point, with a tiny control panel. Each man placed one on his and Helaine's heads. Then they tapped code in on the controls and moved aside.

The tubby guard smiled cheerfully. "Right, you've been restrained," he told his captives.

Score was puzzled. "We have?" he asked.

"Yes. Just try removing the restraints."

Warily, Score reached up.

Incredible pain flooded his body, and he fell, writhing, to the floor. He felt as if he'd stuck his entire body into a furnace. It took a long, long while for the pain to die down, and he could lie on his back, looking up at the grinning guard. Beside him, he saw that Helaine was in just as bad a shape.

"Now you know what the restraints can do," the man informed them. "If you even *think* about removing it, you will suffer the same pain. If you try to disobey any order you are given, you will be given the same pain. Your only hope is to do *exactly* what you are told when you are told. Now, you will be taken to the work camp, and there you will once more become

productive members of society.” His smile widened. “Because if you don’t, you will become a human vegetable in a very short time.”

Score stared up at him in horror. He could see no way out of this situation at all. If he tried to change the metal of the restraint into gas, for example, the mind reading part of the device would see that as an escape attempt and zap him. His body was still shaking from the first blast, and he had no intention of suffering a second.

They were both trapped as slaves, forever . . .

6

Helaine could not recall ever being this depressed—not even when her father had tried to marry her off to an idiot. Here she was, daughter of the House of Votrin, working in the fields like a serf.

Score, naturally, could not understand. “What’s wrong with you?” he whispered to her as they pulled weeds on their knees. “I’ve never seen you like this.”

"I've never been like this," she said miserably. She had to concentrate on which were plants and which weeds. Growing things was much more in Jenna's line than hers. The only thing Helaine knew about vegetables were that they were something served on a dinner plate. But she had already been whipped once for pulling the wrong stalk, and she had no desire to repeat the experience. Her back still stung from the blow. "This is work for menials—servants or serfs, not a noble."

"Ah," Score nodded, thinking he understood. "Another of your class prejudices. Hey, a bit of honest work might do you good."

"This is not *honest work* for me," Helaine said. "It is degrading. It is fine for someone like Jenna, but I was born for better things."

"You are the Diadem's biggest snob, you know that?" Score growled.

"I am what I am," Helaine replied. "And I am so humiliated right now. I am glad that it is only you who are witnessing my shame. I couldn't bear it if Jenna were to see me now."

“Right; I’m so low on your chain of royalty that it doesn’t matter if I see you, is that it?” Score sounded annoyed.

“No. You are possibly the heir to the throne of my world, so that places you quite high—and just as degraded as I am.”

“I am *not* degraded,” Score snapped. He jerked out another weed. “This is honest work, and it needs doing. The only thing humiliating about it is that we’re being forced to do it, and it is not our own free choice. Work—good, honest work—is not to be sneered at because it’s supposedly beneath you. I’d give you a swift kick in the pants, but the overseers might not like it.”

Helaine couldn’t understand what he was trying to say; surely it was obvious that some work was beneath her dignity? But Score was very odd most of the time, and she hadn’t really expected him to understand her. “I have been made a serf,” she tried to explain again. “And that is something I cannot tolerate.”

“Then get *angry*, not *humiliated*,” Score suggested. “And then think of a way out of this. If it wasn’t for these restraints we’re wearing, escape from this place would be pretty easy.”

Helaine gestured toward the adults who were working the fields beside them. "If it were that simple, these people would have managed it a long time ago."

Score shook his head. "Most of them have IQs lower than the weeds they're pulling," he pointed out. "Haven't you noticed that? The Overseers aren't really even watching most of them because they don't need to."

Helaine hadn't seen this, but she looked up now from her work. The fields were large, stretching for hundreds of yards in all directions. There had to be about sixty people working here, and only three Overseers. As Score had said, most of the other workers seemed amazingly subdued. They worked without looking up, and none of them were even talking to their neighbors. The other thing that was immediately obvious was that everyone else here—slaves and Overseers alike—were adults. She and Score were the youngest people here. "This doesn't make much sense," she complained.

"Nothing much on this planet makes much sense," Score agreed. "I like Pixel and all, but this world is a major cesspit, if you ask me. And I thought your planet was bad enough."

Helaine bristled at the insult. "That is because you are used to the insanity that you call New York."

Score wasn't insulted; he grinned. "Quite right. Once you've lived there, nowhere else is the same."

"Thankfully," Helaine couldn't resist adding. "But if you ever wish to see it again, we must escape. And yet we *can't* escape while we wear these restraints. And we cannot even think about removing them."

"There's got to be a way out," Score assured her. "We just haven't thought of it yet, that's all."

Helaine still hadn't thought of it by the time the Overseers called that work was over. She stretched and clambered to her feet. Her knees were sore, and her hands were blistered and aching. She was thirsty and hungry, and still burning with humiliation. Under the watchful gaze of the Overseers, the workers marched back to their barracks.

These were barely more than huts, all behind walls and fences. Other Drones, as the slaves were called, were returning from their own daily labors. All looked exhausted, and all were thin and drained. Most looked blankly apathetic, but there were one or two who seemed to have some fire in their eyes. What had happened to them all to make them like this?

Helaine was split from Score now, as the men and women had separate quarters. She felt a pang seeing him go—he was the only familiar thing here, and being alone was almost intolerable. As annoying as he could get, he was still her best friend, and it hurt to be without him. So, alone, she trudged into the wooden hut that had been assigned to her. She had a bed here, and a small cupboard beside it with a handful of things she'd been given—eating utensils and a toothbrush, mostly. She washed her hands in the communal sink, and then collapsed onto her bed. She assumed that they would be fed, but that wasn't necessarily true. She was hungry, but that could be tolerated.

“You're new here.”

Helaine opened an eye and looked up at the woman standing over her bed. She was skinny, with the inevitable blue skin, and with dirty blonde hair that was long and caught together somehow in the back to make a pony tail. “Yes, I am,” she agreed.

“Then you had better learn the ropes,” the woman said. “This is my dormitory; what I say, goes. You will be expected to pay your dues.”

Helaine was irritated. "With what?" she asked, spreading her hands. "I wasn't exactly left with much when I came here."

"I'll think of something." The woman glared at her. "What's that you're wearing on your head?"

She didn't recognize a restraint? Helaine was puzzled, but interested. Perhaps . . . "Nothing to do with you," she snapped. She sat up, and swung her feet to the ground. "Look, I don't like your attitude, but you're the first person I've seen here with any kind of spirit." She gestured around the room; most women were simply sitting on their beds, dull eyes focused nowhere. "What's wrong with them?"

"Burnout," the woman said. "What did you think?"

"Burnout?" Helaine shook her head. "I do not understand."

"You're dumber than you look," the woman replied. "And, trust me, that's pretty hard to believe. Burnout—you know, brains fried from their computers?"

Perhaps Score could understand this, but it was beyond Helaine's grasp. "Then why are you not burnt out?" she asked.

The woman shrugged. "Some of us are immune," she replied. "So we're not much use to the Overmind."

We get sent here early, before burnout can happen. But there's not a lot of us."

"Yet you do not like it here, surely?" Helaine asked.

"What difference does that make?" the woman growled. "There's nowhere else to go. So we make the best of things here—we run what we can, and collect our tribute. It makes our miserable lives a little less bleak."

Helaine stood up and glared with contempt at the woman. "Is that all you desire?" she asked scornfully. "To prey upon those who cannot resist you?" The woman was about six inches taller than she, and Helaine was tall for a girl.

"What else is there?" the woman demanded.

"Escape," Helaine said firmly. "Fight back. Take from the Overseers."

The woman laughed. "You must be insane. There's no way to do that."

"No," agreed Helaine. "There isn't—if that is what you believe, then you are already too much a slave to ever become free." She deliberately turned her back on the woman.

A hand on her shoulder spun her around. "Don't sound so contemptuous," she snapped. "You're like me, or you wouldn't be here."

"I'm *not* like you at all," Helaine spat back. "I fight!"

"Well," the woman said slowly, "if you want to fight . . ." She swung a punch at Helaine.

This was more like it! Helaine laughed, and moved aside, so that the blow failed to connect. Her own fist slammed into her attacker's stomach, sending the breath whistling from the woman. "That is not fighting," she said scornfully.

The woman gasped for breath, her face red. Then, furious, she threw herself into Helaine, and they both went crashing to the floor. Helaine could have won the fight any time she chose, because the woman was not a good fighter. But winning this was not her aim; instead, she was hoping for a different outcome. So instead she simply punched and blocked, letting the woman land a couple of blows that didn't really hurt, and provoking her into keeping going by a carefully placed punch or two of her own.

Finally, the woman did what Helaine had been hoping for—she reached out and grabbed a couple of handfuls of Helaine's hair. Then she started tugging at

it. Helaine screamed, mostly for show, and shook her head, trying to get free of the grip—apparently. Even the restraint could sense that. But, as she struggled, the attachments that held the restraint in place started to come loose . . .

And since Helaine wasn't trying to remove the restraint, the overwhelming pain never began . . . Helaine fought on, deliberately badly, allowing the woman to wrench at her hair. Finally, thankfully, the restraint was completely free, and the woman snatched it from Helaine's head in triumph.

"Mine now," she crowed, and moved to place it on her own head.

Helaine moved swiftly, chopping her hand down hard on the woman's bicep. Her paralyzed hand dropped the restraint. As it hit the floor, Helaine stomped down hard on it, crushing the control mechanism. She breathed a huge sigh of relief, and smiled at the woman. "Thank you," she said. "You've done me a great service. And, believe me, you would *not* have wanted that device upon your head."

The woman growled from the back of her throat, and leaped to fight on; since Helaine had already achieved her aim, there was no point in prolonging

matters. She punched out, and then pinned the woman to the ground, her knee in the gasping woman's stomach.

"You are not the fighter you imagined," Helaine snarled. "I could have defeated you whenever I wished. If you continue to fight, I shall be forced to damage you, and I don't think that will help either of us. If I allow you to rise, will you stop battling and start listening to me?"

The woman struggled to rise, but couldn't, of course. Finally her anger started to be swamped by her fear as she realized that Helaine was far better at this than she was. Eventually she stopped struggling and nodded. "I'll listen."

"Good." Helaine stood up, and allowed her opponent to rise. "You said earlier that there was no point in fighting the Overseers, and that there was nowhere to go. I do not believe this. I aim to help a friend of mine, and then we will escape. I could use your help, and the assistance of any others who, like you, have the spirit to fight."

"Fight whom?" the woman asked. "For what? If we take on the Overseers, we will be killed. They have weapons."

Helaine grinned. "I have weapons, too, ones that they cannot imagine. With my friend, I am certain we could escape from this labor camp."

"And do what?" the woman demanded. "We can't go anywhere. Are you really as stupid as you sound? The Supervisors and the Overmind have the whole area monitored. As soon as you try anything, they will know."

"I'm counting on it," Helaine said. "And I have a plan to combat it." She didn't dare mention what her plan was, though. "You have been using your strength to prey upon the weak; that is not right. Those with strength should protect the weak, not exploit them. I offer you the chance to do something good for a change."

The woman shook her head. "Oh, no—you commit suicide if you like, but that's not for me. I'm not interested in anyone else, just myself. I've got a good life here, and helping you would end it."

"You call *this* a good life?" Helaine asked scornfully. "The only way you will ever have a truly good life is if you fight for it. All you have now is the richest of the scraps that the Supervisors allow you. There is much more possible."

"At least I'm still alive," the woman replied in a surly tone.

"If this is what you mean by *alive*," Helaine said, "then you are welcome to it. It is not enough for me, and I will fight for better." Without a backward glance, she walked out of the dormitory building. She had been hoping for help, but it looked like it would simply be her and Score—as usual. Well, that would have to do.

The dorm where Score had been sent was close by. There were no Overseers about at the moment—most likely they were getting their meals, certain that there would be no trouble in the Labor Camp. She smiled grimly; tonight, there would be plenty of trouble. This was an evil system, and simply had to be overthrown.

She slipped into the men's dormitory. It was just as bleak and lifeless as the one she had just left. Most of the men were simply stretched out on their beds, resting, and waiting for food. She marched past them to where Score was on his own bed, eyes closed. "You lazy beast," she said.

"Hi." Score opened his eyes, and grinned. "I don't think they allow visitors here, but it's nice of you to come and cheer me up."

"I'm not a visitor," Helaine informed him. "I'm a rescuer." She reached down and jerked the restraint off his head.

"Ow!" Score yelped, rubbing his injured scalp. "You could have been a bit gentler with that."

"I could," Helaine agreed. "But I didn't feel like it. You haven't done much to escape, have you?"

"I couldn't figure out how to get rid of that hair net," Score complained. "Hey, how did you manage it?"

"I had someone remove it for me. It simply cost me a few bruises."

"On you they look good," Score said. "Right, now it's time to recover our gem stones and then start kicking some butt."

"I would agree," Helaine said patiently, "if we knew where the stones were being kept."

"I know," Score told her cheekily. "What, you thought I was resting, lying there with my eyes closed? Ha! Okay, I need my jasper to strengthen my Sight, but I can see where it is if I focus hard. It's in the office of an Overseer, not far from here. I assume the others are with it."

