

Broken Music

by

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BROKEN MUSIC

Chapter One:

New Music

Gabe Wagner had his fingers jammed tightly in his ears. From the two huge loudspeakers in the corners of his garage studio, a roaring, high-pitched sound filled the room. The windows were rattling, and the table that held his computer and electric keyboard shook as though an earthquake had struck. Gabe staggered toward the volume control on his amplifier. But as soon as he took one hand away from his ear to turn it down, the racket, howling like a crowd of hysterical people mixed with the growling of a hundred angry lions, battered his ear and forced him to cover it up again. Finally he bent down, grabbed the off-on switch with his teeth, and pulled the switch down. The horrendous sound went down fighting. The amplifier gave out sputtering and grunting sounds before it finally faded into silence. At last, Gabe took his fingers out of his ears.

The garage door opened.

“Wow, Gabe! Did you do that just to greet me?” asked the cheerful girl who entered the room. “Next time, just a sweet serenade of a flute or two will do.”

A few seconds ago, Gabe was seriously thinking about kicking his computer out of sheer spite. Why, oh why, did that blasted music software program always go berserk when he was across the room and couldn't reach the volume control? But the sight of his visitor made him smile.

“Why Lena, don't you know I always think you're worth the biggest sound I can make?” he asked. Gabe was tall, with long blond hair tied back in a pony-tail. He wore faded blue-jeans and a t-shirt showing J.S. Bach, wearing old-fashioned clothes and a wig, jamming away on a high-tech

synthesizer.

Lena McLaughlin laughed. She was short and wiry, with tight blond curls that bounced across her forehead when she walked. Lena was small, but she took martial arts lessons, and could handle herself against anybody, male or female, who tried to push her around. Lena and Gabe were both members of the Pentegram computer club. In fact, she was the one who gave the group its name. All the Pentegram Club members were computer wizards, and each of them had a specialty. Gabe's was music. Lena specialized in fractal geometry — abstract pictures that looked like swirling kaleidoscope designs. She like to make up fractals, look at them, zoom down inside them, and even print them onto fabrics. Just then, she was wearing an eye-popping fractal jacket made mostly of spiraling green palm fronds and jagged purple lightning bolts.

Lena walked up to the the computer screen and looked. "I haven't seen this program before. Is it new?"

Gabe gave the computer screen a disgusted look. "Yeah, it's called Music Monster. It's new, all right, but full of bugs as a roach hotel. Mr. Yea got me a beta-version of this new music software from Electronic Crafts, a software firm in Silicon Valley. Actually, I'm a beta-tester" — here Gabe gave a mock-serious look of "I'm important," breathed on his fingernails, and polished them on his shirt — "and they're paying me to find the bugs and make suggestions. They're getting their money's worth,too. I bet this thing has crashed ten times in the last hour."

"Have you gotten to make any music at all on it," asked Lena, "or does it always crash before you can save it to disk?"

"No, I've managed to save one piece. Want to hear it?" asked Gabe.

“Sure,” Lena replied with a smile. She pulled up a big empty wooden box and perched on the edge with her hands folded. “I’m ready for my concert.”

“Here we go,” said Gabe, putting in a disk and opening up the music program. “No guarantees, though. This worked yesterday, but it may only be mashed potatoes today.”

“Think positively” said Lena, putting a hand on Gabe’s shoulder. “Maybe you’ve just composed the world’s first and finest masterpiece of computer music.”

The disk drive whirred. “Wouldn’t it have been a shame if Bach had put all of his stuff on computer, then it crashed and wiped out everything?” said Gabe. “Anyway, I’m no Bach or John Lennon. I’m just hey, all right! Here it is! The blasted program actually loaded my piece into memory. Now let me fix up the MIDI connections so it can play through my synthesizer” — he turned on the amplifier again and made some adjustments on his keyboard control panel — “and.....and.... we’re off!”

First came a deep, low purring sound, like a whole section of string basses playing as low as they could go. Then slowly came waving, pulsing sound like an electric guitar rapidly speeding up and down the scales. For a while, the two sounds played against each other, like wind blowing over ocean waves. Then a single clear trumpet sound sailed over the top, playing a clean, pure melody. The bass sound began to thrum in rhythm, and the guitar, too, fell in with the beat. For a minute, the three sounds rose steadily toward a single climax, then declined into silence. Just as the three voices were about to fade away entirely, a harp-sound seemed to echo from far away.

Then it exploded.

The lovely notes of the harp turned nasty and loud, and began to whine at top volume like a giant chain saw gone berserk. The screeching filled the room as Gabe dived for the amplifier. Lena covered her ears with both hands. But she was laughing.

Gabe got the amplifier turned off before the sound reached the ear-splitting level it had before.

Gabe started to swear, but remembered that Lena was in the room. When he saw her laughing, he got mad.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

Lena suddenly stopped laughing. She realized that she might be hurting Gabe's feelings, so she said, "I'm sorry, Gabe. I shouldn't have laughed. The first part was really beautiful. I mean it. The sounds you were getting and the melody line were some of the best music I've heard you make. It's a shame that the program went crazy."

Gabe smiled. "You really liked it — the first part, I mean?"

"Absolutely. You've really got a talent, Gabriel Wagner. But you've got to stop composing serious music on beta software. There's just too much risk that the program will crash and destroy what you've done."

Gabe looked at the computer screen. It read:

**Software error.
Please reboot.**

“You’re absolutely right, Lena,” Gabe agreed with a sigh. I should stick to my Music Maker program for serious composing, and just fool around with this Music Monster disaster” — he held up the guilty disk — “but, you know, it’s hard. You get a program up and running, then you get really involved with making music and forget that you’re just beta-testing. Then before you know it, the whole thing has gone up in smoke and you’ve lost an hour’s worth of good work.”

“You know, Gabe,” said Lena, “the music I heard you making just now reminded me of some other stuff I’ve been hearing recently. I can’t think of the name of the group, though.”

Gabe finished shutting down his computer and the synthesizer. Then he turned to Lena and said, “I bet I know who it is: Pacific Ocean.”

“That’s it!” shouted Lena. “That’s just who it sounds like. Only your stuff sounds better.”

Gabe smiled, “Hey, that’s really nice of you to say that, Lena. But the fact is, I do owe a lot of my style these days to Pacific Ocean. I think I’m doing something different, but I’m still pretty heavily influenced by their sound concepts.”

“Aren’t they playing around town somewhere this week?” asked Lena.

“Yeah, over at the Scott Street West. Uh, by the way, Lena, you wouldn’t like to... that is, you wouldn’t be able..., what I mean is....” Gabe stuttered.

Lena jumped off the wooden box. “Gabe Wagner, are you asking me for a date?”

“Well, uh... well, not exactly. I mean, I’m going to the Pacific Ocean concert tonight. And if you want to go, we could go together,” said Gabe,

turning slightly red in the face.

"Oh, I see," Lena replied. "You're not asking for a date. You just want us to go to the concert together."

Gabe brightened. "Right, right, that's it! Well, how about it?"

