

# Hackers

## David Bischoff

1878

Within its very first year of operation, 1878 (Alexander Graham Bell's telephone) company learned a sharp lesson about combining teenage boys and telephone switchboards. Putting teenage boys in charge of the phone system brought swift and consistent disaster. Bell's chief engineer described them as "wild Indians." The boys were openly rude to customers. They talked back to subscribers, saucing off, uttering facetious remarks, and generally giving lip. The rascals took Saint Patrick's Day off without permission. And worst of all, they played clever tricks with the switchboard plugs: disconnecting calls, crossing lines so that customers found themselves talking to strangers, and so forth.

This combination of power, technical mastery, and effective anonymity seemed to act like catnip on teenage boys.

Bruce Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown*

1983

"SHALL WE PLAY A GAME?" Walter Parkes and Larry Lasker, *Wargames*

hacker (originally, someone who makes furniture with an axe) n. 1. A person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities, as opposed to most users, who prefer to learn only the minimum necessary. 2. One who programs enthusiastically (even obsessively) or who enjoys programming rather than just theorizing about programming. 3. A person capable of appreciating hack value. 4. A person who is good at programming quickly. ... 8. (deprecated) A

malicious meddler who tries to discover information by poking around. Hence password hacker, network hacker. The correct term is cracker.

The term “hacker” also tends to connote membership in the global community defined by the net (see network, the and Internet address). It also implies that the person described is seen to subscribe to some version of the hacker ethic (see hacker ethic, the).

It is better to be described as a hacker by others than to describe oneself that way. Hackers consider themselves something of an elite (a meritocracy on ability), though one to which new members are gladly welcome. There is thus a certain ego satisfaction to be had in identifying yourself as a hacker (but if you claim to be one and are not, you’ll quickly be labeled bogus). See also wanna-be.

The New Hacker’s Dictionary Eric S. Raymond, compiler

<<prologue “

Special Agent Joe Norton’s stomach felt like it was spinning inside his body at about ten revolutions per second. Make that twenty. Inside the van, he took a deep breath and exhaled, watching his breath fog up the small one-way window beside him. Norton and the other five Secret Service agents crammed into the van waited for Agent Rodriguez to give the word. The static electricity of the many cups of Seattle-strong coffee stretched and clawed at his nerves as he wiped away the fog with his sleeve and peered out the window. There sat the Objective: the house. A seemingly innocent looking Cape Cod house badly in need of a fresh coat of paint, tucked along a seemingly innocent looking middle-class Seattle street. From this house came the Crime. Inside the house, now, was the Criminal.

The Criminal who must be stopped.

The other agents sweating in the hot van tugged on their black bulletproof vests, trying to stay alert and ready. They were good men, willing to back each other to the death. Norton felt proud to be in their

company. Still, at these moments, just before an operation, he always wondered if one of them wouldn’t make it. If maybe he would be that one. There were tons of things that could go wrong, from unexpected resistance from their target, to accidentally getting caught in a crossfire from his own team. He gripped his AK-47 like a talisman.

Rodriguez, his steely eyes flecks of flint in a pockmarked face, smelling of Ban and freshly starched fatigues, looked up from his watch, then out at the Objective.

“Remember, it’s vitally important that the subject be totally neutralized once we locate him in the house. Don’t let him touch any machinery, a phone, a stereo, anything. This guy is smart and we don’t want him destroying evidence or setting off any booby traps or causing any more damage than he already has. Keep his hands in clear sight at all times.”

Norton could feel himself nodding in unison with the others.

Rodriguez glanced at his watch again . . . then . . .

“Now!”

The door of the Secret Service van flung open with a loud clang and boots began to slap on concrete as Norton’s stomach did one last backflip.

“Go, go, go!” cried Rodriguez.

The troop raced across the lawn, their black flak jackets stamped Department of the Treasury in stenciled yellow lettering. The agents fanned across the yard to avoid bunching up and becoming easy targets. Norton could feel that the sweat that had popped up on his face was drying in the fresh spring morning. They deployed behind what cover the trees and a parked car provided. To his right, Norton vaguely noticed a young teen couple stare in amazement at them for a beat, halting in midwash of a cherry red Camaro. The stream of water spilled onto the guy’s running shoes. He dropped the hose, which skittered across the driveway like a snake, as he and his girlfriend ran into the shelter of a suburban breezeway.

Rodriguez silently used hand signals to order Norton’s B Squad around to the back of the house. Norton gestured for his men to follow and they took off, running low, holding their assault rifles in front of them as knights of old must have held their swords. Norton could feel his breath catch in his throat, startled by a Doberman behind a neighbor’s fence barking in frenzy. As his squad booked toward the house, the dog followed them along the other side of the fence.

Fortune was smiling on the U.S. Secret Service that day, Norton observed. A quick entry could be effected: the back glass patio door was open. Norton kicked down the screen door and burst into the dining room and the smell of bacon and eggs and brewing coffee. An attractive woman in her thirties in a threadbare robe dropped a spatula and yelped in surprise.

Even above the din of his boots thumping along the hallway, Norton could hear the other squad successfully hammering their way through the front door.

Norton took a quick assay of the hallway, darting his head around the corner.

At the far end was a closed door, covered with a collage of cutout magazine pictures.

Norton led his men in a rush down the hall, pin-balling against the cramped walls in their bulky equipment. Adrenaline screamed in his ears as he kicked open the bedroom door and pushed the nose of his weapon through, ready to fire, if necessary.

“Freeze” he cried. Over his shoulder poked more barrels as the other agents joined in with a chorus of “Freeze! Freeze!” and “Don’t move!”

Within the room, a computer screen flickered the color of the future into the face of the seated Criminal at its keyboard.

### Seattle Day in Court

“The defendant, Dade Murphy, who calls himself Zero Cool . . . ,” the yuppie district reporter had said with amused contempt, shooting his sharp cuffs, preening in his impeccable Armani suit. “. . . This defendant has repeatedly committed acts of a criminal nature. ...”

Those words echoed in Lauren Murphy’s mind now as she sat in the courtroom, looking up at the judge presiding over the case. Somehow, she’d managed to put herself into a numb state. Emotions seemed beside the point in this proceeding. You had your lawyer, the Feds had theirs-and that guy up there in the black robe and the wrinkled glower was going to decide what was going to happen.

Judge Jacob Blackthorne tapped his notes with a pudgy finger and leaned over the proceedings authoritatively.

“The defendant clearly has a first-rate intelligence. . . .” said the judge. Lauren Murphy’s heavy-lidded eyes passed over her son’s well-coiffed defense attorney, Elvira Morgan, who was then peering down to get an eye-to-eye with the subject of this trial. “Unfortunately it is directed to what has been described as ‘destructive and antisocial ends.’”

Dade Murphy, her son, stared back impassively without blinking. Tousled blond hair, eleven years old, freckles . . . braces on upper and lower teeth. Expensive braces. Alas, there was no doubt that this whole business was going to be far more expensive than she’d anticipated. Who would have thought that the brain behind that innocent face would have been capable of creating a computer virus on a cheap IBM clone that could crash 1,507 systems in one day, including several Wall Street computer systems? This flesh and blood of hers had single-handedly caused a seven-point drop in the New York Stock Exchange with his virulent clump of computer language.

Michael, her husband, stirred behind her. He looked more profoundly uncomfortable in a suit than ever. She could feel the anger banging inside him. Anger at his son, anger at her, anger at the judge and the court, anger at himself. . . just plain vanilla anger. Contained, though. That was the thing about Michael. If he could only let loose that anger sometimes, safely, instead of holding it all in and punishing everyone indirectly and coldly.

Everything had changed since those Secret Service agents had bashed so violently into their house to take away her eleven-year-old boy....

She’d lost the thread of what the judge had said, and had to focus again. He was such a dirge. He was sixty if he was a day, and he’d displayed the computer literacy of a troglodyte throughout the trial.

“ . . . and having considered the defendant’s extreme youth and circumstances that do not exhibit an intent to defraud, I am inclined to believe the defendant’s assertion that his virus was simply meant to. . . .” Paper rattled in his microphone as he picked up a note. “... quote map systems unquote and, instead, reproduced at an unexpected rate, inadvertently shutting them down.”

Hope fluttered in Lauren Murphy’s heart. Could there not simply be justice in this world, but understanding and forgiveness ... and please, intelligence?

The judge paused dramatically, looking over his half-frames down at Dade. “However, the defendant must learn that these computer systems are not toys and that their misuse has serious consequences. And his parents must be reminded of the grave responsibility in this matter. Dade Murphy, I hereby fine your family forty-five thousand dollars . . . .”

Michael whipped around and looked at his wife. The anger was all in her eyes now, and it hurt. She was the one who’d insisted they buy that computer for Dade, and had encouraged him to learn it, to use it... despite her husband’s objections.

“ . . . and sentence you to probation, under which you are forbidden to own or operate a computer or Touch-Tone phone ...”

Lauren Murphy looked down at her son, and for the first time in this whole proceeding he was registering some kind of strong emotion.

“... until the day of your eighteenth birthday.”

Dade Murphy's eyes grew wide. Pure horror shone on his face.

But what else they showed besides horror, his mother could not read.

1

New York City Now Blues

Data streamed across mirrored shades.

The sunglasses on the teenager were round and black, John Lennon numbers. Worn to prevent “raster burn” from cathode rays burning into the eyeballs after hours staring at a screen, they reflected the phosphor dot symbols that streamed across the screen of Dade Murphy's monitor.

Come to me, baby, thought Dade, totally focused, totally coherent in his intentions. Give it up!

Dade Murphy was eighteen years old now.

Dade Murphy was hacking.

He'd been hacking for hours straight, and the radiation of his machine felt like the rays of a kind sun upon a lowly prisoner who'd been kept in a dungeon for years.

Hunkered down hacking: Dade Murphy.

Pro-phracking-metheus unbound!

Dade sat in a small room, boxes scattered around in disarray, half-unpacked from the move. Half a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich flopped nearby on a cardboard box by the near-dregs of a two-liter Pepsi bottle. Among the litter were birthday cards reading “Happy 18th” and “You're a Man Now!” and a card from “Grandma and Grandpa” with an empty Compaq box that the precious new addition to his life had come in: a notebook computer, plain, boxy, and vanilla colored, still it was a feast to a starving man.

Dade was one with his system now, surfing the codes, riding the numbers, whacking through the lines, his brain a laser beam plugged into eternity and-

“Dade?”

Here's “Zero Cool,” frigid cipher turned cipher frigid again, his fingers tapping at the keyboard like a pianist on a caffeine jag or a rock and roll star ripping through a high-speed guitar riff. Click, clack, click, clack, click-

Braces gone, pimples gone, shackles gone.

Hair cut short and fashion-defiant, dropping down in razored bangs over high forehead. The pirate-geek

turned pirate-dashing. Outlaw of this frontier far beyond the West. Ride ‘em cow-

“Dade?”

boy....

Distracted, the brain came up for air. Eyes glimpsed digital clock: 3:10, tagged with an A and an M.

Some dim alarm went off in Dade Murphy’s mind. He glanced down at the telephone line, modular end detached from his phone and stuck into the back of his computer.

Rats.

Nailed.

He wasn’t supposed to be doing this. Yes, he could get on a computer again legally, but no, he wasn’t really supposed to be net surfing for hours and hours, which is why his mom had forbidden him to hook up his new laptop to the phone.

“Yeah, Ma?”

He imagined his mom out in the hallway. Groggy Lauren Murphy, a breath away from sleepwalking, worried about her trouble-boy. Early forties now, still a looker but in an overworked-underpaid kind of way.

“What are you doing?” she asked. Some years earlier, she might have come in. Now she liked to respect his piracy . . . whoops . . . privacy.

What the heck. The truth would do.

“Taking over a TV network,” he said, casually.

Pause. Consideration. He visualized his mom tilting uncertainly out there in a have-to-get-some-more-sleep-before-this-hard-new-job-in-the-Big-Apple kind of way.

“Well, finish up, hon,” she said, her voice getting distant as she trooped back to bed. “Go to sleep.”

“Sure, mom. This won’t take long. ...”

The modem jockey bent back to work.

Cyberspacial

Somewhere in Rockefeller Plaza, a phone is ringing.

It’s still night, just before four actually.

In the NBC Building lobby at Rockefeller Plaza, a guard, previously nodding off, is answering that phone.

“Security, Norm, uh, Norman speaking ...”

Somewhere else, outside of Rockefeller Plaza but still in Manhattan, a hacker is doing a bit of “social engineering.”

“Norman,” said Dade Murphy. “Norm, this is Mr. Eddie Vedder, from accounting. Listen, I’m in big trouble. You know anything about computers?” Big smile. “No?”

Somewhere on the West Side of Manhattan, a wire emerges from a New York Telephone junction box, crosses a fire escape, and loops into a window of an old brownstone building cut up into apartments. It stretches through the window and is plugged into the back of Dade Murphy’s new laptop computer, which is far better able to handle this particular situation than his bigger but lesser computer.

“Well, my”-he glances at his sandwich-“BLT drive on my computer just went AWOL. See, I have a big project due tomorrow for, uh, Mr. Kawasaki, and if I don’t get it in I will be asked to commit hari-kari. . . Yeah, well you know those Japanese management techniques.”

Somewhere in a dark and deserted NBC office, slightly later, a sleepy-eyed security guard named Norm ogles rows of desktop computers, each with its screen saver on. It’s a surreal gallery of flying toasters, neon fish, and exploding planets.

“. . . now drop the phone into the modem . . .,” Dade Murphy is instructing Norm.

Befuddled, Norm stares down.

“That’s the little boxy thing, Norm. It lets my computer here talk to the one there.”

Norm the security guard sets the receiver into the modem’s cradle.

Somewhere in New York City, a hacker mumbles: “Bingo.” Dade Murphy’s fingers fly across the keys, searching out the code combos he needs, doing the logarithm tango. The digital figures on the clock radio beside him silently trudge toward dawn.

Finally, the monitor displays the words Dade’s been looking for: ENTERING ARPS 331.

The ARPS is the Automatic Record and Playback System. It is the last stop before the network’s satellite feed. It occupies an entire room on the fifth floor of the NBC Building. The ultimate jukebox, it has eleven banks of videocassette-filled carousels. Even now.

Computer and TV monitors stack everywhere. A handwritten note is tacked on one of the machines, warning: “This machine is on-air. Do not touch.”

Dade Murphy cannot read this.

He would not heed it, even if he could.

Dade Murphy flipped the little Sony TV set in his bedroom to channel 4.

This was going to be good!

The picture adjusted, and low music spilled out of the speaker. NBC was showing a video now. A swim-suit video, with young women tossing a colorful ball on a California beach. Gee, how original,

thought Dade. “California Girls” by the Beach Boys. He far preferred the David Lee Roth version-however, he hadn’t glimpsed that in the catalog here.

Besides, he had other plans in mind.

He hit the RETURN key to implement the command he’d just typed. It went through.

“Say bye-bye.”

The cassette tape he’d selected was doubtless being jammed into its machine, started up, switched to, and-

Take!

The beach gals vanished on the TV set, vanquished by the opening scenes and music of a Get Smart episode. Yep, there was Don Adams as Maxwell Smart, making his sixties-dressed way down that tunnel. Dum de dum . . . DA! Dum de dum\_\_\_DO!

Dade chortled to himself. Yeah!

Suddenly, his computer beeped, breaking up his joy. He swiveled his chair and read the letter that suddenly appeared on the monitor:

U HAVE TREAD UPON MY DOMAIN & MUST NOW SUFFER. WHO R U?

Dade typed in: WHO WANTS 2 KNOW?

ACID BURN, replied the monitor. LEAVE B4 UR EXPUNGED.

“Unbelievable,” muttered Dade. “Another hacker.” He watched, fascinated, as the threats mounted: I WILL SWAT U LIKE THE FLY UR. I WILL SNAP

YOUR BACK LIKE A TOOTHPICK. I WILL HAVE YOUR BRAINS FOR BREAKFAST.

“Okay, Acid Burn,” said Dade. “I think that’s enough.”

He typed in: I IZ MOST IMPRESSED. BUT MESS WITH THE BEST, DIE LIKE THE REST.

YOU ARE TERMINATED, declared the other hacker.

His screen went blank.

Alarmed, Dade tapped a key. To no avail.

How had he done that?

He stared at his monitor, baffled.

Uhm, he thought. Things had changed a little bit in cyberspace.

Murphy Kitchen Jazz



Even in a more residential area like the West Side, a dweller of Manhattan is aware almost immediately in the morning that he's living in a city. Not merely a place of stone and metal, jammed with lots of people, with a few token trees and ponds and flecks of grass tossed in for walked dogs to relieve themselves upon, mind you. No, a multilayered zigzag of bumping trucks and lurching taxis and cars, contorted canyons echoing with honking horns. A complex jigsaw of jerry-rigged circuitry photo-censor to eyeball with mankind.

Dade Murphy could sense this as he woke up. The gray light of morning filtered, surly and old, through his pulled window shade. He felt like his head was stuffed with cotton and hooks were dragging on his eyelids to keep them closed. He would have preferred to have stayed asleep a while longer, but some instinct told him he'd better get up. Maybe it was the electricity in the city air, the sense that here he was in a city careening toward the twenty-first century on titanium Rollerblades with Walkmans jammed into ears and office workers slaving before computer screens and information, information, information ratcheting through optic fibers with white electron excitement, and that if he, Dade Murphy, did not plug his brain into a Thinkman soon, he was going to get left behind in a stale puff of fossil fuel.

Dade's stomach turned over.

He felt a lurch of fear and cold, of vulnerability.

He missed Seattle, he knew. He felt powerless. Powerless and frustrated as he'd been when his toys of the future had been yanked from him by the Retarded Judge. What that judge had done was something worse than castration. He'd tried to bring down a Mind. The Mind had persevered, but not without a cost to his soul.

Dade Murphy sucked the last of the tepid Coke from its bottle. He looked down at his computers, took a deep breath. He went to them, felt their hard surfaces. Felt comfort there.

He could feel his mother stirring outside. That's right, she wasn't supposed to start work yet. He just got here, was still in Seattle workaday mode. Right. Jeez, his brain wasn't working right. He'd better go out and get something else in his system. Light. Coffee. Carbohydrates. Brain-food. Deal with the parental unit.

He opened the door, staggered down the brief hallways, and entered the kitchen.

"Morning," his mother said, looking up from the New York Times and a Far Side coffee cup at this teen vampire emerging unhappily into daylight. "You unpack your stuff yet?"

"Uhhh . . .," said Dade. He'd really intended to say something bright and witty, but his mouth didn't seem exactly on-line.

"Up all night again, huh?"

On his back again. Confrontational mode. Right. Just what he needed. Space. Slack. That's what he really wanted, but somehow in that time-honored tradition of mom-mode, Lauren Murphy was in his face from Jump City.

"Can't this wait till both my eyes are open?" He could feel his attitude bite into his words and relished the strength and identity it gave him.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind if you were doing something useful,” she returned, a weary exasperation making her voice sound whiny. “But you weren’t doing anything useful, were you? No great American Generation X novel, no schoolwork, not even reading a book. Am I right?”

“I’m doing all those before lunch, Mom. Anything else? Want me to clean my room or mow the lawn or something? Oh, I forgot. There is no grass in New York.”

He went to what was laughably called the kitchen-a cubbyhole in the corner of the “dining room” of this dinky little New York burrow of an apartment.

There was about an inch of sludge left in the pot. He pulled it out, directly dumped some sugar into the black ooze, and slugged it without benefit of cup. It was wretched Maxwell’s, and it tasted like polluted river dredgings. He missed the decent coffee they got in Seattle. But it worked. Almost immediately he could feel dense jungle mists clearing from his brain.

His mother walked past him, bathrobe flapping, grabbed the phone, and played the Lauren and Dade Indirect Communication game.

“Yes,” she said, without bothering to dial. “Con Ed? Can I cut the electricity to my son’s room so he’ll sleep normal hours? He’s been playing with his new computer all night for a solid week. No, he hasn’t been dating. Yes, he’s cute, but he pouts, he’s very pouty. I see. I’ll ask.” She put her hand over the

phone and looked over to her son. “Dade, you do like girls, don’t you?”

Dade grimaced at his pot of Java. “Yeah, I just haven’t found one as charming as you.”

He placed the pot back into the holder, then stomped off for the bathroom, his pounding steps signifying his pissed-offness.

Cripes! She sure knew how to stick it to him. What, were women programmed to question a guy’s manhood if there was even a whisper of a hint that there might be more important things in this world than mating dances?

Dade slammed the bathroom door behind him. Not violently. Eloquently.

He went to the tap, splashed some cold Central Park reservoir water into his face. Too much. He gasped, dripped, grabbed for a towel. Rubbed, happy his mother hadn’t witnessed that little Fourth Stooge antic. It was hard to stay cool sometimes, the way the Universe treated you.

Tap tap tap. His mother’s voice, slightly contrite: “Look, I would’ve hated it if I’d had to move in my senior year.”

He turned on the hot water.

This time, he was going to make sure the temperature was right.

“But this school is going to be great. You had to test very high to get accepted and I’m proud of you. I didn’t...”

He hammered up the water more, drowning out her words.

Still cold, blast!

He waited impatiently as the old plumbing knocked and clanged, pumping up that water.

She raised her voice to get over the sound.

“Are you still mad at me because I wouldn’t let you hook your computer up to the phone?”

Dade thought about that. Yeah, maybe that was it! Maybe he had a lot of resentment.. ..

Nah.

Funny thing was, in the seven plus years since they’d supposedly 86’d him from computers, he’d been on plenty of times, snuck in by friends under hacking pseudonyms. He’d been extra-special careful to do zip to cause any trouble. Well, almost none, anyway-sometimes buddies would egg him on. Mostly, though, it wasn’t really necessary to get onto a terminal to hack. Hacking was a state of mind. He hacked in math class with those exquisite formulas his teacher gave him. He hacked when he got on the phone and spoke to people. He hacked when he dealt with his teachers, his fellow students. Hacking was a state of mind-and Dade Murphy had been in an incredible mental gym all his teen years. He’d read every single book there was about hacking, he knew all the updates, the incredible advances in personal computing. Information was out there. What, were they going to keep him out of libraries, out of magazines, out of books, out of friends’ collections of papery data? “. . . and in light of his heinous crimes,” growls the Bad Judge, “Dade Murphy shall not be able to read again. A chastity belt shall be placed over that frightening mind, lest it do our society the horrible damage of questing after truth and knowledge.”

Right.

Uh-uh. Unlikely.

Only now what they had was a guy with a chip on his shoulder . . . and not just a computer chip.

“You know you can’t get into trouble again when you’re about to apply to college. You are going to apply, right, Dade? Right, Dade?”

College?

You bet. They weren’t going to be able to keep Dade Murphy out of any college he wanted to get into . . . even if he was already in another college. Heh heh.

“Right, Mom.”

“Unpack. Are you listening to me? This is your home now. You’re gonna love New York. . . . It’s the city that never sleeps.”

That’s right, Mom. Interject some comic relief into the diatribe. Always helps a lot.

He stared into the mirror.

What song was it that Kurt Cobain had sung on MTV before he stuck that 12-gauge into his mouth?

“All apologies.”

Yeah. That was it.

Sorry, Mom.

I’m not going to like New York City.

I’m not going to like it here, I’m going to be miserable and homesick and ...

Dade made a series of “Calvin and Hobbes” faces at himself in the mirror. This done, he stared at the reflection that was really him.

Trashed. Tired. Alone and frightened.

The face startled him. He rubbed his features hard. Looked again. Result: a cold, emotionless visage.

No: cool.

He had his cool again.

This finally attained, he took off his clothes and jumped into the lukewarm shower.

2

Stanton High Polka

Trent Reznor, strapped to the handlebars of the Vespa, observing all impassively. Trent did not complain as the shocks dealt badly with the potholes in the road, nor did he shriek with the abrupt halt near the special bike parking area of Stanton High School. The wheels screeched to a halt, the rider slammed down the parking apparatus, and Trent said nary a word.

Kate Libby, the motorcyclist, scratched Trent behind his ratty ears. “See ya later, Trent. Be good and maybe we’ll sew that eye back on.”

The teddy bear said nothing, merely grinned blankly at the spectacle of dozens of students from all parts of town, walking, jumping, air-guitaring up the steps to Stanton High. It was a “magnet school,” a place for talented kids from all parts of the five boroughs that made up New York City. The composition of the students reflected that: Asian kids, black kids, Latin kids, white kids-and Kate Libby.

The eighteen-year-old tromped up the steps toward the postmodern building in Tribeca, not too far from the frenzied trading of Wall Street. At the top of the stairs you could see the Hudson River, and across the Hudson, the shores of New Jersey, and you could smell the Atlantic Ocean. It was a nice view, really, and it was a good school, but Kate Libby was not impressed. Kate was seldom impressed by much of anything.

She tromped through the doors of Stanton, god-dessette in grunge wear. Not even her combat boots could remove that sexy something that made the guys instinctively tilt eyes her way. And this morning, especially this morning, she wasn’t in the mood.

Kate lived in Soho, a hip neighborhood uptown from here. Things had not gone particularly well in Soho

last weekend.

She strode to her locker, twirled the combination, opened. Books dumped out. She caught them, put them back in. Selected the ones she needed, installed some stuff she didn't.

Suddenly two tickets got jammed into her face. They read Ticket Dictator Presents: Michael Bolton. She couldn't help but notice that the extra charges were almost as much as the exorbitant cost. The tickets were attached to the smooth hands of a guy named Jim Thomas, immaculately turned out today in his usual preppy clothing.

"Would you care to see Michael Bolton with me?" he said in his nasal, superior voice. She slammed her locker shut. "I'd rather vomit blood from my eyes." Thomas shrugged and went scouting for another possibility.

The clueless prep-boy, Kate thought as she went her way. Now if those were Nine Inch Nails tickets, she'd might have at least paused for polite consideration before declining.

Even as she walked down the hall, she couldn't help but feel the hot breath of male eyeballs dog her. Off to the right, she noticed a clot of jocks chuckling and winking. Oh boy, here came one of the butt slappers now, all shoulders and chin and pumped-up hormones. She recognized him. Terry Adams. A true no-hoper she'd rejected many times before.

"Kate," he said, in his grinny, jocular way. "I think it only fair to give you one last chance to go to that dance with--"

She cut him off. "I only date within my species."

With that slap against his ego's cheek, she peeled off down the hall, leaving him in flames. Sometimes she enjoyed male attention; it wasn't like she didn't wash so she wouldn't get it. Today, though, she almost wished she'd been entirely ratted out. She just wasn't in the mood.

She gave a wide berth even to a good-looking Latin kid, crooning away at a pay telephone with the letters P.L.O. scrawled on it, like Frank Sinatra at a mike:

"... si, todavia te quiero, baby. You still love me? Si, I miss you too." The guy was sleek, with a streetwise, hip-hop look and round wire-rim glasses.

A bell clamored, summoning the students to their destination. Kate couldn't help but notice another student approaching the Latin kid at the pay phone. "Excuse me," said the student politely. "I have to make a--"

Phone-guy lifted an imperious eyebrow at the new arrival. "Chill, man. I'm on long distance."

Kate Libby sighed as she tromped her army-navy-store-fashion way to the school's main office.

Another day at the salt mines.