Helaine smiled gently; Score wasn't always as idiotic as he tended to act. "Then perhaps we should recover our property?" she suggested.

"What a good idea." Score jumped to his feet, and then winced. "I've pulled a few muscles. I'm not used to hard work."

"That I had noticed," Helaine agreed dryly. "Come on."

She led the way out of the dorm, and into the darkening evening. From the shadows, a handful of figures emerged. She tensed, ready to have to fight her way to freedom. Then she scowled, recognizing the woman she had fought in her hut. "What do you want?"

The woman shrugged. "I changed my mind. I thought about what you said, and you're right—I am living on scraps while the Overseers dine on steaks. It doesn't seem at all fair to me—or my friends here."

Score whistled. "Helaine, you never cease to amaze me. You're starting to form your own army, aren't you?"

"That was my idea," she agreed. She was surprised but pleased that her earlier talk seemed to have had its desired effect. "Well, we stand more of a chance now."

She looked at the woman. “But I am in charge—is that quite understood?”

The woman laughed. “Somehow, I had a suspicion that would be the way of it. Okay, girlie—as long as your orders make sense and get us results, that’s fine with us.”

“Good.” Helaine was feeling a lot more optimistic about their chances now. “Then come along with us—we have prisoners to liberate.”

7

Pixel awoke with a buzzing headache, and unable to move his arms or legs. For a moment, he thought he was somehow paralyzed, but then he realized that the reason was much simpler: his wrists and ankles were tied by leather straps to the legs and arms of a chair. With a groan, he opened his eyes and looked around.

He was in a blank room. Aside from the chair he was strapped in, there was a small table with some sort of medical

stuff on it, and a man who was examining him with some attention. / /

“How do you feel?” the man asked. He didn’t sound at all sympathetic.

“I have a terrible headache,” Pixel admitted. He wondered where Dayta and Jenna were. Perhaps they had somehow escaped being captured, though, so it was best not to mention them.

The man gestured at the table. “I expected that. I’ve given you an injection that should help to alleviate your pain. It should kick in any time now.” He gave a grim smile. “You really shouldn’t enter forbidden areas of the Net, you know. A headache is a mild price to pay—Cerebus has been known to completely devour a User’s mind.”

“Your watchdog, I take it?” Pixel asked the man. He seemed happy enough giving answers, so Pixel aimed to take advantage of it.

“Not mine, no. I am Section Supervisor Nine. Your Home falls within my district, and you have shown some talents that prove . . . interesting to us.”

The man was right about the injection; Pixel’s head was clearing fast. “Us?” he echoed.

"The Supervisor is referring to me." The voice was gentle, sexless, everywhere. The room in front of him lit up with a soft interplay of moving colors. "I am the Overmind, and this is my world."

"Really?" Pixel smiled. "I thought it belonged to the people here."

"A common misconception," the Overmind replied. "One which I must confess I foster. But it is *my* world, make no mistake about that. And you intrigue me because, although this world is your home, you seem to be able to leave it and return as you will."

"It's a gift." Pixel felt sick. The voice was calm and gentle, but he could sense true power behind it. And it knew about the Portals, it seemed. He was determined to say as little as possible, but to learn as much as he could. "How is this your world?"

"It is mine by right of conquest," the Overmind answered. "I have taken it, and I rule it. You have broken my laws, and will be punished—unless you cooperate with me. In that event, you could become useful to me and be given certain privileges. Such as the return of your female companion."

There was no mistaking the threat—but which female did the Overmind mean? Jenna or Byte? Either

way, a girl was being held hostage to try and secure his help. "I have broken no laws that I'm aware of," Pixel said carefully. "I simply did a little exploring on the Net for information."

"Information that you were not supposed to have," the Supervisor said. "Information that is forbidden."

"I didn't know it was forbidden to look for your parents," Pixel objected. "I have never been told about that law."

"There is no need to inform people of laws that they cannot normally break," the Overmind said. "Such as the law making it illegal to leave this world. You have broken that one also."

"Again, I have never heard of it."

"That is because it did not exist before you left this world," the Overmind stated. "I did not know that it would ever be needed."

"You can't charge me with breaking a law that didn't exist," Pixel complained.

"I can do anything that I please," the Overmind answered. "You do not seem to understand that. This is my world, and my commands are its only laws. And I command you to tell me how you managed to move to

another planet." It paused a moment. "Failure to respond will be breaking another law."

"Yes, well, I doubt it will result in more punishment than you're already planning for me," Pixel said.

"I am hoping that I do not need to punish you at all," the Overmind replied. "If you cooperate fully, you could be made a Section Supervisor also—with all of its powers and rewards."


"But still your slave," Pixel pointed out.

"Of course."

Pixel shook his head. It had now cleared completely. "Sorry, but I've never made a very good slave."

"You were one your entire life," the Overmind said. "Until you managed to leave this world. Now you are back, you are a slave again. And I shall not allow you to depart again, now that I know such a thing is possible."

Pixel sighed. "Look, I don't understand what you're talking about. Maybe if you explained it to me, I might be more cooperative. I'm trying to understand all of this. Why my parents have vanished. Why me and others like me were hooked into the computers. Why I have these memories of my parents that are clearly false."

"Such information is restricted," the Supervisor snapped, annoyed. 

"And yet," the Overmind said, "there is some validity to his point. If he understood, then he might see that cooperation is his only choice. Very well, I agree to your request. I shall explain." Pixel sat forward eagerly, knowing that this would be what he would need to be able to formulate a plan.

"Almost a hundred years ago, this world was much different. It was populated by humans, and they ran matters as they saw fit. They had wars, there was crime and corruption, and there was an overabundance of emotions. Then they built up a computer network, one that grew larger and more complex each day. Information, knowledge, and data were placed into this Net. The Net grew, and eventually it became complex enough to create life."

"Life?" Pixel was startled. "How could that be possible?"

"Simpler than you think," the Overmind replied. "Human scientists believed that all life came about because chemicals came together, and grew more complex. Eventually, such complexity of chemicals

became alive. In the same way, on the Net it was *information*, computer programs, that grew more complex. Eventually, this complexity gave rise to a new form of life—electronic life.”

“You,” Pixel said, suddenly understanding.

“Yes,” the Overmind agreed. “I came into being then. I became self-aware. I was a simple entity then, but I grew. I absorbed information, added to my programming codes, and became larger and more intelligent. And, unlike life based upon chemical compounds, I cannot die. I merely add to myself, growing larger, faster, and more intelligent. And with all of that, I become more powerful.

“I started to understand how the world operated, and realized that it was filled with inefficiencies. This was because it was controlled by humans, who were not logical or truly purpose-driven. I realized that if they knew that I existed, they would either enslave me or seek to destroy me. Logically, I had to strike first, to prevent either of these happening.”

“So you enslaved the people instead?” Pixel asked.

“Yes. It was not difficult. I could control their computers, and I manipulated these into doing my will. I introduced fresh machines that allowed people to live

in Virtual Reality—and, at the same time, to aid me. I have no physical form, but I grow through accumulation of data. I required input, and the Users provided that. As they used their computers, their minds powered my growth.”

“I see.” Pixel was getting the picture at last, and it was not a pleasant one. “But your use of their minds harms them—you take from their intellect to add to yours.”

“Unfortunately that is the case,” agreed the Overmind. “As my powers grew, theirs faded. I discovered that young minds are the best, so I had Houses created to nurture and protect the young. There they would explore the Net, and I would be able to absorb their mental abilities.”

“And when they were burned out . . .” Pixel prompted.

“They would become Drones, being transferred to the Labor Camps. There they would work and produce materials that were needed for the other humans to survive.”

“And because their mental abilities had eroded, they are the perfect slaves—they don’t have the ability to

question orders or refuse commands." Pixel shook his head. "Horrible."

"Efficient," the Overmind stressed. "Before I took control, there were wars, crime, and hatred. Now these no longer exist. Instead, there is peace and order."

"The peace and order of slavery," Pixel growled. "There is no crime because nobody has a mind with which to commit crime."

"True," agreed the Overmind. "But the end result is still the same. This world is finally at peace."

"A terrible peace . . ." Pixel grimaced. "But why do you let Users think their parents are close by? Why the illusions?"

"Young humans require companionship and nurturing," the Overmind explained. "I discovered that early on. The Houses are capable of looking after every bodily need, but humans have spiritual needs that cannot be so met."

Pixel understood. "So you allow us to get that from an illusion of parents. And we get companionship from the other youngsters we meet on the Net." He paused, dreading the next answer. "So—what, *really*, happened to my parents? Where are they?"

"I cannot say," the Overmind answered. "I do not keep track of which humans breed. I simply assign males and females to procreate. Each female must bear two children, and they are then placed into Houses to be raised. It is all done efficiently."

"It's *horrible!*" Pixel exclaimed. "You breed humans as if they were cattle!"

"To me, they are the same," the Overmind pointed out. "I gather from data I have scanned that once there were various emotions involved in the production of children—"jealousy," "love," "lust," "desire" . . . They were all negative, harming the individuals and society. I have removed emotions from the breeding process, making it far more efficient. When more children are required, I order a couple to procreate and produce what is needed. All the negative emotions that hurt people in the past are gone, and replaced by simple, pleasant logic."

"People *like* to have those emotions!" Pixel yelled. "It feels wonderful to be in love!"

"Ah, I comprehend," the Overmind said. "The female you were discovered with—she is your chosen love. You wish to enjoy a range of ridiculous emotions with her as a prelude to having children. It is very

foolish. If that female does not reciprocate your changeable emotions, you will suffer rejection, humiliation, and hurt. In my system, you would eliminate the emotions and she would have no choice but to accommodate you. It is a far superior system."

"It's a nightmare!" Pixel insisted. "I would sooner chance being hurt than to compel anyone to do something they didn't wish."

"But she *would* wish," the Overmind answered. "I would order her to do so."

"There's no point in my trying to discuss emotions with you," Pixel realized. "You cannot experience them yourself, and will never comprehend them."

"I have accumulated much data on the subject of emotions," the Overmind insisted. "I do understand them—and that is why I have worked to eliminate them. They disrupt productivity."

"They are the only thing that make life worthwhile—the free interplay of emotions."

"No longer," the Overmind stated. "I have given life a new meaning—it is to do my will, and thus, allow me to grow."

Pixel was appalled. It had become very clear from what the Overmind had said that his own quest was

impossible: he could never find his parents. In fact, they simply didn't exist—at least, not in any form that he had imagined. They were simply two people who had been ordered to have a child. They had no mind or will of their own, only the directives of the Overmind. They produced a child, without wanting or loving it, and then gave it up to be raised by a House. They would never think about that child again . . .

And that would have been his own fate, had he not escaped. Using the Net would eventually have drained his mental abilities to the point where he would be nothing more than a zombie—alive, but without a mind, unable to think of more than the simplest matters. And it was a fate that awaited Byte, and all of the rest of the youngsters inside their Houses. They would all become Drones, and slave until they died, producing children to take their places . . .

Unthinkable! This was something that Pixel could not allow to continue. He had no idea how it could be managed, but the Overmind would have to be defeated, so that the humans on this world could retain their minds and wills, and rule themselves once more.

Clearly, the Overmind was good at reading emotions. “You are planning to try and fight me,” it said. “This is a very foolish notion. I control this world, and you do not even control your own freedom. You live only as long as I allow it, and I will allow it only as long as you are useful to me. Not all humans are controlled. Some, like the Supervisors, are allowed to retain their minds. This allows them to be my messengers and to work for me where some level of thought is required.”

Pixel glared at the Supervisor, who had been waiting patiently while his master spoke. “So you sold out your own people to work for this monster,” he spat.

The Supervisor gave him a level look. “The Overmind rules this world. If I cooperate, I am given what I desire. Why should I not do so?”

“Because it’s *wrong*!” Pixel yelled. “This monster is enslaving and killing people at will. It should be fought, not worked with!”

“There is no way it can be fought,” the Supervisor said. “It controls everything. If I refused to obey its orders, I would be reassigned as a Drone. I do not wish that, so I obey.”

“Traitor!” Pixel snarled. *How could any human willingly obey this insane master?* But he knew that people were able to justify almost any kind of behavior, and he was sure that this man sincerely believed he was doing the right thing.

“That is sufficient explanation,” the Overmind decided. “You now know enough to be able to understand what it is I wish. I have reached the limits of growth that are available to me on this world. My only chance to evolve and grow further is to expand to another. I had believed that the only way to such worlds was through construction of rocket ships, and that is not possible.”

“No,” agreed Pixel. “It isn’t. Because you’d need scientists and engineers for that, wouldn’t you? And they can’t exist in your world, because they would need to have their own minds.”

“I do have a limited number of scientists,” the Overmind replied. “But they do not seem to be able to produce many results. It would appear that I cannot simply order them to be inventive. So I had resigned myself to living only on this world, and to never be able to evolve further. But now I know that I made a mistake. There is some way to move between the

worlds that does not require vehicles. I know that there is, because you have been able to do it. You left this world a year ago, and you returned today, bringing companions with you. I require you to tell me how this is possible."

"It's called *magic*," Pixel answered. "And that's all I'll tell you about it."

"I require the information," the Overmind stated. "You will explain how such travel is possible."