"Sure, I'd love to. Want to go by ourselves, or should we see if Dev or Dave and Marly want to come?" asked Lena.

"Hmmm... either way," Gabe replied. Actually, he was hoping that he and Lena might go together by themselves. But he couldn't think of any reason not to invite their friends.

"Tell you what," said Lena, heading for the door, "you call the Chan twins and I'll call up Dev. We'll all meet at Village Pizza at what time?"

"The concert starts at 9:00, but we'd better get there plenty early if we want good places. How about Village Pizza at 8:00?"

"See you at eight, and don't be late, date!" shouted Lena as she left the garage.

"Date?" thought Gabe. I've got a real live date with Lena McLaughlin. He shouted back, "Great!"

Gabe went back to his computer, turned it on, loaded in his Music Maker program, and started to enter in notes. He was whistling all the time he worked at the computer. To the trumpet sound he added the synthesized voice which sang:

The words are right, the sound is strong.

This is the beginning of our song!

* * * * *

At eight o'clock sharp, Gabe strolled in through the doors of Village Pizza. It was Saturday night, and the place was packed, as always. Gabe saw Dumb Don Dackles trying to buy beer with a phony I.D. card, and the woman behind the counter was just laughing at him. At the Battle for Lexis videogame, Destroyer Diggs was plowing through the bad guys while a crowd of on-lookers applauded every time he pulled off some especially slick move. Gabe waved to the people he knew, then slid down into the one empty booth. He draped his jacket over the booth seat, then went up and ordered two cokes. He sat back down, and sipped his drink slowly. Ten minutes later, Lena McLaughlin came through the door.

Gabe's mouth came open. He had seen some spectacular fractal jackets on Lena before, but this one was the all-time prizewinner. Every color of the rainbow was there, and some Gabe didn't think were possible. Purple and oranges and reds swirled and branched and forked in hypnotic patterns across the front of the jacket, onto the arms, and down to the sleeves. Lena came over and turned around so he could see the back. The other side of the jacket was, if anything, even more mind-boggling than the front. It looked like cactus plants flowing and melting in front of a multi-colored sun and three kaleidoscope moons.

"Lena, you've got to teach me to make those jackets," said Gabe in admiration. "In fact, you should patent them and sell them to some company. You'd make a fortune."

"So you like my jacket, but not the rest of me?" demanded Lena. "And I thought you asked me out because of my wonderful personality. Now it

turns out you only like me for my jackets." Lena made a make-believe pout and turned away.

"No, no," protested Gabe. "The rest of you is just as spectacular. What I mean is, I like you for... Now blast it, Lena, you're just getting me all confused."

Lena smiled. "Boys are so easy to confuse. Say, I called up Dev. He was home, but he said he was busy tonight and couldn't come."

"I called the Chans, but I couldn't reach them," said Gabe. Actually, he had called once and gotten a busy signal. Since he really wanted to go to the concert with Lena alone, he didn't try calling back. But he could honestly say he had tried calling Dave and Marly Chan.

"I should have remembered to tell you," said Lena. "Dave and Marly are going out with their family tonight. They couldn't have come anyway. But Dev... You know, Gabe, we haven't seen much of our old buddy, Devin Orion, lately."

Gabe finished off the last of his coke. "You're right, Lena. I think ... Oh, I forgot: this coke's for you." Gabe shoved over the drink to Lena, who smiled, and took a sip. "Ever since that big mystery with the demon on his computer screen, we haven't seen much of him."

"You're right," said Lena. "In fact, I wondered if he really told us the whole story about that incident. Seems to me like there's still a mystery there."

"I'm sure there is," Gabe agreed, "but I'm also sure that Dev won't tell us about it until he's good and ready. Want to take off for the concert now?"

"I'm ready whenever you are," Lena replied. They both slid out of the booth seats, worked their way through the crowds, and out into the street.

Pacific Ocean was one of those music groups that was right on the verge of making it big. They had played around town for about three years, then released a tape. The tape played on some of the local radio stations, and sold some copies at music stores. Recently, Gabe had heard, a big record company approached them about cutting a compact disc. The concert tonight was supposed to be a kind of warm-up for the disc recording session. There was even a rumor that if the concert went well tonight, some of the session would go direct to the disc.

"Maybe that's why there are so many people here," said Lena as they rounded the corner and headed toward Scott Street West, the biggest concert hall for pop music in the area. It had started up in the 1970s, right after the whole acid rock craze was starting to die down. The hall went broke, stayed empty for about ten years, then was opened up a couple of years ago by some big money people from New York. Now, every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights it drew big crowds to hear the music. On Wednesday nights it was open for local bands to try out. The crowds weren't very big for the Wednesday night shows; but the admission was only five dollars, and if you were lucky, you could hear some great music.

Tonight, the Pacific Ocean fans were out in force. "I never knew that Pacific Ocean had so many followers," said Gabe, sounding a little disappointed. "I thought I was one of the very few fans who really listened to their music."

Lena patted Gabe on the shoulder. "Looks like your small fan club grew up pretty fast, Gabe. There must be over a thousand people here."

“Closer to 2,000, I bet,” said Gabe as he and Lena got into line. It would take at least half an hour to get to the ticket counter, Gabe estimated. “I hope you don’t mind the long line, Lena.”

“Not if I’ve got someone good to talk to,” she said with a smile.

Gabe couldn’t think of anything to say. Just a minute ago, it seemed like there were a thousand things he wanted to talk to Lena about. Now he couldn’t remember. Was it something to do with Devin? The Chans? Izumi in Tokyo or Ngiao in Togo — two of their computer network friends? His mind raced.

Just then, there was a commotion in the line about ten feet in front of them. Someone yelled, then someone else yelled back. The first yeller then snarled something, and there was the sound of scuffling. Several people broke out of line to see what was going on. Two men in uniform raced up from the ticket window — security guards. Gabe and Lena saw them dive into the mass of bodies, then emerge with two high school age boys. One of them had a cut lip, and the other one’s right cheekbone showed swelling just below the eye.

The security guards acted quickly. “All right,” said the biggest guard, pulling one of the boys by the collar. “You’re out of here. Go away, now, and don’t come back tonight.”

The second guard thrust away the other boy. “Don’t ever come back unless you know how to act. If you start fighting like that inside the hall, we’ll sit on you til the cops come. “

The two fighters looked subdued now. One of them walked away down the street away from the hall, wiping at his cut lip. The other boy stayed behind.

“That guy started it,” said the boy with the swollen cheek. “I was just standing here and...”

He didn’t finish. The security guard gave him a violent shove, and sent the boy sprawling into the street. The boy got up, looked like he might try to fight it out with the guards, then thought the better of it.

“You guys are real tough, aren’t you?” The boy spat out the words as he backed down the street.

“A lot tougher than you, sonny boy,” said the first guard. “Now beat it.”

“Before you get beat,” said the second guard.

The first guard laughed at his buddy’s words. “Right, before you get beat,” he echoed.

Gabe looked at Lena. “Bad scene.”

Lena nodded her head. “I hope that’s not a bad omen for the concert.”