Main-Office Stuff

Dade Murphy reluctantly dragged himself into the high school's main office. It hadn't been difficult to find, since it seemed to be the nerve center of the school, with lots of signs pointing toward it. Despite his

outward emotionless expression, his hip and calm, I-don't-care attitude, he was experiencing the same feeling he had when he had crossed the threshold of that big impersonal junior high school after a warm and nurturing grammar school: humongous butterflies wobbling in his stomach.

At the front desk, a nerdy kid with acne, a pocket protector, and bottle-bottom glasses was grumping over some papers.

“Uhm . . . pardon me . . .”

The kid seemed reluctant to rip his attention away from the fascinating forms spread before him.

“Yeah?”

“I’m a transfer. I need to-“

The guy honked a laugh. He swiveled and barked to a girl who could have been his fraternal twin over at another desk. “We got fresh meat here!”

The girl giggled.

The nerd pointed a dirty fingernail toward a bank of chairs.

“Sit.”

Dade Murphy sat.

He almost welcomed this little island of calm while he tried to adjust to the stark and grim circumstances of this educational prison. The place smelled of floor wax, with a whiff of disinfectant. The butterflies in his stomach calmed, but he still felt their leaden wings.

After a few moments of hard wood chair against his skinny butt, though, he got uncomfortable and bored. He leaned over, eyes exploring. He looked into the next room, which had a bright brass sign over its doorframe marked PRINCIPAL.

An overweight, balding man who looked like he needed a few Alka-Seltzers in his coffee was doing something on a side table.

Dade gave a friendly wave, attempting to be pleasant. The principal glared at him, stepped over, and slammed the door.

Woo!

Friendly place!

He leaned back, closed his eyes, and worked out some C++ code in his head. This little bit of something might be an interesting automatic-

A voice interrupted his code-filled reverie.

“You have your transfer forms?”

Algorithms changed to heartbeat rhythms.

Rapid heartbeat rhythms.

There was this . . . this . . . female hovering over him.

Girl? Yes, she was young. But “girl” wasn’t the word that popped to mind. Besides, any word that had popped into Dade Murphy’s mind would have been immediately drowned and dissolved in an acid bath of male secretions and bioelectric activity.

Short brunette hair, eyes like green heaven, a perfect sarcastically bent mouth, a long sleek throat.

A slender body bathed in hip-fashion attitude, and draped in a funky leather Suzuki motorcycle jacket.

She was, in short, a slumming goddess.

“I’m sorry,” she said, hand cocked on hip. “Do you speak English?”

Geez. Absolutely nothing in Alt.binary.sex on the Internet had ever prepared him for this. She smelled of soap and shampoo and some distant eternal field of life and earth. The air was so thick with her he could taste ...

“I’m sorry . . .” Dade managed. “You wanted . . .”

She mouthed the words slowly for him. “Transfer forms.”

“Oh. Right.” With a rustle of papers, he pulled them from his coat, handed them over.

She inspected them with the utmost seriousness. Then, with a raised eyebrow, she said, “These all look in order.” She summoned him summarily. “I’m your tour guide. Come with me.”

She started striding away, and as Dade Murphy rose to follow, he was happy she hadn’t said “Walk this way” because he’d never seen a person saunter more sexily in combat boots in his entire sexually maturing life.

“Your command is my wish,” he muttered to himself.

He followed her out of the office and down a corridor, in a direction he had not yet been.

“This is the best water fountain,” she said. “Hardly ever gets clogged with gum.”

“Oh, really? Thanks!”

A little farther on. “The gym’s through there.” Point. Saunter. “The cafeteria’s through there.”

Efficiency, thy name is ...

. . . what? He realized he didn’t know what to call her ... and that surely “Venus” would tip his hand.

“And your name is?”

“Kate. Kate Libby.”

“Kate.” He summoned up the most way-cool tone he could possibly muster, and hoped that savoir faire was simply radiating off his being. “Kate, seeing as I’m new in town, maybe we could resume your role as tour guide sometime . . . outside the perimeter? Like maybe to a movie house?”

She looked at him.

“Sure . . . and then you’ll wake up and realize it’s only a wet dream.”

She hadn’t said it nastily. She was smiling. She was smiling, and she’d said this clever, cool thing, and Dade Murphy’s cynical hacker’s heart was just one big quivering mass.

They stopped in front of a portal into students and desks. “Here’s your classroom.”

“Thanks.”

“And hey-one more thing.” That sexy, taunting smile. Oh, gads, she liked him. “I forgot an important little neat thing about this dump. Be sure to check out the pool. I like it. In fact, I’ll be doing laps third period.”

“Pool?” Dade didn’t remember anything in the brochure about any swimming pool.

Kate nodded solemnly. “Oh, indeed. There’s an Olympic-size pool on the roof. But take the stairs ‘cause the elevators don’t go all the way up.”

Kate Libby in a one-piece. Doing the ... oh lord! . . . breaststroke. The image flooded his mind.

“Yeah. Sure. Thanks.”

He backed into the class, giving her a 60MZ smile.

Stanton Roof Half-Gainer

Puffing a bit from all the stair-climbing, Dade Murphy pushed through the large door and walked onto the tarmac and stone school roof. There had been no sign, but Kate Libby hadn’t mentioned that there would be a sign, so that hadn’t bothered him. Besides, the notion of the sight of those long Libby legs, bare, those strong Libby arms, bare, and that delightful Libby chest and back, mostly bare, all encased in a skintight something, would have been enough to cloud the strongest man’s mind . . . and it certainly clouded Dade Murphy’s.

The clouds weren’t only in his mind; they were up in the sky, too, Dade vaguely noted as he stepped out into the late-summer air. In the distance rose the New York skyline, windows agleam. The roof smelled of tar and of the trees in a nearby park. He couldn’t see the pool; it must be behind that brick corner over there, he thought. He stepped forward, allowing the heavy door to close behind him.

A moment and a half later, two younger students, pimply and definitely freshmanlike, raced around the corner. “Yow,” cried one. “Hey. Keep that open!”

Dade gawked at them for one dreadful, uncomprehending moment.



Then comprehension clunked him on the head. There is no pool.

He spun around, ran, grasped for the closing door.

Missed.

The heavy door slammed shut, bolt slipping into place. An international No Access sign mocked him.

Automatically, he tried at the thing.

It held fast.

“Rats!” cried some other students as they reached Dade. “Looks like we’ve got company, though.”

Dade looked up at the grim clouds heading in from the Atlantic Ocean. The gleam was disappearing from the eyes of the skyscraper windows. Approaching thunder rumbled.

Hallway

Kate Libby, thoughts somewhere else entirely, headed back toward her’ locker to deal with the Boring Old Book Exchange Rag.

Outside, that noisy thunderstorm was just letting up.

In front of her, from under a door labeled Exit, flowed a string of soggy footprints.

She rounded a corner, and immediately found herself beside the apparition: that transfer student guy she’d met this morning. He looked like he’d been doing a fully clothed backstroke. His hair hung down in dingy ringlets over his forehead and his eyes gleamed with murderous thoughts.

She smiled to herself, passed him.

“Oh, hi there, Dazed,” she said over her shoulder. “Looks like you found that pool.”

The transfer student turned around, gave her a hairy eyeball, then sloshed away from her.

Kate shrugged. Oh well. One good way to thin down the sweaty-suitor ranks.

Still, it was a shame. He was kind of cute. . . .

Especially all wet and vulnerable-looking.

She slipped her earphones on and thumbed up some industrial-strength industrial rock.

3

Computer Class

Well, at least he’d gotten off that roof in time for Computer Class, thought Dade Murphy as he sat, cold and squishy, in his wood chair behind the old, banged-up monitor. It had taken considerable bang-ing-and-kicking effort, but, he and the other guys stranded on the roof had raised enough stairwell

ruckus to get some help. Not before they'd been good and drenched, of course. But at least they weren't still up there, shivering lightning targets.

He'd already booted up his computer, long before the bell, long before the big-framed teacher had shouldered his way to the front of the class.

Dade fiddled around the system, getting the feel of the thing.

"I'm Mr. Simpson," said the guy in the wind-breaker and gray Dockers slacks in front of the class. He held a manual in his hand, DOS for Dummies. "I'm subbing for Ms. Bayless, who was arrested at the anti-fur rally. Now, I know some of you have

computers at home, but these are school property, people, so I don't want to see any gum stuck to them. ..." He started to read from the book. "You press down the power button."

Dade observed all this with great amusement. Naturally, most of the students either already had the power buttons clicked on and were tapping merrily away or were hunkered behind their keyboards sawing some Zs. Dade's fingers were dancing, of course, coaching the system under his whip-mind. As he waited for a subroutine to initiate, he happened to glance over to his neighbor. He was a Hispanic sort, smartly turned out. Dade could smell his cologne and attitude from a few feet away. The guy was entertaining a neighboring female student with the antics of a couple of animated stick figures, intended to be either dancing or suffering epileptic seizures.

Dade turned his attention back to the utility he'd just invoked. Excellent! Mapped out in numbers and letters and figures was absolutely everything he needed to know about the computer he was parked behind and its connections to outside systems. He quickly memorized the pertinent descriptions, then changed a default. He fiddled and diddled.

Before long he had what he wanted whipping onto his computer screen:

WELCOME TO THE STANTON HS. COMPUTER SYSTEM. ENTER YOUR PASSWORD.

These machines were also clearly set up for more advanced classes. Night school. Who knew, but the wires were all there. Great! Now all he needed was information.

He turned to the Latin animator to his right, who

had just successfully succeeded in grossing out the audience of Stick Figure Theater. "What's the principal's name?" he asked.

"Warren Burchill."

"Gracias, amigo."

He typed in WARREN BURCHILL.

The reactions to Stick Figure Theater had swung some of Mr. Simpson's attention away from DOS for Dummies to the class. However, Dade's intent workings at his station now caught his full attention.

"You there," he said sternly, athletic chest stuck forward, wagging a correcting finger toward his charge. "Don't play with your keyboard until I've properly explained it. It isn't a toy."

“Yessir,” said Dade brightly and contritely, putting his hands into his lap for the moment.

“Now, you have to think of the D, O, S-which stands for Disk Operating System, by the way-as a kind of a shell inside a computer. By knowing the commands to type in, you can control . . . uhm . . . well, the controls, I guess!” Simpson burrowed on through the books, looking lost, but contenting himself in the droning sound of his own puzzled voice.

Dade Murphy, meanwhile, was thinking.

No keyboards were necessary for that, which was why he’d been able to grow as a hacker in those years between Courtville and Now. Every hacker was constantly confronted with passwords, and sometimes they could be insurmountable. Fortunately, just as humans built computers and their software, so humans also chose passwords. Figure out the human, and you’ve got a shot at figuring out what he might use for his personal code word. Dade Murphy’s mind cast back to this

morning. His inner eye panned over his memory of Principal Burchill’s office.

Hmm. Framed certificates. Picture of wife and kids on his desk. A picture of the guy with some cheerleaders....

Nah.

Pan a little left and . . . There! It was a pennant? What did it say, though . . . ? There were lots of pennants in this sporting universe. He zoomed in his inner eye, looked closer . . . Yes! A New York Giants football pennant. A strong possibility here!

Making sure Simpson wasn’t looking, Dade’s fingers tiptoed back over the keys, typed: GIANTS.

The screen gulped the word. The cursor dipped down, paused, blinking for a moment . . . and then suddenly streaked across the screen, painting a monochrome directory of the high school’s computer system.

“Bingo!” murmured Dade.

He noticed that his work was attracting Senor Stick Figure, but he didn’t mind.

There was something he had to do quickly to effect his goals. He found his way through to the controls of the head computer of the array, the computer that was now attentively listening to a disjointed summary of its innards: Simpson’s computer. With a few commands, Dade put his fingers into that computer’s guts.

DISCONNECT PORT 7, he typed.

The Head Computer winked off, even as Simpson was trying to explain the subtle differences between the slash and its evil brother, the back slash. The phys ed guy glowered at his machine with extreme consternation.

“Folks. Excuse me for a moment. Little glitch.” He kneeled and checked the wires to his terminal.

Meantime, Dade availed himself of the break in teacherly attention and charged full tilt for his objective,

typing madly. It didn't take long to get into the Scheduling Area and find a certain LIBBY, KATHERINE (KATE). A quick scan determined that she was in Advanced English.

Even as Simpson poked at his keyboard in frustration, Dade pulled up his own schedule, rearranged this and that, typed two words . . . and gosh! Suddenly he was a scholar, selected to immerse himself in the Bard and Associates and Advanced English with the best and the rest of Stanton. . . . Right alongside Kate Libby, natch.

To hack or not to hack, thought Dade as he dumped out before his hands got caught in the jar.

Alas, Poor New Yorick!

Hello, Fair Prince!

At the front of the class, a disconcerted Mr. Simpson was reduced to banging the top of his computer monitor.

Hall

After the computer class, on his way to Advanced English, wearing a decidedly Zero Cool kind of grin, Dade Murphy was approached by Senor Stick Figure.

"Hey, man. Nice stack moves!"

Dade lifted a Mr. Spock-like eyebrow. A hacker word. Hmm.

He gave a noncommittal "Hi," in response.

"Couldn't help sneaking a peak at your awesome gate-crashing, guy." A flash of friendly teeth. "So. What's your interest in Kate Libby? Academic or purely sexual?"

"Homicidal."

"Aha. Ms. Trickster strikes again. She does have a rep for that-and you do look a little wet behind the ears. . . . No insult intended. Seriously though, Blood of my Electricity . . ." The guy sidled closer, conspiratorially. "How'd you get Burchill's passwords?"

Dade ignored him, increasing his gait. Senor Nosy kept pace. "You can tell me. I'm Fantom Phreak. Yeah . . . that's right. I'm the Phreak. The King of NYNEX." The guy's chest suddenly got as big and puffed up as the phys ed substitute-teach's. Senor slapped it proudly. "You bet!"

"You wanna know Burchill's password?" Dade threw over his shoulder. "You gotta trade something for it."

The bell rang, and he stepped on the gas, pulling away from his jogging companion, and heading for a class that he hoped would be fateful in the extreme.

Advanced English Class

The class hadn't started yet.

Dade Murphy could feel a lot of brainpower crackling here, a lot of fashion statements. The place smelled of chalk and books and chewing gum.

Near the front, he could see Kate Libby having a kaffee klatsch without the kaffee. Friends. Chatting. She seemed more relaxed now than he'd seen her before, but not a whit less cool. Not frost then; but

cool. The thing about cool was that it hovered between a flicker of warmth and the frigid. He wondered which side this Kate Libby female thing teetered closer to.

Behind Kate Libby was an empty seat.

He slid into it, and sat unnoticed, staring daggers and dire thoughts into the back of her skull.

Doubtless she felt it. She turned around, and he couldn't help but notice a glimmer of vulnerability behind the cold facade. Warmth, then, maybe?

"Nice pool," he said.

"Oh." Shade down to cool again. "Well, it's a school tradition."

"Cool. What's next, the traditional tar-and-feathering?" Hard sarcastic phrasing. "That's it? That's all you can say? That is harsh, babe."

"'Babe'? What are you doing here?"

He looked around, playing baffled for a moment. "Advanced English ... I think."

She looked at him closely, and this time it was her turn to be baffled. However, she wasn't playacting. "It wasn't on your schedule. I saw it!"

"Are you implying I'm not advanced enough for you?"

"No," she said emphatically. "We're just not in the same class." And on that note of finality, she turned and struck back into the important conversation she'd just been having.

Dade kept on staring at the back of her head, knowing that she could feel him doing it, like a grumpy old nasty laser beam.

4

Pieces, Semi fractured

Here is Lower New York at the end of a Stanton High sort of day:

Still sunny, still skyscraper and rock, mixed with cars and pedestrians, sprouting up from polluted water.

And, as always, Important Business to take care of:

Fantom Phreak, in his mortal guise of Ramon Sanchez, stood at his favorite outside pay phone, by the steps of Stanton. As usual, though, he wasn't paying. The phone had been "liberated" through some deft maneuvering with a "red box."

Fantom Phreak was not having a pleasant conversation. Maria, a squeeze of his, was getting on his case about something or another, and Phreak wasn't having a particularly good time. Phone calls were supposed to be fun, man, and this one he was paying for, even though it wasn't in cash.

“... no, baby, I ain't seeing no one else. Mira, I gotta go. Bye.” He tossed the receiver into its cradle

with practiced ease. Phreak lived deep in the heart of Brooklyn, a toll call for others. He'd heard tales of the fabled days of dime phone calls from public phones that would cover the width and breadth of this bonito city. Maybe one day, through his outlaw work, those days might return. And at that time he would most certainly be more than happy to pay for his phone calls!

Phreak was a second generation Puerto Rican, first-generation hacker. He had a facility for languages-from BASIC through Pascal-he could figure out, if he put his mind to it. What he liked was puzzles, and when he'd stuck his nose into that secondhand Mac Uncle Pedro had given him when he was nine, he knew he was in love. Yeah, the Nintendo and Sega stuff was fun-he could figure those out pretty good. But it was the obscure stuff that was really challenging, the stuff that most other people looked at and scratched their heads over. Donkey Kong and his progeny any idiot could understand. But the ways through computer channels... now they rang with challenge and power.

Phreak liked girls. He liked clothes. He liked lots of stuff, including Broadway shows. He'd get himself and a date tickets through cracking Ticket Dictator. Show them a good time, have one himself. It was all “putting on the culture,” as his laundromat-owner dad would say. In short, Phreak was happy with his lot in life. He even liked school. Most of all, though, he liked computers and phones. What people didn't understand was that when Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, he'd essentially created the first computer chip. Any phone

service system was like a computer. And when computers actually started running this primitive nation-no, worldwide computer... Well, it would be all the better!

“Phreak!”

Phreak stiffened at the sound of his name spoken out loud, right in front of school. He spun around to see the perpetrator-and realized that he shouldn't have been surprised.

Gangling up the steps like an atomic pogo stick was a guy who looked like a young cartoon Jerry Lewis/Jim Carrey reject clone with braces. Joey Hardcastle, man, a denizen of Geek City. This geek had spunk, no question, and it looked like he had coffee breaks between his cola drinks. Dark spiky hair and a starched preppy shirt.

“Dude, I been looking for you, dude! Dude, what's up!” said Joey.

If there was one word that Phreak hated to hear himself called in public or in private it was “dude.” Dios! It sounded like he belonged on a ranch somewhere, shuffling horse manure.

“Joey, one more ‘dude’ out of you, and I'll slap you silly, understand?” Joey wore a Mets baseball hat-bill stuck out ducklike. How gauche! Phreak turned it around, street-rider style. Then, for good measure, he pulled out the guy's shirttails. “Now, I try to save you from yourself, but you gotta stop letting your mama dress you.” He stepped back for an inspection. Shook his head sorrowfully. “Hopeless.”

“I've been thinking about stuff. I mean, ever since I found out you were the Phreak and you've been

telling me how to hack, man, I've realized something. Something real important, and that's why

I've been looking for you. To talk to you about this. I gotta have a handle, man. I got no identity till I get a handle." He paused, thoughtful, doubtless running through the possibilities of what to call himself on his cyberspace jaunts. "Hey, how 'bout the Master of Disaster."

Phreak threw up his hands. "Utterly hopeless!"

"How about Stoned Ranger?"

"We're in the nineties, Joey, not the sixties. We're creating ourselves." He draped a protective arm around his apprentice, guided him down the steps. "You must very carefully weigh not only the sound of your handle, but its effects. Even the number of ASCII symbols it uses is important, man. You think I'm Phantom Phreak for nothin'? A great deal of mental power was placed in choosing those three symbols. Now, what say you and me go and get a burger-your treat-and together we will decide what you should call yourself."

"Awesome!"

"Yes, my brilliance blinds me at times, too."

They headed toward the local burger joint.

Burger-Joint Hip

Not just any burger joint, however . . .

The place was called Round the Clock, and it was a twenty-four-hour diner within the Winter Garden Mall. Above it the World Trade towers reached for the sky, monolithic giants. Despite the priciness, the environs was a hangout for Stanton High students. Dade Murphy himself had just Rollerbladed around for a while and stopped into the diner for a soda.

Round the Clock was a chrome and table-jukebox kind of place, supposedly imitating the hallowed french-fry roadstops of the fifties, but in fact designed by cynical yuppies, sipping Zabbar's coffee and eating quiche. In his travels, Dade had seen them all.

He sipped on his Coke, and tried to clear his mind of the day's proceedings. Interesting, mostly . . . challenges galore . . . brave new world and all that. . .

His problem remained, though.

New York was a cold, hard place. The students, smart though they might be, seemed cold and hard reflections of the city. For one twinkling, he'd thought he saw some speck of hope and beauty in those green eyes of Kate Libby, but it had just been a sexy taunt for a home-starved Seattle boy.

He sucked on his straw. Very well then. Mere cool wasn't good enough. Some cold and hard might serve him well. So be it.

There were always the warm and welcome byways of cyberspace to puzzle and zoom through.

A tapping at his window. He turned and saw a guy there. Mets cap and braces, Joey Hardcastle. He'd

sat by the guy in math class, and he'd spotted the type immediately. Computer nerd, Uncool species. Behind him he could see the guy who called himself Fantom Phreak negotiating with yet another pay phone.

Dade waved back noncommittally, whispering to himself, "Total computer geeks."

One of the neat things about talking to people online was that you didn't actually have to look at them.

Dade buried himself in thought. This was going to

be one difficult gig. Well, at least he had people he halfway understood, geeks though they might be.

He shrugged, turned, and tapped back the window at Joey, who was leaning against it. When the kid turned around, Dade gestured for him to come around and sit with him.

For just one moment, the look of pure excitement that crossed Joey Hardcastle's face gave Dade something like a spark of New York warmth.

Around-the-Clock Hop

Three cups of coffee later, Dade Murphy was buzzed.

Phreak stuck to sodas to wash down the hefty cheeseburger that Joey bought him, but Joey himself matched Dade Java for joe.

"So, I was tooling along, just Gophering around," said Joey, "and I found this bulletin board service in Kansas. Kansas, can you believe that? Guys, it had some eye-popping programs for downloading."

"Gee . . . man, let me guess . . . Space Invaders . . . Star Trek . . . Pac-Man?" Dade said.

Phreak seemed stunned. "You've been there?"

Dade and Phreak's eyes met. They broke into laughter.

"Hey, guys, what's so funny? They're great games!" said Joey. They were still chuckling, when a long-haired, Deadhead-looking kind of guy slumped into the booth from nowhere. One moment he was animate, the next he was just there, looking barely coherent but totally there.

"Here's the man!" said Phreak. "I call, he comes.

Aren't beepers wonderful? Ah yes, the age of communications!"

"Dade Murphy," said Joey, introducing. "This is the guy we've been telling you about. Cereal Killer."

"Yes. I can read his T-shirt."

Cereal looked down at the name emblazoned thereon. "Yeah, that's in case I forget."

"Where you been, man?" asked Phreak.

"Chinatown. Market area." The eyes in the face suddenly blazed, back into pitching mode. "'Buds! I got



crispy bootleg concert tapes for all you idol worshippers. Zappa, the Dead, Pearl Jam, and specialty items like this ...” He pulled a tape from a pocket. “A compilation tape of my own making. I call it The Greatest Zukes Album,’ Featuring Hendrix, Joplin, Belushi, Mama Cass, and more. All artists who asphyxiated on their own vomit. Please. One at a time. No traveler’s checks, please!’ Oh heavens, too much!” He put the tape back and pulled back a pair of mirrored eyeshades. “There we go. When in Rome!”

“Good day?”

“I made a few bucks. You know, though, I’m kinda bummed. I was thinking. 1984 was a typo. 255-91-1755. That’s me. I been reduced to a series of digits. My Social Security number is in thousands of computers that buy and sell my life story. FYI, you can sit at home doing nothing and your name goes through seventeen computers a day. Orwell is here, our privacy is invaded every day. We have no names, man. No names. We are . . . nameless.” Suddenly, he brightened. “Oh, hey . . . fries.”

His hand darted forward and dived into Phreak’s french fries.

Phreak twirled his index finger by his temple: Looney Tunes, man. “Ah, yes. This is Cereal Killer all right. As in Froot Loops. But he is useful from time to time. He does ‘know’ things.”

“Oh yeah, guys,” Joey said, thoroughly caffeine-cranked. “There was this other computer I got into . . . on the lines, I mean. I don’t know where it is or what it does. Nothing, right? But I get in. It was a big system, two hundred ports. I mess around, throw some commands at it.” He laughed. “I don’t know what I’m doing, but it’s so choice. I’m eating it up for three, maybe four hours. Finally, I figure out... it’s a bank!”

Dade looked at him, totally shocked. The others had similar looks.

“And this morning,” Joey continued, “I read in the paper an ATM in like Nowhere, Idaho spits out seven hundred dollars in cash into the street, in the middle of the night. It was so funny! That was me, that was me that did that!”

Phreak was staring at him, frowning. “You did this from your house?”

Joey nodded yes, took another sip of his coffee.

“What are you, stoned or stupid?” continued Phreak. “You don’t hack a bank across state lines from your house. You’ll get nailed by the FBI. Don’t you know anything?”

“Yeah, I know that,” said Joey. “But I didn’t know I was in a bank until after.”

“Stupid, Joey. Universally stupid,” admonished Phreak contemptuously.

Joey was taken aback for a moment. Contrite, but then aggressive. “You think I should know everything, but you never tell me anything!”

Phreak scratched his ear lightly, considering. He

glanced at Dade, then shrugged. “Okay, what are the three most common passwords?”

Joey did not hesitate in his recitation. “Secret, Love, and Sex . . . though not necessarily in that order.”

Cereal stuffed another fry in his mouth and spoke as he chewed. “Don’t forget God. System operators love to use God. It’s an ego thing.”

Phreak tapped Joey condescendingly on the shoulder. “You want to be elite? First you have to do a righteous hack. None of this accidental crap.”

“Hey . . . Hold it right there!” shouted Joey, standing up and waving his finger.

Dade had to turn around to see what he was pointing at.

The cashier had a remote control device in his hand. Dade had noticed that he’d been channel surfing earlier; apparently he’d resumed that, and was now being asked to stop on a particular channel.

All assembled turned around and looked at what was getting Joey so excited.

The TV tube showed the image of a blond TV reporter, looking fresh and stylish, standing before a huge computer. Dade recognized it immediately: a Gibson Supercomputer. Its sleek black towers made it look like a ten-foot-tall version of the World Trade Center.

“. . . years scientists have labored to perfect a supercomputer capable of doing a million calculations at once,” said the perky reporter with perky seriousness. “The computing equivalent of breaking the sound barrier.”

Dade looked over at Joey. The guy had an expression on his face, as though he was dreaming the most desirable of dreams. “Wouldn’t you like to score one of those babies?” Joey whispered.

Dade turned his attention back to the reporter, who was saying, “. . . this commercial-use Gibson was delivered to the Atlas Oil Corporation to run its worldwide network and conduct geological oil surveys. Barry.”

The image cut from the Gibson to the anchorman back on the news set, giving a professional artificial laugh. “Bet they’re still puzzling over the instructions that came with it.”

Cereal sneered. “Yeah, Barry, and you’re still puzzling over your VCR!”

“Yo,” said Phreak suddenly. “Who ate all my fries?”

Dade noticed a funny expression crossing Joey’s face, but immediately focused on the fun that was going down between Cereal and Phreak.

## The Atrium

What happened was that Cereal decided he was still hungry so he ordered more fries for everyone. Even Dade ate some, and he felt like the guy was really okay now. A little retro in his attitudes, but in his case that seemed okay. Anyone who liked his fries dipped in both catsup and malt vinegar with a dash of Dijon mustard was okay by him.