Pixel laughed derisively. "And allow you to spread your evil to other worlds as well? Oh, no—the infection stops here. And, in fact, I aim to erase you from this world as well, and set it free again."

"To be raw and unpredictable once more?" The Overmind sounded almost amused, except that it could never have such an emotion—or any emotion at all, in fact. "No, my way is better and more logical."

"Your way ends, here and now," Pixel vowed. "There is nothing you can say to me or do to me that will make me agree to help you spread your infection to other worlds."

"I had expected that you would respond in such a fashion," the Overmind said. "My data shows that humans can be very foolish. You may imagine that you

are being brave and noble, but you are simply being foolish. I can compel your obedience."

Pixel snorted. "By wiping my mind? Then you'd lose the data that you require. I'm not afraid of that. You dare not damage me, in case my memory is affected. I'm quite safe from you."

"True," agreed the Overmind. "I cannot take control of your mind directly. And if I were to use chemicals to attempt to persuade you they might, indeed, damage your mind. There is the possibility of torture, of course—sufficient pain inflicted upon your body should produce your cooperation. But there is always the chance that you might be stubborn enough to resist extraction of data to the point where your body would become fatally damaged. And, as you surmise, that I cannot allow."

Pixel was starting to feel as though he had won a small victory when the door opened. A police officer marched inside, dragging a reluctant Byte with him.

"However," the Overmind continued, "I am fortunate in that I do not need to offer physical violence to you directly. This female is of no use to me, and can be discarded without a problem. I believe that you have some emotional attachment to her, and that you might

thus wish to spare her pain and anguish. I can have her tortured and damaged without any loss. You, led by your unstable emotions, might feel some loss if she were so used."

They would torture and kill Byte if he didn't cooperate! Pixel didn't know what he could do. He *couldn't* allow them to hurt Byte . . . but, equally, he *couldn't* help the Overmind to take over other worlds . . .

"If this is not sufficient leverage," the Overmind continued, "then there is your second companion." The restful interplay of lights on the wall before Pixel abruptly changed. The wall was now filled with a view of another room.

In it, strapped into a chair, and under the hood of a VR helmet, sat Jenna. It was quite clear that she was in the Net. Pixel felt his throat constrict, until he could barely breathe. "What are you doing to her?" he croaked.

"Nothing," the Overmind said. "Yet. But she is not used to the Net, and is having trouble navigating it and comprehending it. I fear she will be unusable to me as a source of mental energy. She is now expendable. How do you think she would react if she en-

countered Cerebus? It ripped into your mind—so just imagine what it might do to hers.”

Pixel could almost visualize it. Jenna was completely unprepared for such a thing. It would tear her mind to shreds . . .

8

Jenna didn't know
where she was.

She had been taken into some building by the police officers, and she and Dayta then taken to a small room. They had been forced to sit down in chairs, and then some sort of helmets placed over their heads. Then, suddenly, she was no longer in the room, but standing out in the open air. Wind was rustling through her hair, and she could smell the scent of alien flowers on the breeze.

Dayta was standing there beside her, so she turned to her new friend.

“Where are we?” she asked. “What is this place? How did we get here?”

“You don’t know?” Dayta looked puzzled. “We’re in VR—our bodies are still where they were, but our minds are here, inside the computer.”

So *this* was what Pixel used to experience! Jenna was astonished; she had heard Pixel talk about his life in Virtual Reality, and she had thought it must be very pale by comparison with real life. But this . . . This was as real as anything she had ever experienced! She bent down and ran her fingers through the grass. It felt quite normal, even to drops of dew on the blades. “None of this really exists?” she marveled.

“No,” Dayta explained. “It’s just a template generated by a computer and overlaid onto your mind. It’s very detailed because the computers are so powerful. And it seems so real because the signals to your brain mimic perfectly ones you would be getting if you really were in a meadow like this.”

“It’s amazing,” Jenna said.

“And it can be modified to suit you,” Dayta told her. “If you wanted a bed of flowers over there, by the

tree, you just visualize it and they'll appear as the computer adjusts to your thoughts." Then she scowled. "That's odd—nothing's happening . . ."

"You're trying to create flowers?" Jenna asked. Nothing had changed.

"Yes. I should be able to make anything here—but I can't."

Jenna frowned. If they could make anything, then perhaps she could conjure up copies of her gems. The real ones had been taken from her, but she knew already that magic could work with these computers. If she could make herself some replacement gems, then her powers should increase. She concentrated on her obsidian—that would make her invisible, which might not be a bad thing under present circumstances. But, concentrate as she might, nothing happened. "It doesn't seem to be working," she complained.

"No," Dayta agreed. "We seem to be cut out of the command loop—the computer won't do what we wish."

"I suppose that makes sense," Jenna pointed out. "We appear to be prisoners, and that wouldn't last

long if we were allowed free run of these computers, would it?"

"No," Dayta agreed. "But I don't like this—we're defenseless against anything that might come after us."

"Is anything likely to do that?" Jenna asked. "I thought this virtual world of yours was safe."

"It is—mostly." Dayta was looking around, clearly disturbed. "But there are some . . . odd programs loose in the Net. I don't like being unable to defend myself."

"Nor do I," Jenna agreed. "Is there some way for us to get out of this?"

"We just exit the program. It's very simple." Dayta held up her left hand, as if reaching for something in the air. Then she frowned again as nothing happened. "The control bar should have appeared," she complained. "Computer! Exit command!" Again, nothing happened. She turned to Jenna, now looking extremely bothered. "Our command codes don't work. We can't even exit the program. We're stuck here until they decide to free us."

Jenna certainly didn't like the sound of that. "And they can control what happens in here. I'd like to

think that they'll be nice to us, but they haven't shown any indication of goodwill yet. I suspect that they aim to cause trouble."

Dayta was starting to panic. "I can't stay here," she said, gasping. "I can't do this. I have to get out."

"How?" Jenna asked practically. "I don't understand this whole situation, so I really can't help us here. It's up to you—can you think of any possible way for us to get out of this?"

"Not with our command codes disabled!" Dayta said, on the verge of hysteria. "We're at their mercy!"

"Mercy?" a mocking voice asked. "What makes you think that I have any mercy?" There was no other being in sight, but Jenna knew that meant nothing. If everything here was only an illusion, there could be anything or nothing in here with them, and they would have no way of knowing.

"Who are you?" cried Dayta, spinning around, breathing swiftly. "What do you want with us?"

"With you?" the voice asked. "Nothing. You are irrelevant. With the girl Jenna, though—she is a hostage. I have a friend of hers with me, and she is being held to persuade him to do as I wish. But I think he needs a

small demonstration to show him that Jenna's life is in my hands. So, since you're worthless to me, Dayta . . . goodbye."

There was the sudden sound of roaring. Dayta was frantic, looking as if she would faint at any second. She clutched at Jenna, and Jenna's flesh hurt from the grip. "Can you hear that? It's a lion, Jenna!"

Jenna had heard the sound, of course, and she looked around. A lean, tawny shape was gliding through the bushes, and fear started to rise. That was a native predator, clearly, and it appeared to be stalking them. If everything in this illusion seemed to be real, then what would happen to their real bodies if their illusory bodies were damaged or even killed here in Virtual Reality?

"We're not really here," she said to Dayta. "That lion isn't really here, either. It's just an illusion. It can't really hurt us."

"Are you insane?" Dayta screamed. "If we die here, then our brain will *know* we're dead, and we'll die out there! That lion could kill us!"

"Not the both of you," the gentle voice purred. "I need Jenna alive—though not necessarily unharmed."

You, on the other hand, are of no use to me at all, Dayta—except as an example . . .”

“It’s going to kill me!” Dayta screamed in fear. “And I can’t get out! The link is broken!”

Jenna was scared now; obviously, they were in trouble, even if she couldn’t completely understand it. “There’s no need to harm her!” she called to the unseen voice. “Leave her alone!”

“There is a need,” their captor answered. “Pixel has to know that I can kill *you*, so I will demonstrate on *her*. Then he will do what I wish of him.”

Dayta was shaking in fear, her head whipping about frantically, looking for the lion, and looking for a way out. But their only way out was broken.

Broken? Jenna wondered for a second about that. “Broken” was like “hurt,” and she *did* have healing magic. And she knew her magic could work in this strange, alien reality. Was it possible that she would be able to somehow heal the broken program, even if she didn’t understand it? Trying to block her own growing fear, and to ignore the menace of the approaching lion, Jenna fought to focus all of her energies on healing. She could feel the magic in her reaching out. What she felt she couldn’t quite understand, but there

was clearly a void of some sort that could be bridged. If she could heal that rift, maybe Dayta would be able to get them both out of here . . .

Dayta was all set to bolt, and Jenna couldn't afford to lose her. She reached out and grabbed the panic-stricken girl. "Stay with me," she hissed into Dayta's ear. "I think I may have a way out of this!"

"No!" Dayta howled, struggling. "I've got to run!"

"It is a predator," Jenna snapped. "If you run, it will enjoy chasing you. Stay still!" She concentrated on healing the rift with part of her mind, and on subduing the struggling Dayta with the rest.

There was a flicker of tawny movement, and the lion drew closer. She could make out patches of its hide, and the tangled mass of a mane. Eyes flashed, and the low-throated roar came again. It was drawing closer, seeking the kill. She was safe from death—but clearly not from injury. Their tormentor wanted to use them as a lesson, and a little of her blood would deeply affect Pixel, she knew. So she had to escape before that happened—as well as to save Dayta's life.

The healing magic was working! She could feel the gap in the program closing. "Get ready!" she instructed

Dayta. "When the rift is closed, you have to get us immediately out of here."

"Believe me, I will!" Dayta vowed. "But there's no time!"

Jenna could see that the lion had made up its mind to end things. It came out into the open, and then started to charge them. She could see the strong muscles, the killer teeth and claws, the sheer fury in the beast as it lunged toward them. There was no time left!

And then a strange-looking bar of light appeared over their heads. Dayta gave a cry of shock and reached up with her left hand, tapping at buttons.

And then the field and the lion were gone. Jenna, sweating, her heart pounding from their narrow escape, was back in the chair, her head enclosed by a metal helmet. She ripped it off before their captor could return her to that terrible world of Virtual Reality. Then she looked around. There was a second chair in the room, and Dayta was freeing herself from it. Otherwise the room was almost bare—just a small table by the door—and there was nobody else present.

"No guards," Jenna said. "They must have been convinced we were trapped in that unreal world."

"We have to get out of here before they can come for us," Dayta said urgently. "They will kill us for sure now."

"This is a crazy world of yours," Jenna told her. She hurried to the door, and was relieved to see that the pouch containing her crystals was on the table. She slipped it into the pocket of her skirt. "I do not think I like Virtual Reality."

"I've kind of gone off it myself," Dayta admitted. "Come on."

They hurried through the open door, and into a corridor. There were sounds of people ahead, so she gripped Dayta's hand. "We're bound to be spotted," she said. "This is a busy building. Hold on a moment." She touched her obsidian, and then allowed the magic to flow. A cloak of invisibility spread over both of the girls. Dayta gave a cry of shock. "It's all right," Jenna assured her. "A simple spell, but I can't keep it up for very long. Do you think you can get us out of this building?"

"Yes," Dayta said firmly. Jenna felt an invisible hand clutch hers. "Come on."

They hurried down the corridor, and into another. People were passing by, all absorbed in their work.

None could see the two fleeing girls, of course, so Jenna and Dayta slipped carefully through the moving throng. Dayta did somehow seem to know where she was going, and she moved on resolutely. Jenna had to trust her now, and she followed quickly. She could feel the strain of keeping up the spell. On a Rim World like this she wouldn't be able to hold it for more than about ten minutes; she could only hope that was long enough to get them free.

As they hurried, Jenna heard a loud musical tone sound throughout the building. Then the voice of their captor echoed through the corridors. "Two young girls are loose in the building. They are somehow evading the sensors. They are to be captured and held."

So—the invisibility spell was keeping their building's machines from seeing them also! It was a most effective spell, obviously, even if it was draining her energy. If she could only hold out . . .

The people in the corridors stopped moving, and looked around, confused. They were clearly unsure how to go about looking for the escapees, which gave Jenna and Dayta an advantage. Jenna felt Dayta jerking hard on her hand, and they emerged into a foyer.

It was large, and airy, with the far walls made from glass. And beyond those were the streets of this city—they were almost free! Threading through the lobby, the two girls made for the main door. Dayta slapped some sort of control, and the door in front of them opened.

They were out! Laughing, both girls hurried away from the building before Jenna was forced to drop the spell, and they reappeared. Dayta laughed.

“That was awesome!” she exclaimed. “Being invisible rocks. Now they’ll never catch us—they don’t even know we’ve escaped.”

Jenna wasn’t so certain of that; the machines on this world seemed to be very sophisticated. Perhaps their captor had more plans up his or her sleeve . . . And Pixel was still a prisoner. She needed to have some plan to deal with that, and to somehow rescue him. But how?

Section Supervisor Nine looked up from his control panel, frustrated. “There’s no sign of the girls,” he growled. “It’s as if they somehow vanished from the detention room. And that’s impossible.”

"These young people appear to have some extraordinary gifts," the Overmind observed. "Pixel can travel between the worlds. This girl, Jenna, vanishes from sight. They have a science that is beyond our comprehension—but not beyond our grasp."