The crowd began to break up and drift back into line. Three big teenagers wearing motorcycle jackets got into line in front of Gabe and Lena.

“Hey,” Gabe whispered to Lena. “Were these guys in front of us a moment ago?”

“No, they weren’t,” replied Lena. “They just butted in.” She tapped one of the line-crashers on the shoulder. “Pardon me, but I think you must have gotten back into line at the wrong place.”

Gabe froze. These bozos weren’t going to like being scolded for butting into line. But it was too late. All three turned around to look at Lena.

And they were all bigger than Lena and Gabe. The fat one on the end looked bigger than Lena and Gabe put together.

“What’d you say?” asked the boy whom Lena had tapped on the shoulder.

Lena looked up at the crasher. He was thin, with a pimpled face and greasy hair straggling down onto his shoulders. He wore a black leather jacket, dirty jeans, and motorcycle boots. A chrome chain hung down from his front pocket in a loop, and disappeared into his back pocket.

“I said, I think you got back into the line at the wrong place,” said Lena, looking the boy in the face without flinching.

The other two boys were watching their friend and Lena with smiles on their faces. The middle one leaned over and whispered something into the fat boy’s ear. They both laughed.

The skinny boy curled his lip, spat on the sidewalk close to Lena, and said, “You trying to say we butted into line, girlie?”

“Did you?” Lena answered.

“Yeah, we did. What are you going to do about it, blondie?” said the boy with a mean smile.

Gabe stepped around to Lena’s side. “Just...” he started to say, but Lena put out her hand and held him back.

“I’m going to ask you to go to the end of the line, like you should,” Lena replied in a level tone of voice.

The skinny boy barked out a laugh, then turned to his companions. “Hear that, guys? The little lady wants us to be polite and go to the end of the line.” The he turned back to Lena. “And just who’s going to make us do that, curly girlie?”

Without replying, Lena moved with the speed of a cat. She hooked her foot behind the boys leg at the knee, and pulled forward. The boy’s leg

buckled, and as he lurched forward, his arms flew up. Lena grabbed one arm with both hands, then slipped around behind the boy, keeping his elbow pointed straight up as she exerted gentle but firm pressure holding it back. The boy sagged to his knees and struggled futilely to break the hold.

"I'm asking you politely," said Lena. "Won't you please go to the end of the line where you're supposed to?"

The fat boy started to move forward to grab Lena from behind. Gabe stepped forward — but the fat boy stopped in his tracks. Two large arms encircled the other two boys' necks. A big man with dark skin held them firmly in place. In a calm voice he said, "I think maybe you children had better go play with some other toys tonight." To Lena he said, "Better let him go, young lady. I think he wants to leave with his friends." The man released the two boys, who lurched out of the line holding their throats. The skinny boy got up and bolted down the street. The other two followed after him more slowly. The crowd in line gave the victors a burst of applause.

Gabe put his arm around Lena's shoulder. "With you around, who needs security guards?" he laughed. Then he extended his hand to the man who had subdued the other two boys. "Thanks, mister. You probably saved us all from a major-league hassle."

The man shook his hand, then shook Lena's hand. "From the way this young lady handled herself, you may not have needed me. But I'm glad we got this settled before those guards came out again. They might not have let any of us into the concert."

"You're right," said Lena. "I sure hope this music is worth the hassle. By the way, I'm Lena McLaughlin, and this is my good friend Gabe Wagner."

“And my name,” said the man, “is Rodger English. My friend here — ” he pointed to a tall woman with long black hair and deep-bronzed skin “is Ellen Blackhawk. Now if you’ll excuse us, we were in the middle of an important discussion before those three line-crashers butted in.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Gabe. “I hope we meet again.”

“I have a feeling we might,” said English, and turned back to his conversation with the woman at his side.

“That was a strange reply,” Gabe whispered to Lena. “I wonder what he meant by that?”

“Probably just being friendly,” said Lena, smoothing her hair back into place. “He seems nice.”

Gabe thought so too. There was something about the fellow’s assurance that they would meet again that disturbed him. But he couldn’t say why.

Chapter Two: Waves in the Ocean

After buying their tickets, Gabe and Lena went with the crowd into the main hall of Scott Street West. The place had once been a stadium court for a professional basketball team. At one end was a stage, now covered with a mass of musical instruments and sound-processing equipment. In front of the stage was a big dance floor. Up above, and surrounding the stage and dance floor, were seats for people who just wanted to listen. The area directly behind the stage was blocked off. But this arrangement still left several hundred seats for listeners. On nights when the dance floor and the seats were full, Scott Street West could hold about 2,500 people — or more, if the management decided to pack the place.

“It’s stuff city tonight,” said Gabe to Lena. Though the concert wasn’t scheduled to begin for another 45 minutes, the upper seats and the dance floor were already almost completely full. People were still coming in, and the flow showed no signs of stopping.

“Are we going to dance, or just listen and watch?” Lena asked.

Gabe thought a bit. “Which do you want to do?”

“Maybe some of both,” she said.

“In that case,” Gabe replied, taking her by the hand and heading up to the seats, “We’d better get a seat right now. We can always give up our seats if we want to dance. But if we stay down here, we’ll never get a seat later.”

“Good thinking, Gabe,” said Lena as they dodged and slid past crowds of people. At last they got a pair of seats together up towards the top row.

“Wish I’d brought my binoculars,” said Gabe. “We’re up so high I think we’ll need oxygen masks.”

“To tell you the truth,” Lena replied, “I’m glad we’re way up here. Sometimes the music’s so loud it hurts my ears. This way, we’ll be far enough away so that the volume won’t bother me.” She reached out and gave one of Gabe’s ears a tug. “I bet you musicians secretly keep ear plugs in there to keep from going deaf.”

Gabe smiled, reached into his pockets, and pulled out two tubes. He handed one to Lena. “You’re right, fellow Pentegram Clubber. This tube’s for you. Know what’s in it?”

Lena looked. “No idea. A mini walkie-talkie?”

Gabe laughed. “Right. You swallow it, then lean over and talk into your stomach. No, really, open it up.”

Lena opened the tube. “Ear plugs! Just what every thoughtful boy should bring on a date to the local rock concert!”

Gabe felt a little foolish. “Did I make a mistake?” he asked.

Lena patted his arm. “Not at all, not at all. You did just the right thing. I’m surprised that someone who spends time writing music for computer and synthesizer would think of bringing along ear plugs.”

“Hey,” said Gabe, “it’s because I’m into music that I bring these things along. I like good sounds, and I even like loud sounds sometimes. But I hate it when they just turn up the volume full blast. The only groups that do that all the time are the ones who are playing lousy music. They use the volume to cover up their bad licks. Pacific Ocean isn’t that way. But you

never know when some crazy sound man might decide that he wants to fill the place with a thousand watts of electric guitar."

Gabe and Lena continued talking as the auditorium filled up. The crowd was mixed — all ages, all sizes, all kinds of dress. Gabe pointed to a small group of young men huddled over in the corner.