They all emerged from the atrium as dusk lowered dark and melancholy on the city. A lonely boat horn bellowed alongside the traffic noises. The smell of something about to happen was in the air. Lower New

York symphony.

Phreak's beeper went off and he checked the display.

Joey was back on the topic of the name he should call himself as he darted hither and thither through worldwide computers, hacking.

"How about Doctor Doom?" he suggested hope-fully.

"Lame," said Cereal.

"Hey," said Dade. "As long as we're on the subject of hacker handles-anybody know a hacker who goes by the name of Acid Burn?"

Joey seemed about to say something, but Phreak cut him off quickly. "Hey, Joey. We got some business to do. Get lost."

"Sure, man. Bye."

And, with no further adieu, nor clinging of any variety, the hanger-on ceased hanging on, hopping away every bit as frenetically as he'd lived every other moment of this day-if not more so.

Dade noticed Phreak and Cereal exchanging baffled looks.

"That was easy," said Phreak, clearly surprised.

"Yeah. Weird."

"Yeah, well, guys, it's been a real blast of a day, and I got to dump out," said Dade, starting to walk away, but making sure he was headed in the opposite direction from Joey No-Handle.

Cereal's beeper went off. Sheesh, thought Dade. What these guys needed was notebooks and cellular modems.

"Hey!" said Phreak. "Where you going? Hang out. C'mon, I got something to show you, a trade for Burchill's password."

Dade halted in his tracks. Spun around. Now they

were talking digital turkey, baby! "Hmm. Now that might be interesting."

"You bet it will be," said Cereal. "But I strongly suspect we'll need provisions. And I know this perfect little deli."

Dade followed them, curious despite himself.

Joey Playing

The newbie hacker sat behind his home box.

Joey Hardcastle grinned.

He had a nice machine. His father had bought it for him last year. Birthday present. A Pentaflex 486/50MHz with three hundred and twenty meg hard drive, 16-bit ROM, quadra-speed CD-ROM- and all the peripheral trimmings.

Now, the purring machine whispered to him and the hard drive cranked and clunked efficiently as it displayed the visual dances on its progression through Windows toward his communications programs.

He ran his fingers lovingly over the monitor. Touched the edge of his keyboard with the feeling only a computer hacker can know for formed plastic.

“Oh, Lucy, my Lucy,” he said. “Baby, baby, baby, you and me, we’re gonna show those guys.”

Yeah. He took a sip of his cola, shivered with the stacked caffeine inside his soul. Those guys thought

5

he was a munchkin. An urchin. A wanna-be, a bitty box. They thought he was in larval stage. But he was doing things, learning things so quick. . . . He was sure he was in full hacker’s mode now, and this little cyberspace escapade would surely, surely show them.

Half the dilemma was figuring out the phone access number. It wasn’t exactly in the phone book. But by calling directory assistance and getting some of the other numbers chances were you could get some numbers which could give you parameters for an access number-seeking program. Then you ran a “WarGames” scanner, searching for a computer comm squeal. Joey was running that right now, even as he studied a mangled copy of commonly used passwords.

He heard his monitor dialing. Mostly it was getting phone machine messages at this time of night. At the mere squeak of a human voice it snapped off and resumed its sequential quest. Nice program! Phreak had given it to him.

Joey Hardcastle was a latecomer to computers. A late bloomer. He lived on the Upper West Side, second of two sons to a well-to-do Wall Street broker and his wife. All his life he’d felt eclipsed by the accomplishments of his older brother, Ted. Ted was an honors student, he’d raced through Harvard Business School magna cum laude, and he was now following father into the business world, with resounding success. Joey, though, had generally gone through life with his nose stuck in books, comic books, or a TV screen. He’d never been permitted computers before, not even video games, so this was all a brave new world for him.

When this beautiful gift had come his way, it was intended to enrich his business sense. Which it certainly had. Joey was a spreadsheet terror, mastering Lotus and other business programs and databases with ease. This pleased his parents, who assumed that this would finally put their dreamy, gawky kid on the path to success. However, what truly attracted Joey was the telecommunications world. Finally, he could talk with other guys like him! At first he subscribed to CompuServe and GENie, and then advanced to Netcom and the world of the Internet. There he’d run into hackers, talking, and strange allusions to mysterious BBSs with bountiful information and camaraderie. With the help of a Sprint account and Internet, he hopped all over the country, and all over the world. This was how he’d met Phreak. When he’d realized that Phreak was at the same school as he-he knew he’d found a mentor.

Now, cola in hand, a pack of chips set up for munchies, equipped with wrinkled hacker’s reference sheets, he was ready for an expedition.

The program kept searching. A half hour had passed already. Joey opened the potato chips. He'd been persuaded by his mother to have some dinner, so he wasn't really hungry. However, he felt his nerves pressing against spine and he needed something to do with his mouth and fingers.

Another fifteen minutes. Patience, man, patience.

Another ten, and Joey was bored. Oh well, it was a good try. Maybe he should just get onto Internet and suck down some new nudie binary pictures. That at least would give him some sense of satisfaction. He was just leaning over to turn off this program, when he hit.

A graphic suddenly spread over his monitor:

ELLINGSON MINERAL CORPORATION

WARNING!

ACCESS TO THIS COMPUTER AND ITS DATA IS RESTRICTED TO AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

LOG IN YOUR PASSWORD: Yes! Joey Hardcastle bent industriously over his keys.

Ellingson Mineral

Ellingson Mineral was the kind of company that had the money to afford an entire Manhattan skyscraper. Thus, this slab of a building in midtown Manhattan, some of the priciest real estate in the universe, devoted every bit of its ugly self to being the Ellingson Worldwide Headquarters. Although Ellingson Mineral had never actually had a large oil spill like Exxon, it nonetheless prided itself on the other kinds of damage it had done to the planet. With a past reaching back to the oil barons of the nineteenth century who thought that John D. Rockefeller was being too generous when he dished out dimes to people, this dinosaur doled out its fossil fuel with miserly relish. A kingdom within a nation, its proprietary tentacles spread out throughout the world, racking up bucks, pounds, yen, marks, liras, kroner, drachmas every way it could and leaving it to its PR people to clean up the metaphorical oil slicks it left behind.

In the heart of this behemoth, past security doors and thick glass windows and locks and monitoring cameras, a man played with a GameBoy.

Totally immersed, he was playing a scaled-down version of Mortal Kombat. The man's name was Hal. Around him were slung the sleek appointments of a Gibson Supercomputer and its attendant array of stations, monitors, and tastefully colored cables. Everything had a pleasing sheen, a tasteful smell of streamlining. Maybe a trace of coffee and tuna sandwich, a whiff of illegal tobacco to humanify things, but that was all.

As Hal gleefully hammered at his GameBoy, one of the monitors well to his right was showing an attempt at access.

At the password line, the letters G, then O, then D appeared.

Immediately the screen wiped, replaced by a huge directory of information and services and storage facilities contained by the Gibson.

Not terribly far away, a teenager cackled with glee. He had just waltzed past some of the world's most sophisticated defenses to enter the belly of the beast.

Nikon's Pen

The Three Hacketeers walked down the hallway, Dade bringing up the rear.

Salsa music and muted sirens floated in the background. There was the aroma of cabbage here, and less savory scents. Phreak pounded on a scabby door, and it opened, revealing a tall, menacing figure in a sweatshirt with its hood slipped over the head. In one hand the guy held a can of beer. A red-twirled straw emerged from its top.

"Yeah! Hola! Hey!" said Phreak smoothly. "This is Lord Nikon. Nikon, this here wirehead is—" Phreak paused, waiting for Dade to respond.

"Crash Override," Dade said, uncomfortable enough in the situation not to want to give out his true hacker name, Zero Cool.

"He's from Seattle," said Phreak.

Nikon was an imposing figure, tall and still. Dade could feel intense eyes taking the sight of him in. "Does he 'know' anything?" the figure asked.

Phreak was confident. "Sure, man. He's elite."

Nikon nodded imperceptibly. His voice was deep and resonant. "Welcome to my crib."

He walked away from the door, intent clear. The trio followed him into the apartment. The place was clearly a true bachelor's pad. A pile of unopened boxes stood in the living room, beside various sorts of bottles and paper dishes and utensils. There was the smell of a dirty sink to the place, unwashed clothing. Two printers clattered on a table by a pair of laptop computers. A twenty-six-inch TV faced a ratty sofa, next to a singularly out-of-place, startlingly beautiful flower arrangement, reds and purples, greens and whites.

Nikon directed that the bags be dropped onto a cluttered dining-room table. "I got your shipment for you, if you can find it."

Cereal went over to the stack of boxes and started searching as Nikon stuck his head into the bags, rooting around. He snorted with pleasure, pulled out a bag of white-cheddar popcorn.

Dade pulled Phreak aside. "What's up? Drugs?" Nervously. That wasn't his scene.

Nikon laughed. He pulled off his hood. A solid,

handsome black face came into view. High cheekbones, high forehead, sharp dark eyes. His dark hair was spiked with funky dreadlocks. He tossed a few kernels into the air, somehow caught them with an open mouth.

"Hey, man. You know how they come up with credit card numbers?" asked Nikon, in a testing kind of way. "Let's see what this guy really knows."

“Sure,” said Dade. “They use an algorithm code.”

Phreak started handing out beers. Dade took one, but only sipped, not particularly liking either beer’s taste or effect. “Cereal cracked the code, so we can use the numbers on phone services that run a check on the cards themselves. They just make sure the card number fits the algorithm.”

Nikon picked a TV remote switch, zapped the tube. “Outfits like this one.”

The channel clicked to life. The image showed a woman’s hand modeling a cubic zirconia bracelet, with a graphic inset and a droning, cooing voice pitching the product: “. . . and remember, America’s favorite way to shop is from-“

“-the comfort of your own home,” answered Nikon and Phreak in harmony. They toasted the TV with their Budweisers.

Dade shook his head disbelievingly. “You guys are scamming the Home Shopping Network?”

Cereal pursed his lips thoughtfully. “We think of it as a unique form of trickle-down economics.”

“Yeah . . . but I mean . . . look at that stuff.”

On the TV the next item for sale had popped into view. A sequined jogging suit. Oh drool!

Phreak hopped to the phone. “Oh man, my uncle loves that stuff!”

Nikon wagged a finger. “Now, now. Patience. Bide your time and they’ll drop the price.”

Cereal was regarding the arcane lettering on his Budweiser can. “Hey, Nikon. Can I crash here tonight?”

“Again?” Nikon scratched his dreads. “Yeah. Sure. Why not?”

Smiling, that little shred of insecurity blown from his mind, Cereal now seemed even more laid-back and relaxed than before. He noticed that Dade still seemed stiff and not at home, and placed a brotherly hand on his shoulder. “Chug your beer, man, watch the show, get into the flow.”

Dade looked at the flow, and he wasn’t entirely sure it was the kind he wanted to get into.

The Plague

Things were getting violent.

The sparring partners in the GameBoy were smashing each other something fierce, and Hal the Sysop was really getting into the whole thing. Crunch. Smack. Splash of blood. Umph!

BEEP!

The beeping, however, wasn’t coming from the cheap little plastic box in his hand, but from the expensive big metal box in front of him. Hal the Sysop paused the game, and his chair squeaked as he leaned over to check his monitor. He then picked up his portable phone and walked down to the monitor indicated.

On this particular monitor, a few yards down, stuff was happening. Weird stuff. He stabbed a number, lifted the receiver, and listened to the ring.

The ring echoed behind the door several floors up. This door was marked Computer Security Officer, and behind it a hand reached out from the covers of a bed folded out from a sofa to pull off a receiver and answer the call. Although the darkened room, lit only by a couple of screen savers on computer monitors, was supposed to be an office, at the moment it more resembled a teenager's inner sanctum than some modern and efficient place of business. Clothes were strewn everywhere. Posters of nymphets in various stages of undress were tacked on the wall, alongside posters of comic book superheroes.

"Yeah?" said the man beneath the covers.

"Mr. Belford?" said Hal the evening Sysop.

"Can't you get anything straight, guy? My name is 'The Plague.'" The voice was like a crack of a sleepy whip.

"Oh. Right. Mr. The Plague, there's something weird happening on the net."

"As in what, you hapless technoweenie?" The mound beneath the covers moved. A bag of Cheetos dropped off onto the floor, spewing yellow cheese puffs.

"The accounting VAX is working really hard. Only one person's on-line, but the workload is high enough for ten users." Pause. Worried breath. "I think we have a hacker."

The hacker that Hal the Sysop suspected, Joey Hardcastle, was still hacking away behind his steaming CPU, many blocks away. Hacking as though his life depended upon it. This was his moment of glory, his time in the sun. With this hacking success, he had placed his stamp upon the world,

and oh! how his colleagues would appreciate him now! No longer would they sneer. No! They would look at him with respect, yea! Even awe.

He shook his head, glorying in his success. He patted his computer lovingly. "Lucy, we just need proof now that we were here."

With a touch of the appropriate key, Joey the Hacker scrolled the directory all the way to the bottom, stopping on the very last file marked. He had to steal something to show to his compatriot renegades.

GARBAGE, it said.

"That'll do. Okay, gimme garbage."

He hit a key.

Data began to flow. The screen went aglow with a hypnotic ballet of numbers crunching. Every few beats, a ripple would move through the data, as if something were alive just below the surface of the program. Joey gaped in awe. Numbers flowed onto the screen like white blood from a punctured computer aorta. Quickly, Joey grabbed a blank, preformatted "stiffy"-a 3.5-inch, high-density microflop-and stuck it in his A: drive. Fortunately, he'd had the forethought to prefigure his buffer on that path.



COPY GARBAGE FILE, he formally instructed Lucy.

As the Garbage file routed toward the microfloppy in the A: drive in Joey Hardcastle's computer, Eugene "The Plague" Belford routed down the halls of Ellingson atop a sleek, expensive skateboard, startling a janitor and a security guard along the way. At the Computer Center doorway, he popped the skateboard up, clasped it firmly in hand, and

pushed his way in, strutting like a cocky gunman entering a saloon.

"Never fear. I is here."

A man in his early thirties, Eugene Belford was a thin and sharp-featured guy, long-haired and ferret-like. His eyes sparkled with self-satisfaction. A long, black duster overcoat flowed around him, like a punk Billy the Kid. Here, truly, was a man who was a legend in his own mind.

Hal seemed relieved, though, to have that legend around. "I've narrowed the activity to terminal twenty-three."

The Plague sat down at his personally customized console. In front of him were two black rotating keypads shaped like human hands. These were "DataHands," designed to make data control that much faster, that much easier.

Limberly, The Plague tapped his fingers. "Let's echo twenty-three. See what's up." The product of his typing fingers, a string of commands, appeared on his screen. The screen immediately commenced disgorging the huge and disconcerting mess of numbers and symbols that was the Garbage File.

Plague shook his head wonderingly. Someone indeed had entered the proper password. "'God' wouldn't be up this late."

He hit a few more keys.

The monitor responded. FILE: GARBAGE, it read. STATUS: DOWNLOADING FILE.

Eugene "The Plague" Belford was rocked. "He's copying it!" he whispered to himself. "Crap!" He grabbed a phone, dialed operations, got somebody immediately. "This is Belford," he barked. "Get me the inward operator. I need a priority trace!"

He couldn't cut off the line now; he had to see where this stuff was going. Otherwise, there was going to be the devil to pay.

While The Plague was speaking to the operator, Joey the Hacker watched the mesmerizing flow of data stream on his computer. His bedroom door opened, but was stopped by the chain secured there. He looked over and saw his mother trying to peek through.

"Time for bed, Joey, okay?"

"Aw, Mom! Not now, I'm busy!"

Her sweet voice suddenly became rock-hard. "Open this door, Joseph! Immediately!"

Joey Hardcastle knew that tone meant business. He got up, unlatched the chain. His mom entered. She had her mud mask on; not exactly the beauty queen tonight, Mom.

“Bed. Sleep. Now,” she demanded.

Quickly, Joey popped the partially copied garbage File from his drive. He had enough, he figured. Then he turned off his computer. His mom didn’t like it on. Said it sucked up electricity, but mostly she liked to be able to hear the thing starting up, so she could listen for his illicit activities.

He crawled into bed and got a kiss for his trouble. “Dream sweet dreams, dear.”

While Joey was receiving his good-night smooch and benediction, Hal the Sysop was looking at his monitor. The stream of information had halted suddenly, and now a stationary cursor blipped passively.

“The hacker’s gone!” he said.

The Plague wheeled around in his chair, speaking into his phone. “Did you get a trace?” he demanded.

He looked harried and worried.

He listened intently at the phone.

Slowly a reptilian smile crept across his features.

Nikon’s Pen Redux

It was late. Real late. Dade could sense that, and he wondered why the heck he was still up, staring at the Home Shopping Channel. Immediately the answers came to him:

Caffeine and anticipation.

Something was going to happen.

Beer cans lay littered all around, and the others seemed pretty blitzed, but still aware, even expectant. And to his surprise, Dade was kinda getting into the Home Shopping Network himself.

The TV was saying: “An Elvis Presley china set. Each piece displays a key chapter in the King’s saga, including a hefty gravy boat.”

Suddenly, Nikon lifted the remote, stabbed.

The channel changed.

“Hey,” said Dade. “Wait a second, that was cool. My mom loves Elvis. Uh, early Elvis, that is.”

On the screen was an Indian head test pattern. From the speakers came the last strains of the national anthem.

“Nikon’s got himself a dish,” said Phreak.

“What. A satellite dish?”

“Well, it ain’t mine, exactly. I’m kinda tapped into the one on the roof, know what I mean?”  
Mischievous grin. Yeah, Dade knew exactly what he meant.

“Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . .,” Nikon counted down. “Uh . . . one?” He leaned forward, concerned.

The TV blitzed into static for a few moments.

Then, abruptly, a video image buzzed into view.

It was grainy, but Dade could make out what it revealed: a bedroom. Teen-sloppy, with the detritus of pizza dinners and pizza breakfasts, comic books and Spin magazines, and soda cans sprawled hither and thither. Rap and metal posters plastered the walls.

“The Razor and Blade Show, man,” explained Cereal, looking as though he was thoroughly grokking the whole experience, extremely.

“Cable access?”

“Satellite pirate, more like!” laughed Phreak. “But watch, man. This is great stuff.”

Onto the unmade bed suddenly appeared two teenage Asian-American twins. Razor and Blade presumably, although it was difficult to say who was who. They both had spiky hair and scraggly facial fuzz.

“Rich kids,” said Nikon. “But cool, man. Cool.”

“Welcome to our show,” said one. “I’m Razor.”

“And I’m Blade.” One placed a hand-lettered sign against the lens of the camera. “Hack the planet. Tonight we-“

Razor elbowed his way into the shot. “-answer viewer mail!”

One of them pulled up a piece of computer paper, presumably inscribed with E-mail. “One viewer writes: I want to hack, but I’m afraid of getting caught.”

Razor said, “The answer is tres simple: don’t do hairy hacks from home so you won’t be traced.”

“You bet. Incursions into federal computers, for example, require prudence.”

Razor gestured the camera over to the racks of hardware precariously perched on desks and makeshift planks and cinder-block bookcases. “The essentials: a laptop computer and an acoustic couple-“

Blade finished for him, “-allow you to reach out and touch someone.”

“And for those late-night hacks . . .”

Blade held up a red soda can. “Jolt Cola, the soft drink of the elite hacker.”

“Twice the sugar, double the caffeine.”

“Next,” said Blade, “find a pay phone in a remote locale.”

He went to the computer and hit a button, and the bottom of the screen grew a crawl which scrawled locales at high speed.

“Here’s some suggested locations. As always, tape the show and replay in slo mo to read the information burst,” said Razor.

Blade said, “If you’re hassled by a security guard, just say the word ‘Estabia.’”

“Don’t laugh, don’t smile,” emphasized Razor. “Answer every question ‘Estabia.’ Sounds foreign, but doesn’t mean anything.”

“They’ll kick your ass out, but they won’t bust ya,” said Blade.

“‘Cos they know what a hassle the paperwork will be if you only say . . .”

They voiced the last word together. “Estabia!”

Dade Murphy stared disbelievingly at the screen as the others chortled around him merrily.

The world was a stranger place than he’d ever pictured in his fondest dreams.

6

Dade and Dreams

He was in an elevator.

It was a fancy elevator, too, with chrome fittings and subdued inset lighting. Dade was going down, watching the lights blink light robotic semaphores.

Beside him was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen in his life, carrying a silver briefcase. The elevator reeked of her perfume, and the waves of her voluptuous red hair winged out over her exotic eyes. A tight Armani suit clung sleekly and possessively to her rounded figure.

“Hi,” she said. “I work for the phone company. Computer Operations Division.”

The elevator control proclaimed a hearty DINNNNG, signaling arrival at destination, but the beautiful woman, face cool, actions fierce, bashed the Door Close button with a finger and smashed the Emergency Stop switch downward. The car shuddered. Savagely, she pushed Dade against the wall and began tugging impatiently at his clothes. In the

attack, the briefcase was banged against the wall. It opened, spilling a splash of computer printouts.

“Uh . . . what are those?” he asked as the hot musk of her perfume filled his nostrils.

“All the log-ins to every Bell Unix,” she breathed, passionately pulling off his shirt. “Everything is echoed-all the passwords, all the commands, all the numbers to all the systems. Help me with your belt

or I'll chew it off.”

Despite her frenzy, her heat, somehow Dade couldn't keep his mind on this savage seduction. His eyes remained on those exotic documents. “I, no, no, no, wait . . .” He realized that he'd started to sweat. He pushed her away. “I gotta photocopy all this stuff first. I need this stuff!”

She pulled a hand away, put a fist into the ALARM button.

The world came alive with the sound.

The elevator alarm became something far more insidious, far more nasty and familiar.

The alarm of his clock radio by his bed.

He whacked it off, then sank back into his pillows, his fatigue a heavy weight on his chest and his brain, the dream still echoing in his eyes and ears.

“I'm losing it,” he muttered.

Dade had come home late, stayed up later. He'd logged some time on the high school computer, and only then had dumped himself into bed.

He hurt.

Suddenly, he remembered what he had done to the Stanton High School computer system.

He smiled then, feeling much better.

Stanton High, Day Two

Dade Murphy walked along the halls of Stanton High School, an umbrella tucked under his arm along with his books.

He was feeling slightly tired, but a couple of cups of coffee had put him back into fighting trim. As he headed off for class, he examined his watch.

Just about time.

Phreak stepped out in front of him, tapping his shoulder in a jocular, brotherly kind of way. Last night must have been some sort of passage for Dade; the Razor and Blade Show had apparently bonded them.

“Yo! What's up!” said Phreak.

“Not much. Another day of school.”

“Good time last night. No?”

“Oh yes. Very educational.”

“Say, man,” said Phreak. “How come the umbrella? It's like all sunny and beautiful outside.”

“Oh yes. That’s right. The umbrella.” He checked his watch. Yes, indeed-about now.

He opened the umbrella, checked his watch. Three, two, one, zero.

RINNNNNNNNNNG! went the fire alarm.

Fortunately for the safety of students, faculty, and administration, the new antifire system that had been installed-computer-linked, for maximum quality-was quite efficient. The spray nozzles went on immediately, spewing at high velocity a very generous amount of water indeed!

Screams and yelps filled the halls and classrooms as practically everyone in the school was sprayed.

Phreak’s eyes almost popped. “Way cool!”

“You know, brother, I do have room under this here umbrella, which I fortunately happened to have on my person.”

Phreak grinned and stepped underneath, eyes filled with appreciation.

A running student stopped at the sight of the cozy pair. Dripping, she stepped up to them, confronta-tionally. “What the hell is going on?” she demanded.

Dade pointed toward the ceiling. “You know, I guess that pool on the roof sprung a leak!”

Kate folded her arms across her chest, shot daggers from her eyes at him, then stormed off.

Kate shot one more hateful glance back at them, and Phreak chuckled. “You two-man, this is gonna be good.”

Dade Murphy chuckled in reply.

Tanker

The tanker was called the Far Tortuga.

The tanker sailed toward the coastal oil refinery, bearing its burden of oil, as well as its proud Ellingson logo.

Nearby, sailboats bobbed on the waves. The songs of seagulls filled the air.

All was well.

Suddenly, without warning, the tanker listed badly to one side. Alarms sounded. Panicking voices filled the air with the Japanese language. A wave washed over the side of the tanker, washing over its deck, pulling it down to ghostly ancestors in Davy Jones’s locker.

Then, the Far Tortuga capsized.

As though this were not bad enough, the Far Tortuga began to spill its load of crude oil. The stuff began to collect around it like a black spirit, disgorging.

Things looked bad for the Far Tortuga.

Fortunately, however, the technicians were around, and were promptly dispatched to deal with things.

Legs slogged beside the sinking tanker. The twelve-foot scale model was pulled up, then dragged back to the scale-model coastline inside the warehouse, complete with miniature palm trees, all part of the Ellingson Oil Tanker Training Center.

On a control deck beyond the “coastline,” two Japanese men wearing headsets blasted each other with commands and demands. Behind them, two technicians, Joe and Moe, worked feverishly at computer consoles.

“The ballast computer went nuts,” explained Joe. “The starboard tanks were flooded.”

“Is it a software glitch?” asked Moe.

Seagulls cawed.

“Would somebody kill the birds?” begged Joe.

The canned seagull sounds abruptly ceased.

The workers hauled the model tanker through the water, beaching it on the “coast.”

“Joe” said Moe. “Take a look at this.” Pointing at his monitor.

Joe and Moe looked together.

The screen showed a series of words. All the same word, actually: WHOOPS WHOOPS WHOOPS WHOOPS WHOOPS WHOOPS, it said, covering the entire area.

Then the words were gone, and a face appeared. It

was a face of an old man, with long, flowing hair, wrinkles, and a white beard. Digitalized. A flap of a mouth, moving, like a Terry Gilliam Monty Python cutout animation. Sort of like an Old Testament God-but far more Renaissance-looking.

“Greetings,” said the image.

His eyes sparkled with stylized stars.

It was Leonardo da Vinci’s self-portrait, come to computer-life.

Far More Advanced English

“What we’re trying to do today,” said Mr. Branch, the English teacher, scratching at the side of his pony-tailed head, “is get an idea of some of the cultural literary referents we’re working with. This way, I’ll be able to adjust my instruction accordingly.”

Dade watched as Charles Branch got up from behind his desk and thoughtfully paced about. He wore a

gray corduroy jacket with elbow patches, English-teacher style, and was fortysomething, and clearly an ex-hippie-though not all that ex-, come to think of it. Dade thought he was rather interesting. Probably smoked a pipe or something.

The class regarded him uneasily.

“So . . .,” he continued. “I’m going to randomly choose a number of you. All I want each of the chosen to do is to go to the chalkboard and write a quote-any quote-from a significant twentieth-century author. Got that?”

The class rustled. They probably were wondering if any such quotes were knocking around their heads. Dade had read a lot, in his computer-limbo

time, so he had plenty. Chances were, though, he wouldn’t get picked.

Branch chose three-Kate and Cereal (who’d appeared out of nowhere in the class, but looked very comfortable in it), and last, Dade.

Dade shrugged and went to the board. Which quote? Finally, something good zapped into his head, and he chalked it up.

The others had already written theirs.

“Very well. Thank you,” said Branch. “Ms . . . uhm . . . Libby. Would you care to read your quotation?”