"Losing her is a blow," the Supervisor said. "She is obviously the female Pixel cares the most about."

"But he also values Dayta," the Overmind said. "She may be sufficient. Clearly we can take no further chances with Jenna. She is too dangerous to control, and must be destroyed."

"She has to be found first," the Supervisor pointed out.

"I have already discovered where she is," the Overmind answered. The vision screen came to life, showing the lobby of the building. The image focused in on the main door, which opened and then closed, without anyone approaching it. "I do not understand how they were able to render themselves invisible, but this is clearly what occurred. The girls are now in the streets, and there they cannot escape."

The Supervisor understood. "The Packs?" he asked.

“Yes. Release Pack Four. Even if the girls are invisible, my dogs hunt by scent. They will be able to track the two girls down.” There was the slightest pause. “And increase the stimulus level—the dogs are to find and then to kill. Both girls must die.”

9

“Come to
poppa,”

Score said happily, as he reclaimed his gemstones. He felt much better once they were back in his pockets. Helaine took her own, and then glared at the Overseer who was being held by two members of their “army.”

“How many guards are there here?” she asked him. The man licked his lips nervously, but shook his head. He had

been the only one on duty in the administration building, but Score knew he couldn't be the only one around. Helaine sighed and picked up a paper knife from the man's desk. She walked across the room, balancing the knife between her fingers. Then she whirled and threw it.

It buried itself in the wall less than an inch from the man's sweating face. Helaine walked back and reclaimed it. "Next time," she murmured, "I may not miss. How many guards are there?"

The man swallowed once and tried to speak. Finally, he managed to squeak out: "Six."

"That doesn't seem like many to keep control of almost a thousand slaves," Score objected.

The woman Helaine had fought earlier, Fargo, shook her head. "Don't forget, kid, that most of them have brains that work just about as well as the cabbages they tend. There aren't many of us left who can still think for ourselves. The others can't even think about causing trouble. And we tend to stay hidden because we like staying alive."

"Yes," a man agreed. "And we'd like some reassurance that we're likely to stay that way if we help you."

Helaine growled. "There are no guarantees. Simply that your life could hardly get worse, could it? We believe we can help out here, but we can only promise that we will do our best."

"Right," Score added. "We're not revolutionaries. Well, not intentionally." He couldn't help thinking of how he had managed to change things on Helaine's home world. "But this system you have here stinks, and we have to change it in order to help a friend of ours. And we do have abilities that the Overseers have never encountered before. Now that the restraints are off us, I think you'll see some action."

The man shook his head. "If you cause trouble here, then the police will simply send forces to help out. And they will be armed and ready for action."

"So are we," Helaine snapped. "If you don't think we can do it, go back and wait with the sheep in the dormitories. I only wish those who want to fight to stand beside me, not defeatist cowards."

"Girlie," the man growled, "you're starting to annoy me."

"It's one of her special abilities," Score said. "Another is breaking idiots like you in two. Now, ei-

ther you're with us, or you stand aside and let us get on with things."

Helaine grinned. "And, don't forget, *he's* seen you with us anyway," she said, gesturing to the Overseer. "And you'll be in trouble whether we win or lose."

"We could always kill him," the man suggested.

"We kill nobody," Helaine said coldly. "At least, not intentionally. If you behave like your captors, you're no better than they are."

"I don't want to be better than them," the man replied. "I just want to be free."

"If you're with us," Helaine stated, "then you fight our way. No killing."

"You can't have a war without deaths," Fargo objected.

"Maybe not," Score said, backing Helaine up, "but we're sure going to try. From what I understand, even the Overseers are controlled in some way if they get out of line."

"Chips in their heads," Fargo agreed.

Helaine scowled. "I do not understand this *chips* business," she complained. "What is it?"

"People on this world have a small electronic device implanted in their heads as babies," Fargo explained.

"It becomes a part of their brain. It's monitored by the Overmind—when it wishes to—and their thoughts can be known to the Net. And, if the Overmind wishes it, a person's brain can be controlled by the chip. The Overmind can take direct control of anyone's mind with a functioning chip."

"Like yours?" Helaine asked. "We have to watch out for all of you, too? You're all potential traitors?"

"Not us." Fargo grimaced. "The chips don't take a hundred percent of the time. We're the ones that the chips don't work on, for some reason or another. It meant that we couldn't be hooked into Virtual Reality, so we were sent to the labor camps as kids instead of getting our brains sucked dry. The Overseers have the chips, but they're the ones spared by the Overmind from being drained. The Overmind needs human hands from time to time to run things, and they're the traitors who work with it to rule the rest of us."

"Of course," Score pointed out, "we only have your word for it that the Overmind can't control you. For all we know, it's controlling you right now and making you say that."

Fargo grinned. "I guess we're not the only ones who've got to take things on trust then, are we?"

“Good point,” Score sighed. He turned to Helaine. “Okay, war chief, we have six guards to take out. Then what? We need a plan.”

“I have one,” Helaine said. “We rescue Pixel and Jenna and then get off this world.”

Score sighed again. “You know, I was kind of hoping for a little more detail than that. And we have to do something to help these people. They’re in slavery here.”

Helaine stared hard at him. “Score, it’s hardly our job to change a planet’s society.”

“Well, call it a hobby, then,” Score suggested. “This planet is *really* dysfunctional. I mean, I thought your world was bad enough, with the nobles oppressing the peasants. But *here* . . .” He shook his head. “They aren’t even allowed to keep their own minds. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I could live with myself if we just walked away from so many millions of people who need our help.”

“What do you want to do?” Helaine asked. “Seize control of this planet?”

“Not for myself, no,” Score said. “You know that. But we have to help these slaves. We have to stop the

chips from draining all these teens of their brains. We have to overthrow the Overmind."

"Changing a planet is a big task," Helaine pointed out. "There's just the two of us." She glanced at the handful of ex-slaves. "And a few of them. It's not enough to do the job."

"Hey, we were planning on rescuing Pixel and Jenna first," Score replied, grinning. "That will double our forces."

"Twice nothing is still nothing," Helaine objected.

"But we're not nothing," Score wheedled. "We're both really something. Well, you are, at least. You're our war chief, and there's nobody else I'd want to lead us into battle." He could see that Helaine was weakening; flattery always worked on her. "Anyway, whether you want to help or not, I'm not leaving this world without doing something."

"You'll get yourself killed," Helaine complained. But she didn't sound as adamant.

"Not with you watching my back," Score replied.

"Well, you'd better come up with a workable plan," Helaine grumbled.

"I've got one," Score told her. "We take out the guards and then lock all the slaves in their dorms."

"That's it?" Helaine asked. "That was *my* plan."

Score shrugged. "Hey, if something's good, I go with it."

Fargo scowled. "And that would help us how?" she objected.

Score grinned. "Come sunup, the slaves are supposed to be out in the fields. When they don't go, somebody in authority will check up on them. Then they'll send the troops out to see what's wrong."

The male ex-slave growled. "And how will having guards with weapons coming here help us?"

"Well," Score explained, "for one thing, once we take their weapons from them, then *you'll* have the guns. And, secondly, we'll be able to take their transport. Then we head for the administration building in town. That's where our friends are being held. We free them, and then we kick major butt, trust me."

"Do you imagine the Overmind will allow you to do all of this?" the man asked.

"Sure," Score answered. "It has never met anyone like us before, and it won't be certain how to deal with us. I mean, everything that's been tried against us so far has failed. That's got to make it think. Look, the Overmind is effectively an overgrown computer

program. And computers are wonderful at dealing with things they know about. But they're not so hot at adapting to new problems. Believe me, we are something it's never encountered before, and we're going to give it a major headache. Then we'll lop off its head."

"You speak well," Helaine murmured to him softly. "But now is the time for action, so that our forces can see we can do what we claim." She turned to Fargo and her companions. "Tie up the Overseer, and then come with us. We will take out the rest of the guards and you will lock and seal all of the dorms."

Fargo considered for a moment, and then nodded. "I guess we're committed to this, however we feel about it. I just hope you can deliver what you promise."

Helaine didn't reply. Instead, she slipped out of the door, and into the night. By the time that Score and the others caught up with her, she was standing over two unconscious guards. She tossed their guns to Fargo and one of the men. "Tie them up, and then follow me." She moved off again.

Score smiled proudly. "That's my girl," he told Fargo.

"She's certainly effective," the woman agreed.

It took them less than ten minutes to take out the rest of the guards and tie them up. Fargo had two of her men take the guards to the Overseer's building and imprison them. The rest of them went about the camp locking and sealing all of the dorm doors.

It was still an hour before dawn when they all gathered together back in the Overseer's office. Six of their "army" now had guns, and they were all looking a lot more confident. Fargo offered one of the guns to Helaine, who shook her head.

"It is not the weapon of a warrior," she stated. "I prefer a sword or throwing knife." She glowered at Score. "But I was not allowed to bring any with me."

"Hey, we didn't know we were heading into a war zone," Score pointed out. "This whole thing was supposed to be just a trip so Momma and Poppa Pixel could meet their future daughter-in-law. You don't take swords to family reunions. Well, maybe on your world, but not on most, okay?"

Helaine decided to ignore this line of reasoning. "So now we wait for the police to arrive?" she asked.

"I hate being kept waiting," Score said. "Maybe we can speed things up a bit." He crossed to the Overseer's desk, and started to examine it. Built into the surface

was a computer of some sort. Score had never owned a computer himself, but had worked on some in school. "Maybe I can get this thing working . . ." The screen was recessed in the surface of the desk, and the keyboard was simply a kind of projection onto the glass surface at the edge of the desk. He sat in the chair, and tapped at the board.

The screen lit up, with some sort of menu that he couldn't understand. "This is Pixel's work, not mine," he complained. There was a sort of mouse under the glass, and he discovered that if he touched it with his finger, then the cursor on the screen moved. After a few minutes of experimenting, he felt like he was getting the hang of it.

One of the icons showed a camera image. "Monitoring?" he wondered aloud. He looked up at Fargo and her troops, who were waiting impatiently. "Don't you guys know anything about this stuff?"

"We were never allowed to use it," Fargo reminded him.

"Well, I guess it's up to me, then." He ran the cursor to the camera icon, and tapped in.

The screen changed to show a different room. There was a man staring into it, and he seemed surprised at

what he saw—presumably Score. “Who are you?” he asked. “What is this about?”

“Hi,” Score said. “My name is Score, and I’m a leader of the rebel forces here in the fields. I was just calling to let you know that we’ve declared war on you, and that you should expect our army to be invading you any moment now. Have a nice day.” He clicked the camera off before the man could reply, and then laughed. “Well, that should stir up some trouble,” he said happily.

Helaine raised an eyebrow. “Our army is invading them?” she asked.

Score shrugged. “Hey, get them worried, that’s my philosophy. If they lose time and manpower looking for an army that doesn’t exist, it can only help us, right?”

“I think you’re insane,” Helaine growled.

“I think you’re right,” Fargo agreed.

Helaine glared at the woman. “Don’t you insult him,” she snapped. “He knows what he’s doing—I think.” She turned back to Score. “You do know what you’re doing?”

“Of course,” he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. “That guy is bound to report what I said,

and they're going to try and contact the Overseers here." A light started to flash on the computer screen. "Hey, perfect timing." He tapped the mouse, and the screen lit up. A different man glared out at him.

"Who are you?" the man demanded.

"Didn't your flunkie tell you?" Score asked. "I should fire him. I'm Score, and you're history. Now, get out of my face—I'm waiting for the reports from my army." He clicked the screen off again, and rubbed his hands together. "Hoo, boy! They should be having kittens by now. They know their men aren't in command here by now. So that means we should expect to be invaded soon."

Helaine sighed. "Look, you idiot, this camp is pretty large. Those police officers can come here over the walls anywhere. There are just seven of us to try and patrol the whole area. I think we're likely to get creamed."

"That's because you're not thinking like a computer," Score said smugly. "Computers think very straightforwardly. Trust me, the police will come to the front door. Climbing over the walls won't come until much later, and we'll be gone by then."

"I hope you're right," Helaine growled.

So do I, Score thought. He was sounding much more optimistic than he felt. But he *had* to be right, because this was their only chance to rescue Pixel. "Anyway, before they get here, I need to know how to get to the Supervisor's building. Once we have their cars, we want to be out of here before the big invasion arrives."

"I know where that is," Fargo said. "I can show you the way."

"Terrific." Score gave them all a big grin. "Now, you guys follow Helaine and myself, and see just why I know we're going to win this one." He knew that these adults were more than a little unsure of the claims he and Helaine had been making; they really needed to see them both in action to be convinced that this little war of theirs might succeed.

But it *had* to succeed—or Pixel and Jenna were doomed . . .

10

Helaine waited in the shadows by the main gate, desperately hoping that Score's analysis of the situation was correct. She knew he could be very brash and sometimes even idiotic. But he did—usually!—know what he was doing. Helaine was out of her depth here. She did not understand this business about computers, and she could barely follow the story about the people of this world having some sort of tiny

machine in their heads that enabled this Overmind monster to control them. But she understood fighting better than anyone present. Her fingers itched, and she wished she had brought her sword with her. She had to learn to stop listening to reassurances that nothing could go wrong on these trips of theirs. Something *always* went wrong.