"Aren't those the guys that tried to hustle their way into line?" asked Gabe.

"Sure looks like them," Lena replied. "What are they doing?"

One of the boys was taking something from his coat pocket and putting it to his lips.

"Booze, I guess," said Gabe.

"Won't he get kicked out if someone catches him drinking in here?" asked Lena.

"Yeah, if someone catches him," replied Gabe. "Usually, when the place is packed like this, the security guards won't try to bust someone. As long as everything is cool, they let people alone."

A boy in front of them turned around and looked up at them. "It's not the booze that get people wired up here. It's the hard stuff," he said, looking at Lena and Gabe.

"What kind of hard stuff?" Lena asked.

The girl next to the boy turned around now. "You know — powder."

"Powder?" asked Gabe. He was pretty sure he knew what they were talking about, but he wanted to make sure.

The boy gave Gabe a look that seemed to say, "Where have you been all your life?" Out loud the boy said, "You know — cocaine, maybe heroin — stuff like that."

“You mean hard drugs?” asked Lena. She was trying to keep the surprise out of her voice, but she didn’t succeed.

“Sure he means hard drugs. Say, haven’t you two ever been to these concerts before?” asked the girl.

Gabe was about to answer, when the boy and the girl quickly turned to look at a bizarre scene. Someone was walking on the backs of the chairs, working his way to an empty seat in the middle of the row.

“He’s going to fall and break his skull,” said Gabe as the fellow tiptoed on down the row.

“No he won’t. He’s mellowed out,” said the girl. They watched the man of about thirty years step, totter, then step some more. Finally he made it to the seat. He clambered down into the chair, sat down with a big grin, shut his eyes, and began humming to himself.

“He looks happy,” said Lena.

“He looks stoned,” Gabe added.

“Stoned is happy,” said the boy, and he turned around to watch the stage, which was now lit up brightly as the musicians began to drift out to their instruments.

The girl gave Gabe a wink, then turned around.

Lena didn’t miss the wink. “Stoned is stupid,” she whispered to Gabe. “I wonder how many people here are high on something?”

Gabe didn’t answer. He was looking at a dark-skinned man and a bronze-skinned woman about ten rows below him. “Aren’t they the people we saw before the concert?” asked Gabe, pointing at the man.

“I think so,” Lena replied. “I wonder what they’re doing here? They look at least ten years older than practically everybody else at the concert.”

Gabe was about to reply; but the overhead lights dimmed, and a cluster of swirling balls began to scatter patterns of light over the entire auditorium. An electric guitar gave out a high-pitched cry, and a big tom-tom sound began thundering underneath it. The concert was beginning.

Gabe leaned forward to listen. Of all the new music groups, he liked Pacific Ocean best. There were others that were a lot flashier, a lot louder, and a lot more famous. But the musicians knew their stuff, and put the music before glitzy costumes or rude lyrics. The drummer was solid, the electric bass player could really lay down some good licks, and the lead guitar could pick with the best of them. They had two singers who were good; but most Pacific Ocean fans felt that the singers were the weakest members of the group. The lyrics were interesting, though, and at least the singers sang on key.

As the band started to pick up the beat and get into their groove, dancers started moving down on the dance floor. It was crowded, and a lot of people were just standing around watching. As more people started dancing, the standers were crowded back toward the walls.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Gabe shouted to Lena. She had already stuffed the ear plugs into her ears. Pacific Ocean may have been one of the quieter bands around, but they were still too loud for Lena to listen to without the plugs.

"What?" she shouted.

Gabe leaned over and shouted back, "I said, I've got a bad feeling about this crowd. The dancers are moving around a lot, and the people just watching are getting crunched up against the walls."

Just then there was a flurry of motion down in one corner of the dance floor. Half a dozen people were pushing and shoving. A girl went down onto the dance floor. One of the dancers struck out with a right hook, and someone else toppled over backwards. More people rushed in. There was more shoving and pushing. Angry voices could be heard even above the roar of the music. Four guards rushed in from the side entrances, but they couldn't get close to the center of the trouble.

Now people in the upper stands were on their feet, trying to get a better view of the shoving and fighting. People left their seats, scrambled over the chairs in front of them, and pushed their way down to the front row. Somebody — Gabe thought it was the same fellow who had walked across the back of the chairs to get to his seat — tried jumping from the back of one chair to the back of another. He didn't make it, and went crashing into the people in front of him. Now there were dozens of people thrashing and pushing, trying to get free of the other people who had toppled over on them. Swear words came ripping out of the mass of writhing bodies. A girl screamed, then another, then another.

The guards had finally gotten to the center of the angry crowd below, but some of the audience were still angrily milling around and waving their fists at each other. Meanwhile, the whole upper balcony seethed with groups of people, some trying to get a look at the crowds below, some pushing and shoving other people in the stands.

The music kept on playing at full tilt. The lyrics seemed to be describing what was going on in the crowd:

*Listen to the roar
On the ocean's shore.
Keep on comin',
We got to have more!
More!!
More!!!*

"Let's get out of here," said Lena, taking the plugs out of her ears.

"Right," Gabe agreed. "I'll lead the way." He took Lena's hand and slowly started to make his way toward the upper exit from the stands. Someone's elbow struck Gabe on the cheekbone. A young boy, no more than ten, was hurled against Lena, who staggered under the blow. The boy was crying. A hand reached out and jerked him back into the crowd.

Finally, after a quarter of an hour of squeezing and pushing, Gabe and Lena propelled themselves through the front door of Scott Street Auditorium. Knots of people were gathered around, talking furiously about what they'd been through inside the auditorium.

"Did you see his lips, man?" said one voice. "There was blood..."

"She kept on screaming," said another. "She just wouldn't shut up. I bet..."

"I'm going back in and getting my money back," said another. "What a rip-off..."

Gabe looked at Lena. Someone had spilled an orange drink on her jacket. She was looking down sadly at the mess, trying to clean it off with a tissue. A wave of sadness swept over Gabe. "This is my fault!" he thought. "I asked her here, and now look at what's happened."

Out loud he said, "Lena, I'm really, really sorry I brought you here. I've never been to a concert where there's been this kind of a major bummer before. Is your jacket O.K.?"

Lena kept on rubbing. Gabe thought he could see tears in her eyes. "I think it's all right," she said. "I'll send it to the cleaners, and they can probably take out the stain."

Gabe stood there, not sure what he should do. Just then, someone spoke up behind him.

"I see you guys got out alive and in one piece. Pretty bad, wasn't it?"

Gabe and Lena both turned. It was the couple who had been sitting in front of them. Gabe hadn't been too impressed with them inside. But right now, it was nice to hear a sympathetic voice. The girl looked at Lena's jacket.

"That's one of the prettiest coats I've ever seen," she said. Then she saw the stain. "Oh, no! Did that happen in there?"

Lena nodded.

The boy said, "Hey, here we are talking and we don't even know each other. I'm Adam Dayton. This here is my girlfriend, Mona Tessler. We're both in the group Venus Flytrap. Heard of us?"