“Sure.” Kate read. “‘God gave men brains larger than dogs so they wouldn’t hump women’s legs at cocktail parties’-Ruth Libby.”

Branch scratched his big Frank Zappaish nose. “I’m not sure your mother qualifies as a significant author of the twentieth century.”

Kate glared indignantly. “Her last book sold two million copies!”

“Okay. Let’s see what we have here.” Branch adjusted his glasses and read Dade’s quote. “‘Angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night’-Allen Ginsberg.” He nodded, regarding Dade, who stood, staring down, looking almost embarrassed. “Nice, very nice. Ginsberg was kind of a cosmic hipster here, wasn’t he. Mister . . .”

Dade shrugged. “Murphy. Dade Murphy.” He looked over and could see Kate, a little haggard from her drenching, looking at him with a not entirely nasty look. Looking like she thought there might be something interesting here. The look hardened quickly.

“He’s not in this class,” said Kate, softly.

Dade whispered to her out of the side of his mouth, “I said, Give me time.”

“Pardon me, Ms. Libby?”

Louder. Directly to Branch. “I said, He’s not enrolled in this class.”



“Oh?” Branch strode to his desk, flipped through a computer printout. “Hmm. Well, Mr. Murphy is most certainly on my list.”

Kate blinked, surprised.

Dade tried not to gloat.

“You then, in the Doors T-shirt and the mirrored sunglasses,” said Branch, looking at Cereal. “Let’s see what you have. ‘Of all the things I’ve lost, I miss my mind the most’-Ozzy Osbourne.’ So ... what’s your name?”

“Emmanuel Goldstein,” said Cereal.

“In my opinion, Mr. Goldstein, Ozzy Osbourne went downhill after leaving Black Sabbath.” He checked his printout. “Besides which, you are most definitely not on my list.”

Cereal lowered his shades. He looked around. Dade could see surprise filling his eyes.

“Wow, man. You mean, this is not wood shop?”

Murphy Living Room

She was sitting at the table by the window with the nice view of a Manhattan street and Central Park just beyond. Lauren Murphy was studying the office manual she’d been given today. Things always went smoother at a job when she knew the written procedures, so she wanted to make sure she had command of them.

Good smells were coming from the kitchen. Dade was in a cooking mood. He’d started after he’d been shut off computers. The poor guy-he’d stuffed himself with books at first, played video games on the TV, but sometimes he’d gotten restless. One of those times, he’d watched her make a weekend-elaborate meal for his father, using a lot of different cookbooks. Something had struck him, fascinated him about the cookbooks, and he’d asked if he could help. He’d done a great job, and every weekend they cooked together. Often he’d even made weekday meals. When she’d asked why he seemed to like recipes so much-using them, and often creating them himself-he’d answered, “Because they’re algorithms.”

“Algo ... what?”

“They’re like computer programs.” He’d grinned. “No harm to Wall Street making Chicken a la Dade!”

Once he hit the moody straits of puberty, though, he only cooked once in a while, and spent more time at the mall or at school functions or just doing what teenagers who couldn’t use computers did.

He came in, bearing a plate with some kind of casserole dish and a side of salad. He put it beside her. She poured herself a little more blush wine from a bottle she’d just opened.

“Hey there, guy. Anything new?”

He put his plate of food down. “Well, actually, Dad left a message on the phone machine.”

She paused for a moment, regarding the tasty-looking meal before her. Beef something. Lots of

vegetables. Good. She wasn't too thrilled at hearing about Michael. Michael was someone she was trying to put up on a shelf now, her own private shelf labeled The Past. Michael Murphy traveled a lot in his job. That was one of the reasons for the bust-up, and consequently she felt a little bitter about that traveling job of his.

"Really? Where is he?" she said, maybe just a little too casually.

Dade paused a moment, looking at her in an odd, almost accusing way, then sat down. "L.A. Then Portland. Then back home next week." He coughed. "I mean, then back in Seattle next week."

She let silence sit for a moment as she picked up her fork. The beef was good quality and the spices were unusual-rather oriental, with an exotic peppery tang. "Very good dish, Dade. Interesting."

"Yeah. I found some cool spices in Chinatown." He picked at his plate. "I'll make a fine wife someday."

She didn't know whether to laugh at that one. His voice was so sardonic. Lauren knew that was the way he got sometimes, but still it was hard to take. She'd hoped that now that he could get on computers again, he'd calm down some. But no-if anything, the move to New York had made Dade even more caustic than before.

She wondered if she could change the subject, and hit on a plan of attack, grabbing the pile of college recruitment letters that sat on the counter. He was getting noticed by a lot of programs, and there were a lot of possibilities for him, scholarshipwise.

She placed the pile in front of him.

Dade picked up a letter, read the front. Then he started talking to the envelope: "Dade, Dade, come to ms. Go to college. Become a nice little drone, get credit, buy a car, buy a house, get married, have kids, get divorced . . ."

Dade lowered the letter.

Lauren Murphy took some wine. She could feel the pain unfold its spikes in her heart. That word. Dammit, it still hurt very badly.

He must have noticed her reaction, because he said, "Sorry."

Lauren sighed. "Can we just talk for once without getting twisted?"

He looked down at his meal. "You know, I think I'm going to eat in my room tonight." He grabbed his plate and walked away.

Well, it looked as though she wasn't the only one who was having pain here in New York, New York, the city so nice it has exotic spice.

She sipped at her wine, wishing Dade hadn't turned eighteen yet. At least she could get a little bit of his positive attention from time to time, back then. Now, with his long-lost love finally returned, he seemed as devoted to his computers as a boy might be to his first girlfriend.

She still couldn't figure out the fascination people had for the things. Yes, she used them at work, but

only when absolutely necessary. Word processing, faxes, communications . . . and then she generally had to ask questions. Once she was finished staring at a screen, though, she was much happier burying herself in a nice thick juicy book of words, or maybe taking a luxurious bath. Hard to figure how kids these days dived so freely into all those numbers, all that data.

What were they becoming?

She sipped her wine.

“It gets lonely around here, having a computer for a son.” She sighed.

She closed the book and tried to enjoy her meal.

7

## Cyberdelia

The place was alive with light and action and electronic power and cool. People meshed with sound and splash and design. Plastic and metal and circuitry and flesh, melded into a topsy-turvy mind-wrench.

It smelled of the city and of Now. It tasted of the future and of a new kind of genius. This psychedelic/cyberpunk hangout was filled with pool tables, android mannequins, a food and espresso bar, and slackers of all ages. The walls were covered with Chinese lettering and graffiti-like: we’re not in Kansas anymore.

To Dade Murphy, as he walked past the video games and monitor displays, it felt more like home than the place his mother called home. It wasn’t Seattle. Sigh. Nothing was like Seattle, here. Not even the fancy coffee. But at least it was making him feel better.

He’d eaten his dinner parked behind his computer,

but something was bothering him. He felt trapped and antsy in his little room. He felt the profound need to get out.

So he hit the streets, jumped on a subway, and headed down here. Something about these people he’d met... He liked them. He’d tried to look them up on some local BBSs tonight, but came up empty-handed.

Phreak had said they liked to hang around down here at Cyberdelia some evenings, so he’d figured he’d give it a try. And now, who should be the first friend he spotted but Phreak himself.

As Dade cut past some video games, he saw Phreak walking at a different angle. Toward pay phones, of course. Before Dade could call out and announce his presence, Phantom Phreak had grabbed himself a spot and was dialing a long-distance number.

Amused, Dade walked past him to hear what was going on.

He could hear a voice coming from the phone as Phreak held it away from his ear and pulled up a device: “Please deposit five dollars for the first minute.”

Phreak put the device—a microrecorder—to the receiver. It emitted a series of computerized DMF tones.

“Thank you,” said the voice. An automated voice, Dade could tell.

“No,” said Phreak. “Thank you.”

The guy took out a black Magic Marker and scribbled P.L.O. on the phone.

Vaguely, Dade noticed Joey entering via the main entrance. However, he also noticed something far more interesting, and immediately headed off to inspect it at closer range.

What Dade saw was the back of a shape remarkably feminine. Sharp contoured jeans, a white starched blouse, a beautiful fall of hair.

Yum!

Hmm . . . Maybe his mom was right, he thought. Maybe he should start exploring his more traditional male tendencies. . . .

She stood at a video game containing 3-D holograms. She was doing wiggling, sexy combat with the help of a wheel and toggles. Reflex City. Hand-Eye-Coordination Town.

He sidled beside her, leaned over so as to be close enough to let his Obsession cologne (thanks, Mom!) waft her way.

“Nice score,” he said.

She turned around. Dade almost jumped out of his boots.

It was Kate! Kate Libby, minus fatigues-and-attitude-outfit, sheathed and glowing in what looked like an all-white fencing outfit created by a cyberpunk fashion designer. Dade’s hormones were wolf-whistling, but his brain was smacking them down in horror and apprehension.

Instead of a sneer, though, he got a smile. “Think you can do better?”

She hit a button, and the display told an intimidating tale. The initials KL aligned with the number one score. Not only that, but KL was a solid column behind all the placings.

He couldn’t back down, of course. “Better than you? I’ll give it a shot.”

“Okay,” she said, standing aside. “If you lose, you can’t sit behind me in class anymore. I hate feeling hostile vibes against the back of my neck.”

“And if you lose,” said Dade, “I get to do anything I want with your neck.”

Kate lifted a thick, beautiful eyebrow. “Me lose? Highly doubtful.”

Dade took the controls. He’d played this before, of course. It was a souped-up tank game. You had an objective and you rolled along, zapping holographic aliens, weapon emplacements, alien aircraft, and tanks.

Dade thunked in a couple of quarters, settled in, and started blasting away. Casually, competently, looking like a true denizen of the digital universe he'd just jumped into. How could the poor girl possibly know that, in the too-many years of his formal exile from computers and links, he'd spent many a moment sharpening his video-game skills. The Stupid Judge hadn't ruled that out, though he probably would have liked to. But video games didn't harm society.

"So," said Kate. "How's school?"

She was probably hoping to break his concentration. In truth, her intrusion didn't bother him at all.

"School is school," he said. A proton torpedo blasted a batlike alien that was swooping in. Parts and gore scattered.

"Angelheaded hipsters . . . where'd you pick up the sixties stuff?"

"Books," said Dade.

She chuckled vivaciously, stuck up two fingers in a peace sign. "Oh wow. Hard copy. My mom's into that. Groovy."

Whack! Ka-boom! A one-eyed armored beastie bit the dust.

He grinned a superior grin at Kate, who merely folded her arms in a "We'll see" attitude.

A guy sauntered up to her, holding a hot dog in one hand. He put his free arm around Kate possessively. She smiled at him. Oops. The Date. He was ridiculously handsome in a genetically planned kind of way. Reeked of money. Bleh. Brown hair, blue eyes, preprogrammed brain.

"This guy bothering you?" the guy asked, assaying Dade in a confident glance.

"No. He's just. . . kinda in one of my classes."

Dade grunted and blew apart an alien tank. Bristling at her dismissive description, he elbowed her away from his space.

"Could I get some room here?"

Bam, bam, crash!

Die, aliens, die!

Vaguely, he was aware of two new onlookers: Phreak and Joey. Under this scrutiny, his intensity increased. He totally concentrated on his cyberdelic task, and before long, his score hopped ahead of Ms. Kate's. Heh heh.

He looked over at her with a stab at imitating her raised eyebrow. She looked like she'd just been hit over the head by a brick.

"He's good," said Kate's boy-toy date, noncommittally.

Kate glared at him.

Dade hammered a few more alien enemies, then- final taunt-simply stopped playing.

With a flourish worthy of a preening rock star, Dade punched in his score and initials above Kate's. Yes! Victory!

"Well, looks like I'm on top now."

He turned to see the effect of this pronouncement and discovered that the dating duo had departed. He noticed the back of the tall guy's head disappearing behind an ancient Pac-Man machine.

"Who's that?" he said, disgust in his voice.

"Curtis," said Phreak, turning up his nose.

"What's he do?"

Phreak cocked a thumb disappearing Curtis's way. "That's it. You're looking at it. He just looks slick all day."

Dade felt uncomfortable, annoyed, pissed off-a confusing muddle of emotions. Joey, on the other hand, seemed totally oblivious to the adolescent rites of angst going on here: his eyes were luminous and he was hopping up and down with excitement.

"Hey, dudes, I been meaning to tell you! I hacked a Gibson!"

Dade didn't even hear what the guy was saying, his mind was in such a black funk. However, Phreak responded much as Dade would have.

"Yeah, yeah, sure, sure."

Joey said, "Really! I copied some files to prove I was there!"

Dade paid no attention to that, either. This girl was bothering him, bothering him a lot.

Grrrr.. .

Joey's House

It went down like this.

Joey Hardcastle was in the shower.

Joey was feeling pretty good. He'd hacked a Gibson, after all. He'd done the Rite of Passage. He was a full Hacker now. He had proof. He could take his place amongst the ranks of the True and the Brave. He could saunter about, cool and suave, like the other trogs. His brain shone with sun-bright intensity. He knew his calling now: Hacker genius.

Joey Hardcastle was in the shower at his home now, the warm friendly water pouring down upon him

like accolades. As he washed off the perfumed soap suds of his cleansing efforts, he visualized himself before a screaming concert throng of his peers. He was decked out in rock-star duds. In his hands, though, instead of a guitar, was a keyboard, connected to a giant Gibson Supercomputer, crisscrossed with lasers. Snoop Doggy Dogg was in the background, doing his new hit, "Joey, He's No Fool; Joey H, He's Way Cool."

A roar of appreciation.

"Thank you thank you thank you!" he said. "My goodness, I'm a bit wet. Roadie, would you hand me a towel, please?"

He turned off the shower and pulled back the shower curtain. Just as he did, the bathroom door whipped open and a man in the heavy-duty togs of a storm trooper stepped through, aiming a shotgun as big as death at him.

"Freeze!" said the Secret Service agent.

Joey screamed. Instinctively he raised his gawky arms. As he did, he managed to trip over the edge of the bathtub and fall against the officer, dripping water on him in the process.

"Sheesh, kid! Get yourself a towel!"

Whimpering, Joey wrapped himself in a great big towel, then fell onto the tile floor, petrified with terror. Snoop Doggy Dog had changed into Droop Soggy

Rat, and he was rapping, "Nobody can be trusted."

"Don't kill me. I don't wanna go nowhere," he bawled.

"Come on, kid. We've got to take you with us."

"Noooooooooooo."

With a great deal of distaste, the Secret Service man lowered his shotgun, grabbed Joey Hardcastle, and started to drag him down the hallway and into the living room. There, things were in tumult. A whole gaggle of Secret Service agents were milling about, while Mrs. Hardcastle was sobbing on a couch. Another agent was hauling Lucy from Joey's bedroom, cords and plugs dragging like uprooted viscera. The keyboard banged onto the ground.

"Lucy!" cried Joey, forgetting his own soggy, sorry state. "Where are you taking her?"

He ran to save his Lucy, forgetting about clinging to the towel. The towel dropped, the Secret Service agent lost his grip on the slippery boy, and a naked Joey Hardcastle ran to rescue his true love. The sight of this bizarre display so stunned the assembled invading force-and mother-that they all stopped what they'd been doing and gawked.

However, the agents recovered, and soon Joey was clad again in his towel. He was marched to his room, crying, and was properly clothed, under armed prompting.

Meanwhile, outside, a veritable three-ring circus was under way. You had your New York onlookers. You had your cop cars with the flashing bubble-tops. You had a van, into which a line of federal agents

was roughly tossing Lucy, her printer, phones, disks, and notebooks, a boom box, music tapes, an answering machine, and a toaster oven.

Out of a car stepped Secret Service Agent Richard Gill. He was forty years old, and he'd guarded vice presidents. Dan Quayle had been the crowning moment of his career, and he bore the memory proudly. Now, though, he had another, more complex destiny: computer crime. He looked staid and regulation-obeying, right down to his spit-polished shoes.

He stepped up to a younger agent.

"How's it going, Ray?"

"We got an uncorrupted hard drive, sir," said Ray.

"In English, please," said Gill. "I didn't spend ten years guarding vice presidents so I could finish my career looking like an idiot."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Ray. "We caught him by surprise, so we don't think he was able to erase any of his computer files."

"Good man," said Gill. "Let's finish up here and take him in for interrogation."

A TV news van pulled up. A lady reporter hopped out.

Ah! Here was his chance to put out the news about this kind of crap, thought Gill. He waded through the scene and told her who was in charge. She started interviewing him.

"Just how dangerous are hackers?" was one of her final questions.

Gill chewed on that one, chewed on all the disgust he felt at the very thought of these creeps.

"Hackers penetrate and ravage delicate privately and publicly owned computer systems, infecting them with viruses or stealing sensitive materials for their own ends. They are terrorists."

He turned around and watched with satisfaction

as Joey Hardcastle, two bulky Secret Service guys beside him, was marched out toward the car.

Wait till he got a hold of this guy, thought Gill. He'd feel the long arm of the law, all right! Right across his skinny butt!

Ellingson Mineral Corporation

Jim Wilkins, Junior Executive, held the steaming mug of top-quality Zabar's Kona coffee, 2 percent milk, no sugar, waiting for arrival.

His eyes absently wandered over to the clock. Eight forty-five, exactly.

Any moment now . . .

The elevator doors opened, disgorging a single passenger: a smartly dressed woman in a high-quality



dress suit, legs scissoring forward, bearing her frown toward her office. Sleek, no-nonsense brunette hair, minimal makeup, attractive in a sharkish, feral kind of way: Margo Wallace, VP of public relations for this august organization, Ellingson Mineral Corporation. Corporate woman, with a vengeance. Success in pumps and perfume.

She reached out, grabbed the coffee, stalked forward, with hardly a glance toward the man who'd given it to her.

She sipped the coffee as she moved toward her office, noticing with gratification how people kowtowed to her, stepped out of her way. She was queen bee here, no question.

An assistant in wire-rim glasses approached her

with a piece of paper. "Good morning, Ms. Wallace. Here's the new press release."

Without breaking stride, she handed him the cup, took the paper, and picked up a pen. She scanned it quickly, wrote MW in the margin, then exchanged it for her coffee. "Send it to the AP and CNN. The networks can sweat it till noon."

Another sip of coffee. As she approached her office, her personal assistant, Laura Moritz, approached, with nothing like the fear the other workers showed her. In Laura's case, Margo knew, fear would hamper proper communication, so the VP had cultivated a no-nonsense, no-threat relationship.

"Ellingson wants you in his office ten minutes ago," reported Laura.

"Ah," said Margo Wallace. And no wonder. Troublesome things were afoot. She'd had a phone call this morning, briefing her. She'd only missed a couple of brushstrokes. "A detour then."

They turned down the hallway, headed for the corner area of the 40th floor.

There C. Lyle Ellingson, CEO of Ellingson Mineral, had his suite of offices.

Margo handed Laura her mug as she entered the hallowed, oak-veneered domain. Laura produced a coaster.

With hardly a missed beat, Margo pushed open a door, walked past a secretary, then marched into the conference room.

Laura closed the door behind her.

Awaiting her was a huge polished walnut table, people in suits.

The conference room was massive, with shelves holding expensive books and artwork and fittings, in

streamlined, old-school taste. The place was paneled in mahogany and smelled of fresh-waxed tables and expensive cigars. Beyond the aircraft carrier-size conference table, pristine windows revealed a panoramic view of the lower portion of Manhattan, featuring the Statue of Liberty raising a torch-toast to capitalism.

Sitting in a high-backed, leather-upholstered chair was no less an imposing personage than C. Lyle Ellingson himself, CEO of Ellingson Mineral and great-grandson of Dwight Ellingson, who had robbed

and baroned with the most corrupt of his nineteenth-century breed. He was fiftyish with a manly mane of gray hair and a stern visage like that of a fifth face on Mount Rushmore, made flesh. He wore an old-style suit, beautifully cut, with a pocket watch—an affectation, but a stately one. He had a fatherly aspect, but with strong hints of steel in his gray gaze.

Four vice presidents, also white males and also in their midfifties, sat at their places at the table. Two more vice presidents, younger but equally male, hovered nearby via telecommunications. Down a few seats, with reams of printouts before him, was Eugene Belford, looking as distinctively disheveled as his printouts.

Margo Wallace sat beside him; unfortunately, her place at the conference table was preassigned. “I see you’re still dressing in the dark, Eugene,” she told him.

He gave her an insolent smile. “Once again, don’t call me Eugene.”

“The Plague,” of course, was the preferred name.

Ellingson leaned over. “Mr. Belford, get on with it,” he said impatiently.

“Anyway, our recent unknown intruder penetrated using a superuser account.” The Plague had notes before him, but seemed not to need them. “Giving him access to our whole system.”

“Precisely what you’re paid to prevent,” Margo snapped.

Plague did not appear bothered by this reminder. “Someone didn’t bother reading my carefully prepared memo on the commonly used passwords. Now then, the four most used passwords are Love, Sex, Secret, and”—he swiveled to face Margo—“God. So, would your holiness care to change her password?”

Margo managed a tight smile.

“Anyway,” Eugene “The Plague” Belford continued. “The hacker planted a virus.”

“What virus?” said Margo. Clearly, she’d missed something important at the beginning of the conference.

“Yesterday,” The Plague explained patiently, “the ballast program for a supertanker training model mistakenly thought the vessel was empty and flooded its tanks.”

“Excuse me?” said Margo.

The computer security chiefs voice was impatient. “The little boat flipped over. A virus planted within the Gibson claimed responsibility.”

“What, it left a note?” said Margo.

The Plague grabbed a remote by the computer paper and switched on another TV monitor.

There flickered into view the same face that had given the metaphorical Bronx cheer to the technicians dealing with the capsized model oil tanker.

In an absurdly exaggerated Italian accent, da Vinci said, “Unless five million dollars are transferred to the

following encrypted account in seven days, I will

capsize five tankers in the Ellingson fleet.”

“Oh my God,” said one of the veeps. “Was that...?”

“That, people, was Leonardo da Vinci, the virus,” explained The Plague.

The TV flashed pictures of oil spills; blackened beaches; dying seals and seagulls; washed-up fish.

Another screen blinked on containing a meridian map showing blinking dots within several oceans.

“The problem is,” The Plague continued, “we have twenty-six ships at sea. And we don’t know which ones’ computer systems have been infected.”

“Uhm,” said another veep, hesitantly, clearly feeling the need to add his two cents. “Can’t you vaccinate it or something?”

The Plague breathed out a thoughtful, patient breath. “A virus has artificial intelligence. It’s a computer smart bomb. It easily camouflages itself in a system as big as ours.”

Ellingson had a thought: “Well, then put the ship’s ballast under manual control.”

The Plague shook his head sorrowfully. “There’s no such thing anymore. These ships are totally computerized, they rely on satellite navigation-which links them to our network and the virus, wherever they are in the world. As long as there’s a single computer onboard, the virus can hide within it.”

Margo had taken out a pad and pen. She was a compulsive note taker, and she had already scribbled things on it. Now she tapped her pen against the notebook.

“So, what do you suggest we do?” she said impatiently.

The Plague let them dangle over a dramatic pause. He surveyed them for a moment with a grim frown, which suddenly cracked into a smile. “Well, luckily you have a gifted and talented security officer. I traced the hacker’s call. The Secret Service picked him up this morning. I’ll just search his files for the original virus code, then eliminate it.”

Margo could see the other faces relax. Even Ellingson breathed an obvious sigh of relief. Only Margo Wallace’s expression did not change. The Plague looked very pleased with himself as he launched into details.

Margo took notes.

When the meeting was over and the executives were dismissed, she followed the others, without speaking, into an elevator, even though her office was on the conference-room floor.

The other veeps chatted amongst themselves, but she said nothing. The car lowered. Doors opened. The two excess veeps exited, leaving Margo alone with the computer security chief. She waited until the doors closed before lighting into him.

“What the hell was that all about?” she demanded.

The Plague looked at her and shrugged. "I had to move fast. The hacker copied the Garbage File."

For the first time in a long while, Margo Wallace lost her composure. She leaned against the car railing for support, feeling the blood draining from her face. "Copied the Garbage File? Why would anyone want a Garbage File?"

The Plague shrugged. "Who knows. Shouldn't have happened, but it did. Kinda like the human race. Anyway, to continue, the good news is he didn't get the whole thing. I created the virus so we could call in the Secret Service, arrest the hacker, seize his equipment-things we can't do on our own-to find out how much of the Garbage File's been copied."

"Let me get this straight. You made a virus that can cause worldwide ecological disaster-just to arrest some kid?"

Again, the noneloquent, self-assured shrug. "Well . . . yeah!"

The elevator slowed down. "Oh God," said Margo.

"I can cancel it anytime; I don't need the program code," explained The Plague. "But it's a perfect cover to get the Garbage File."

Margo Wallace shook her head, still disbelieving. "Well, get it. Get that file ... or you lose all your toys."

She stomped out onto the cafeteria level in a huff.

"Nice shoes!" called The Plague after her.

Dade Hacks Again

Dade was at his laptop again, tapping keys.

It was a compulsive thing, this manipulation of code, this cracking system. There was adventure, suspense, and, he hoped, success and fulfillment.

A lot more exciting than so-called flesh-and-blood reality, that was for sure. With computers, at least you had some kind of control. There was a beauty of logic and sense in the digital domain. And certainly nothing of the pain. . . .

Now he had a Manhattan traffic pattern on the screen.

He was just snooping around, just trying to find out how things worked. Dade had absolutely no desire to mess anything up. You especially didn't

want to fool around with stuff like this. He actually didn't feel too bad about having accidentally caused that screwup on Wall Street; however, he studiously avoided things like getting into air traffic control computers. Whew! That was territory that could be dangerous to lives. But he'd always had a fierce interest in how things worked, in information. There was so much information the outside world tried to keep from you. This was one of the beauties of hacking: curiosity had a unique and beautiful key now to domains of knowledge. Dade loved entering those doors, and examining the treasure troves inside.

He hit a combination of buttons. The portable laser printer attached to the laptop began making a map of the traffic patterns.

There were also other reasons this was interesting stuff. . .

Suddenly, on the laptop screen, a snorting digital bull appeared.

Letters appeared below the angry animal:

ACID BURN SEZ: VACATE MY DOMAIN, PINHEAD!

“Yikes!” said Dade, truly surprised. “You again?”

He hastily tapped in a response:

CRASH OVERRIDE SEZ: BITE MY SHORTS

A knock sounded. Dade turned toward it. He was always startled by sudden exterior noises, ever since the Secret Service had battered down his door. Now, with all the stuff he’d heard about Joey Hardcastle . . . well, he was just hyperparanoid, that was all.

“Can I come in?” His mother’s voice. Of course. Whew, though. Quickly, he switched off his computer. His duel with the mysterious Acid Burn would have

to wait. Then he hopped into bed and pulled a copy of Futuresex from a stack of magazines at his bedside.

“Sure. Yeah, Mom.”

She came in, and smiled as he made it look like he was trying to hide his sexy magazine. Dade had no doubt that she preferred his reading sleazy literature to hacking. A little more normal for a teenage boy. Lauren Murphy looked around. “I see you haven’t unpacked yet.” She took a deep but casual breath. “Hey. Wanna veg out with me tonight?”

“No thanks,” said Dade. He felt uncomfortable. She was trying to bond.

“C’mon,” said Lauren Murphy, still bright and chipper. “We can sit on the floor, get close to the TV screen, and kill some brain cells.”