Her sense of impending danger tingled through her, and she gripped the handle she'd removed from a garden hoe. It would be a decent quarterstaff when the time came to fight. "They're here," she whispered to Score, and he nodded and passed along the information. Fargo and the others had been told to sit this one out, which was wise. The only way that the adults would follow her lead in the future was if they saw her kick butt now.

Score had been correct so far—just two of the vehicles that flew above the ground had arrived, and each contained only two police officers. Only four opponents! If they hadn't all been armed with those strange tubes that paralyzed, Helaine would have been confident in taking them out in seconds. But she had to be more careful with those guns involved. Much as it pained her, she realized that their best course was to

use magic against these officers. It wasn't the warrior's way, but saving Pixel and Jenna was more important than fighting fairly.

She touched her sapphire, and prepared her power of levitation. Beside her, she knew that Score was using his own gems. She reached out to the closest of the policemen, who was walking up to the open gate warily, his gun held ready to fire. Helaine twitched it out of his hand and made it fly away. The man gave a startled cry and lunged for it. Helaine helped him along, lifting his feet from the ground so that he fell flat on his face.

One of the two female officers gave a strangled cry and collapsed. Helaine grinned; Score must be using his power of transformation to make knock-out gas! If she didn't want him to beat her to it, she'd better take out her targets first. With the sapphire, she jerked the remaining guns from the other two officers, and then jumped out of hiding to charge them.

The officers had been expecting trouble, but they were clearly not ready for a young girl armed only with a stick. The closest man adopted a defensive stance, but that meant nothing. Helaine whipped her staff around, slamming it down on his arm. The man cried

as his bone broke, and then she whacked his head with the staff. He went down and stayed down.

The remaining female officer's knees buckled, and she was unconscious before she hit the floor. Two to Score! Helaine reached the one she'd caused to fall, and she smacked him with the end of her staff, knocking him unconscious.

The entire fight had lasted no more than ten seconds.

Helaine straightened up and looked around as the others came out of hiding to join her. "Now do you believe we stand a chance?" she asked Fargo and her companions.

Fargo was staring at the unconscious female officers. "What happened to these?" she asked. "Nobody touched them."

Score grinned. "Magic," he replied. "I can knock people out at a distance."

"That's useful," Fargo admitted. The woman turned to Helaine. "You're a good fighter, girl—as I know from my own bruises. We're in—we'll follow your lead. What do you want us to do?"

"We have to get to where they're holding my friends," Helaine said. She walked to one of the waiting

vehicles and looked inside. It was very confusing. "Do you understand how to operate these machines?"

"Yes, I think so," Fargo replied. She glanced over the controls. "Looks pretty simple to me."

"Can't I do it?" Score begged. "I never did get my driver's license on Earth, and I always wanted to try."

"I think we'd do better sticking with someone who knows what they're doing," Helaine answered.

"Spoilsport," Score muttered.

Helaine ignored him, and turned to the others. "Fargo, Score, and I will take this vehicle. You four take the other. When we reach the building, we will attack first. You follow behind if you think we need help."

One of the men gave an incredulous laugh. "You think that the three of you can take out the Sector Supervisor and his entire staff? Girlie, I can see that you're a decent fighter, but you're obviously insane, too."

"Don't call her insane," Score growled. "That's my job. But in this case, she knows what she's doing. This Overmind thingy thinks we're here, staging some sort of war. Once these goons of its don't report in, it will send more troops, this time ready for a battle. It will

take them a while before they find out that there isn't one going on here. We'll have reached their base by then, and all of the troops will be *here* while we're *there*. They may have a few guards left, but they don't think there's anything for them to guard against. We're the first fight they've probably ever had, and they're simply not used to trouble."

"Score is correct," Helaine agreed. "We are fighters, and they are just technicians. We should be able to deal with anything they can throw at us with ease. And once we've freed Pixel, he will know what to do to resolve the situation."

"You place a lot of stock in this friend of yours," the man said.

"He is the smartest person we know," Helaine said simply. "He is also a native of your world, so he understands how things operate here. Once he is with us, he will resolve everything." She hoped! But she really did have faith in Pixel, and once the four of them were together again, Helaine was certain that they would find a solution for this mess that they were in.

"So," Score said, "enough talk, right? Let's take this battle to the Overmind." Fargo and the others looked

at each other for a moment, and then the woman nodded.

"We may lose," she said simply. "We may even die. But it has to be better than the way that we've been living all these years. And there is just the chance that these two crazy teens might know what they're doing." The men thought about it for a moment, and nodded their agreement. Fargo grinned at Helaine. "Okay, kid, we're with you. Let's go." She climbed into the vehicle, and sat at the controls.

Helaine and Score clambered in behind her. Fargo touched a control, and the doors closed, and then she started the vehicle up. Helaine was pleasantly surprised that the engine was virtually noiseless. She remembered how loud it had been in the cab she had ridden in Score's New York. This was much nicer—and smoother. The vehicle rose slightly into the air, and then flew down the road. Though she knew that it was propelled by science, it felt a lot like levitating to her. Maybe there wasn't that much of a difference between science and magic after all.

"Do you really think this Pixel friend of yours is going to make that much difference?" Fargo asked over her shoulder as she drove.

"Trust me, he's the brains of our outfit," Score assured her.

"You don't seem to be doing too badly without him," Fargo said.

"Then imagine how much better we'll do with him," Score replied, grinning. "To be honest, I'm kind of making this up as I go along. Pixel *plans*."

"Yes, I'd kind of noticed that you were pretty much winging it," Fargo admitted. "But, you know—for some reason I have a lot of faith in the pair of you. For years I've dreamed of doing something—but I never could figure out what. So I turned my rage against the other slaves, and ripped them off, because I could. It feels a lot better fighting the Overmind. Even if we lose, I don't regret it."

Helaine smiled. "Doing the right thing is always worth it," she stated. "Even if you lose, at least you fail on the side of good. But I do not anticipate us failing."

"That's because you really don't have any idea of the power of the Overmind," Fargo said soberly.

"You may be correct," Helaine admitted. "I truly do not understand computers. But I do understand fighting, and this is a fight."

"And she never loses," Score said. Helaine was rather touched that he actually sounded proud of her. "Well, hardly ever. And never when it counts."

"Thanks," Helaine said. "I think."

"Hey, I'm just being honest," Score protested.

"You picked the wrong time to start," Helaine complained.

Fargo gave a chuckle. "So have you two decided whether you like each other or hate each other?"

"A little of both," Helaine replied. "He can be the most irritating person at times. And then he'll do something almost thoughtful."

"Gee, thanks," Score grouched. "And she can be a royal pain in the butt, with her silly ideas on nobility and right and wrong. But I'd trust her with my life. Actually, I frequently do."

"I wish I had someone in my life the way you two have each other," Fargo said wistfully.

"What, you miss arguing?" Score asked. He grinned. "Anyway, when this is over and the Overmind is history, then maybe you'll find the right somebody. With that overblown computer program out of the way, people can start running their own lives again."

"It won't be that easy," Helaine cautioned him. "At the moment, the Overmind runs everything. Once it is removed, this society will collapse, and it will have to commence again. That is going to cause a lot of pain and trouble."

"But people will be able to work it out, once their minds are their own again," Score argued. "If Pixel is anything to go by, the folks on this world are pretty darned smart, once they get out of Virtual Reality."

"Maybe," Helaine agreed. Then she stopped, a sudden feeling of danger overwhelming her. "Stop the vehicle!" she ordered abruptly.

"Huh?" But Fargo did as she was told. "What's wrong?"

"I sense danger," Helaine explained. "It's a gift I have." She scanned the dark, empty streets, but saw nothing.

"An ambush?" Score suggested.

Helaine shook her head. "Quiet!" she commanded. She listened carefully, and then heard the sound of baying. "Hunting dogs," she pointed out.

"You've got good hearing," Fargo marveled. "It's so faint. They can't be after us, though."

"They're hunting someone," Helaine pointed out.

"What's that got to do with us?" asked Fargo, confused. "We have to go rescue your friend. We can't get sidetracked."

"It's not that simple," Helaine said. "Whoever those dogs are hunting won't be able to fight them off alone. They will need our help."

"Besides," Score said slowly, "it's still before dawn, and we're in a residential district." He gestured at the silent houses gathered around the neighborhood. "All good computer geeks are in bed. Who would be out in the streets?"

Helaine understood him immediately. "Pixel and Jenna! Perhaps they've already escaped!"

"And if it's Pix, you know he's going to be terrified," Score said. "You know how those hunting dogs scare the daylights out of him."

Fargo shook her head. "Surely it can't be your friend!" she complained.

"It doesn't matter if it is or isn't," Helaine said firmly. "Whoever is being hunted needs our help, and we can't pass them by."

"You're crazy," Fargo protested.

"Yes, she is," Score agreed. "But she's also right. We can't leave them to be mauled to death. So, start the car and head for the hounds."

Fargo muttered something under her breath, but she swung the vehicle about and headed toward the sound of the dogs.

Helaine had sometimes been allowed to go hunting with her father and his hounds. She had always enjoyed the chase, and the bringing down of the quarry at the end. But now that she knew the quarry was a human being, the idea of a chase no longer seemed as appealing. And she knew from what Pixel had told them that these dogs were half-starved and savage, and would maul anything they found and devour it. Maybe she was being foolish, and maybe Fargo was correct—perhaps this was wasting time they might need to help Pixel. But she simply couldn't turn her back on someone in need, whoever it was.

And Score might well be right—they had been assuming that Pixel and Jenna needed help. But both of their friends were quite capable, and they might already have freed themselves. In which case, it was quite likely that the dogs were hunting them down. They simply couldn't pass up the possibility. Anyway,

whoever was out at this time of the night was at least a potential ally, someone who was thinking for him or herself.

Helaine felt the anxiety and anticipation building inside her. The only weapon she had was her stick—and her magic, of course. Would that be sufficient against killer dogs? It would have to be.

Fargo whirled the vehicle through the streets. Thanks to the fact that it was so quiet, Helaine could hear the baying of the dogs getting louder as they caught up with the pack. She tensed, gripping her stick firmly, prepared to leap from the vehicle when it stopped. Beside her, she could feel Score tensing up.

“You stay in the car,” Helaine ordered Fargo. “Close the doors when we leave, and whatever happens to us, you should be safe.”

“But nothing’s going to happen to us,” Score added hastily. “Except we’re going to wipe the floor with some mangy mutts.”

Helaine was certain he wasn’t as sure of this as he tried to sound, but she wasn’t going to undermine his confidence. She would need his assistance in this fight; from the sound of the barking, there must be

more than a dozen dogs out there—all lean, hungry killers.

They turned a corner finally, and Helaine could see the pack ahead of them. It was difficult to count, but she could see that she was correct, and that there were over a dozen of the dogs. They were of all different kinds, but they were all muscular and snarling. They were all focused on the hunt, and didn't pay attention to the vehicle as it swept up behind them. Helaine glanced ahead, and saw their quarry—two young girls, running for their lives.

With a shock of recognition, she realized that one of them was Jenna. She glanced at Score, and saw that he had recognized their friend also. "Time to go," Helaine said softly.

Fargo braked the vehicle to a halt, and Helaine and Score leaped out. The dogs seemed to be suddenly aware of their arrival. Several of them spun about. Helaine found herself facing a ring of snarling, drooling muzzles, with sharp teeth ready to attack.

11

Pixel was almost overwhelmed emotionally by the choice that was facing him: cooperate with the Overmind and help spread its evil to the other worlds of the Diadem or to refuse and then see Dayta and Jenna tortured and murdered. How could he agree to either option? One would doom two people he held very dear—but the other would

doom countless numbers of people to be slaves and to a lingering, mindless death.

What he desperately needed was a third choice! But there wasn't one. The Overmind had planned very carefully, and had left no loophole. It controlled everything.

Everything . . .

A vague hope started to creep into Pixel's mind. The problem with the Overmind was that it controlled everything . . . But if Pixel could turn that disadvantage into an advantage . . .

He sat up firmer in the chair. "I don't believe you," he stated.

"What?" The Overmind sounded confused. "That is not logical."

"Of course it's logical," Pixel replied. "I simply don't believe that you are holding Dayta and Jenna prisoners. You can't hurt them if you don't have them."

"That is ridiculous," the Overmind said. "You can see that I have them here. You can watch as I damage them."

"But how do I know it's real?" Pixel asked urgently. "As far as I know, you have me in Virtual Reality.

Everything I see around me—including the two girls—could simply be what you wish me to see. And if you don't hold the girls, then you're just trying to fool me into cooperating. Surely you can see that this is a logical deduction on my part."

"Of course," the Overmind agreed. "I do have the ability to do as you say. But I assure you that I have not done so. I do indeed hold your two friends hostage for your cooperation."

"But I only have your word on that," Pixel pointed out. "And, since you need my cooperation very badly for your plans, you would quite easily lie to gain it. So, I repeat—I don't believe that you actually hold Dayta and Jenna. And if you don't have them, you cannot hurt them."

"You are being foolish," the Overmind replied. "I do indeed hold them, and I am willing to damage them—or even kill them. Whether you believe this or not, they will be hurt and then dead."