Adam looked hopefully at Gabe and Lena. Gabe had never heard of the group, but he didn't want to hurt their feelings, so he said, "Well, no, but I don't keep up too much with the local scene. I'd like to though. My name is Gabe Wagner" — he held out his hand, and shook with Adam and Mona — "and this is Lena McLaughlin."

Mona nodded to Lena. "And are you Gabe's girlfriend?"

Gabe and Lena exchanged quick looks. Then Lena turned to Mona and said, "No, we're just really good friends. We belong to the same computer group, the Pentegram Club." Lena smiled, turning to Adam. "Heard of us?"

They all laughed.

"Sure," Adam replied, "Saw you on the 6:00 news!"

"Uh, oh," said Gabe, "Looks like the President has been talking about us again."

While they were talking and laughing, Gabe caught sight of the man and woman they had met before. They were coming out of Scott Street West, and talking to each other excitedly.

"Hey, Lena," said Gabe, "Isn't that Rodger English and Ellen Blackhawk, the people we met just before the concert?"

Lena looked in the direction Gabe was pointing to. The couple was standing by the street corner, when a black limousine pulled up to the curb. The back door opened by itself — an electronic door, Gabe decided at once — and the couple got in.

Lena clutched Gabe's arm. "Look!" she cried out. "Gabe, look at the license plate!"

The license plate read:

SPD DMN

"That's a weird plate number," said Adam. "Wonder what it stands for?"

Gabe looked at Lena, then back at Adam and Mona. "It's a long story, friends, and maybe some day we'll tell it all to you."

“So what kind of computer stuff is your Pentegram Club into?” asked Mona.

It took a moment for Gabe and Lena to get back into the spirit of the conversation with their new acquaintances. Finally Gabe said, “Lena here is into fractals.”

A puzzled look came over Mona’s and Adam’s faces.

“Fractals are a kind of geometry, like kaleidoscopes,” said Lena. “My jacket is made up of fractal patterns. Get the idea?” She turned around to let them see the swirling patterns that covered her jacket.

“Pretty trippy!” said Adam with enthusiasm. “I mean, really trippy. Like, do you get high to do those?”

Lena stopped turning. “No need to get high. Just getting into making and printing these patterns is high enough for me.”

“How about you, dude?” asked Adam, turning to Gabe. “What’s your trip?”

“Synthesizers and sound patches,” said Gabe. “I like to compose music and make up new sounds, then process the whole thing through my computer. Once the music’s in the computer, I can do anything with it.”

Mona and Adam looked at each other, smiled, then turned back to Gabe.

“Like, you play with a group, man?” Adam asked.

“No group,” Gabe replied. “I just do it for my own pleasure — and the pleasure of my friends in the Pentegram Club, plus other people in the music SIG.”

Adam looked puzzled again. “What’s a SIG?”

Lena laughed. "We'd better get out of the habit of using computer jargon, Gabe. It's going to make us unpopular, or make us look like nerds." She turned to Adam. "SIG stands for Special Interest Group. The computer network has people all over the world linked together. Some people on the network are into games, some are into programming, some are into cooking — there's no end to what computer people get interested in. So they form SIGs to talk to each other, share information, and follow up on whatever they like."

"Sounds great," said Adam. But there was something in his tone of voice that told Lena and Gabe that he either didn't think it was so great, or didn't really understand what a Special Interest Group did.

But Mona picked up the conversation at once. "So, Gabe, I mean, like, do you think you'd ever be interested in playing in a group?"

Gabe considered that for a moment. "Maybe. It would depend on what kind of music they were making."

Adam slapped Gabe on the shoulder. "We're into some really heavy stuff, dude. I mean, the music's kind of raw right now, but we're working on it. Venus Flytrap's going to be great, you just wait and see."

Mona smiled sweetly at Gabe. She put her hand on his forearm and said, "We could really use someone who knows about synthesizers Gabe. And we could use a keyboard or synth player. How about coming over to jam with us some time?"

Gabe brightened. "Sounds great! When do you guys get together?"

Adam said, "We're having a session tomorrow afternoon at Tyrone's house. Tyrone's the singer. Can you bring your stuff?"

Gabe thought for a moment and said, "I don't know. I've got a lot of equipment that's pretty bulky. I might be able to pack up the synthesizer. Do you have an amp and speaker I could use?"

Mona laughed. "Do we have amps and speakers, Adam? Do we have them?"

Adam turned to Gabe and said, "Got enough amp power to start an earthquake, my man. And if you need some help, I can send over someone to help you with your stuff."

Gabe was excited about this turn of events. "All this sounds really righteous. I live at 54 Camino Medio in Mill Valley. Do you want directions on how to get there?"

"We'll figure it out," Adam replied. "The jam starts at three, so we'll pick you up around 2:00, O.K.?"

"O.K.!" Gabe agreed.

"Got to go now," said Adam, taking Mona by the arm and moving off down the street. "See you tomorrow."

"Right," said Gabe, waving good-bye. "See you."

"Hey," said Gabe, turning to Lena, "How about that? I've got a chance to... hey, what's the matter?"

In spite of his excitement, he could read Lena's looks. They were a cross between angry and hurt. Gabe understood at once.

"Oh, wow, Lena, I forgot to ask if you could come along! Hey, I'm sure it would be O.K. Let's do it."

Lena looked down at the spill on her jacket again. "No, Gabe, they would have invited me if they'd wanted me to come. You're the music genius, and it's you they want to jam with. I'd only be in the way."

“But...” Gabe started to protest.

Lena interrupted, “Look, Gabe, I know you’re trying to be nice, and I appreciate that. But right now, I’m not in the mood to argue. Let’s just go on home.”

Gabe and Lena started walking back. As they moved down the street, they could hear the music from Pacific Ocean rising and falling in the background. To Gabe it sounded like the distant cry of an ambulance siren.

Gabe and Lena walked back to her house in silence, each wrapped up in his and her own thoughts.

“What a disaster,” Gabe thought. “I go out with a really sweet girl to hear one of my favorite music groups, and we’re walking home like we’ve just been to a funeral.” But he still couldn’t think of anything to say. And he longer they walked, the harder it got to say anything.

Finally they arrived at Lena’s doorstep. Lena put her hand on Gabe’s arm and said, “Hey, Gabe, I know you feel bad about tonight. But really, it’s not your fault. Anyway, it was nice being with you.”

Gabe looked down, his hands in his pockets. He kicked a leaf off the steps. Without looking up he said, “Do you think we might go out again some time?”

Lena put her fingers under his chin and raised up his head. Now they were looking each other in the eyes. “I’d like that, Gabe.”

Gabe smiled too. “Are you sure I can’t talk you into coming with me tomorrow for the jam session at Adam’s place?”

“I’m sure,” Lena replied. “I’ve got to work on this programming assignment that Mr. Yea gave us. But Gabe —” here she gave him a serious look — “you be careful tomorrow. You don’t know these people at

all.”

Gabe gave Lena a puzzled look. “What do you mean?” he asked. “They sound like real musicians, don’t they?”