Dade said, “Nah, thanks. I’m beat. I’m gonna turn in.”

“Oh. Okay. Right. Yes, I suppose you’ve been clocking in some late hours.” She turned around, then examined her watch. “Turn in”? It’s eight o’clock.”

“Like I said, Mom: I really am beat.”

“Okay. Rain check, though?”

“Sure. I think I can arrange that.”

“Good, Dade. And just remember: if there’s anything you ever need to talk to me about . . . just let me

know.”

“Sure, Mom. Of course.”

Silently, he watched her leave.

This was a really difficult part of her life, he knew.

He just hoped she found some wealthy lawyer or something and got over it.

Razor and Blade

Later, after he'd finished hacking just a little while longer (and managed to avoid Acid Burn, most thankfully), Dade found that, even though he really and truly tried, he couldn't sleep.

So he got up, turned on his TV, and put in a VCR tape that Nikon had allowed him to borrow.

“Some Razor and Blade highlights,” the hip guy had explained. “A little bit of big-city hacker education, courtesy of yours truly.”

The show's production values were below those of Wayne's World, but the Japanese duo did have a certain appeal. They were like a couple of electrons bouncing away from their molecules and trying to shoot off at light speed for someplace far, far away.

Dade watched, chomping on some pretzels. He knew most of what they were saying already, but he kind of dug the way they said it. On his mind was Joey Hardcastle. He felt kind of guilty. He knew what Joey must be going through; he'd gone through it himself. And Joey would be getting into more trouble now, since he was older.

Maybe that was why he was watching this tape now. Maybe Razor and Blade, in their twisted avant-garde way, might give him some kind of insight into why he did this kind of thing, why this subculture had developed.

Halfway into the tape, they did just that.

Razor had his nose stuck against the camera lens.

“We're in, man, we're in!” he cried.

Blade snuck his eyes over Razor's shoulder. “Hey, people, don't panic!”

“You there! You got a monster piece of popcorn stuck in your teeth, man,” said Razor.

Blade said, “But seriously, we're here to refute certain people's definition of a hacker.”

“That's right,” said Razor. “Don't buy the hype. It's only a dirty word to those who want to keep your data their secret.”

“Right! To keep us from empowering ourselves against Big Brother!”

“Like, didja know it was a hacker who discovered that credit rating services kept illegal files on your

race, religion, and sexual preference?”

“A hacker is a liberator of information.”

“A desperado of data.”

“One who knows that information ...”

They both chimed into the assertive affirmation: “. . . Yearn to be free!”

They wiggled their fingers and started jumping up and down on their bed, giggling and acting like the brilliant kamikaze freaks they were.

Dade watched the tape a little longer.

Although he was by no means at peace, this little declaration comforted him somehow.

Yeah, he thought, when he was finally drifting off. That was about it. But if information got liberated ...

... What was the price?

Lauren

Later, he woke up.

He went to the bathroom, groggy.

Dade Murphy saw that the living-room light was still on. He peeked out, and saw that his mother was asleep on the couch, fully clothed. She was clutching a pen, and papers were spread all around. In her lap was a calculator, its cord attached to a wall socket.

He watched her for a moment. She’d been under a lot of pressure lately, no question. Maybe he should have watched some TV with her tonight. She was probably lonely. Yeah. Maybe he was lonely too.

Quietly, he took off her shoes. He took the calculator off her, and placed it on the coffee table. Then he found a blanket and spread it over her.

Dade Murphy looked at her a moment. She really was beautiful. He could almost imagine what she looked like when she was his age. Odd to think of Mom being in her teens, but of course, she had been.

Yes, he decided, she was right. There was a tension between them that caused everything to get twisted lately.

Maybe he would get some of those free Broadway tickets from Phreak and take her.

She’d like that. As long as they were in New York, they could maybe take advantage of what New York offered. Maybe.

Quietly, he turned off the light and padded back to his room.

## Headquarters Interrogation

In one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the Secret Service kept offices. One of these offices was used for routine questioning of people involved in activities with which the Secret Service concerned itself: threats on presidents and other dignitaries; the counterfeiting of currency; and, more recently, computer crime.

Into this room, the latest suspect was now hauled. He still had his handcuffs on, and was still bracketed by his very own muscular agents, specially assigned to him. The suspect looked like he'd just had a dip in a bathtub full of ice cubes. He seemed to be shivering, and his eyes were filled with fear and tears. This was what had become of Joey Hardcastle. There had been no improvement whatsoever from this morning. They'd kept him locked in a room all day, allowing him to chew only on a couple of hamburgers and fries, and his terrible crime against the state. Not until now, when he'd had some time to contemplate

things properly, were they bringing questions to bear.

The room to which they brought him was already occupied by the machinery that had allowed him to perpetrate his crime: his computer and its peripherals.

Alas, Lucy the computer was in sad shape. The metal hood of its CPU had clearly been pried apart and badly screwed back on. The monitor screen was cracked, and the keyboard was so dented it looked almost bent. All had clearly been manhandled. More tears filled Joey's eyes as he fingered the wounds and injuries of his beloved for a moment, before the agents sat him down on a chair and pulled up a couple of chairs for themselves beside him, alert for any attempted escape.

Agent Gill entered, looking bullish, officious, and totally in control of the situation. He had a full cup of coffee in his hand, stubble on his chin. His white shirt was rolled up his brawny arms, and his tie was slack around his neck. In short, he looked like he was prepared to stay here for a very long time indeed, as long as it took to get what he wanted.

"Son," he said point-blank to the boy, his face squaring off with the thinner, more frightened face. "We know everything you've done." Closer, pushing his dinner-breath into the boy's face. "Now tell us everything else."

Joey sniffled, looking on the verge of a breakdown. He couldn't quite get any words out.

Gill pulled back, but his voice remained strong and firm. "We have evidence you penetrated the Ellingson system and planted a highly damaging virus."

"Mmmmmeeee?" Joey managed. "I didn't really, I swear!"

Gill leaned over the boy, imposingly, placing a hand on the back of Joey's chair and tensing his muscles so his veins and cords showed tight and strong. "Son, if you don't cooperate there will be a long and expensive trial. You will do time in juvenile prison and your parents, I guarantee you, will be financially broken."

Joey looked as though he were struggling to say something. He started to squeak softly, and Gill leaned over to catch what he was trying to say. Instead of words, though, a miserable Joey spewed tears and saliva.



Gill took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. Then he handed the cloth to one of the agents. "Deal with this. I'll be back in a minute when he gets under some kind of control."

He stomped back through the door. Outside, waiting for him, was Ellingson's computer security chief.

"Did you find the program for the virus on any of the disks we confiscated?" He turned and looked through the one-way mirror. He had a perfect view as one of the agents used his handkerchief to blow the perp's nose.

"No," said Eugene "The Plague" Belford. He looked through the window himself, shaking his head sorrowfully. "He's either very smart or very stupid."

Gill hammered a fist into a palm. "Then he stashed it somewhere, or he's got an accomplice. We'll release him until his indictment; keep a tight surveillance and see if he leads us to your disk."

"Sounds like a good idea. I hope you're not buying the crying jag," said The Plague.

"Not for a minute. This guy's sharp and smart, and a damned good faker. I can see it in his crafty eyes. But mark my words, he's no match for me and my men. We'll get what you need, and this whole thing will get nipped in the bud."

The Plague nodded. "That's what this kind of criminal needs. And once this is over, the word will spread about the clean, efficient work you and your men have been doing." He nodded emphatically. "Yes, and these troublesome computer bottom-feeders will learn there's authority in the world of tomorrow, just as there is in the world of today."

"Damned straight," said Gill, nodding soberly, adjusting the pistol in his shoulder holster. "The Secret Service, Mr. Belford, is in control."

"Uhm . . . The Plague ... or just Plague, if you like."

"Unusual nickname."

The man grinned. "An unusual name for unusual times. Besides, I don't think you're going to forget it, are you?"

Gill looked at him uneasily, then went back into the interrogation room to see if he could get anything more out of the kid before they let him go.

Maybe if they threatened to smash his computer with a baseball bat.

## Confrontation

It had been an interesting morning for Dade. He'd been thinking about the stuff that had been going on in his head recently, about why he was so obsessed with computers.

Lunchtime, over mystery meat and ice cream sandwiches, the Phreak had been reading a copy of 2600: Hacker Quarterly.

"Hey, man, listen to this," Phreak had said, and he'd read an excerpt:

“This is our world now, the world of the electron and the switch, the beauty of the baud. We make use of a service already existing that would be dirt cheap if it weren’t run by a bunch of profiteering gluttons, and you call us criminals. We explore, and you call us criminals. We seek knowledge, and you call us criminals. We exist without nationality, skin color, or religious bias. You wage wars, murder, cheat, lie to us, and try to make us believe it’s for our own good, yet we’re the criminals. Yes, I am a criminal. My crime is that of curiosity. My crime is that of outsmarting you. I am a hacker and this is my manifesto. You may stop me, but you can’t stop us all.”

Dade had thought about that, later on in the guidance counselor’s office. Mrs. Mertz, the counselor, in a flutter of Post-its and printouts, had tried to get a fix on what college Dade should be thinking about attending.

“I just had a very interesting talk with your mother, Dade. She says you’re very interested in computers.”

“Computers,” said Dade. “Yeah, right. With my record.”

“Pardon?” And of course Mrs. Mertz had no idea whatsoever what Dade Murphy was talking about; old stuff, his record. But it was undoubtedly in computer files somewhere now, and Dade Murphy well knew that if you wanted information on a person, you just had to tap into information companies.. ..

“Have you considered majoring in computer science at NYU or MIT?” Mrs. Mertz had asked.

And then it had struck Dade. . . .

A hacker explored, sought knowledge . . . but there was more. . . .

In a world controlled by information, perhaps only hackers had a hope of controlling their destiny. Because a hacker, after all, could control information.

When that lightbulb had flicked on, Dade Murphy had smiled to himself. “Yes. Why not?” he said.

Hacking the MIT or NYU computers would be fun.

He’d worn that smile all afternoon, all the way back on the subway. But then, back home, just as soon as he opened the door of his apartment, the smile was removed when he was grabbed from the rear by the Secret Service agent named Ray and slammed up against a wall. Another agent, a little less burly and named Bob, quickly frisked him.

At first he thought this was a burglary or something equally New Yorky. Then he noticed the ties and the well-shined shoes and smelled the aftershave.

Joey, he thought; this has something to do with Joey Hardcastle. He was just glad his mother wasn’t there. Another Secret Service break-in might well give her a heart attack, he figured.

The two muscular agents hustled him into his bedroom and into his first audience with The Plague.

The man was sitting at his computer. The screen was full of machine language scrolling downward. His hair looked like the last time he’d combed it had been last year. He had on jeans and a T-shirt with a great big eyeball peering from the chest, and a long,

flowing black windbreaker, all atop expensive basketball shoes. He looked like a superstar Silicon Valley programmer god.

There was another agent in the room, looking older and in command. This was Gill. For some reason, though, Dade fixated on the man sitting at his computer. Some kind of sixth sense said, "This is the Enemy."

"Sit on the bed," the Secret Service thug named Ray commanded. "Keep your hands where we can see them," Bob added.

Dade sat down. He kept absolutely still and expressionless, but he couldn't help the explosion of fear and adrenaline that flashed through his body now. He fought for control, and achieved it.

The guy at his computer swiveled around. He wore a look of superiority and total command of the situation in his slate-gray eyes behind top-of-the-line glasses.

"You know, guy, I had to actually go through hard copy to find you. Stanton High records, don't you know." Tap of fingertips to desktop. "Ugh."

Dade was about to say something wiseass, but decided to keep his mouth shut and let this odd guy do the work.

"The name is The Plague. You may have seen my work hither and thither years ago on your childhood cyberspace peregrinations." He looked for recognition in Dade's face. Found none. Shrugged. "Ah, well. To sum up: The year was 1988 and this nasty virus crashed fifteen hundred systems in one day."

Dade couldn't help correcting the error. "Fifteen hundred and seven."

"Wow," said one of the Secret Service agents.

The older, in-charge guy who talked like Joe Friday with a hernia said, "It got you seven years' probation with no computer. Couldn't even use a Touch-Tone phone."

"Musta been hell, huh, 'Zero Cool.'" The guy swiveled on the chair, enjoying the annoying squeak it made. "What makes me think, though, a guy like you didn't get on once in a while anyway, hmm?" He shrugged. Squeaked. "Well, that's not our concern now. Let's get into some facts here. A virus has been planted in the Ellingson Mineral computer system. You were our prime suspect." He made a sweeping gesture and another squeak. "Until I trashed your stuff and found no trace of it."

Gill said, "However, we believe one Joey Hardcastle is involved with the Ellingson virus. He, or perhaps his accomplice, has a disk Mr. Belford here needs to disable the virus. We want you to help find it." Gill nodded to the other two agents. "I think he's got the message. We can leave now." He pulled out a card and tucked it into Dade's pocket. "Just so you know where you can reach me, Mr. Murphy."

"Oh. Thanks."

Plague tapped the machine language on the machine.

"You recognize this, don't you?"

Dade looked at it, was surprised. He wondered where he got it from. "I haven't seen this for a while,"

he said.

“I can’t believe you were only eleven when you wrote this,” said the geek. “It’s an impressive virus.”

“Thanks.”

“Still, there was one small mistake. Have you seen it since then?”

The geek scrolled some more of the screen, then stopped it on a line. He punched a key, and a > sign became <.

Dade studied the code for a few moments. “Damn,” he said. “You’re right!” Who was this guy?

“Dade, I know how you might feel about narking on your friends, but we are hackers, both of us. For us there’s no such thing as family or friends. We are each our own country, with temporary allies and enemies. I’d like to make a treaty with you.”

“Who are you?” Dade said.

“I’m the one who understands you,” said The Plague. “Now then, can we be allies?” He extended a hand.

Dade looked at that hand. Tried to make it look as though he were honestly considering shaking it. “Naw,” he said finally. “I don’t play well with others.”

The Plague smiled. “Watch which ‘others’ you play with. A record like yours could get you kicked out of school. No colleges would take you. Maybe land you in jail. No future there. You’d be exiled from everyone and everything you love.” He pulled a disk out of the computer and turned off the machine, ridding it of Dade’s virus. “I’ll be in touch. You try and stay out of trouble, okay?”

“Bite me,” said Dade.

The grin remained. “Thank you.”

The Plague left.

Dade let loose a breath and put his hands to his face. He let some of his emotions go, and shuddered. Damn! He was back in the big leagues again, and it didn’t feel one bit better than it had last time!

He sat for a while, regaining his regular breathing, his composure. He couldn’t believe they’d just

crashed in like that, without even a search warrant. He looked around. Everything had been pulled from his boxes. His storage disks were all out and manhandled. A quiet rage began to build in him. Whatever happened to the Bill of Rights? He felt like he’d been handed over to fascism, pure and simple.

He heard the bang and bash of the front door opening again.

What now? Were they back?

His mom poked her nose through the door, looked around at the boxes the agents had opened. “Dade!” she said, happily. “You unpacked!”

## Party

The night after the Secret Service raid, Dade Murphy found himself heading up a Soho staircase along with Fantom Phreak, Lord Nikon, and Cereal Killer. The staircase smelled freshly painted and the sounds of partying people and acid jazz filtered down, echoing in the stairwell.

He hadn't particularly felt like partying tonight. What with all that had been going on, he had been thinking he'd just like to chill for a while, stay out of the heat, think things over.

But then, there'd been this particular dialogue with the chums:

"Hey, hear about Joey's bust?" Phreak had said.

"Probably had to do with that bank in Idaho," suggested Cereal, who seemed relieved they weren't ragging on him now. Fantom Phreak had just suggested that Cereal's parents had missed Woodstock and had been raising their son to make up for it.

"You think he really could hack a Gibson?" Phreak had wondered aloud.

Dade said, "Did you talk to him about it?"

"Nope. But I did get an earful from Momma de Joey," Phreak had answered. "She said he's grounded for his next three lifetimes, man. And he can't 'consort with his computer friends' either. Hey, man-you think she means us?" A wry chuckle, then a serious shake of the head. "The Secret Service is really out to screw him."

Dade had not commented on that at all. He felt it best at the moment to keep his mouth shut concerning that visit from that Pestilence guy. He needed to scope the territory properly first.

As they approached the party-the existence of which they'd discovered by hacker means-Dade recognized the music. Funky acid jazz by US 3. There were so many grooves going on, they were going to have to watch their footing in this party.

Phreak knocked on the apartment door. Lord Nikon flashed the invitation he'd wangled from his computer contacts. The pinhead who opened the door acted like it could have been a coupon for cornflakes for all he cared. He just let them in, and they cut through the hip-hopping, party-up party-down throng.

"Woouoooo. One heavy-duty, deluxe-size apartment," Phreak commented. "Geez, I bet they gotta import cockroaches from Texas for this one."

"Yeah," said Lord Nikon, his head already bobbing, his toe already tapping to the killer beat. "They made these kind of apartments back before WW II when there was some space in Manhattan. Nice, huh?"

There were people dancing and people shmoozing and people just sitting on expensive couches or chairs, zoned and grooving. There were people in front of computer screens, there were people in the kitchen attacking the drink supply, there were people chomping on chips and onion dip at the refreshment

spread. The place smelled of perfumed people and floor wax, with a gentle touch of potpourri in the air, occasionally without the pourri.

However, despite the fact that this was definitely a party and they had not been wrongly guided, they could see no sign of Kate.

“Nice place, huh?” said Phreak.

Dade could only whistle with appreciation.

Phreak led them over to a bookshelf. “Her mom makes big bucks writing these self-help books for women. Stuff like this.” He pulled one out of a pile. “Women Who Love Men Who Are Emotional Amoebas.”

“That would explain a lot,” said Dade sarcastically. It was his way of pretending to himself that he didn’t care if he saw Kate Libby or not.

In fact, last night, he’d had troubling dreams. One of the featured attractions had starred the hostess of this party and included some bare flesh and a lot of kissing-until Secret Service had ripped him away and stuck him on a plane slated for Siberia, U.S.A. Okay, okay, so she wasn’t unsexy, he thought. Okay, okay, so maybe the less brainy parts of him, uhm, reacted to her. The traitors!

His friends, after picking up some drinks and food, seemed to be similarly affected by the female gender.

Nikon pointed out a particularly blond sort with a

particularly black leather outfit. “Yo, Mr. C. Check it out. Houston, we have liftoff. Nasty niblet, three o’clock.”

Their heads all turned to inspect the young woman attired partly in a microskirt, but mostly in bare legs.

“Ouch. Look at her!” said Phreak.

“Look at her?” said Cereal, looking as though a great deal of snap-crackle-pop was going on behind his mirrored shades. “I’ve already erected a monument to her.”

“Hmm. Getting other kind of internal readings on that one,” said Phreak, scrunching his face as he consulted his brain on the matter. “Uh . . . Lisa Blair . . . 26 East Seventh Street. Apartment 16, phone 555-4817.”

“How’d you know that?”

Phreak smiled. “Photographic memory. It’s a curse.”

Their gazes wandered, lighting upon another dancing woman, overweight and jammed into quite tight pants.

“Spandex,” said Cereal. “It’s a privilege, not a right.”

“Hey, guys,” said Phreak. “I see the phone. I gotta phone call expected about right now in Buenos Aires.”

There was a spare space on the couch beside the phone. Dade grabbed a Jolt Cola and sat, hoping to hear the Master in Phone Phreak Action. At the other side of the room he noticed a guy in rave attire dancing rather spastically who looked a little like one of the thuggy S.S. guys from yesterday.

Naw....

Phreak was getting into it with his long-distance

girlfriend. "No, baby, I'm not here at this party with no one. I'm thinking only of you. Why you think I'm calling you now?"

The guy who'd been with Kate at the Cyberdelia the other day-that brain-dead Apollo who'd been identified as Curtis-sauntered by Dade, not noticing him. He stopped by Phreak, though, gave a disapproving scowl.

"Hey, man, practicing phone sex again?"

Phreak just glared with immense hostility at him.

Dade chugged at his Jolt. Soon it was gone and he went to get another. "Happiness in Slavery" by Nine Inch Nails came on and the dance floor went nuts. Dade wasn't much of a dancer. And while he liked the general angry anarchy of the music, he just wasn't in the mood for tintinitus tonight.

He suggested to the others an exploration of other rooms, and they happily agreed.

"Hey, man, let's see if Hostess has a computer! Let's see what kind of megabytes she's packing, man!"

It didn't take long to find Kate's room. It was the one with the first-rate sound system and the Trent Reznor poster alongside a fancy bed and tasteful Georgia O'Keeffe and Frida Kahlo prints on the walls. No stuffed animals, no pink, Dade noted. It looked like the room of one girl who got sophisticated a little too early for her mental health.

"Yo," said Nikon. "I found it."

"Leave it to Nikon, man," said Cereal. "I never would have. Sometimes these small ones, they just blend in with the atmosphere."

Phreak was already at the notebook computer. It sat neatly at the desk, already hooked up to all the peripherals. Phreak turned it on, hit a command, and examined the interior specs. "Check it out, guys. This is insanely great. It's got a 28.8-kilobaud modem."

Dade's attention was diverted from the room to the notebook. It was a really cool little machine, no question. It even smelled expensive.

"Display?" he asked.

"Active matrix, a million psychedelic colors. Man, she's sweet."

"I want it," said Nikon.

“I want it to have my children,” said Phreak.

They admired the sharp graphics and colors of the new Windows display. “Bet it looks crispy in the dark,” said Cereal.

“Hit the light, then!” said Phreak.

The top light went out and the guys hovered over the computer, silently oohing and aahing at the varied shades and hues glowing from this miracle of technology. The bedroom door opened, and Dade turned to see two entangled figures enter the room and tumble onto the bed: Kate and Curtis. Kissing sounds arose from them as they rolled around.

The antics were even more interesting than computers. However, for some reason, Dade was irked by this particular display.

“Now there’s some interesting linkage maneuvers,” he whispered.

“Yep,” said Nikon. “You think Burn’s got wetware to match her software?”

Dade was alarmed. “Burn?” As in Acid Burn?

But he said it too loudly. The osculating duo ceased osculating. “What the-“ said Curtis. He groped around, hit the lights.

Kate was readjusting her clothes. “What are you doing in here?” she demanded, totally outraged. Her eyes touched Dade’s. She looked away. Was that a blush? he wondered.

“I’m sorry,” said Phreak. “We’re sorry. We were just checkin’ out your fly laptop.”

Nikon’s head bobbed. “That’s hype. You’re in the butter zone.”

Only slightly in disarray now, Kate had come over to them. However, she no longer seemed angry, but pleased at the compliment.

“Isn’t it? I want to triple the RAM-“

Curtis was aghast. “You’re going into that computer crap now?” He made an abrupt and dismissive gesture. “Forget it. I’ll see you later.”

“Sensitive lad.”

Kate looked abashed at having slipped into a technical mode. She pointed at Dade. “What’s he doing here?”

“Relax, Burn. He’s my guest.”

Oh no! “Burn? You’re Acid Burn? You booted me out of NBC?” said Dade.

“What?” Kate was confused.



Dade stuck out his hand. "I'm Crash Override."

Kate's eyes went wide. "You're the moron who keeps invading my turf?"

Cereal seemed totally overwhelmed. He pointed at Dade. "Crash . . ." To Kate. ". . . and Burn!"

Kate's eyebrows furrowed. Her hands went to her hips and she looked grimly thoughtful. "Wait. Does it occur to you guys that Joey's arrested just as this guy shows up?" She turned to Dade. "Nothing personal, but how do we know you aren't some amateur who got busted and turned informer?"

Phreak shook his head. "He ain't no narc. Don't be paranoid."

She stalked out. "It's nice being paranoid. It makes you feel wanted."

"Crash and Burn," said Dade, considering. "That has a lovely ring to it."

"Speakin' of Joey, I wonder how he's doing," said Nikon.

"Oh, he's fine. He's a hardy soul," said Phreak. "They probably got him at an AA meeting or something 'cause they think he's a computer addict. Can you imagine that?"

Nikon laughed, sipped his beer, and burped.

The Plague's Office

The Plague sat at his computer, typing away furiously. It was a hacker's dream, this computer. Top of the line, all that money could buy, with a horizontal Radius display, a DataHand keyboard, and a Cyberman joystick.

He was getting exactly where he wanted to go, too, because he was good, the best. These amateurs . . . nobody could access like The Plague!

There was a knock on the door.

"Yeah?"

"It's Margo."

"Sure. Come in."

She was dressed in a tight black dress, accentuating a slim and sexy StairMaster-in-the-office form. She had on a nice floral scent. The Plague studiously ignored her. "I thought we were going out for a drink. Several drinks, actually."

"I realize this situation is stressful, Margo, but there's really no time to waste here." The Plague spat the words tersely. "Things haven't gone as planned."

"The Murphy kid turned you down?"

"Look here," he said, preferring not to dwell on the matter. "I've disguised myself as an IRS probe and penetrated the FBI NCIC \_\_\_\_"

“Whatever are you talking about?”

He stopped. Below him was a compact refrigerator. He pulled out a cold Jolt. Offered Margo Wallace one.

“No thanks. I’ll take a diet.”

He gave her a diet Coke. He popped his Jolt and sipped. Gestured at the screen.

“The FBI’s computer holds’ files on twenty million Americans. I hacked into it.” He started typing again. “From here I can get access to every piece of data ever stored on Dade Murphy’s parents. Everyone has a secret, Margo. Even you and I, hmm?”

She sat down on the couch and took a nap.

By the time she awoke, Plague’s desk had magically become strewn with soda cans, candy wrappers, and computer printouts, all evidence of his hours of hacking activity. |

“Hey. Sleeping Beauty,” said The Plague. “Look what I found!” She got up, went to his side. The printer was working. The Plague tapped some information onto the screen. “His parents separated five years ago, reconciled two years later, filed for divorce last year. Custody battle, boy chose to go with his mother.”

“So?” said Margo, rubbing her eyes.

The Plague pulled paper from the printer. It

showed a driver’s license photo marked MURPHY LAUREN ROSE, along with other information.

“So,” said The Plague. “We get the mother, we get the kid.”

Margo Wallace smiled. She put her arms around his shoulders and gently nibbled The Plague’s neck. “You know, it’s nice to have a man around who’s good for more than one thing.”

The Plague grinned cockily.

### Acid Burning

The party was still going on in the main part of the apartment, but Trent Reznor was taking a snooze and Liz Phair was subbing, at a lower volume. Dade heard the Whip Smart tunes only vaguely. He was in Kate’s room again, fooling around.

Not with Kate, alas, but second best was not far behind in gratification value: Kate’s laptop computer.

He was just fooling around now in a local BBS, marveling at the subtlety of the shadings this machine got on its screen. It was late. He’d dived outside the room during some of the hairier parts of the party. He’d even joined in a moment of peace with Kate. She actually laughed. Of course, that was when the beer can had exploded in his face. It was particularly galling, since Dade didn’t like beer, but the nice laugh it had coaxed out of the usually glacial Kate had made it worthwhile.

On his way back here, he'd been looking for the bathroom and found Kate Libby's mother's office by mistake. Ruth Libby had been pounding away at

some new antimale book, puffing away at cigarettes. She'd asked him some embarrassing questions about whether he'd been bottle-fed or gone the natural route before she let him go.

Dade was having an on-line chat with a late-night BBS party-guy when Kate wandered back into her bedroom-this time, fortunately, minus a certain studly growth named Curtis.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"It's cool. I'm just on the Big Board. Under my own name, too."