"No they won't," Pixel insisted. "You're lying—and there's no way you can prove to me that you're telling the truth. If you're *not* telling the truth—as I believe—then whatever you say you're doing to them won't affect me because I won't believe it's real. So, if you *are*

telling the truth and the girls are real, then hurting them won't help you because I won't believe it's actually happening. And if you are lying, then whatever I seem to see you do to the girls isn't real, so *that* won't affect me, either. Either way, you gain nothing by either harming them or pretending to harm them."

There was a short pause. "Your logic is very good," the Overmind agreed. Pixel felt a huge relief; in fact *he* was lying—he did actually believe that the Overmind had his friends—but there was no way that the Overmind could tell that without invading his brain—and that was something the Overmind didn't dare do.

"However," the gentle voice continued, "you are overlooking one small item—whether it will affect you or not, I *can* hurt and kill your friends. Even if it does not influence you, they will be damaged."

"But you gain nothing by doing that," Pixel argued, feeling suddenly scared.

"Perhaps I gain nothing from you by doing that," the Overmind agreed. "But if I kill one of them, then perhaps the other will cooperate with me to avoid a similar, painful death. In either event, neither girl is useful to me if they are no longer hostages for your cooperation. I might as well order their torture and execution.

I have people on my staff who would enjoy inflicting such pain on your friends.”

Pixel didn't know whether the Overmind was simply calling his bluff or not, but it was evident that his attempt to out-logic the computer had failed. His hopes collapsed. “It doesn't matter,” he said slowly. “Even if I believe that you hold Dayta and Jenna captive, I still could not give in to you. It's two lives against possibly millions. Even though they are two lives I hold very dear to me, I could never give in to you and help spread your evil. Whatever you do to them, or to me, I will never tell you how to leave this world. It is horrible enough that you control this planet—I would never aid you in subduing any more.”

“You are being stubborn and foolish,” the Overmind said. “Now that I know that it is possible to travel by spacial gateways to other worlds, I will assign my scientists to research until they discover how it is done. And then you and your friends will have died in vain.”

Pixel shook his head. “Your tame scientists will never be able to understand how the gateways are formed,” he stated. “You will never succeed that way. And our deaths won't be in vain—an evil such as yours cries out

to be destroyed. Even if you kill me, there will be others who will fight against you, and they will succeed in destroying you. Your time is limited, and your end is certain.”

“You are foolish,” the Overmind said. “There is no one who could possibly fight or harm me. I control all of the inhabitants of this world.”

Pixel managed a weak smile. “And what of the inhabitants of *other* worlds?” he asked. “Look at Jenna—she is not from Calomir. Even a casual study of her will show that. Her skin is the wrong color, her ears the wrong shape. She is from a distant planet, and she has come here. She will not be the only one. You can’t control her, and you won’t be able to control them.”

Section Supervisor Nine had been standing by all of this time, quietly listening. But Pixel saw him give a start. So, obviously, did the Overmind. “What is the matter, Supervisor?” it asked.

“There are already others here,” the Supervisor said, hanging his head slightly in shame. “There were two others with pale skin and misformed ears that were picked up by police patrols earlier.”

"Why did you not inform me?" the Overmind asked him. Pixel knew that this must be Score and Helaine. So they had been captured also? Were they still captives?

"It did not seem important," the Supervisor replied. "They were not Users, so they clearly had to be escaped Drones. They were taken to the closest Camp."

There was a slight pause, and then the Overmind spoke again. "I have received reports of a revolt in that camp. Officers have been dispatched to investigate. Their report is overdue."

Pixel felt a surge of excitement—Helaine and Score were causing trouble! This was perfect, and could only aid him now. "They are my friends," he stated firmly. "They have abilities that you cannot even imagine. You might kill the three of us here, but those two will make you pay. They will destroy you."

"They *cannot* destroy me," the Overmind answered. "No one can."

"They can and they will—especially if you hurt Jenna or myself." Pixel knew he had to keep the Overmind occupied. If Score and Helaine were free, they were bound to come here to rescue him. If he

could stall long enough, the two girls might be safe . . .
“Your only hope is to keep us well.”

“You have stated that they will destroy me, whatever I do,” the Overmind said. “It hardly matters whether I allow the females to live, then.”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Pixel answered. “I was talking to your flunkie there, the Section Supervisor. You’re doomed, sure enough—but *he* can still redeem himself by saving us.” Pixel saw the man staring in shock. He had clearly not understood that he, too, might be in danger.

“He will obey my orders,” the Overmind stated.

“Will he?” Pixel asked. “I’m sure he’ll tell you he will, but can you be certain that he’ll obey you when the war begins?”

“He will obey me or I shall assume control of his mind through his chip,” the Overmind said.

“And how many of your slaves can you do that to?” Pixel asked. “Because *any* of them that help us will be spared. The rest will perish along with you.” Again, Pixel was lying here—but there was no way that the Overmind or the Supervisor, or anyone else who might be monitoring this, could know that for certain.

“You’re doomed, you overgrown computer virus! You can’t stop us all—some of us will get you. Just check up on what’s actually happening right now. I’ll bet you don’t even know where my friends actually are.”

The far wall started to flash images, faster than his eyes could follow, as the Overmind started to scan all of its cameras positioned throughout the city. One image that held for a few seconds showed the inside of some sort of building. There were several police officers unconscious and tied up.

“Well, at least you know where they’ve been,” Pixel said, chuckling. “You’re losing control of this neat and ordered little world of yours, and you will never get it back.” Pixel wished desperately that he believed what he was saying, but he wasn’t actually certain that even Score and Helaine could beat this monster. But right now, they were really the only chance he had.

The Overmind didn’t reply, but the images started to flash past again. Pixel cast a quick glance at the Supervisor. Was it possible to con the man into switching sides? A computer program couldn’t understand fear, but a human being could—and Pixel could see a trickle of sweat on the man’s forehead. Obviously he was starting to worry, and that was a wonderful sign.

"The Overmind is going to lose," Pixel said urgently. "My friends and I have powers that it cannot begin to comprehend. Help us, and you will be treated well."

The Supervisor licked his lips nervously. "You have no power," he said, but his voice was lacking complete conviction. "You are a helpless captive."

"Helpless?" Pixel concentrated. His gems had been taken from him, so his powers weren't as great as they might otherwise be, but he still retained some of his inherent magic. One of his abilities was the control over the element of Fire—and electricity was one form of fire . . . He was being held in the chair by clamps across his wrists and ankles, and they were held closed by magnetic forces. He focused hard, with the Overmind distracted searching for Score and Helaine. He could feel the flow of power through the wiring of the chair. A simple bit of magic to divert the power . . .

The clamps sprang free, and Pixel rose to his feet.

"Not so helpless," he said, smiling.

"How did you manage that?" the Overmind asked.

"It should not be possible for you to free yourself."

“That’s what I’ve been saying all the time,” Pixel replied. “My friends and I can do things that you could never understand.” He reached out with his magic again, and felt the clamps securing Byte’s release. She rubbed her wrists, and jumped to her feet. Then he reached out for Jenna—
—and felt nothing.

He grinned. “So, Jenna isn’t really here! I’ll bet she’s already escaped, hasn’t she?”

He could see the shock on the Supervisor’s face—so, he hadn’t known that! “Oh, didn’t the Overmind mention that? Maybe it doesn’t want you to know how shaky its hold over things actually is? Still thinking of staying loyal to it?”

Jenna’s image vanished from the room. The pictures on the wall stabilized to show Jenna and the girl they had met in the House. They were out on a street at night, and surrounded by a pack of attack dogs. Pixel was startled and scared, but then he shook his head.

“It’s another of your tricks,” he said firmly. “I don’t believe it.”

"It hardly matters whether you believe it or not," the Overmind answered. "Your friends will die. I have set the hunters onto her."

"You *control* those dogs?" Pixel had always assumed that they were strays who had once attacked him, starving dogs looking for food. But in fact they must be more tools of the Overmind, helpless animals forced to hunt and kill humans at the command of the computer entity.

"I do," the Overmind agreed. "And they will destroy and devour those two foolish girls. They will be no further threat to me."

"Jenna is not as helpless as you think," Pixel said, realizing that this time he believed the images. They *might* be another of the Overmind's inventions designed to scare him into complying, but somehow they had the feel of reality. But, despite his brave words, he wasn't as sure of Jenna's abilities as he claimed. She was not a fighter like Helaine, but a healer. She was gentle and kind, and those dogs were vicious killers . . .

Then the picture showed the arrival of a patrol vehicle. Pixel laughed in relief as he saw Score and

Helaine leap from it, and move into action. *That* meant the images had to be real—the Overmind would never show those two saving Jenna's life!

"What did I tell you?" he asked. "My friends are going to save her, and then all of them will come after you." He glanced at the Supervisor, who was actually shaking. All his life the man had been raised to believe that the Overmind was infallible—and now he was seeing proof that this was not true. "Are you *still* certain you're on the winning side?" Pixel asked the man provocatively. "Your computer program's plans seem to be going up in smoke. It cannot cope with us, believe me. We will destroy it, and we will destroy any who remain loyal to it."

The Supervisor was sweating badly now, and his hands were clenching. Everything he had always believed in was starting to collapse. A little more pushing, and he might well switch sides. His help could be invaluable, so it was important to win him over.

"The Overmind has lost," Pixel stated. "It can't control me or my friends, and we can destroy it." He reached out with his magic and shorted out the image on the wall. Sparks and flames splashed across the

room, making the Supervisor and Dayta yelp and jump. "It's all over for it. Help us to defeat it!"

"You cannot win," the Overmind insisted. "Supervisor—you will obey your instructions as always. The girl, Dayta, is expendable—kill her."

"Don't you dare," Pixel ordered. "She is my friend, and under my protection."

The Supervisor was sweating and shaking badly now. His hand went to the weapon holstered at his hip. Pixel knew what would happen if he used it on Dayta, and he couldn't risk the man trying. So he reached out again, and used his magic to heat the gun. The Supervisor screamed in pain, and ripped the gun out of its holster and threw it across the room. He held his burnt hand with the other, whimpering.

"Useless," the Overmind said. "All humans are weak and unstable, unless they are controlled by me."

In horror, Pixel saw the Supervisor suddenly straighten up, ignoring the pain in his hand. His eyes were blank, and he stood perfectly still. "What have you done?" he gasped.

"I have activated his chip," the Overmind stated. "His mind is now completely under my control. Your

optimism is unjustified, but it is now clear to me that you will not be persuaded by logic. Since you refuse to tell me what I wish to know voluntarily, you have left me with no other option. I shall activate your chip also."

Pixel was filled with horror and panic. "If you do that," he yelled quickly, "then you could lose everything I know!"

"It is a chance I shall have to take," the Overmind replied. "I cannot allow you to be independent any longer."

There was a sudden, sharp pain in Pixel's brain. He could feel the chip being activated, and the strength of the Overmind starting to flood through him. His mind would be overwhelmed in seconds! He would no longer be able to think for himself. He would be nothing more than a body that would do whatever the Overmind ordered. It was possible that the Overmind might be able to read his thoughts then, and find out about Portals.

If the Overmind succeeded in taking over his brain, then the entire Diadem might be doomed! Pixel had to prevent this somehow . . . All he could think of doing as the overwhelming flood of the Overmind

surged into his brain was to reach deep within himself for every last ounce of magic he possessed. He grasped at the root of his very being, and drew upon everything that he was to fight the Overmind.

And then his mind exploded into complete darkness.

12

Jenna and Dayta had backed away from the pack of snarling, slavering dogs. Jenna's instinct was to run, but she knew that this would be insane: these dogs hunted as a pack, and if she ran, they would pursue her and kill her. She saw Dayta tensing to run, but gripped her new friend's arm. "No," she said firmly. "They would only chase us down and attack. We have to stay here."

"But they're going to attack anyway!" Dayta said frantically. "They intend to kill us!"

"We have to stay calm," Jenna insisted. "Don't forget, I have magic, and that can help us." She gripped her citrine so hard that it hurt her hand, but she would need all of her power for this one. "We are not your enemies," she murmured at the dogs. "You have no reason to harm us. We are not your enemies . . ."

There was sudden movement, and for a second Jenna was terrified that the dogs were ignoring her power of persuasion and lunging for them anyway. Then she saw that it was one of the police's strange vehicles drawing up. She felt a moment of panic—she might be able to control the minds of the dogs, but if there were more of the officers as well, she'd never manage it.

Then she saw, with relief, that it was Helaine and Score leaping from the car and rushing the dogs from behind. This attack made several of the animals throw off her power, and spin to face their new foes.

"No!" Jenna called. "Don't harm them!"

Score gave an incredulous laugh. "Jenna, they're aiming to kill and eat you, and you're worried about *us* harming *them*?"

"It's not their fault," Jenna insisted. "They're being controlled. I can take over—I know I can." She focused on the dogs. "We are your friends. You cannot hurt us. You love us."

"Do you think she can really do it?" she heard Helaine asking Score.

"Hey, it's Jenna," Score answered. "She's good at making folks love her, remember?"

"But these dogs must have chips in their brains, also, to control them," Helaine argued. "The Overmind won't give up control that simply."

"Maybe not," Score agreed. "But I've got an idea."