Lena nodded. “I’m sure they’re musicians. But just don’t.... well, don’t do anything wrong.”

“What’s she talking about?” Gabe thought. He was starting to get a little bit angry. Did Lena think he was some kind of baby that needed watching over every minute? “What do you mean, Lena? Do you think I’m going to start stealing their sound equipment or something? I know better than that!”

Lena looked at Gabe again. This time the tears were starting to well up in her eyes again. “Sometimes even smart boys can be so stupid,” she said.

“Stupid!” cried Gabe. “Who’s stupid?”

Lena whirled around and ran through the door. “Just.... don’t do anything wrong,” she said, and slammed the door behind her.

“What on earth was she talking about?” Gabe thought as he walked home slowly. He started thinking of all the things he wished he’d said to Lena. At first he thought of some clever replies he wished he’d made. Then he remembered the look in Lena’s eyes, and the spill on her jacket. He wished that he’d said something soothing. Maybe he should have offered to take her to Village Pizza so they could talk. Or maybe he just should have turned down the jam session with Venus Flytrap tomorrow and offered to help Lena get into that programming assignment.

Before he knew it, Gabe was home, through the door, upstairs, and getting ready for bed. He thought about calling Lena. He looked at the clock: 11:00. Too late for a call. He thought about the jam session

tomorrow with Venus Flytrap. Somehow, he didn't feel as excited as he thought he should feel.

What a night!

Gabe turned off the light. But sleep wouldn't come. After half an hour, he got up, went downstairs, and turned on his computer in the basement. The screen cast a greenish glow on the walls as the Electronic Crafts experimental music program started to load. He opened the program and looked at the screen. "Music Monster" had some nifty programming tricks that made it easy to write the music for several instruments at once. The program was much faster and more versatile than his old Music Maker disk. He called up the main screen and stated to enter in notes. Then he paused.

This was the program that had crashed out on him already. "Do I want to have fun and fool around," he thought, "or do I want to write something for keeps?"

He sat still for a moment. Then he took out the Monster Music Disk, turned off the computer, rebooted, and loaded up his trusty but slow Music Maker program. He pulled up the song he had been working on when Lena first came over. Gabe worked solid for an hour, then listened to the results: drums, bass, synthesized guitar, two flutes and a female voice added to the male voice. After the strong beginning, the tune grew slower and quieter, but still forceful and urgent. The synthesized female voice almost whispered the final words to the song:

Please don't do anything wrong.

Don't spoil the ending of the song.

It was after one o'clock when Gabe finally rolled into bed and fell asleep at once.

*Chapter Three:
Jamming at Tyrone's*

By two o'clock in the afternoon the next day, Gabe was packed up and ready to go. He had put his synthesizer in its carrying case, and his computer, plus his sound patch disks, in a custom-made canvas bag. The sound equipment he left behind, because Adam had assured him that there was plenty of amplifier and speaker power at the house where they were going to jam.

Gabe went over to the phone again and rang Lena's number. No answer. "That's strange," Gabe thought. "She said she was going to be at home working on an assignment for Mr. Yea's programming class." He thought about trying to contact her by way of his modem; but he had all his computer equipment packed up. "I'll call her again when I get to where we're rehearsing," he thought.

Gabe looked at his watch: 2:15 p.m. Whoever was going to pick him up was late. Gabe started to think that Adam and Mona might have forgotten all about him. Since he didn't even have their address or phone number, there was no way to contact them. He went into the kitchen, poured himself a glass of milk, and went out onto the front porch to wait.

"At least the day is nice," thought Gabe as he sipped his milk and looked up and down the street. It was a warm spring day, with a clear sky and the

smell of acacia flowers in the air. Just then, he saw a familiar sight.

Coming down the street on his unicycle was Devin Orion.

"Yo, Dev!" Gabe called out. The unicycle turned sharply into Gabe's driveway, and Devin Orion dismounted with a leap.

"Looks like you've got a serious engagement, there, Gabe," said Devin, looking at all the equipment packed up at Gabe's feet.

Gabe brightened. Devin Orion was one of his best friends, and one of the members of the Pentegram Club. Gabe used to see a lot of Devin; but during the past few months, no one in the Club saw much of Devin or his unicycle. Gabe wondered if it had anything to do with the adventure of the demon face that appeared on Devin's computer. But Devin would only say that everything worked out all right.

Gabe finished off his milk and stood up. "You're right, old buddy. Last night I met a couple of people at Scott Street West, and they invited me over for a jam session today. Want to come along?"

"I wish I could," said Devin, "but I've got some heavy-duty programming to finish by this evening. Where are you off to?"

"Somewhere in San Francisco, I think," Gabe replied. "They're supposed to pick me up here and drive me over."

"Who is *they*?" Devin asked.

"A rock group called Venus Flytrap. Ever heard of them?"

"No," Devin replied, "but I don't keep up with the local music scene that much. You say you don't know where they're taking you for the rehearsal?"

"No idea," Gabe replied. "Hey, you sound like you think there's something wrong. I just met these people, and we're going to jam. That's

all. If it works out, great. If not, I'll just go back to writing stuff on my own."

"Nothing wrong with that," said Devin. "You've written some of the best things I've ever heard coming out of a computer. I wish I had your talent."

"You do have my talent, and then some," Gabe replied. "You just use it for... say, what are you doing with the computer these days?"

Devin hesitated for a moment. "Mostly assignments that Mr. Yea has me working on," he replied.

Devin's reply caught Gabe's interest. "Aha!" he thought. "I *thought* there was something going on with Devin and Mr. Yea! Ever since that demon incident, they'd been seen together a lot, huddled around the big system server in the school computer room. Gabe was about to ask another question, when he heard the beep of a car horn.

Gabe and Devin both turned to look at the source of the beep. What they saw made Devin whistle and Gabe mumble out, "Totally awesome, dude!"

Parked in front of Gabe's house was an old Volkswagen van. Maybe it had been grey once; but now it was every color of the rainbow. Someone had covered the entire body with wavy stripes of color. On the side was a picture of a lime-green flytrap closing its jaws on a fly. The fly had a human face, and it expressed a look of horror on seeing the jaws about to close over it. The door opened, and out jumped a boy wearing green jeans, green sneakers, and a t-shirt with a picture of King Kong snatching a biplane out of the air. Under the picture were the words:

I'd climb a mile for a Camel

The clothes belonged to a boy with long, straight black hair tied back in a band. He was thin, and his face was pock-marked. His eyes were lively, and constantly looked around as if searching for something. "Hey, you Gabe Wagner?"

"That's me," said Gabe, coming down the steps and putting out his hand to shake. The other boy gave it a side grip, and said, "Glad to meet you. I'm Okimoto. Let's go."

Gabe turned back, picked up his equipment, and said, "This is a friend of mine, Okimoto. Devin Orion, meet — what is your first name, Okimoto?"

"That's it — just Okimoto. Let's go, man, we're all waiting."

Gabe was about to say that he'd been waiting for 45 minutes himself, but decided to keep quiet. Without waiting to say anything to Devin, Okimoto jumped back into the van, turned the key, and gunned the engine.