She moved next to him. Close enough that he could smell her perfume, still strong amidst the party odors. "I think it's too much machine for you."

"Oh yeah?" He grinned, typed his way out of the board, and then started running through the operating systems with the ease of a pro.

"Not bad," she said.

"It's got a wicked refresh rate," he commented.

"P6 chip. Triple the speed of a Pentium."

"It's not just the chip." He pounded out a command, got a display, tapped some info. "It's got a PCI bus." He smiled. "But then, of course, you knew that already, didn't you."

"Indeed," she said, arching an eyebrow. "RISC architecture is gonna change everything."

"Risk is good," said Dade.

Their eyes met, held. There was sweet electricity in the gaze. Frizzle and hum.

A couple kissing on the balcony smacked against the window, breaking the spell.

Dade turned back to the laptop, patting it appreciatively. "You sure this sweet machine's not going to waste?"

Kate leaned against the desk, a vision of nonchalance. "Crash Override. What was it you said, 'Mess with the best. . . die like the rest'?"

"Uh-huh. Not exactly hyperoriginal, but I still mean it."

She laughed. "What? You're challenging me?"

"You bet. Name your stakes."

Kate's eyes came alight. "If I win, you become my slave?"

"That actually sounds like fun!"

“You wish. You’ll do crap work. Scan, crack copyrights, whatever I want.”

“Deal. And if I win . . .,” said Dade.

“Hey, you can have my firstborn!”

“How about your first date . . . with me!”

“You’re not going to win.”

“And on this date . . . you have to smile.”

Kate seemed to think about this for a moment. Then a wicked smile split her face. “Well, I don’t do ‘dates’ . . . but I won’t lose, either.” She nodded. “You’re on!”

They shook hands, and her palm and fingers were cool and soft and sexy.

“I look forward to interfacing with you,” he said.

“Ready for some advanced failure therapy?” she returned.

But she was still smiling.

10

## The Competition

This was the deal:

The contest was to hassle the Secret Service and achieve something to avenge the way that Joey had been treated.

Dade Murphy and Kate Libby had agreed to let Fantom Phreak outline the tasks they would use to prove who of the two was the superior hacker.

“Me, Nikon, and Cereal are the judges and referees,” Phreak had proclaimed. “Our decisions are made final by a vote of at least two to one. No appeals. The duel lasts until a winner is declared. You may use only the dial-ups, access codes, and passwords in your collections. You can’t ask for any help from us.”

The next day the two opponents hit the streets, notebook computers in hand, the Three Hacketeers along for observation purposes.

“How quaint,” Kate Libby said upon seeing Dade’s plain vanilla machine.

“It’s all I need,” Dade assured her.

Under Phreak’s supervision, they set up temporary operations at two pay phones on a low-trafficked street. Dade went first, while they all watched. Dade called the Village Voice, hacked into certain computer operations.

“He’s in the personal ads!” Kate said. “Looking for a date when you don’t get one from me?”

“Nope,” said Dade. “A date for somebody else.”

The ad listed some very embarrassing dating specifications, and it gave Secret Service Agent Richard Gill’s personal office number.

This resulted in a countless stream of phone calls one night that got logged onto Gill’s phone mail and caused a great deal of annoyance to him. Even worse was when he got phone calls during the day. As The Plague looked on with amusement, Gill finally got a line out to Bob and Ray, who had been stationed to watch Joey’s activities.

What was the kid up to?

He was watching Star Trek, returned the agents. Classic Trek. “City on the Edge of Forever,” starring Joan Collins. Good episode.

Gill hadn’t authorized a bug, so he wanted to know how they knew. The Plague answered that one: it wasn’t a bug. It was a phone company computer which went on people’s lines between two and four a.m. checking for maintenance problems. The Plague had subverted this computer for Gill’s purposes to work around the clock, because the side effect was that it turned a phone receiver into a speakerphone. Thus, Bob and Ray knew what Joey had been watching on TV-and knew that he had not been responsible for all the obscene phone calls.

This prank impressed the Hacker Committee very much indeed. Kate’s had been good too-she’d managed to get sixty-seven pizzerias from the tri-state region to make deliveries to Gill’s home at the same time—but they liked Dade’s better. However, they conferred first on the subject.

“Dade’s been strokin’ twenty-four/seven,” Phreak said. “Your boy want to interface?”

“Say,” Phreak said, “wouldn’t you rather a nice clean-cut freak like Crash be with Acid Burn than Curtis?”

“Right, Mr. Simplex. Good point,” Nikon agreed.

“Listen up,” Phreak said. “We gotta keep declaring their duel a tie. Sooner or later, chemistry will take over.”

Cereal offered another possibility: “Or we’ll be accessories to a murder.”

So they’d gone back to the dueling duo, announcing a tie and an advance to Round Two.

“I think I’m going to win this one,” Dade announced.

“Dade thinks,” observed Kate. “There’s an oxymoron.”

They went out to hit the pay phones again, the Hacketeers in tow to observe. The expedition proved quite fruitful.

Secret Service Agent Gill’s credit card was declined and then cut up by an irate waiter at a fancy restaurant in front of important guests. Secret Service Agent Gill exited the restaurant to discover his car

being hauled away by a tow truck, the driver of which nastily advised him to pay his bills.

The next day, Gill's beat-up rust-bucket rental car was pulled over by a cop, who handcuffed him after discovering that Richard Gill's license had been suspended because of a DUI and 113 traffic violations.

Later that day, the Secret Service received flowers and messages of condolences.

Richard Gill, upon trying to get the computer problems solved (he'd figured out that someone was messing things up-and not Joey H.; he'd checked on that), called accounting to get a paycheck he particularly needed due to the circumstances in which he'd been placed, only to discover that the government accounting computers had him listed as "deceased."

That had been Dade's doing, as he announced proudly before the judging committee and Kate.

"Very impressive," Nikon said.

"Almost. . . Godlike," Cereal added.

"Yeah. Whatever," Kate said. "So. What's the score?"

The trio conferred.

"Still a tie," Phreak declared.

Both Dade and Kate disagreed.

"With Mr. Gill's untimely demise and all, guess you two will have to improvise the next round."

Dade turned to Kate. "If I win, will you wear a dress on our date?"

Kate nodded. "But if I win, you wear a dress as my slave!"

"Deal," said Dade.

Their next hacker objectives were a little more difficult.

## High Places

At the top of the observation deck of the Empire State Building, where Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan had finally found one another in *Sleepless in Seattle* and the giant ape had taken the plunge for Fay Wray in *King Kong*, Kate Libby attached her super-notebook to a public phone, while Dade Murphy, Fantom Phreak, Lord Nikon, and Cereal Killer looked on.

"It's ringing," said Kate, cupping her attached phone unit. "Gimme a name to use."

"Nah, nah," said Dade. "No help from the audience."

Someone answered on the other end. "Hello?"

Kate glanced at the writing on the side of Dade's sunglasses. She found a name to use.

“Yeah. How are you tonight? This is Miss Oakley, with the computer operations office.”

At the other end of the line was a presidential aide sitting in a room just a few doors down from the Oval Office of the White House.

“Yes,” said the aide, fiddling with his suspenders.

“You have access to the PROFS system, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” said the aide.

“Yeah, I know,” said Kate, “‘cause I’m troubleshooting the system. Something’s wrong with the log-in prompt. I’m not sure if it’s your end or our end. Could you help me with this?”

“Sure, what can I do for you?” The aide was distracted. He was working on some stuff for a speech the president had to give the next day.

“I know you’re not supposed to divulge your account number or password over the phone-after all, we told you not to. But could you just type the word ‘echo’ into your computer?”

“Sure,” said the aide.

The word ‘ECHO’ appeared on the screen of Kate’s computer.

“I can’t see,” said Cereal. “What’s she doing?”

“Shhhhhh!” said Phreak. “She fooled him. He thinks he’s logged onto the White House computer, but she sent him a dummy screen.”

“Now then,” said Kate. “Enter your account.”

As the aide typed, numbers appeared on Kate’s screen. 2-2-2-6-2.

“And now your password, please,” instructed Kate.

“Uh-huh,” said the aide.

STUD appeared on the screen.

Kate laughed to herself, then typed a message to the aide’s computer.

On the aide’s monitor: INCORRECT LOG-IN.

“Odd,” said the aide. “I thought I typed it correctly.”

“Don’t worry,” said Kate. “I see the problem is on my end. Thanks for the help. . . .” She hung up. “Stud!” She cackled with glee. “I hacked the White House. Beat that!” The last remark was for Dade. And Dade was duly impressed, though naturally he chose not to reveal this.

“We can read the president’s mail!” Cereal exulted.

Nikon bobbed his head. "Now that's what I call freedom of information!"

## Temptations

Life went on, and so did the various efforts of certain people struggling for control, one-upmanship, domination, and the various odd things of value to human beings.

Early the next day, at school, Kate Libby beckoned Dade Murphy to her locker, where she showed him a frilly pink dress and a wild red leather bra-and-panty ensemble. "I didn't know your size, so I guessed. You are man enough to stick to the deal, right?"

Dade assured her that he was.

He was very impressed by the girl's perversity.

He was equally impressed later that day, though, by the parcel he received back home at his apartment. After signing for it, he opened the cardboard package. It was a translucent laptop, its interior mechanisms revealed. Dade had never seen one before. He turned it on. The face of The Plague appeared.

"You want to know who I am?" his voice announced. "Well, let me explain the new world order. Governments and corporations need people like you and me. We are the samurai, the keyboard cowboys. And all the people out there who have no idea what's going on, they're the cattle, herded and helpless. You help me and I'll help you earn your spurs. Think about it. Meanwhile, enjoy your new, improved laptop."

The program ceased and immediately erased itself.

Meanwhile, at the Libby household, this mother-daughter interchange was going on:

"Who was the cute new kid at the party?" Ruth Libby wanted to know. She was sitting at the table, smoking a cigarette, drinking coffee, and reading the Village Voice Literary Supplement. She had a yuppified Bohemian pallor to her face.

"Some jerk," said Kate, pondering a copy of Wired as she finished her dinner.

"That serious, eh?" said Ruth. She squinted through her cigarette smoke and wagged her finger. "Be careful-we always seem to fall for the ones we hate, to fulfill what I call a woman's 'suffering cycle.' Men are as unavoidable as menstrual cramps, and equally unpleasant, yet an integral part of our female experience."

"Thanks. More cryptic parental advice," replied Kate.

That night, though, she had a dream that was not cryptic at all. It involved rolling around and kissing a guy who was wearing a red dress, and who turned out to be Dade Murphy.

Oh dear.

She awoke immediately and sat up in bed with shock. Then, when she realized that she'd enjoyed the dream . . . well, maybe, she thought this Murphy person had more uses than being merely someone to best in a hacking contest. Hmm . . .



Back at Ellingson Mineral, The Plague's dreams were less pleasant. The data printouts on Lauren Murphy were strewn on his desk. IRS data. Banking data. Medical data. Insurance data. And whatever other data he'd been able to come up with.

Margo Wallace sat on the couch, regarding him.

"Lauren Murphy, this is your life." He drummed the papers with his fingertips, then looked up at Margo. "Nothing here. I found zip. She's boring. She had a misdemeanor arrest for marijuana possession, way back in 1979. That's about all."

"Dammit," said Margo. She got up and paced. She was used to getting what she wanted, used to getting immediate feedback. Action, action, action was her trade in PR. Immediate returns. Now, coming up blank for so long was making her frustrated.

The Plague watched her. Enjoying her anxiety. She was such a cool number that he enjoyed it when she lost balance-that is, as long as he could put her back on-line. There had been times when she'd simply crashed into a screaming, out-of-control freak-out. She was a Hades-on-wheels at the best of times, and keeping her reined in was part of the challenge and pleasure of his mutually beneficial relationship with her. A small part.

The Plague stood up, stretched, cracked his knuckles, then got himself another Jolt. He vaguely thought about going back to coffee-but then coffee didn't have the carbonation to inject the caffeine into the system properly.

"This is a true story," he said. "This guy was mistakenly arrested because he had the same name as a felon in the FBI computer. And when he was booked there was a typing error. His name was entered 'Rook' instead of 'Brook.' He was in jail for months while the computer searched for the name 'Brook' to put it on the court calendar. His family called the police, but they couldn't locate him." He indicated the computer. "Because the computer said no such person was in jail."

"What's the moral of this story?" snapped Margo, still pacing.

The Plague rubbed his hands together, relishing the facts that he was about to present. "It's a dirty little secret that wrongful arrests occur constantly. That's why I wiped myself out of every system years ago." He sat back down in his seat, inserted his hands into the DataHands. "The only free man is the one that doesn't exist. Now then, this"-he penetrated screen after screen with a

wild ferocity-"is where we find out if Dade Murphy is a momma's boy."

"So you want to tell me what you're doing?" said Margo.

The Plague smiled mischievously. "Ms. Lauren Murphy works at a bank as a loan officer. I think, in light of my expertise, we might play around with her reputation, hmm?"

Margo brightened. "I think I like the way you think."

As The Plague and Margo plotted and hacked, elsewhere in the city-Joey's apartment, to be exact-Mrs. Hardcastle looked in upon her son. She found the boy lying despondent upon his bed, staring up at the ceiling like a limp lasagna noodle without sauce. It was simply too much for the good-hearted woman to take.

“You look pitiful, Joey,” she said. “Okay, okay, you’re not grounded anymore.”

Shaking her head sorrowfully, wishing that the boy merely wanted to play guitar in some rock band instead of illegal computer games, she left the room.

Joey jumped to his feet.

He felt one hundred percent better. He had known this would happen eventually, and he had bided his time accordingly. Now for vindication!

He placed several telephone books on a chair, then hopped on. He pushed back a ceiling tile, pulled a pile of Playboys aside, and retrieved a leather bag. In the bag was a card collection. He delved into this and pulled out his “firmie,” the infamous 3.5-inch disk marked copy-ellingson mineral.

Then, liberated, he bolted for the great outdoors. He paged Phreak, got a return call at the phone

booth. Wanna meet me at Battery Park? he asked. Designated bench? Would he! Phreak said. You bet, buddy! Welcome back to the living.

The two hackers met. They high-fived. They walked. Joey talked.

From a distance, Bob and Ray, who had followed Joey to Battery Park, tagged along, lurking.

“Joey,” said Phreak. “A Garbage File just holds miscellaneous data, junk, bits of stuff that’s been erased.”

Joey shook his head adamantly. “Not this one,” he insisted. “I got it from Ellingson. They keep askin’ about it. Take a look!”

Joey pulled the disk from a pocket and Phreak took it. But even as he did, he heard a faint click, looked around.

There was a Secret Service jerk, taking a picture of the transaction! “Oh, crap, Joey. You got a tail.”

“Rats! I gotta go!”

Joey split, leaving Phreak holding the deadly disk in his hand. He looked down at it, said, “Oh, crap,” and split in the other direction.

The Secret Service hopped into action. Bob followed Joey. Ray followed Phreak.

Something was happening!

11

When Ramon Sanchez, aka Fantom Phreak, woke up the next morning to the pounding of his mother on his door and her shouting of “Ramon, Ramon! Get up! Time for school,” he was grateful to her. He’d just been having a monster of a dream, and he was glad to be rid of it.

He’d managed to ditch Ray the Secret Service Agent with a combination of his trademark technical

efficiency and his cleverness. He'd ducked into a pizzeria phone booth. When the SS guy trained a laser listening device on the pizzeria, Phreak left a small recorder going, spouting his love songs to some distant amour, and then slipped out the back. The Secret Service guy spent the next half hour listening to Phreak's tape, thinking Phreak was still in the pizzeria.

Then he'd hid the Garbage File that Joey had given him in a Stanton boys' room, gone home, and shredded lots of incriminating computer notebooks.

Nonetheless, when the lights were finally out and he'd hit the sack, he'd dreamed that helicopters were buzzing around his apartment and that Secret Service Agent Gill was on his computer screen, nose protruding, saying, "I'm watching you!"

Enough to ruin any good night's sleep, certainly.

He sighed with relief. However, his relief was short-lived, for when his mother pulled the shades of his window open, there were a couple of Secret Service agents there, peering in, guns drawn.

They opened the window and stuck their guns in. "Don't move!" they cried.

Bob and Ray. The Dropsy Twins. They came in and pointed their big guns in the general direction of Phreak's brains, emphasizing the seriousness of their phrasings.

"Deja vu," said Phreak.

"Ray Sanchez," announced Secret Service Agent Bob. "You're under arrest under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act of 1986."

His mother, truly pissed off, started screaming Spanish at Phreak and smacking him even though she had no clue as to what he did, she had known he'd get into trouble with his computer hijinks some day. "What're you waiting for?" he cried. "Arrest me already!"

They were only too happy to oblige. They put handcuffs on him and hauled him down to jail, bars and heavy-duty criminals and all. The criminals looked at him as though he were breakfast.

Phreak asked for the phone call every citizen is entitled to under these circumstances. He was reluctantly obliged.

"You get one call. Uno," a, big-bellied guard told him. "Understand? Comprende? Write down the number."

He scribbled the number on the clipboard. The guard dialed it, shut and locked the plate, preventing any other calls, then waddled out.

Phreak pressed the phone's hook to hang up, then flicked it ten times. Dial tone. He pursed his lips and whistled a short, clear tone. Back in the old days, you could get a whistle from Cap'n Crunch boxes that could do this. Fortunately, Phreak had developed the same lovely and useful talent.

When someone came on, he said, "Operator, I'm having trouble dialing a number. 555-4202. Thank you."

Kate Libby answered. She knew what had happened to him.

“Hey, it’s me,” said Phreak. “Yeah, I’m freakin’. I get arraigned Friday. The lawyers cost a lot. My parents are buggin’. They’re chargin’ me with serious shit. And this is stuff I didn’t even do, like, get this, inserting some virus called da Vinci. And they keep askin’ about you guys.”

Kate Libby kept calm. “You think they’re gonna bust us?”

“Yeah,” said Phreak. “You better figure out what’s on that disk, ‘cause we are being framed. I put it in that place where I left that other thing that time. Remember?”

Kate remembered.

The next day, she got the disk from the locker at Stanton High School.

Shortly thereafter, Dade Murphy received a phone call from a man with a familiar voice. “The girl,” said Plague. “The girl has the disk I need. Get it for me.”

“Told you. I don’t play well with others,” said Dade.

“Your laptop is on the telephone line?”

“Sure.”

“Turn it on. Set it for incoming data.”

Dade shrugged and obeyed, booting up the machine, then setting up a terminal quickly. It whirled with incoming information, and then the screen filled with a picture of a woman who had some facial resemblances to his mother.

Suddenly, digitally, the image changed- morphed-into an exact resemblance of Lauren Murphy.

“Lauren Murphy is now a wanted felon in the state of Washington. Forgery, embezzlement, two drug convictions. Plus, she jumped parole. When she’s arrested, she will not pass ‘go,’ she will go straight to jail. Then, I change this file back to the original and your mom disappears.”

“No way!” said Dade.

“Computers never lie, kid. Your mother will be arrested at work. She’ll be handcuffed. Later, she’ll be strip-searched. And that’s only the beginning!”

Dade stood up and screamed into the phone. “Leave her alone, Plague, or I’m going to kill you!”

“Kid, don’t threaten me,” said The Plague. “There are worse things than death, and I can do all of them. Now listen to a true story. It’s about a poor guy named Tom Brook. . . .”

Dade listened in hopeless, forlorn disbelief to the story of a wrongfully jailed man. Damn! These were no idle words, either; The Plague had the chops to accomplish all this, no question about it! He was up against the wall, big time!

Helplessly, he listened to this techno-Beelzebub, thinking furiously.

## Snap Crackle Hack

Cereal Killer was standing in Central Park, a rucksack of tapes by his feet, hawking his wares, when Kate rolled up on a trail bike.

“Re-edited videotapes of my own devising!” he called to passing strollers, skateboarders, and Rollerbladers. “Godfather versus Scarface. Pacino versus Pacino. Which is the baddest AI?”

“Hey, C. K.,” said Kate, skidding to an elaborate halt.

“Nice moves, sunshine,” said Cereal, peeling back some of his long hair to get a better look at his visitor.

“Phreak’s been busted.”

“That’s the buzz. Life’s getting hot all around.”

She pulled out a disk from her windbreaker. “This is what they’re after. But why? We’re going to have to decipher this little baby, that much is pretty clear.”

“Guess you already thought about. . .?”

“Dade? No way . . .,” she said.

“Man, that guy knows some code. . . . His brain is seriously tuned up, that’s all I can say!”

“We don’t know him. How can we trust him?”

Cereal shrugged. “Well, I guess you can trust him about as much as any hacker. . . . But me, I got a sixth sense for this thing, I think.” There was a sudden and different kind of depth in his eye. “I been scoping out the dude. I think he resonates.”

“Well, C. K. That’s nice. But can we trust him?”

“The question you’re asking yourself, Burn, is ... can you trust yourself?”

She looked away.

“We gotta stick together. The Man’s on our butts and our lifestyles are threatened!”

“Okay, okay, he does seem to know his way around this kind of stuff. You know where he lives?”

“You bet, sweetheart!”

When Kate and Cereal Killer arrived at Dade Murphy’s apartment, Lauren Murphy opened the door.

“I’m Kate. This is Cereal,” Kate said by way of introduction. “You must be Dade’s mom. Is he here? Can we see him if he is?”

Lauren Murphy and Kate eyed each other in an appraising fashion. Kate grudgingly thought that this was a pretty cool mom. She didn’t look like the kind who analyzed everything to death. Lauren Murphy was

a little more basic than that.

“Now I see what all the fuss is about,” she said, appreciative of the fact that Kate had just the right amounts of youth, beauty, and smarts to interest a guy like her son. “He’s here, all right. Come this way, please!”

Lauren Murphy led them through the small apartment to Dade’s room. She knocked. “You have company,” she announced.

Dade, lying on his bed, managed to get ahold of himself. He mumbled agreement to an audience and Lauren pushed the door open and left them alone.

Kate took a deep breath and pushed out the words. “We need your help.” It was incredibly painful for her. Asking for help from a guy like this! That he was so cute and so smart made him that much more unbearable.

Dade seemed honestly surprised. The sarcasm in his voice was just habit. “Do my ears deceive me? You need help?”

Cereal held up two fingers in a sixties peace sign.

“Truce, guys. We got a higher purpose: a wake-up call for the Nintendo generation. We demand free access to data. Well, it brings responsibility.” He swept back his long hair dramatically. “I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man I put away childish things.”

Kate just rolled her eyes. “Are you feeling all right?” she said jokingly.

Cereal nodded gravely. This immersion into reality was causing him stress.

Kate put her hands up in a gesture of reasoning. “Look, guy, Phreak and Joey are being framed. We need your help in figuring out what’s on this disk.”

She took the thing out from her pocket, let him see it.

Dade shook his head warily. “I can’t. Everybody who touches that thing gets busted. I can’t afford to get arrested. I’m sorry.”

Kate could not hide her disappointment. She let his words sink in for a moment, then extended the disk toward Dade. “Okay. Just one favor then-no risk. Would you make a copy of the disk? Just hide it, in case we get busted, so we’ll have one to give our lawyers that we know hasn’t been tampered with.”

Lauren Murphy leaned into the room. “You kids help yourself to anything in the fridge,” she said cheerfully.

In his mind, Dade could hear the scenario that The Plague had painted for her future: “Your mother will be arrested at work . . . handcuffed . . . strip-searched . . .”

Dade turned to Kate. “Okay. Copying it’s no problem.”

“Thanks, Dade.” Her smile was heaven.

After they'd left, Dade smashed the clear laptop Plague had given him. "I hate my life!" he told the uncaring walls. Then he called The Plague.

The security chief was only too happy to hear from him. Dade told him what he had and demanded that the extortion discontinue, and also demanded that no harm or trouble be visited upon Kate Libby. "I mean, she came to me to figure it out. She isn't the one who planted the virus. Leave her alone."

"Don't worry about it, kid. If she's innocent, she'll be fine," said the Plague.

The Plague came around to the neighborhood in a silver limo and picked the disk up outside, according to plan. His eyes shone as he took the disk. "Your mommy's fine now. Okay?"

Then he'd disappeared, swallowed up again by the big empty stone canyons of the city.

No, Dade thought. Things were not okay at all.

Nor were they exactly okay when, later, his mom came into his room with a batch of new letters from colleges. Unopened, of course.

"Dade," she said. "Would you please consider these!"

Dade turned away from her. "I don't care! To heck with college!"

Lauren was completely flabbergasted. "Great, just ruin the rest of your life."

Dade rolled over and stared at her. "Uh, like I ruined your marriage?"

She seemed taken aback by this. "You know what happened with your father. . . ."

Dade got up off the bed, shot her a dead look, and started walking. "You blame me for it, don't you. Don't you!"

He kept going toward the door. Lauren Murphy started to deny it, but somehow could not.

"Dade . . .," she called after him.

He slammed the door on the way out.

### Garbage Alert

Kate Libby's mother let him in with no hassle, and he went right to the bedroom, where he knew they'd be.

The hackers were hovering over Kate's computer, seemingly in some kind of spell. On the screen was the code that could only be the Garbage program. They were attempting to figure out what it was, why the Secret Service wanted it so much.

"Kate, listen . . .," said Dade.

Kate barely acknowledged his arrival. "Hold on," she said, lifting a restraining hand.

“I have to . . .,” said Dade.

Nikon was shaking his head, tapping the screen. “Look at this, it’s so mean and clean . . .,” he said.

“ . . . like a hacker wrote it,” Cereal finished for him.

Dade blinked. He considered. Intricate wheels turned within tinier cogs in his brain. “You mean, like, a Dark Side hacker?”

Kate didn’t seem to hear him. She was too wrapped up. She knew something about computer programs, enough to tell the difference between a sloppy program and an elegant one. This program, though, was like some offspring of Chthulu and Dracula, wearing Regency cybergear. “C’mere. Look. This thing is tense!”

Nikon scrolled down to the bottom and tapped a ragged thread, ripped off in midcoding. “This is ill. It’s incomplete. It’ll take forever and a day to figure out.”

“Let me take a look,” said Dade. They let him in, and he started scrolling back up to the top of the program. “Better start at the beginning.”

They studied the thing for hours. Dade was surprised at how much code the others had picked up just from fooling around with computers; however they did not have the complete book knowledge he’d gotten from reading, reading, reading during his years of exile. Still, there was stuff going on in this program that he’d never seen or imagined.

Eventually they got hungry and ordered a pizza.

The pizza boy arrived with the pineapple-Canadian-bacon-with-double-cheese at exactly the same time as boyfriend Curtis showed up. Mrs. Libby let them both in.

“What’s this?” Curtis demanded, at the same time as he turned his nose up at the offer of a steaming, greasy hunk of pizza.

“Just an orgy,” said Dade.

Curtis focused his attention on Kate. “Where were you last night?”

Kate slapped a hand against her head, as though to knock some faulty part of it back into functioning. “Oh God, I’m sorry. Can we talk later?”

“No thanks!” snapped Curtis. “So you can blow me off again?” He gazed with total contempt at the collection of computer paper, empty and unempty Jolt cans, and funky teenage brainy disarray surrounding the group huddled around the computer. “Enjoy your nerd buddies. I see they’re rubbing off.”

He sneered in Dade’s general direction, then stormed out.

“Get a leash on life!” Cereal called cheerfully after him, a wedge of pizza hanging limply in his hands.