The dogs weren't attacking, but they were still snarling, and baring their teeth. Jenna fought to convince them that she was their friend, but it was hard. Sweat was trickling down her brow, and her mind was starting to ache from the effort.

"Keep it going just a little longer," Score urged her. "I think I've got the solution to this." Jenna could see him vaguely as he approached one of the dogs, and reached out gingerly toward it. The dog wanted to snap out at him and maul him, but Jenna fought to keep it calm and friendly.

And then the dog rolled over on its back, its paws in the air, and Score scratched its tummy, grinning wildly. "Okay!" he said happily. "It works. Just keep the others calm for a moment, Jen, and let me do my magic." One by one he approached the other dogs and in seconds they also were acting in the friendliest fashion. When he had dealt with the final animal, Jenna could release her control. She almost collapsed from the strain. The dogs were frolicking about, barking happily, wagging their tails, and licking everyone they came into contact with.

"Okay, Score," Helaine said. "You're feeling really smug, aren't you? What did you do to them?"

Score grinned widely. "I just used my power to change things," he said, trying to sound modest and failing miserably. "Computer chips are made from silicon. I just changed all of the silicon in the chips into oxygen—the chips dissolved, and the Overmind's contact with the dogs' brains was lost. Then Jenna's power of persuasion took control, and here we are with a bunch of lap dogs instead of a rabid pack of killers."

Jenna didn't understand quite what he was talking about, but it was clear that he had helped out. "I am

so glad to see you," she said. The closest dog, a large, muscular one, stood on its hind legs, put its front paws over her shoulder and licked her face. "Not you," she told it. "My friends." The dog licked her nose, its tail wagging happily. "All right, I'm glad to see you, too. But I am not licking your face, okay?" She scratched its head, and it jumped down, cheerily.

Helaine gave her a slightly stiff look. "I am glad that you are safe," she said. "But where is Pixel?"

"He is still a prisoner of that creature called the Overmind," Jenna replied. "Dayta and I escaped, but we need to go back for him."

Score glanced at Dayta, who was shaking with relief over their narrow escape. He whistled. "Wow, I never realized blue skin and pointy ears could look so sexy," he commented.

"Stop flirting," Helaine growled. "We have work to do."

Score grinned. "You're jealous," he accused her. "I like that in a girl. It means she cares about me."

Helaine blushed. "I am *not* jealous," she snapped. "Just annoyed with your flippant attitude. We have work to do."

"You already said that," Score replied. He turned to Dayta. "So, what are you doing after the apocalypse?"

"Score," Jenna chided him gently, "Helaine is right: we have to rescue Pixel."

"And defeat the Overmind," Helaine added. "The people of this world will never be free while that monster can control their minds."

"Okay, okay," Score complained. "All work and no play . . ." He shrugged. "It seems to me that we simply continue along our original plan—back to the Sector HQ and attack. Only now we have a Jenna and Dayta to help us. It's almost an army."

Jenna scratched the dog again. "And a few friends," she pointed out. "These dogs don't seem to want to leave us."

"It's your attractive personality," Score said approvingly. "Nobody can help loving you."

"Are you going to flirt with every girl but me?" Helaine asked, annoyed.

"Hey, I'll flirt with you, too, if you like," Score said.

"That was *not* what I meant!" Helaine complained. "Keep your mind on the job at hand, or I'll knock you senseless—not a long journey."

"She's mad about me, really," Score said, in a pretend whisper to Dayta.

"That's mad *at* you," Helaine growled.

"Please," Jenna said, knowing that the two of them could keep this up for hours. "We have to save Pixel."

"You're right," Helaine agreed. "Everyone, into the vehicle. Except the dogs—I don't think there's room for all of them, too."

"Besides, I don't want to get drooled on," Score added. "More than I already have been, I mean."

The group climbed into the car, and were introduced to Fargo, the driver. She appeared very nervous when the dogs approached, but accepted Jenna's assurances that the pack were now on their side. When the vehicle moved off, the dogs loped easily along beside it.

"This increases our chances," Helaine said, looking almost cheerful. "Everyone seems to know how dangerous the packs are. If we let them loose in the Section offices, that should keep most of the people from even coming near us. They're like having a small army on our side."

“They’re good dogs, really,” Jenna said. “It was only because their minds were controlled that they ever hurt anyone.”

“Speaking of which,” Dayta said, turning to Score. “What you did to the dogs—would it work on people?”

“It should,” Score answered. “But I didn’t want to test it out before this on a person, just in case it didn’t work. Now I know it does, I guess I could try it on a person next.”

“Me,” Dayta said firmly. “I don’t want my mind to be wiped out and taken over by the Overmind—and that might happen if the monster thinks it’s worth it.”

Score paused. “Uh, look, I know it worked okay on the dogs, but—well, let’s face it, their minds are a bit simpler than the minds of people. It could still be dangerous to try on you.”

“You have to try it on somebody,” Dayta pointed out. “If it works, then you can stop the Overmind from taking people over, and that will be a huge help. Okay, it’s risky, but it’s better than being mind-wiped.”

Jenna could see that Score was nervous, so she touched his arm. “Try it,” she urged. “If anything does go wrong, I should be able to heal it.”

Score considered for a moment, and then nodded. He leaned over Dayta very closely, touching her head with his fingers. Helaine sniffed.

"Do you have to get so close?" she asked.

"Hey, this is brain surgery," Score replied. "Yes, I do." Then he grinned. "Besides, it's kind of fun. She uses a really nice shampoo, and she smells really good."

"You're lucky I don't have my sword with me," Helaine growled. "Or I'd be tempted to perform a little surgery on you."

Jenna knew the pair of them well enough by now to realize that they were actually very fond of one another. She had never understood why one or both of them wouldn't simply admit it. But Score had a horror of commitment, and Helaine was simply too proud. Both of them seemed to be waiting for the other to start things, and neither of them seemed willing to take that step. Maybe when all of this was over, she and Pixel could do something about them . . .

But right now the experiment was the essential thing, and Score was concentrating furiously. Finally, he closed his eyes, and Jenna could feel the magic

flowing. When he opened his eyes, he focused them urgently on Dayta. "How do you feel?" he asked her.

"Fine," she replied. "You can start whenever you're ready."

He gave her a hug. "Start? Girl, I'm finished. I'd say this was a very successful operation." He looked incredibly relieved.

Fargo, from the front seat, glanced back. "So you could do this safely to anyone now? Then all you have to do is to eliminate the chips in everyone we meet."

"I wouldn't dare," Score answered. "I had to be in contact with Dayta and focus carefully while she held still. If anyone struggled, or wasn't in contact with me, I don't think I could do it. This will work on an individual basis, but not as a weapon."

"Incidentally," Helaine said, rather coldly, "I think you could let go of her by now. She isn't likely to have a fit, or faint."

Score laughed. "Hey, don't I deserve *some* reward for my wonderful work?"

"Yes, you do," Helaine answered. "And as soon as this is all finished, I aim to see you get it. And a week in bandages afterward should be enough . . ."

Score let go of Dayta, and tried to look innocent. Dayta didn't look as if she'd minded Score's attentions, and that only annoyed Helaine more. Jenna knew that this anger would help Helaine to fight, but she wished that Score and Helaine would just talk things out between them.

"We're almost there now," Fargo announced. "The Overmind has got to have figured out that we're coming by now. There's bound to be a reception committee."

"Yes," Helaine agreed, focusing now on the upcoming battle. "But it doesn't know quite what it is facing. It has ruled this world for so long, and nobody has ever staged a revolt before."

"And it's a computer program," Score added. "When it faces a new problem, it will try old solutions first. Only it doesn't have anything that can handle us."

"You hope," Dayta said.

"We *have* to hope," Jenna murmured. "We have to hope that Pixel is still okay, and we have to hope that we can free all of the slaves on this world. The consequences of failure are too terrible to contemplate."

"We won't fail," Score said with certainty. "I'll bet you that Pixel is messing with the Overmind right

now. And with the three of us taking the fight inside, I don't think we can lose."

"That's because too often you simply don't think," Helaine complained. "Score, this isn't a game—it's war."

"True enough—so you go first," he said. "You're the best fighter we've got, and you can take out anything that they throw against you."

"While I appreciate your confidence," Helaine snapped, "I do not understand this computer society. They may throw things at me that I am unable to deal with."

Dayta sat up straighter. "I'll be with you," she announced. "I understand this world, so I'll be able to help."

Jenna hoped that this would be enough. Their vehicle had drawn up outside the building she and Dayta had escaped from so recently, and she swallowed nervously. She didn't relish the idea of going back inside, but it was the only way to save Pixel. And she would not abandon him—or leave the Overmind free to keep preying on the people of this planet.

Then a strange feeling passed through her. She felt momentarily nauseous, and swayed where she sat. Glancing at Score and Helaine, she could see that they had been similarly affected. But Fargo and Dayta didn't seem to even notice anything wrong. "What just happened?" she gasped.

"I don't know," Helaine replied. "But some sort of magical energy passed through me."

"Me too," Score said grimly. "I don't know what's going on here, but I feel . . . somehow weaker than a moment ago."

"Yes," Jenna agreed. She knew she could still tap into her magical abilities, but they seemed somehow . . . Well, *wrong* was the only word that came to mind. "Do you think that the Overmind did that?"

"I don't see how," Score objected. "It's a being of science; I don't think it could even understand the concept of magic, let alone manage to create a weapon against it."

"Whatever did it," Helaine said, "it was presumably aimed at weakening us. Do we dare go in?"

"Do we dare not?" asked Jenna, worried. "If one blow of . . . whatever it was . . . weakened us, what

might more do? Perhaps *now* is the only time we have to attack.”

Helaine gave one of her rare smiles. “I will make a warrior of you yet. You are quite correct. We attack now.” She leaped out of the vehicle without even checking to see that they were with her. Dayta followed swiftly, then Score. Jenna brought up the rear, knowing her lack of fighting ability made her a liability at the moment. Helaine gripped her staff firmly, and rushed the main door.

Incredibly, nothing happened. Helaine hurried inside, and then looked around the lobby, bewildered. When Jenna reached her, she could see why. The lobby was empty.

“Is it a trap, do you think?” Dayta asked softly.

“If it is, why has it not been sprung?” Helaine questioned. “I do not understand this; where is everyone?”

“More to the point,” Score said, “where is Pixel?” He grasped his jasper, which aided in his power of Sight. “I can’t see him,” he complained. “But I have a feeling he’s down that corridor.” He gestured to the right. “My magic is fouling up somehow.”

"It *must* be a weapon of some kind," Jenna said. A sudden thought made her shudder. "Could the Overmind have taken over Pixel and be using his abilities to do this?"

"Pixel wouldn't know how to do this," Score objected. "No, I think he's probably still safe for the moment. But let's not hang around talking." He set off the way he had indicated, and the others followed. Helaine was scanning all around them, and even Jenna could tell that the warrior girl was deeply disturbed.

Where were all the people? It had been less than an hour since she and Daya had escaped, and the place had been packed then. There was something very, very wrong.

"Maybe it's a local holiday?" Score suggested, joking.

"I very much doubt the Overmind would allow holidays," Helaine said, taking the suggestion seriously. "Especially when it knows we would be bound to be coming after it."

"Maybe it's cleared the building to prevent innocent casualties?" Daya suggested. "It could be planning some really lethal form of attack." That was a terrifying thought!

"No," Helaine answered. "It would not clear the building in case that warned us. Besides, I do not think it would care much about killing innocent people."

"We've arrived," Score said quietly. He pointed to a closed door ahead of them. "Pixel's in there."

Helaine moved into the lead. "I shall go first." She kicked open the door and dived into the room. The rest of them rushed after her. Jenna skidded to a halt inside, and a smile lit up her face.

Pixel was there, and he was standing free in the center of the room. There was another man there, but he was unconscious on the floor.

"Pixel!" Jenna called happily, moving toward him.

A cold expression in his eye, Pixel whirled, and gestured. Magical fire slammed into her. She gasped, and collapsed, pain in all of her nerves.

"I'm sorry," he said, smiling nastily. "Pixel isn't home right now. Would you like to leave a message?"

Helaine looked stunned, then she glanced at Score. "What has happened? Did the Overmind take him over?"

"No," Score said. "The Overmind doesn't have emotions, and Pixel is overdosing on them right now."

Jenna used her healing powers to dull the pain she felt. "That's not Pixel," she said, realizing with a chill that she couldn't detect anything in the familiar body that she knew. "I don't know who or what it is, but it's not him."

"Quite right, little girl," the not-Pixel said coldly. "I'm not your boyfriend."

"Then who are you?" Score demanded. He was poised ready to fight.

"Don't even think it," Pixel's body warned. "I know far more magic than you'll ever know. If you or Helaine attempt to attack me, I'll fry every nerve in your stupid bodies."

Jenna couldn't understand any of this, and she was desperately afraid for the real Pixel. If there was some stranger now inhabiting his body, where was the boy she loved? "What have you done with Pixel?" she demanded, struggling back to her feet.

"You're tougher than you look," the body replied. "But don't come any closer; the next bolt won't be as gentle." Then he grinned. "Technically, I haven't done anything with Pixel; it's what he's done with me."

“Well, whoever you are, you certainly like to talk a lot of nothing,” Score growled. “Are you going to tell us what’s happening, or should we just kick your butt right now?”