"See you later," Gabe said to Devin.

His friend picked up his unicycle and accompanied him to the van.

"Keep your head on straight," said Devin. He gave Gabe a slap on the shoulder, then rode off down the street.

Gabe and Okimoto traveled over the Golden Gate Bridge and into San Francisco without speaking a word to each other. There were plenty of questions Gabe wanted to ask, but Okimoto had the van's cassette tape player on full blast. Gabe found the music too raw for his taste. "I wish I'd brought my ear plugs," he thought to himself as the loud music rattled the van's speakers.

At last they pulled up to a Victorian house on Slayton Street in the Haight-Ashbury section of the city. Okimoto pulled into the driveway, jumped out, ran up the stairs and rang the doorbell. Gabe opened the side doors to the van and pulled out his synthesizer and computer bag.

“Hey, need any help with that?” came a familiar voice.

Adam came down the stairs, shook Gabe’s hand, and started to pick up the canvas bag.

“Thanks,” said Gabe, “but I should probably carry that bag. It’s got my computer and disks in it. Could you help me with the synthesizer?”

Gabe’s synthesizer was big, but it was packed inside a hard plastic carrying case. Together the two boys mounted the stairs and entered the house.

601 Slayton Street was a 100 year old house that had seen better days. Gabe noticed the peeling grey paint on the outside of the house. He and Adam went down the hall, turned right into the front living room, then through an archway that led into a back living room, or parlor. The hall was littered with bottles and papers collected in sacks. It seemed like someone was getting ready to take the stuff to a recycling center, but hadn’t gotten around to it yet. Walls of the front living room were covered with posters — posters from the old Fillmore West concert hall, from 70s pop groups, from 80s heavy metal bands, and 90s rapper groups. Someone had spread a sleeping bag out in the center of the room, and there were clothes, opened cans of food, old juice cartons, and two ash trays full of cigarette butts. Underneath a house plant that looked like it was dying for water, a fat gray cat seemed sound asleep.

“Who lives here?” asked Gabe as they stepped over a mound of dirty laundry to get into the back living room.

“Tyrone, his girl friend, some buddies of theirs, and someone nobody seems to know is crashing here in the living room,” Adam replied.

“Nobody knows who it is?” Gabe asked in surprise. “Then what’s he, or she, or they, doing here?”

“Well, at first everybody thought that the guy was a friend of someone else. After about a week, they discovered that nobody seemed to know him. But the guy’s gone most of the day; and when he comes back here at night, no one wants to be the one to tell him to leave. He calls himself Majudo.”

“Weird,” was all Gabe could say. “Have you met him?”

“Yeah,” Adam replied.

“What’s he like?”

“Weird.”

Gabe put down his equipment in the back room. The hallway and the front living room were sleaze city. But this room was an electronic musician’s dream! Straight ahead was an electronic drum setup. The bass drum, snares, tom-toms, timbales and cymbals were all thin and sleek looking. Bright red and clear plastic wires ran from the drum units to a gigantic control unit to the left of the drums. There was an electric guitar and an electric bass lying on the floor in front of the drums. In front of the guitar and bass were an array of foot pedals for special effects — fuzz, wah-wah, chorus, octave, and several that Gabe didn’t recognize.

There was also a strange smell in the room that he didn’t recognize. It was like incense, only more sweet and more bitter at the same time.

Just then, a head rose up from behind the control unit.

“Adam, my man, is this the computer whiz you promised us?” said the boy behind the control panel. He came around and shook Gabe’s hand. “Monk Warren’s the name. I don’t play an axe, but I know how to mix and match with the best of them.”

Gabe smiled. He’d met a lot of people like Monk Warren since he started getting interested in electronic music. In spite of his mop-flop blond hair and ragged blue-jeans, Monk Warren was an electronics wizard. Music was a way for him to get his hands on some superb electronic equipment, and maybe get a taste of stardom if the musicians were good enough. But it was the love of the electronic equipment itself that attracted Monk Warren to Venus Flytrap.

“Gabe Wagner,” said Gabe. “Though I’m no whiz at the computer. But I do have some stuff I’ll bet you like.” Gabe began to unpack his synthesizer and his computer. Monk just whistled when he set up the sound patch link between the keyboard and the output jacks of the computer. He took the leads and ran them through a huge amplifier, then into his master control panel. The red lights on the amp told Gabe that he was ready to play.

“You really need a computer to drive that synth?” asked Monk.

“No, I don’t need it,” Gabe replied. “The synthesizer’s got some good sounds built in. But with the MIDI device and the sound patches, I can make this keyboard sound like—” Gabe clicked the mouse button on his computer, and played a scale. Monk’s eyebrows shot up.

“An honest-to-goodness violin! Man, that’s great! I’ve heard some synthesizers play violin sounds before, but they sounded terrible. Yours really sounds like the original instrument.”

"Thanks," said Gabe. "It wouldn't fool a real violinist for a second. But the sound quality's good because I use digitized sounds."

"What's that?" asked Adam.

"Sounds recorded from a real, live instrument. Most computers just use electronics to generate sounds. The results aren't too bad if you're trying to imitate another electronic instrument like an electric piano or an electric guitar. But if you try to sound like an acoustic instrument, the results are lousy. The only real solution is to record a live instrument, bank the sounds, process them, then store them away for when you need them."

Monk smiled and nodded his head. Adam looked baffled. "If you say, so, man," he said, then left the room by a side door.

Monk and Gabe talked about electronics for a few minutes. Then the room started to fill up. Okimoto took a seat behind the drum set. Mona picked up the electric bass. Adam began to play riffs on the electric guitar. And a new boy whom Gabe hadn't seen before looked around on a table full of electronic gear, then finally came up with a cordless microphone.

Gabe stood by his synthesizer, waiting to be introduced to the singer with the mike. But the drummer had already started hammering out beats and mini-solos on his set. Mona played the same scale, up and down, up and down. In a different key, Adam picked out riffs that sounded like they came from one of the old acid rock groups of the 60s. The singer closed his eyes, and hummed. He had a good voice, and even used vibrato on the end of phrases.

Gabe was impressed. They all seemed good. But the total effect right then was chaos. Everyone was off in his or her own world, not paying any attention to anyone else. The volume level of the music was picking up.

Since the drummer and the bass player were using two different beats, and the bass, guitar, and singer were all in different keys, Gabe couldn't decide who to follow. So he just waited, letting his fingers run over the keyboard without making any sounds.

But slowly, a sense of order grew out of the chaos. Okimoto settled down to a steady, driving funk beat, the kind you could play blues, rock, or rap to. Mona's bass left off playing scales, and smoothly started picking a rhythm to go with the beat. She stayed in the key of E. Adam's guitar stopped for a moment, then got into the E groove with Mona. The harmony of the music wasn't going anywhere. But at least now there was a rhythm and a key, and the singer could put word to the instrumental sounds:

*We're not rock and roll, and we're sure not rap.
We're the new true sounds of Venus Flytrap!*

Gabe was about to enter in with some riffs of his own, when all of a sudden the drummer banged down with a tremendous crash of cymbals and snare. Everybody stopped. Silence.