They devoured the large pizza, washed down by more Jolt, and set back to work at deciphering the program in the Garbage File.



They did so deep into the night.

Finally, Dade examined one significant bit that was part of a long printout they'd spread on the bed.

He slapped the paper, astonished. "It isn't a virus! It's a worm."

Nikon leaned back in his chair, interested but sleepy. "So what's this one eating?"

"It's nibblin'," said Dade. See all this?" He tapped a pile of accumulated paper. "This is every financial transaction Ellingson conducts. From million-dollar deals to the ten bucks some guy paid for gas."

"I've heard that what a worm does is eat a few cents from each transaction," said Kate.

"No one's caught it because the money isn't really gone, it's just data being shifted around," said Dade.

Kate nodded. "So when the worm's ready, it zips out the money, then erases its tracks."

"You bet," said Dade. "Joey got cut off before he got to that part. Check it out. By this point"-he went back to the computer screen, scrolled, tapped-"the worm is running twice the speed as when it started."

Kate said, "At this rate, it ends its run in ..."

"Two days," said Nikon.

Dade went back to the printout. "Judging from this segment alone its already eaten about. . ."

Cereal held up a string of paper. "Twenty-one point-eight million dollars."

"Pretty good, Cereal," said Kate. "Whoever wrote this needs someone to take the fall, and that's Phreak and Joey and us. We gotta get the rest of this file and find out where the money's going before the worm disappears, so we can find out who created it."

"The jerk!" said Dade abruptly.

"What?" said Kate. "Who? You know, Dade?"

"I know. Yes. I know who wrote it. This Ellingson security creep. I-uh ... I gave him the copy of the disk you gave me."

"You what?" said Kate.

"I didn't know what was on it."

They were all aghast at the news. "Universally stupid, man."

Kate pursued the topic doggedly. "Why did he come after you?"

Dade looked at them. There was no way he was going to get out of this one. The only way they were going to understand the reason he'd done this was to let it all spill. "I've got a record." He had to force the truth out. "I'm, I mean ... I was . . . Zero Cool."

Whatever cool that remained in the group drained away immediately. They stared at Dade Murphy, totally shocked.

“Far out,” said Cereal, the first one to speak.

“Zero Cool crashed fifteen hundred and seven systems in one day. Biggest crash in history,” muttered Nikon. “Front page, New York Times, August tenth, 1988, photo on page seven. You had braces then!”

Kate put her hands on her face. “Oh, this is great. There goes MIT.”

Dade looked at her, mustering every bit of sincerity he could. “I’ll make it up.” “How?” asked Kate.

Dade thought a moment, then shrugged. “I’ll hack that Ellingson Gibson.”

With a laugh, Nikon said, “You’ll get traced like that!” He snapped his fingers. “The cops will find you holding a smokin’ gun!”

Dade was still looking at Kate, still being sincere. “I don’t care.”

“Even if you had passwords, it’ll take you ten minutes to get in,” Lord Nikon pointed out. “Then you still have to find the file. The cops can find you in five.”

Cereal Killer pulled a french fry from his pocket. “Oh wow. We are fried!”

Kate folded her arms and smiled at Dade. “Never send a boy to do a woman’s job. With me we can do it in seven.”

Dade was surprised. But not too surprised. Somewhere in this person he’d glimpsed this kind of individual. Maybe that was why she bothered him so much.

Cereal grinned. “Ah, you’re both doomed. I help, we can do it in six.”

Nikon shook his head wearily. “I have to save all your asses.” He broke into a grin. “I help, we can do it in five.”

Dade looked at them all, and he got a thrill. Here were all these independent cusses, united. . . . United, in solidarity, against an evil force that had penetrated the individualistic but oddly principled universe of Hackerdom.

“Okay,” he said, cracking his fingers. “Let’s go shopping!”

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There were, of course, things that had to be accomplished before the gates of the Gibson could be breached again. They all knew that Joey had been incredibly lucky-no, make that unlucky-to have hacked the Gibson in the fashion he had, plopping them all into this kind of awkward situation. There would be added precautions by the computer security people to make sure that a hacker never got in again. However, that did not mean that hacking the Ellingson Gibson was entirely impossible. Only improbable.

And if hackers had done nothing else over the years since amateur computer operators had first jammed onto the telephone lines and the Information Highway, they had developed odd loop-de-loops and limbos around, above, and below that Line of Improbability.

First off, Lord Nikon and Cereal Killer went on a small skateboarding expedition. It didn't take them long to find the telltale colorings and insignia of New York Telephone on a van parked above a manhole.

While the workmen labored below the city street, the duo successfully snagged a phone headset, a lineman's belt, and a yellow hard hat. Cereal forgot the manual. Had to go back. Almost got caught, but their expertise on skateboards soon streaked them away from harm.

Using the swiped items, Cereal disguised himself as a phone repairman who was looking for something wrong in Secret Service Agent Gill's office. Crawling under desks, working away, he was able to get into some very worthwhile mischief, right under Agent Gill's nose. Cereal planted an electronic bug in the middle of Secret Service headquarters.

Lord Nikon found a couple of flower bouquets on special at a nearby florist. Under a deliveryman cover, he got inside the offices of Ellingson Mineral and immediately discovered the areas with the densest computer populations. His bouquets never quite got delivered; however, he was able to do a great deal of "shoulder surfing" for passwords as people logged onto their computers, even spotting the movement of fingers, correlating them with an imaginary keyboard and memorizing the passwords collected.

Meanwhile, Dade and Kate prepared for their own task, which had to take place under cover of night to be most effective: Dumpster diving.

"We're gonna climb that?" said Dade, eyeing the ten-foot Cyclone fence running the length of the rear alley of the skyscraper.

"You can if you feel like it," said Kate. "I've got some other ideas." She pulled out a pair of wire cutters from her backpack.

Once inside, they found the Dumpster.

Unfortunately, it correlated to the Ellingson Building perfectly: it was huge!

"It's the size of a truck," said Dade, peering up at the moonlit monolith.

"Lotsa trash, guy," said Kate.

Dade took an exaggerated breath. "Ah! Strangely romantic, isn't it? Moonlight and stench."

They scaled the side, opened one of the lids, and jumped inside. Dade first, Kate's bag, then Kate . . . a little awkwardly. She fell onto him, pushing him into the refuse. They lay together, body to body, face to face, and Dade did not mind the sensations he felt being close to her.

"If I didn't live by a personal code of honor, I might take advantage of this situation . . . uhm . . . erotically, if you know what I mean!" he said.

"Save it, my friend." She reached down for the bag and pulled out a flashlight. Turned it on.

Amongst all the mess, they discovered two large bags full of computer printouts that looked likely to contain necessary information. Hauling these, they scrambled out of the Dumpster.

“Good work,” said Dade, examining the papery loot. “This is just the kind of-“

A metal side door of the Ellingson Building opened. Light spilled into the alleyway, illuminating the ransackers. A guard stepped out.

“Hold it right there, you two!” the guard cried.

Kate pulled something from her bag. She lifted her arms. Bright light shot from her hands: a brilliant ball of it.

“Holy . . .,” cried the guard. No hero, he slammed

his door shut. The fireball-more fireworks than weapon-smashed harmlessly yards away from the door. The effect, however, had been achieved. “Outta here!” cried Kate. Dade scrambled behind her.

Out on the street, he caught up. “What was that?”

She pulled a flare gun from her pocket. “Personalized Subway Defense System.”

“Well, Mace wouldn’t have worked back there, that’s for sure.” He hoisted his bag of papers. “Onward to rendezvous?”

“Yes, and quickly.”

They jogged on into the night.

### The Plague Spreads

Margo Wallace had tried to sleep, God knew she had. She was getting these sunken eyes and these awful lines on her face and the stress was going to start showing through the makeup soon. That would not be good for her job, and it certainly would not be good if anyone got suspicious about her. (But why?” Margo, she asked herself. How? Nobody knew she was involved with The Thing From Under the Computer. She had no record. This was her first attempt at crime. That it was for a multimillion-dollar score was what had made her cross the line. It had been she who’d been reading that book *The Hacker Crackdown* by Bruce Sterling, after she’d taken a fancy to the skateboarding computer ferret. It was she who had asked if it would be possible to quietly and anonymously drain a few million off the amazing number-flow of Ellingson Mineral. She’d been half-surprised when The Plague had said that not only was it possible, but it would be amazingly easy, provided she pulled off a few corporate memos and maneuvers that would make the books balance in the end.

So, she was getting older and she still didn’t have the kind of life she wanted. Millions of dollars, she’d thought, would buy exactly what she wanted. She’d wait a few years, retire, and then live the rest of her life in just the fashion she deserved. With Byte Brain? Most likely not. But then, there were lots of other men who were more powerful and wealthier, and if she could just be in the right places, she knew she could snag one.

No, Margo couldn’t sleep, so she put on jeans and sneaks and went to the office to see what was up.

The Plague was up, of course. Working on his computer.

“What’s going on?” she said.

“Close the door, will you?” He looked a little weary and worried, but unbeaten. She closed the door. “They had the Garbage File, all right.”

Margo stiffened. She sat down in a chair, gritting her teeth. “How much do they know?”

“Very hard to say. Certainly not everything. These are smart kids, though.” He sighed. “And curious. They’ll know enough. Maybe enough to implicate us.”

Margo shook her head. “You said the beauty of this plan was that the ‘worm’ was untraceable.”

“Oh yeah. Your normal civilian computer people wouldn’t know what it was. Not even if they had computer science degrees. But these are hackers.” He banged his desk with his fist, snapped his fingers. “What we have to do is to nail them first. With something big . . . and nasty.” He thought for a

moment. A greasy smile crossed his features. “Tell you what. We launch the virus, then implicate the little chumps with having written it. The worm delivers our payday . . . and no one believes the guilty!”

Margo stood and paced. “Launch the da Vinci?” Damn! This was supposed to be just pulling some numbers from a computer, putting those numbers into a Swiss bank account, then earning interest and pulling out raw cash over the years. “This is getting too messy!”

Plague frowned. He stood up, grabbed her arm, held it firmly. There was iron in his voice. “Look. There is no right and wrong. There’s only fun and boring. A thirty-year prison sentence sounds pretty dull to me. Who do you prefer serves it-us or them?”

She could say nothing. She had no choice. “I’m not stopping you,” she said.

The Plague sat back down. Hit a few buttons. An operating screen for the da Vinci virus appeared on the screen. A graphic menu choice stated: CANCEL and LAUNCH.

The Plague hit the LAUNCH command.

He reached back and patted himself on the back.

“I think we’ve got ‘em,” said The Plague. “Now all I have to do is make some arrangements with law enforcement.”

Margo Wallace sighed and nodded.

Well, nothing would come of it, anyway, she told herself.

And they were only hackers. Scum of the new technology. Lowest of the low. They deserved to be put away.

Further into the Night

The Plague placed a phone call the next day to Richard Gill, Secret Service agent.

“The virus goes off tomorrow, and those hackers attempted to get into our network again. Last night, one of the guards caught them snooping around our building. At this point I insist you take more strenuous action or Ellingson Mineral will hold the Secret Service responsible.”

The call was enough. It got Gill cracking. He requested arrest warrants for Kate Murphy, alias Acid Burn; Emmanuel Goldstein, alias Cereal Killer; Dade Murphy, alias Crash Override, also known as Zero Cool; and Paul Cook, alias Lord Nikon. He designated that they be picked up at nine a.m. the next day. Fortunately, Cereal had a tap on Gill’s phone. He and Nikon heard every dire word. A meeting was called. For safety’s sake, it was held in the A train, speeding up and down the length of Manhattan.

In the last car the group, newly aware of the time limit they had, sat and pored over the printouts and the trash that looked info-worthy.

Dade was taking a break, rubbing his eyes from the strain and stress he’d been experiencing. He’d been talking to Kate all day, about the way he felt about his parents, the world, his life . . . and cyberspace. He felt the need to sum things up, to make sense of it all.

“Yeah, cyberspace,” he said now to all of them. “It’s like astral projection. Sit in your room and go to Japan. It’s where our money is, where our phone conversations take place, our messages are stored, our identities are. No fuzzy edges, no emotional spill,

just pure logic. It’s a world that hasn’t been screwed up yet. And I want to plant my flag in it. I just can’t stop.”

Kate tapped him on the shoulder in a comforting way. “Look-A: You didn’t break up your parents’ marriage, they did. B: No one who’s been where we have can stop. And C: We’re all going to jail soon, so enjoy it while you can, ‘cause the way things are going, our kids won’t be able to do it. We’re the last of the free hackers.”

He digested that for a moment, then looked into her eyes. They were really deep eyes, deeper and sweeter than he’d realized anything could be. She looked into his for a moment, and there was a surprising spark of contact.

Embarrassed, vulnerable, they both looked away. Kate ruffled through her notes, then looked up at the others.

“So. How are we doing?” she asked.

“We have fifty passwords,” replied Dade. He pointed at Lord Nikon. “Plus whatever Polaroid-head over there got at Ellingson.”

“I got a lot,” said Nikon. “Don’t know how many, but my head hurts.”

Cereal was studying the pieces of a shredded printout. He had rearranged this odd puzzle.

“Guys, what’s a ‘da Vinci Virus’?” he asked.

“Huh?” was the general reply.

“Look at this,” said Cereal. “It’s a memo about how they’re gonna deal with those oil spills that happened on the fourteenth.”

“What oil spills?” asked Kate.

“Yo, burnout,” said Nikon, gently slapping Cereal’s arm. “Today’s the thirteenth.”

“This hasn’t even happened yet!” said Cereal.

Kate said, “The fourteenth? Isn’t that the same day the worm ends its run?” They all leaned over to read the memo. Then a memory stirred in Kate’s mind. “The da Vinci virus! Yeah! Didn’t Phreak say that’s what he’s being charged with?” She read from the memo, “. . . ‘infecting ballast programs of Ellingson tankers.’ They blame hackers.”

Cereal’s head bobbed with great seriousness. “Whoa. A worm and a virus. The plot thickens.”

“We’re going to need all the help we can get,” said Kate. “We’ve only got a few hours before we’re arrested. You two,” she said to Nikon and Cereal, “stay low. I’ll beep you.” She gathered up her Rollerblades, then turned to Dade. “You coming?”

The train was coming to a stop. The doors opened, revealing the concrete-bunker station-dim lights, grim signs. It was a world he hadn’t created. But maybe he could have a say in the world that was coming.

“You bet!” he said, grabbing his Rollerblades and jumping out after her.

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### Robot’s Revolt and Beyond

The robotic arm rose from the array of mechanical contraptions with a whirring noise. Dade Murphy and Kate Libby halted at the doorway of the room they’d just entered. In the dim light, they could just make out what was attached to that robotic arm.

A gun, pointed directly at them.

“Oh, I definitely don’t like this,” said Dade.

It was very late in the evening. Kate had dragged him all over New York City Creation, looking for those two weirdos on that pirate satellite station, Razor and Blade. Dade figured them to be flakes and was confused as to how they could help, but Kate had insisted they were “elite” and would be of incalculable value. She dragged him into an East Village nightclub called the Robot’s Revolt. The music had been industrial, the clothes had been weird squared, and Dade had never seen so many tattoos, scars, and bizarre primeval dances since that National Geographic special on deep-jungle New Guinea tribal

rites. However, technology had clearly had its impact on it all, and they’d also located both Razor and Blade, spiky hair and all, dancing like loony pogo sticks. The club has been noisy, smelly, and packed, though, and they’d lost them. With the help of their ‘blades, they followed the twins in the limo they’d hopped in, back to their building.

Then, of course, they'd gotten into their loft.

"What do you want?" said a challenging voice. There were the banks of monitors that were featured on the TV show. Now they held multiple images of Razor and Blade.

"Uh," said Dade. "We come in peace." -

"Look, dudes. We need your help. ... I mean, if you're up to it." Kate's voice was taunting, daring.

"She's buff, ballsy," said a voice from everywhere.

Another: "Let's keep her."

However, the pistol tracked on Dade. The trigger tightened. "But definitely waste the dude!"

"Yeah!"

A stream of water spewed from the water pistol, splattering Dade's face.

"These guys are zero-harm," Kate said to him. "Think I'd bring you here if they were? I'm on good terms with them. C'mon!"

She led them back to a bedroom, the one in the twins' show. Hyperhip though it might have been, it smelled of stale snacks and old pizza.

Lounging on the bed were Razor and Blade. They told their visitors to sit down and asked them what was going on. Kate gave the preliminaries, took a deep breath, and then unleashed the rest:

"A virus called da Vinci will cause oil spills tomorrow."

"It's somehow connected with the worm that's stealing the money," said Dade.

"We need your help to overload the Gibson," said Kate, "so we can kill the da Vinci virus and download the worm program."

One of the twins played with a spike of hair. "She's rabid, but cute," he pronounced.

"See," explained the other, "we're very busy. A TV network that wishes to remain nameless has expressed an interest in our show."

Dade, smelling a sellout, turned and started walking. "Let's go, Kate."

One of the twins shot up from his lounging position. "Wait! Nobody said no." He jumped off the bed, started pacing. A forefinger smote the air. "But you need more than just two media icons like us. You need a whole army!"

The other twin hopped from bed and threw an arm around his brother. "That's it, Razor! An electronic army! If I were us, I'd get on the Internet, send out a distress signal."

Again, the finger in the air. "Hackers of the world, unite!"



“How’re you going to take care of the cops?” Blade asked.

“Same way as with a lot of stuff in our business, gentlemen.” Dade went to a phone that looked like an old-fashioned cash register, dialed his home number.

In his bedroom, his laptop, attached to the outside phone line, answered the call and responded immediately:

0900: RUN PROGRAM, said the screen.

“It’s taken care of,” announced Dade. “I’ve just bought us a little more time.”

“Good job! We’ll need it,” said Blade. “I’m really jacked on this. Aren’t you, Razor?” “You bet. An army!” “An army needs weapons, though.” “A high-tech army needs high-tech weapons.” They high-fived and wiggled their butts together, then hurried to a closet. Dade and Kate watched, bemused, as they hauled stuff out. Razor handed Kate a stack of notebook computers, while Blade gave Dade a black Velcro headband. To this band a tiny eyepiece was attached.

Dade’s bemused expression stayed put. “It’s a Pirate Eye,” explained Blade. “It improves your reaction time. Plus, it looks cool.” “So,” said Razor. “When do we party?” “Soon,” said Dade, examining the device. “Very soon.”

Dawn of the Hackers

At eight-thirty in the morning, Cereal Killer and Lord Nikon were in Central Park playing chess on one of the boards provided there for just that purpose.

The beepers on their wide, heavy-buckled belts went off.

The message-GRAND CENTRAL: HACK THE PLANET.

Donning their backpacks, they jumped on their skateboards and cruised off toward destiny.

Secret Service agents in a black Lincoln followed closely behind. It would not be long before they would swoop in and take these guys to jail.

After leading the agents a casual chase through

sideways and byways, Cereal and Nikon met Dade and Kate at the appointed street. By now, they had plenty of Secret Service cars on their tail. Dade examined his watch. Straight-up nine A.M. was only seconds away.

Perfect.

Up ahead was one of the busiest intersections of Manhattan at the quietest times-and now it was the height of rush hour.

At nine a.m. exactly, Dade’s computer sent a message to traffic control.

The green lights at the intersection flicked on.

All the green lights.

To New York drivers, green means serious business. Streams of cars rushed out to greet the new wide-open space from all avenues, causing a mangled traffic jam of tremendous proportions. Through this merrily skated and Rollerbladed the Generals of the New Hacker Army, easily eluding the Secret Service cars that were now thoroughly jammed into place.

Bob the Secret Service Agent got out of his car and tried to use a pedestrian's skateboard to follow, but wound up with only a sore rear end for his trouble. Ray, however, raced after them, colliding with one of New York City's Finest.

Secret Service Agent Gill saw what was happening, but could do nothing about it. He got out of the back of the car he was riding in and saw the cyberbladers skate away toward a new day. Terribly frustrated, he pounded on the hood of a red Lexus that was parked by a quality hotel. The Lexus's alarm squawked in Gill's ear, adding its whoop-and-wail to the clamor of horns and shouts that accompanied this incredible traffic snarl.

The skaters and bladers whirled onto Park Avenue like the Four Roller People of the Apocalypse.

Next stop: Grand Central Station. Quickly they rolled under the ancient scrolled columns, frightening pigeons and panhandlers. Then it was down into the marble concourse, into the old and noble station. Their noise blended with the echoes in the vast space. Dade had chosen the station for a simple reason: down past the ticketing windows, beyond a couple of newsstands, was one of the largest banks of pay phones in New York City.

A good place indeed for a hacker army to make a stand!

There they nearly ran over the waiting Joey, holding a laptop and a box of disks and wearing a look of total thrill upon his face.

"You got the other laptops?" said Dade.

"Right over there. And we've got the phones all to ourselves!" said Joey.

"P.U., man," said Cereal. "What's that smell?"

"That's why we've got the place to ourselves." Joey held his nose and dragged an old derelict coat back to its derelict, along with its ten-dollar rental fee.

"Guy's sharp, all right," said Kate, making a face. "Wish he'd rented us some nose plugs, though."

"We'll send him for some Lysol from a bathroom," said Cereal. He grabbed himself a laptop, placed it on the lip of a pay phone. "Hey, we're a crew, a posse. We need a name. How 'bout the F.O.D.-the Flowerpickers of Death!"

"Free Our Data," said Nikon, selecting his own weapon.

"Fathers on Drugs," continued Cereal, checking

out his gear and booting up. "Friends of Dogs. It could depend on the day of the week."

“Sure,” said Dade, “and initiation means putting you up for a night.” He pulled out his own laptop. “Let’s jack in.”

While Ellingson supertankers cruised off the rugged coast of Japan, the balmy beaches of Southern California, and yes, even the already oily waters of New York Harbor, the Wanna-be Infamous F.O.D. lined up at the bank of pay phones, hooking up. They stacked 3.5-inch disks beside themselves like infantrymen reading extra ammo clips.

A couple of businessmen tried to angle for empty booths, but Kate waved them away. “Use ‘em if you want,” she said, “but I’ll warn you-somebody just died here!”

The businessmen wandered off to find other phones.

“All right,” said Kate. “Listen up. Use your best viruses to buy us some time. We need to get into Plague’s file so we can copy the worm, then find da Vinci and cancel it.”

“Stand by,” said Nikon. “Remember: we only get five minutes.”

A scream made him jump. They all turned to see that Cereal had been the screamer. “A little tension breaker,” he explained.

Kate looked at him with total exasperation. “Cereal, go and take care of those other phones.”

Cereal readily agreed. “But of course!” With nary an afterthought, he abandoned his post by his laptop and hurried off to his next assignment.

Joey was on his way back, nervously looking around. “Joey, take Cereal’s place,” Kate said.

“Me?” said Joey, astonished but delighted.

“Just do it.”

As Cereal skated away, holding a box, he sang out, “I’ll be your angel!” Then he was gone.

“Ready?” called Kate.

“Yep,” said Dade. “Let’s boot up.”

“Right on, brothers. Let’s put up.”

Dade pulled on the Pirate Eye the Razor/Blade boys had given him. He jacked it in. Yeah, he could perceive the screen much better with this thing. Dade Murphy, as he attached his computer into the public phone system and booted up the whirlings of his laptop computer, fancied he was some character in William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, diving into a won-drously luminous schematic of New York City, cruising through the canyons, flying through the circuitry. He could almost feel his jacked-in brain nodes reaching for that supercomputer in the Ellingson, getting ready to dive into it, headfirst!

He started typing in passwords.

It was but the work of a moment. Soon, all hell broke loose in the computer operations room of Ellingson Mineral.

The alarm sounded, tugging Eugene Belford from bed. On the way to the computer room, Margo ran into him.

“Good news?” she asked.

The Plague rolled his eyes and said nothing. Margo followed, trying to look merely like a very concerned employee.

Inside the computer room, Hal and the other sysops were typing at high speed. The Plague jumped into his stirrups and flicked on his monitor. What he got there was pure snow.

“What is it?” Margo demanded. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” said The Plague. “It’s a minor glitch.”

Hal called over to his boss, his voice barely under control. “There’s a new virus in the database.”

Another alarm went off. Words filled the large main monitor:

COOKIE COOKIE COOKIE COOKIE COOKIE COOKIE COOKIE COOKIE  
COOKIE COOKIE COOKIE

“It’s replicating,” said Hal. “Taking over memory. What do I do?”

The Plague was already doing manic typing at his machine. “Type ‘COOKIE,’ you idiot. I’ll head him off at the pass.”

A hacker had gotten in again, through a line. Which line, though? There was a virus already in the computer, but the computer was a gigantic, convoluted place and the virus could only cover so much territory in so little time. By coding in an appropriate counterprogram, The Plague could easily nullify the progress of this oncoming program.

Unfortunately for him, he did not realize that there were several channels open into the computer and that while they’d been distracted by the Cookie virus, they’d been invaded on other lines.

At Grand Central Station, the hacking invaders moved through the multitude of screens, searching for the evidence they needed in the supercomputer. They all typed furiously, staring intently into their screens, silent save for the clicking of keys against the echoing din of the railway station.

Fortunately for him, The Plague was smart enough to monitor the Ellingson network and note that other lines were opening up, viral programs

spreading. He’d already written some stuff to deal with just this kind of encroachment, and now he called it up from memory storage, then coolly observed the main monitor as he popped up a 3-D graphic of the whole system.

“We have a zero bug attacking all log-in and overlay files,” called one of the sysops.

A happy face appeared, eating zeros like Pac-Man eats dots—certainly an alien creature in the Ellingson system.

“Run antivirus!” called The Plague, the picture of calm in the midst of a storm. The 3-D graphic he’d called up illustrated the huge maze of all the Ellingson computers, with the Gibson Supercomputer at the very center of operations. Below it was a title: System Command Shell. The majority of the graphic was green, which meant it was virus-free. However, five of the sectors were red, which meant they were infected with a virus program, doing unauthorized things.

The Plague smiled. All these sectors were within easy reach of his own prepared programs. Along with those of the other sysops, this stuff should be easily contained, he felt certain.

“Die, snotweeds,” he snarled, stabbing at a key.

While the Secret Service agents, newly freed from the traffic jam, hurried on their way in search of the F.O.D., baffled secretaries in the Ellingson Building watched as Ping-Pong-ball graphics bounced around on their work screens.

In the computer room, the antiviral programs were not working quite as well as The Plague had hoped.

“A rabbit is in the administrative system,” called another sysop. “It’s maxing out all the local disks.”

“Send a flu shot!” cried The Plague.

“Rabbit? Flu shot?” said Margo Wallace. “Someone talk to me! I’m a VP here, and I want to know what’s going on!”

The Plague ignored her, but Hal answered her question. “A rabbit replicates till it overloads a file, then spreads like cancer.”

“Cancer?” said Margo. “I didn’t know that cancer was a virus!”

Abruptly, they got a visitor.

The picture of Leonardo da Vinci by way of Terry Gilliam appeared on several screens. Images of oil tankers began to pop up beside the face, then started to tilt over to one side.

“Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream.” The puppet-lined jaw of da Vinci moved up and down as the voice sang.

After studying the viral spread, The Plague hit another key, letting loose an additional already prepared program. “Gotcha!” he cried triumphantly.

At the phone bank, Kate watched as she was pushed from the Ellingson computer system and her connection was broken. “The Gibson,” she called to Dade. “It’s finding us too fast.”