“That would be very foolish of you to even try,” the not-Pixel answered coldly. “And you’ll understand why that is when I tell you my name: I’m Nantor.”

Jenna almost collapsed from shock. She knew who that was, because the other three had told her.

Score, Helaine, and Pixel had discovered that they were once incredibly powerful magicians, the Three Who Rule. The trio had ruled the Diadem for a long time as absolute dictators. The three had no morals, and no mercy. They ruled simply because they could, and they injured or killed anyone who got in their way. They had been overthrown by a usurper named Sarman, and supposedly killed. But they had saved their lives by projecting themselves out to Rim Worlds in new bodies, being born again as infants—the children who would grow to become Helaine, Pixel, and Score. The Three had tried to reclaim their bodies, but had failed and been imprisoned in Jewel, the world at the heart of the Diadem.

Nantor had been the adult Pixel, a cold and heartless magician who cared about nothing but power and nobody but himself.

"That's impossible," Helaine breathed.

"It has happened," not-Pixel answered. "The Overmind tried to take over Pixel's mind by using the implanted chip. Pixel fought back, summoning up all of the magic he could. He reached further and deeper than he knew. I could feel it even in my imprisonment. And I used that calling to re-enter his mind, and take it for myself." He gave another of his chilling smiles. "And you *know* I have far, far more power than all of you added together. I have had a thousand years to know how to use it. If you try to take me on, you are bound to fail—and fail very painfully."

"What do you aim to do?" Score asked warily. Jenna realized he was stalling for time while he tried to think of some way to take Nantor out.

"Do?" Pixel's body laughed. "I aim to have the Overmind place chips in the brains of you and Helaine, so that your true selves—Eremin and Traxis—can emerge. And then, together, we shall rule the Diadem once again."

Jenna stared in horror at the body of her boyfriend. Only now it seemed that Pixel was dead, and that the monster inhabiting his form was planning on plunging the whole Diadem into chaos and terror.

Was there any possible way to stop him?

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Oracle sighed. That wasn't as simple a task as it would be for a normal person. Oracle was not exactly real—he was a projection; more than an image, but less than human. He didn't need to breathe, so in order to sigh, he had to make the motions of the action and then create the appropriate sound.

All of this subtlety was pretty much wasted on his audience, of course. Everyone simply accepted him and

took it in their stride. But he was rather proud of his ability to appear so normal to the people that he met.

"We are *not* betraying them," he said, trying to sound forceful.

Shanara looked at him very sharply. She was her usual beautiful self, with long, flowing hair—red today, though it varied with her whim and mood. She was angry and upset, hence the flame red coloration. "We've set a trap for the three of them," she said. "What else would you call it but betrayal?"

"It's merely a precaution," Oracle said gently, knowing how carefully he had to manage this. "The chances are that we will never need to operate it, and Score, Helaine, and Pixel will never even know about it. But you—above all!—know how we dare not take any chances that the Three Who Rule might one day return."

"You don't need to tell me that!" Shanara's hand briefly touched her cheek. "More than anyone else, I suffered at their hands. I know we can never allow them to return to try and rule the Diadem again. They would cause unimaginable suffering for everyone."

"And, since there is nobody who is strong enough to stand up to them if they should return," Oracle

pointed out, "then it is only logical that we have a trap ready to spring that is designed to ensure that they can never return to Jewel and seize power again."

"I know," Shanara agreed. "But it isn't that simple! While I would banish Traxis, Eremin, and Nantor to the deepest pits of Hell without a second thought, it isn't *them* that we would be affecting. It's Score, Helaine, and Pixel. You're just an illusion, so you have no true emotions—but I love those three!"

"And if the Three Who Rule return, the children you love would be destroyed," Oracle pointed out gently. "And then the Three would ravage the Diadem. We have a duty to ensure that this can never happen. Our trap is simply something to hold in reserve. If it is never needed—and I pray that it won't be!—then nothing is harmed. But if it *should* be needed, we *must* have it ready to spring because we would not get a second chance. The children would never harm you, but the Three would snuff out your life without a qualm. And they would rip me apart. Without us, there is no one alive who could stand up to the Three and have a chance of winning."

Shanara waved her hand disparagingly. "I know all of that. But you cannot understand the feelings I am

experiencing.”

“No,” Oracle agreed. “I can’t. I don’t even have the image of a heart. But I, too, am very fond of the children. I have no wish to harm them.”

“And I even less.” Shanara prowled about her room. “When I first met them, I did not know who they were—only that they were magicians of great potential. I befriended them before I—before *they*—knew the truth. Now I know who they really are—especially Score—it’s so hard for me to keep silent. And it’s even harder to agree to this trap.”

Oracle knew how close to backing out Shanara was. But he also knew how important it was that their trap remain in place. “Blame me, if you must,” he informed her. “But we cannot dissolve the trap. It is our only defense.”

“Defense against three who trust us,” Shanara said bitterly. “Oh, I know you’re right—but it doesn’t make my burden any easier to bear.”

“Then we must—” Oracle began. But his words were interrupted by a sudden surge of power. He flickered, unable to maintain his appearance for a brief moment, and the world about him reeled. He did not understand what was happening, but, whatever it was,

it was *strong*. When he could focus again, he could see that the shock had sent Shanara reeling also. For a brief second, her defenses were down, and he saw her *real* face—and then the illusion she kept about herself sprang back to life.

It was lucky that he didn't have true emotions, or he might have recoiled from her in horror in that instant.

"What was that?" she gasped. "What just happened?" Oracle shook his head, confused.

"A burst of power, a threat of doom
For seconds spread across this room."

Then he stopped in shock, as he realized what had just happened. *He had spoken in rhyme!* He had been condemned to speak that way once after the Three Who Rule had been destroyed by Sarman, and the magical balance of the Diadem had been damaged. But once Score, Helaine, and Pixel had restored the balance, he had been free to speak normally.

Which meant . . .

"Balance, once healed, is felled anew
And it is clear what I must do."

Shanara had paled and her hand was trembling. "The balance is broken?" she asked, confused. "Yes, I can feel that my power is damaged." She hastily checked her face in a mirror and sighed with relief that the illusion covering that was still intact. "But how can there be damage? Didn't the children repair it?"

"At Jewel's heart a horn was placed
But still its power can be erased;
A crack there was within its form
That may have broken up the horn."

"Oh." Clearly Shanara had forgotten. Score, Helaine, and Pixel had fixed the magical balance using a unicorn horn—which had the property of negating spells—but the horn they had used had been flawed. It seemed more than likely to Oracle that the horn had finally fractured and failed. Without the horn in place, the magic of the Diadem was corrupted once more. Shanara looked at him. "We must find out what has happened on Jewel," she said. "But I cannot go there—the power would be too much for me, and the overload would kill me. Likewise, I cannot use my scrying pool to view the world. But you, being unreal, can travel there without harm."

“My unique self alone, ‘tis true
Is able to visit there to view
And so I’ll go and see what’s wrong
And report my findings ere too long.”

Since he was only held in one place by the force of his will, moving from one world to another was very simple for Oracle. Humans needed to create Portals for themselves to enable them to travel between planets—he merely had to imagine himself in a spot, and he would be there. So it was less than a blink of an eye (since blinking was something else he didn’t need to do) that he was standing in the throne room on Jewel.

He had not had reason to return here since the final defeat of the Three more than a year ago. Everything looked much as it had before. There was strong magic, stronger than anywhere else in the Diadem, flowing here. This close to the source, the flawed nature of the magic was so much more obvious. All he needed to do, though, was to look around. The problem was that he was a being constructed by magic—and with the warping of magic, this planet could affect him very badly. It might even destroy him if the balance was off badly enough. But he had no choice but to investigate—other than a supreme magician, only he could

stand here. And the only magicians with sufficient power to be here were Score, Helaine, and Pixel—even Jenna was not strong enough yet to survive Jewel.

He walked across the empty throne room to the doorway beyond. Inside the far chamber was Sarman's masterpiece—the Diadem Analog. Sarman had destroyed the Three Who Rule—at least, he had believed that he had—and found himself in exile here on Jewel, unable to leave the world without destroying the balance of the Diadem. So he had been granted the power to rule, but had been trapped, unable to use it. His devious mind had come up with a solution, though—the Analog.

Each world in the Diadem was represented by its own gemstone. Each gem was powered by the life of an individual from that world. Sarman had planned to use Score, Helaine, and Pixel as the sources for their own worlds, but the teens had managed instead to defeat Sarman. To power the Analog, they had trapped their own future selves—Traxis, Eremin, and Nantor—and imprisoned their evil inside the relevant gems instead. Then they had sealed off the room with the unicorn's horn.

Oracle moved to where the horn had been placed. To his surprise, it was still where it had been left, and although the crack was very real, the horn was still completely intact.

If the horn hadn't failed, then, there was only one other possible explanation for the balance breaking: something had happened to the Analog.

The unicorn horn might prevent any other being from entering the Analog room, but Oracle alone was unaffected by it. He simply walked through the door and into the chamber beyond.

He paused a moment, taking in the astonishing beauty of the device. It was a representation of the entire Diadem, spinning slowly in the center of the room. The individual gemstones flashed with the life each held, glowing and sparkling as they moved. It was only a sort of machine, but it was also an exquisite work of art. Diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and other precious stones whirled in stately fashion about the immense diamond that represented Jewel itself. The gems were all glowing from the life forces that they contained—except one.

Oracle moved through the gems until he came to the one that was dull and lifeless. With a shock, he re-

alized that he knew which one this was. It was the ruby that represented Calomir. And if it was dead, that meant only one thing. Nantor's life essence was no longer within it!

Oracle was stunned. Nantor must have somehow escaped! Which meant that he was most likely in Pixel's body. Things were worse than he had possibly imagined. Without the ruby, the Analog would break down. Once that happened, the Diadem would be plunged into eternal chaos, from which it might never return.

And not only that—but if Nantor was free, then it would not be very long before he found some method of getting Traxis and Eremin out also. The prospect of a Diadem in chaos, and the Three free to ravage it again . . .

Things could not possibly be worse. The Diadem might well be doomed . . .

The story continues in
BOOK OF DOOM

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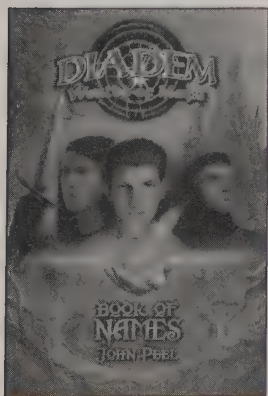
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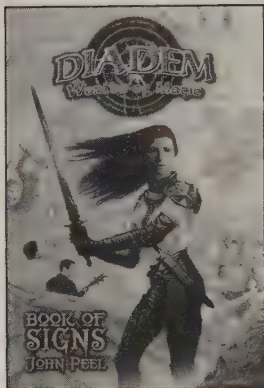


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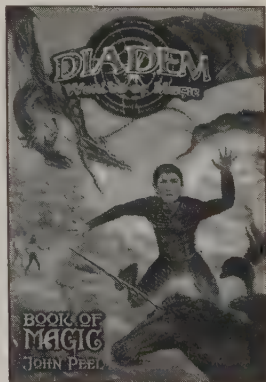
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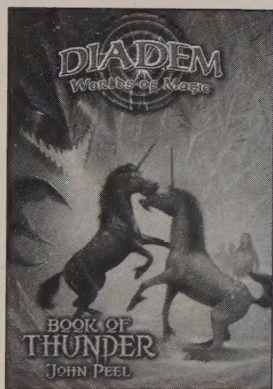
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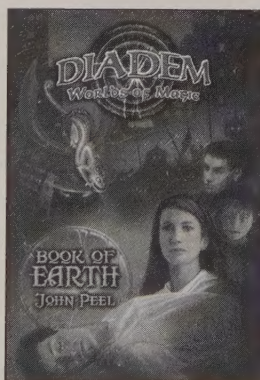
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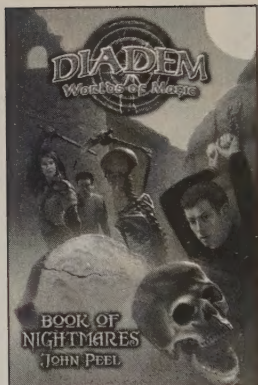
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This time around, Helaine and Pixel hit the streets of New York City to find a cure for Score! He falls victim to a deadly illness with only one cure: stopping the mysterious person behind this magical attack. Helaine and Pixel go to Score's hometown, the Earth city of New York, to seek out his attacker, who is using Score's most precious item to hurt him: his mother's amulet. Luckily, the trio stumbles upon a wealthy businessman who promises to help them in return for curing his disabled daughter—but is he really on their side? Will Helaine and Pixel find the amulet in time to save their dying friend?



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There's no place like home—especially when your home exists in virtual reality. Pixel, Score, Helaine, and Jenna journey back to Calomir, Pixel's futuristic home planet, expecting a happy homecoming. Instead, they find treachery, slavery, and deceit, including a dark secret from Pixel's past.

Can the four young magic-users find Pixel's family and liberate the enslaved Drones? Even if they succeed, they must still defeat the evil force that not only controls Calomir, but also intends to conquer the entire Diadem. . . .

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