Dade had gotten into the main directory and found a slew of files. Unfortunately, there were plenty of similarities among them. “There are too many Garbage Files,” he said. “I need more time.”

Kate leaned over and checked the halls. No sign of expected arrivals. “Where are the twins?” she said. “They’ve flaked out on us.”

Back at the Computer Center, things were looking up. The unleashed antiviral programs were mopping

up the spread of the virus. In the graphic

representation, the red of the virus had been pushed back to three sectors.

The Plague was wailing with glee as he typed out another small flu shot for backup. “Morons! Give it up!”

“Can’t you figure out where this is coming from?” said Margo. “Can’t you trace these hackers’ calls?”

The Plague’s eyes glittered. “It’s already been done. Agent Gill and company are on their way to nab the pack!”

As Kate Libby worked away at her laptop, the empty phone beside her rang. She picked it up.

“Razor here,” piped a voice. “Are we fashionably late?”

“Maybe too late!” Kate snapped.

“No, no. We’ve been on the ball. You did good. Lots of passwords, lots of connections. We’re in,” Blade said.

“What, you two?”

“And a few others, just for laughs!”

Kate’s heart was gladdened.

It would have been even more gladdened had she seen the extent and array and quality of these hackers: some of the world’s best.

In Venice, California, in the rosy glow of dawn, a couple of surfer bodybuilders were on the boardwalk with laptops at a pay phone, crying “Rock and roll” as they logged onto the Ellingson computer.

In Hamburg, Germany, where it was late afternoon, a trio of punk rockers were sprawled on a bed, a computer in front of their pimply faces. “Wannsinig, man!” cried one.

In Madrid, Spain, in an office at siesta time, a couple of tapa-tossing, black-clad Spaniards had just crammed their way in. “Ahora, mano!” cried one.

Across the world, hundreds of men and women of all nationalities cyberelbowed their way into the entirety of the Ellingson computer system. Their one commonality: they were of the new world communications order, with the common languages of C++ and Fortran and a dozen others. They were hackers.

The results of their expert anarchy were immediate.

As Old Man Ellingson himself, CEO Extreme, rode down his building, the elevator stopped, then jerked up and down shockingly at the selected floor. The smug smile left Ellingson’s face. What was this, an earthquake in Manhattan? He didn’t have the right insurance!

All over the building the fax machines and the computers blurted bizzare messages: FRANK ZAPPA

LIVES! FUGS OF THE WORLD UNITE! OFF OUR CYBERBACKS! VIVA REVOLUTION!

Down the hallways blared the song of all the phones ringing. Workers picked the receivers up, with no result. RINGRINGRING, continued the maddening jangle.

All over the place, lights suddenly went out, replaced by the odd red glow of emergency lights.

An ashen Elder Ellingson emerged from the elevator. He wobbled over to the nearest trash can and lost his breakfast there.

Inside the Computer Center, things were battening down for a true battle. A red light, previously unlit, spun as a Klaxon sounded.

The Plague was astonished. What was happening? He'd thought he was dealing here with a few stupidly brilliant kids! What, had they multiplied?

"We have massive infection," cried a sysop. "Multiple GPI and PSI viruses!"

"They're coming in from remote nodes!" cried another.

The Plague and Margo looked up at the 3-D graphic. There were splatters of red everywhere now. The sight was so consternating they did not notice their boss, Ellingson Senior, stumble in, gasping like a beached bass.

Hal the Sysop blended his cry into the throng. "They're going for the kernel!"

"Colonel who?" said Margo, doubtless noticing the military bunker atmosphere.

"The system command processor," returned Hal. "The brain."

"Cancer, brain. . . ." said Margo, trying to connect. "Brain cancer?"

Ellingson shook The Plague's shoulder. "Belford! What's going on?"

Plague did not miss a single keystroke in providing the answer. "In short, a multiple-hacker problem."

Hal shook his head. "Why are hackers trying to shut us down when it would kill their virus? I don't understand!"

Margo nudged The Plague.

"Yeah. Why?"

Maybe he could come up with a satisfactory lie. She certainly couldn't!

The 3-D graphic of the Ellingson computer system darkened with creeping red.

14

Grand Central Hackers

The Hacker Festival continued on the lower lobby of Grand Central Station.

Kate Libby had triple duty. She not only had to work her own keyboard and monitor all proceedings, she also had to talk to the Razor/Blade boys, who were directing the Worldwide Hacker Army.

“Razor,” she said quickly into the phone, “keep your guys on the outer systems. We’ve lost the worm. We can’t zap the Gibson before we find it.”

“Roger that,” agreed Razor eagerly, his voice squeaking with pleasure. “Everything’s connected absolutely properly.”

Cereal slid back into her view, casually grinning.

“Good work, guy,” said Kate, giving the thumbs-up sign.

Cereal held up a knife and black electrician’s tape, smiling over her approval.

In the room that was the center of the Mother of All Computer Battles, the multicolored lights were flashing like a carnival at ultraspeed. Frenetic activity upon keyboards did not seem to slow those lights down one bit.

“We have Steroid and Fu Manchu virus!” said a sysop.

“The Gibson’s operations are slowing down!” cried Hal.

Indeed, the face of Leonardo da Vinci looked as though it had gone into slow motion in contrast to the lights around it. “Rooooow, Rooooowwwwwwwww-www . . .”

The Plague stood, his DataHands forgotten. He was working with incredible speed using just his own naked hands.

Margo Wallace yelled above the din, “Can’t we just unplug our computers?”

The Plague looked as though he’d been hit by a bolt of lightning. “Ohmigod!” he cried. “The woman has a clue.” Nonetheless, he did not lift his typing fingers. “Do it!” he cried to his assistants and Margo. “Turn off computers, have the central operators disconnect phones. It’ll slow ‘em down.”

Margo raced out to obey the command.

In place by his telephone and computer, Dade Murphy worked through the various directories. Screen after screen after screen zipped by under his scrutiny.

Suddenly, he stopped.

Right in front of his nose was a file, stating: EYES ONLY: EUGENE BELFORD, COMPUTER SECURITY OFFICER.

He hit a key.

There it was:



GARBAGE. And only one to choose from!

“What the—” he gasped. “I found it.”

Quickly, he typed a command and started siphoning the thing into a disk he’d already slotted into a drive.

“Razor, Dade’s copying the worm,” said Kate into her phone.

The phone to Dade’s right rang. He picked it up with one hand, still controlling the siphoning of the Garbage File. The voice on the phone was disgustingly familiar.

“Yeah?”

“Game’s over,” said The Plague. “Last chance to get out of this without a prison sentence. You’re not good enough to beat me.”

“Maybe I’m not,” said Dade. He turned to Kate and took a moment to give her the A-OK sign as he chinned the phone. “But we are.” He hung up.

Cereal, who’d been scouting about, raced up to them. “Cops are in the building.”

The disk in Dade’s machine had already filled up. Kate zapped it out, popped in another, which proceeded to copy the rest of the Garbage program. “Almost there!” she said.

Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of bright light on Dade’s display. The screen went blank and the machine stopped copying.

“He got me,” said Dade.

“I’m there!” cried Joey. “I’m where I was before. I recognize the area.”

“Yo, Joey,” said Nikon. “Gettin’ stupid busy.”

“Joey,” said Kate. “Let Dade.”

“No,” said Dade. “Don’t interrupt him!” He stood close to Joey and said softly, “Joey, drop your virus. Get the worm for me, you’re the closest. It’s /root/.workspace/.garbage.”

Joey blinked sweat from his eyes. He was more scared than he’d ever been. He couldn’t blow it. Not this time.

Dade slid in a disk unobtrusively so as to not disturb Joey’s concentration.

Secret Service Agent Gill, who with his fellow agents and a few police had just entered Grand Central Station, pulled out his gun as he approached the bank of phones.

He raced around the side to the front of a phone, two hands on his gun, in perfect stance.

“Freeze!” he cried, pointing.

Unfortunately, however, there was only a frightened old lady and a businessman using the phones here. They raised their hands, terrified. Most of the phones here had been paired up, coupled together at handsets with black electrician's tape.

"Blast!" Gill cried. "Is there another set of phones here?"

"Yeah," said Bob. "Upstairs."

"No, downstairs," said Ray. They began arguing.

At the Ellingson Computer Room, Margo was just coming back in, exhausted by her work, when The Plague's screen flashed.

"There you are!" The Plague cried with glee. He had found Joey, who was copying the Garbage/worm file. "I'm gonna kick your butt outta there, you bet!" He hit a key. "Die!"

"They're in the kernal!" cried Hal.

The Plague swiveled to look at the 3-D graphic of his computer. It was almost completely covered with red now-and then it changed. The graphic was completely wiped, and in its place was the message: BUILD ME A MATE!

The Plague unleashed another antiviral program, but it was too late.

I'M HUNGRY, said the main monitor. INSERT HAMBURGER INTO DRIVE.

"What does it mean?" the baffled Ellingson wanted to know.

"There's a viral blockade around the kernel," explained Hal. "We're locked out."

ARF! ARF! said the main monitor. WE GOTCHA!

On Joey's screen in Grand Central Station flashed the welcome words: COPY IS COMPLETED. Joey fell back, exhausted. Kate grabbed the final disk. Dade typed a message to The Plague with one hand, grabbed the hot line to Razor with his other, placed it against his mouth.

"Kill the kernel!" he cried.

"Kill! Banzai! Banzai!" cried Razor.

The message was transmitted quickly all over the world. The Hacker Army sent a final onslaught of viruses and auto instructions through the lines into the Gibson Supercomputer.

Dade's message zapped onto The Plague's screen: MESS WITH THE BEST, DIE LIKE THE REST.

The Plague gritted his teeth, smiling like a corpse. "Little jerk," he whispered harshly.

Hacker slogans and handles started pelting the monitor, filling it up, dominating it with cyber-graffiti. The da Vinci virus was eaten up totally. No tankers would tilt today, no oil would spill. As for da Vinci himself-the picture's eyes were wobbling, the jaw wagging, as he slowly oozed to the bottom of his

screen. “Helllllp meeeeeeeeeee,” he cried, becoming phosphor-dot sludge.

The lights in the Ellingson Computer Room shuddered, then went off, steeping the room in darkness.

In the lower lobby of Grand Central Station, Kate Libby was hugging Dade Murphy. “We did it!” she whooped. Alas, the hug was all too brief for Dade’s taste. “Let’s get out of here,” she said. There was certainly wisdom in the woman’s words, Dade knew- after all, The Plague had promised that Gill and company were coming their way.

They started packing up quickly, untangling their gear.

Secret Service Agent Richard Gill, however, had determined that since the hackers were not in the first-level lobby, nor on the second level (they’d checked), they must be in the lower lobby. And that was indeed where they found them.

“Freeze,” cried Gill, gun up.

Kate and the others lifted their hands into the air; Dade did not. Plenty of guns, plenty of agents, plenty of frustration. Dade had the disks containing the full Garbage File in his hands. He backed up, banged into the trash can. Pushed open the lid and dropped the disks into the trash.

“Okay,” said Gill. “Spread ‘em!” To his fellow officers, he said, “Get out the cuffs.”

Dade had been through this before. Nonetheless, he again felt the fear, the helplessness, the outrage, again felt himself freezing up, reacting to the power displayed by these men in suits of authority. He determined to fight it off-there were things he had to do. He had to retain his courage, his power, despite all the reactions this experience was unearthing in him.

He had to get the message out-but how?

As the busted F.O.D. were being dragged outside toward the police cruisers, bubble-tops flashing, Dade saw his chance. A crowd had gathered to watch the sight of kids being hauled away. In that crowd was Cereal Killer, munching a granola bar, looking totally bemused by the whole business. If he could get the message to Cereal, Dade thought.. .

He started struggling melodramatically, then yelled at the crowd at the top of his lungs. “They’re trashing our civil rights!” he cried. “They’re trashing the flow of data! They’re trashing, uh . . . trashing . . . trash . . .”

A car door opened and Dade was stuffed into the back of the cruiser. He managed one more cry before they closed the door on him. “Hack the planet!” he cried. “Hack the planet!”

Some of the crowd cheered, despite the fact that they probably had no idea what Dade was saying. But this was, after all, New York City.

Secret Service Agent Richard Gill, his Joe Friday aplomb now fully recovered, whipped open his cellular phone and dialed The Plague’s number.

“We caught them red-handed,” he told the computer security officer as the police cars toted the hackers away. “I don’t think you’ll have any more trouble with them.”

This was good news, naturally, to those at Ellingson Mineral, as they tried to get things back on-line at the business. However, it was particularly good news to Margo Wallace and Eugene “The Plague” Belford.

It meant that the threat to them was over. They’d

won. The worm could nibble away at Ellingson Mineral Corporation’s money now, and they’d soon be very rich indeed, and remain very free.

Upon hearing the news, The Plague kissed Margo’s hand, leering. She actually enjoyed it.

At Grand Central Station, however, Cereal Killer wandered the halls, not enjoying himself, confused. Dade Murphy had been looking straight at him, wiggling his eyebrows significantly, when he’d started spouting that nonsense about trashing.

Thinking, thinking, thinking, Cereal was wandering by the phone bank when he decided to toss his granola bar wrapper. He pushed the trash can lid open, let go. ... Trashing . . . trash . . . Trash! That was it!

Inside the trash can, he found two computer disks. “Cool!” said Cereal.

Interrogation

It was all coming back to him now, all the Secret Service stuff. The mean grimness of it, the no-nonsense offices, the implied threats in every movement the dark-suited people made.

Dade, however, was surprised that the fear was disappearing. Instead, what he felt was defiance. He knew what he’d done was right. He knew that they’d killed that virus, saving lots of environment and maybe even ruining the plans of that Dark Side hacker thug The Plague. Somehow, knowing this, feeling moral about the whole thing, not only made him feel less than frightened-it made him feel noble, gave him a sense of himself.

For Kate, defiance appeared easy. She seemed the type, indeed, who would happily get arrested at an anti-fur rally.

Still, with this feeling of self-discovery giving him iron in the spirit, he began to feel protective of her.

“Okay, kiddos. Who’s going to spill everything I need to hear first?” said Gill, hovering over them, glowering.

“Me,” said Dade. He pointed at Kate. “She knows nothing about computers. She’s just my girlfriend.”

Kate got a perplexed look on her face. “Huh?”

“Okay, then, Mr. Computer Expert. Tell me what F.O.D. means,” demanded Gill.

“Freak out Dude!” snarled Dade.

Gill stuck his face into Dade’s. He’d had onions for breakfast. “I’d suggest you modify your attitude, chum.”

Snarling, the man left. Dade shot a look at the intercom sitting on the desk. Was the place bugged? Kate seemed to think so, because she whispered when she spoke to him.

“Are you crazy?” she asked. “What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to help you.”

There was a long pause as Kate considered how much Dade was sacrificing to save her. With his previous record, she knew the law was going to come down hard on him. Finally, she spoke up.

“Dade?”

“What?”

“Thanks for your help.”

Gill reentered, dark suit coat flapping. In his hand was the clear laptop The Plague had given him- busted up now, of course, thanks to Dade’s disgust. He placed it on the desk right near Dade.

“The original program for the da Vinci virus is encrypted in your laptop’s hard drive. Care to explain that?”

“That guy ... Belford . . . The Plague. He gave it to me.”

“Not according to your mother’s credit card receipt.” He thrust a piece of paper in Dade’s face. “Isn’t that your handwriting?”

Oh geez. . . . The Plague must have gotten his signature when he’d signed that thing the UPS man had given him to accept the package! UPS. Yeah, right. He turned to Kate as if to say, “Would you just tattoo ‘sucker’ on my forehead?”

The intercom buzzed. “Sir,” it announced. “We have a Mrs. Murphy to see you.”

Gill grabbed the laptop, shot the two kids a “Don’t move a muscle,” look, and then was gone.

“I’d like to hear this,” said Dade. He went over and switched the intercom on.

He recognized the voice of his mother as she introduced herself. The reply was gravel-voiced: “You son is in big trouble. He has violated his probation and he has engaged in criminal activity.”

“My son happens to be a genius,” said Lauren Murphy. “He understands something happening today that you won’t comprehend if you live to be a hundred, and he would never use what he knows to harm a living soul.”

Dade heard another voice enter the conversation, and recognized the agent called Bob. “The news crew you requested is here, sir.” “

“Good,” said Lauren Murphy. “I have a few things to tell them.”

“Your son is facing thirty felony counts in an ongoing investigation,” said Gill. “You face possible arrest if you do that.”

Lauren's voice snapped back, "Mister, I don't care if I face certain death!"

"We better have Mrs. Murphy wait here, Bob," said Gill.

Kate's eyes were wide. "Wow! She's great!"

Dade nodded, surprised. "Yeah."

Yes indeed. She certainly was. There was more inside both of them, he realized, than he'd ever imagined.

"Hey, guy, look," said Kate, peering out the window. "We're at the happening place all right."

They both looked out the window. Below was an ABC-TV news van, its microwave antenna unfurling from its roof and focusing upward.

"And to think my dark little secret desire is that one day I would be newsworthy," said Kate.

"Welcome to the club," said Dade.

We Regret to Interrupt . . .

Across the screens of TVs throughout New York, the midday newscast had a special interview with a Secret Service agent named Richard Gill.

"These hackers apparently attacked the Ellingson computer network," said the reporter. "Is this the last we've seen of this type of high-tech espionage?"

"I'm afraid not," said Richard Gill, looking grimly professional. "Hackers are a grave threat to our national security. This incident proves beyond a doubt we need increased funding to--"

The video monitor beside the technicians, echoing the broadcast that was originating live on the premises, frizzled with static. Straightened into a figure of a long-haired youth holding a pair of 3.5-inch disks in his hands.

Richard Gill recognized him. It was Emmanuel Whatshisname-aka Cereal Killer.

"Hola, boys and girls!"

"Get that clown off!" cried Gill.

"I can't," said the technician. "He's coming from someplace else."

"I come," said Cereal, "to tell you about a heinous scheme hatched from within Ellingson Mineral. For what, you ask? World domination? Nay, something far more tacky!"

Gill stared with horror at the broadcast.

Without a doubt, this was turning into the worst day of his life!

There's No Business Like. . . .

High up above the Earth, between a universe crammed with stars and a planet white with whipped clouds and blue-brown with ocean and land masses, a communications satellite fired a thruster, repositioning its antenna to a new position.

Through one of its channels beamed the image and the voice of the hacker known as Cereal Killer, courtesy of the wealthy technopirates Razor and Blade. The image waved the disks it held, and the voice told of a nasty plot:

"... a virus called da Vinci that would cause Ellingson's tankers to capsize would be blamed on innocent hackers."

All across New York City and its environs, this odd live drama was broadcast. In bars, in malls, in electronics stores, the slightly dazed but happy expression of Cereal Killer peered out like a refugee from the sixties, newly stumbled out of a time machine. Then the face became a virus-a computer

virus, written in a language that may as well have been hieroglyphics to most.

"The virus was just a smoke screen, however. But for what? Could it have been to cover the tracks of this worm program?"

In Times Square, passersby looked up and gawked as the complex code for the Garbage program flashed over the giant screen. Then Cereal's huge visage reappeared.

"A worm," continued Cereal, "that was to steal twenty-five million dollars. The passwords to this hungry little sucker belong to Margo Wallace, head of public relations for Ellingson, and Eugene Belford, the corporation's computer security officer. Ah . . . what's this?" Different sorts of numbers and letters flashed. "The encrypted account in the Bahamas where the money was to be stashed!"

In her bed, Margo Wallace sat, watching with horror as her future riches went down the drain. She and The Plague had taken a "lunch break" to celebrate their victory. They'd been watching TV to see what was becoming of their foes. She stared, stunned, as she watched those foes turn the tables. For a very long time she could only gape at the TV screen, unable to turn or even to speak. Finally she managed to say something. "Oh my God. Plague?"

She turned. The bed was empty now but for her.

"Eugene."

Eugene, however, was gone.

On the TV screen, a camera pulled back to reveal Cereal Killer cavorting in the makeshift studio of Razor and Blade's bedroom.

A little later in the day, after the story spread by the specter on the afternoon TV screens was checked out and found to be true, Dade Murphy and Kate Libby were released.

Lauren was waiting outside for them.

Dade wasn't sure what to do. He felt, in a real way, that he'd betrayed her. One of the conditions of his having gotten that computer was that he wouldn't cause any more trouble. True, this was all for a good cause. But it was still trouble, and big trouble at that.

"Mom, uh . . . I'm sorry," he choked out. "What I mean is . . ."

She just smiled and hugged him. Her acceptance felt really good, in a way he hadn't realized that he'd yearned to feel. Emotion clogged his throat, and there were tears in his eyes.

Kate looked on, smiling.

Alas, some hours later, a certain ex-public relations vice president named Margo Wallace was not smiling. She was standing in a federal detention center, wearing handcuffs as information about her was typed into a computer.

"Get me a cup of coffee," she said, feeling tired and drained as she stared at the computer, feeling total loathing for this machine and every machine like it in the universe.

The officer typing her in looked up at her over his half-frames. "Lady, what do you think I am . . . your executive assistant?"

He snarled and went back to work.

Elsewhere, a great deal higher up, in the first-class compartment of a British Airways flight, a man in sunglasses and a spangled cowboy hat and shirt, and looking like a skinnier version of Garth Brooks, received his first glass of champagne from an attractive stewardess.

"We should be landing in Tokyo in about fourteen hours, Mr. O'Reilly. Can I get you anything else?"

He took off his glasses to get a better look at his new friend. They weren't the kind of glasses that Eugene "The Plague" Belford was exactly used to. "No, thank you, darlin'." He smiled and sipped at the cool, tart champagne. "Uh ... on second thought, ma'am . . . Could I have another pillow?"

He got one and took a little nap, his plane soaring out of the country, and as the Plague slept, he dreamt of a land without borders, where he was still a player. A land where soon, he knew, he would get revenge on certain hackers.

Things were still, after all, a lot of fun on the Dark Side of the Force!

Cyberdelia and Beyond

Look out, Algonquin Round Table, thought Dade Murphy as he sat on the glossy vinyl couch at the Cyberdelia, surrounded by his buddies, sodas and coffee and junk food sitting in front of them. Here's the F.O.D.

Friends of Dade!

"So what'd they slap you with, Kate?" a newly self-confident Joey asked.



“Two hundred hours of community service,” said Kate. She was sitting right by Dade, and he liked it.

“Me too,” said Joey. “But I’m happy.” He pulled out a snazzy-looking laptop. “Meet Mindy!”

Cereal put his wedge of pizza down. “Joey, you get a handle yet?”

Joey grinned significantly at Dade. “Yeah. I got one handed down to me. Zero Cool.”

Cereal nodded. “That’ll work.”

Sitting by Phantom Phreak was a beautiful young woman with long lashes and a killer smile who spoke with him in Spanish. Kate leaned over and asked him, “Is this your girl from Venezuela?” Phreak nodded.

“Who paid for her flight?” Kate asked.

“Frequent-flier miles.” Phreak shrugged eloquently. “I can’t help it. Airline computers are so choice.”

Nikon knocked back a hit of espresso. “You guys apply for college on time?”

“Mertz got me a late application,” said Dade.

“Nah, man,” said Cereal. “I never made it to the S.A.T.”

“Oh, I forgot.” Kate pulled a letter from the inside of her jacket, handed it to Cereal.

“What’s this?”

“Your S.A.T. You scored 1540.”

Dade untucked another letter from a book. “Also, in appreciation of your excellence in trash diving, you’ve been accepted to Harvard.”

Nikon had a bigger envelope. “Or if not. . . here’s a degree. You graduated with honors.”

“Thanks,” said Cereal, clearly underwhelmed with emotion. “I don’t know what to say, except, uh, what did I major in?”

“What else,” said Dade. “Communications.”

Date Night

Kate Libby was in her apartment getting ready for the date she’d promised to Dade, when her mother called to her in her bedroom.

“Kate, Curtis is on the phone for you.”

“Tell him I have nothing to say,” said Kate.

Ruth Libby returned the phone to the side of her head. “I’m sorry, Curtis, she says she has nothing to say.”

“Tell him he’s a narcissistic jerk who only looks deep into my eyes to see his own reflection.”

Ruth Libby spoke into the telephone receiver. “Kate thinks your insecurity about your appearance has given you an intimacy problem.”

“Touche, Mom. Touche!”

They high-fived.

The Date

They walked together near Central Park. Dusk had just fallen and the streetlights hung in the tree branches like fairy jewelry. New York City had a summery magic now, and the park still smelled of flowers and grass, with just a suggestion of the coming cool of fall.

Dade was enjoying himself immensely, walking with this absolutely drop-dead-brilliant girl who just happened to be beautiful in the bargain.

“You look good in a dress,” he said.

“You would have looked even better.”

He took in the smells and sights of the city street. He listened to the traffic, then checked his watch.

Yes. Pretty soon his computer, linked up to its line per usual, would set the program into action.

“Say,” he said. “You want to go for a swim?”

“A swim? Where?”

“A pool on a roof.”

Dade sprang for a cab, and they were there in a shot. It was just as Blade had described it: an oasis of shimmering green on a rooftop-pool, complete with lawn chairs, umbrellas-and a lovely inflatable raft for two.

“Shall we?” said Dade, gesturing to the raft.

“We shall,” returned Kate.

Together, fully clothed, they launched themselves out into the water. It was wonderful, floating and rotating against green iridescence, gazing up at the dim starlight, looking over the lights of the cityscape.

“I can’t believe they decided you won,” said Kate finally, after a delicious silence.

“I didn’t,” said Dade. “The guys felt it was the only way I’d get a date. Anyway, you’re pretty good. In fact, you’re . . . elite.”

She looked at him with amusement, the lights glistened in her eyes.

“Yeah? You know, if you would have said so at the start, you would have saved yourself a lot of trouble.”

He checked his watch.

Ten . . . nine . . . eight. . . seven . . . six ....

“Say, Kate. Take a look over there.”

He pointed. She looked.

It was a huge office building, with many, many windows, most of them dark now.

. . . three . . . two . . . one . . .

Now, though, the building’s few lights were being rearranged, like something on a silent pinball machine.

They finally settled into a pattern ...

... A pattern spelling out in lit windows:

CRASH + BURN.

The result of a little amusing computer-controlled hacking last night.

She looked at him, smiling approvingly.

“You know,” said Dade, putting his arms around her. “I’ve been having these weird . . .”

“Dreams,” said Kate.

They embraced, they kissed, and they rolled off the raft into the water. Dade barely noticed. It was the best kiss he’d ever had, or ever even dreamed of. It was better . . . better ...

Even better than hacking.

The term [hacking] can signify the free-wheeling intellectual exploration of the highest and deepest potential of computer systems. Hacking can describe the determination of access to computers and information as free and open as possible. Hacking can involve the heartfelt conviction that beauty can be found in computers, that the fine aesthetic in a perfect program can liberate the mind and spirit. . . .

. . . given that electronics and telecommunications are still largely unexplored territories, there is simply no telling what hackers might uncover.

For some people, this freedom is the very breath of oxygen, the inventive spontaneity that makes life worth living and that flings open doors to marvelous possibility and individual empowerment. But for many people-and increasingly so-the hacker is an ominous figure, a smart-aleck sociopath ready to burst out of his basement wilderness and savage other people’s lives for his own anarchical convenience.

Any form of power without responsibility, without direct and formal checks and balances, is frightening to people-and reasonably so.

Bruce Sterling, The Hacker Crackdown

If you don't want it known, don't use the phone. -Nelson Rockefeller