One beat, two, three, four.

Then they were all off on a furious chase, the drummer beating out the same rhythm as before, only faster and more energetic. The bass played solidly around the drum rhythm, and the guitar added just the right number of tasty notes. At the fifth measure, the harmony went up a fourth.

"Ha — a blues pattern!" Gabe said to himself, and began to put his mind in a 12-bar pattern. Sure enough, the chord changes came at the

ninth and tenth bar, then headed straight for E-tonic of bar number one as the pattern cycled through.

Gabe decided to wait one more cycle of 12 bars just to get a sense of Venus Flytrap's groove. He was impressed with how smoothly they had gotten from the aimless fooling around to this solid togetherness.

The next twelve bars were Adam's turn to solo. His hair went flying as he leaned and bent into his instrument. Gabe had seen musicians shake and jump around the stage before, It always struck him as an act. But now, seeing Adam up close, Gabe was forced to admit that Adam seemed to mean what he was saying on his guitar. The sounds screamed and moaned out of the instrument, sometimes sad, sometimes mad, sometimes mean, sometimes happy. Adam was throwing his whole body into the message of his music.

After the solo, the singer stepped forward, singing:

*That was Adam, the guit-tar man,
Now listen to Mona, the bass of the band!*

Adam's guitar sound dropped into the background, and Mona began playing a furious succession of notes all over the fretboard of the bass. Gabe got the idea that she was trying too hard to impress people with how fast she could play. She could really get around on the instrument, Gabe had to admit. But he thought that fewer, right-chosen notes would have done the job better.

The singer came in:

Now for Okimoto, the man with the beat.

Get on out of here now, if you can't take the heat!

For a few measures, the drums splashed and crashed in a storm of cymbals and drums. Then out of the seeming chaos came a complicated, powerful rhythm. Gabe recognized where he had heard that kind of sound before: Taiko drumming. Okimoto was thundering out a beat that was part Taiko, part Brazilian, part rock. Gabe was impressed. "I've never heard anything like this!" he thought to himself. "This fellow is world class." Gabe hadn't much liked the fellow who had picked him up at his house, then driven him all the way to Slayton Street without saying a word. But Okimoto could play the drums, no doubt about that!

The singer came back.

And now —

The singer turned to Adam and shouted something Gabe couldn't make out. Adam shouted back. The singer continued:

And now listen up! This is for you, babe!

Here come the sounds of synthesizer Gabe!

Gabe wasn't expecting this! he'd been so caught up listening to the others' solos that it never occurred to him that he might have to take a turn. He looked over at Monk, who gave him a smile and a thumbs up signal from behind the master control panel.

Gabe played some simple chords for the first few bars. The sound patch from his computer wasn't wired into the synthesizer yet, so he had to use the home voices of his keyboard. Little by little, though, he warmed up to the rhythm and the blues pattern. By the end of the first twelve bars, he was feeling good. Just before the new cycle began, he looked at the computer screen, then with his right hand, pointed with the mouse and clicked twice. Now his synthesizer was fully jacked into his computer.

The next four bars Gabe played sounded like bells with an underpinning of tom-toms, to match the percussion. Then at the fifth bar, with the rhythm driving hard behind him, he switched to a plucked acoustic bass that closely matched the sound thrumming from Mona's electric bass. For four measures their sounds danced together. Then Gabe switched to a mighty, howling electric guitar that swelled up to meet Adam's instrument. Adam looked amazed, then smiled broadly. For the final two measures they played a swinging duet. Then Gabe faded out into the background.

Yeah, yeah, oh yeah!

The voice of the singer rolled out over the instruments as they all faded down, down into silence. At the end of the final bar, only a quiet tap of Okimoto's cymbal indicated that the music was finished.

Then there was silence.

"All right, my man, ALL RIGHT!" the singer shouted, flashing a big grin at Gabe.

"Told you I was bringing home a live one, Tyrone," said Adam as he removed his guitar strap.

“What you say your name is?” asked Tyrone, coming over to slap five with Gabe’s hand.

“Gabe Wagner,” said Gabe, gripping Tyrone’s hand after the high five.

“Gabe Wagner, G.W., George Washington and good wailing,” Tyrone shouted to Okimoto.

Mona came over, put her arms around Gabe’s neck and gave him a big kiss on the cheek. “Something else,” she said, her eyes bright with excitement.

Okimoto was still sitting behind his drum set, smiling. “I’m goin’ to have to watch you, man. You got a drum sound in there that could put me out of business.”

“No one’s going to put you out of business if you always play that well,” Gabe replied.

“Except for me,” said Monk from the control panel. “I rule the world!” They all laughed.

Tyrone looked around to Okimoto, Adam, and Mona, then pointed at thumb at Gabe. “Is he in?”

In chorus, they all replied. “He’s in.”

Tyrone looked Gabe straight in the eye. “My man, you are officially enrolled in Venus Flytrap. You play that righteous all the time, and we’re all going straight to the top of the charts.”

Gabe was still smiling — but his mind was racing in two directions at once.

First direction:

“These guys are really good. They like my playing, and I like theirs. This is what I’ve been looking for — good musicians and a good group feeling.

Tyrone's right: we've got a good chance to make it."

Second direction:

"I hardly know these guys. I wasn't too impressed with Adam and Mona at the Pacific Ocean concert, and Okimoto didn't say anything to me all the way over here. Lena warned me I'd better watch my step. I don't want to get involved too deeply with these people until I know more about them."

Before Gabe could answer they all heard a voice from the front room. "Outasight! Great! The greatest! You dudes really made heavy duty music! Now how about a reward? I got something that will put your music over the top and out of sight."

Everybody turned toward the the voice at the door.

"Hello, Majudo," said Tyrone in a not too friendly voice. "Haven't seen you in a long time."

Chapter Four

Broken Music

Gabe knew it wasn't polite to stare, but he just couldn't help himself. He leaned over to Monk and whispered, "Is this the dude who lives in the next room and never shows up in the daylight?"

"Right," said Monk. "Just like a vampire."

"Vampire" was exactly the image that came to Gabe's mind when he saw the thin man with straggling back hair and dirty clothes who stood in the doorway between the two rooms. Majudo was short, thin, and bent over. His eyes were dark and restless. But every so often they would come to rest some place and he would stare for a while. Then he began looking around again. He seemed to have a cold, and he constantly brought up his sleeve to wipe his nose.

"What kind of reward you talking about, man?" Tyrone asked. "And before you reward me your rewards, maybe we should talk a bit about your share of the rent."

Majudo's eyes rested on Tyrone for a moment, then wandered off as if they were searching for something hidden on the ceiling.

"Well now," Majudo began, "like, the rent...yeah, the rent. Money's funny, you know that? Real funny. You got it, you spend it, you don't got it, maybe you get some more. But what counts is what you spend it on, right?"

Tyrone started to answer, but Majudo continued in a rush. "So, what I mean to say is, like ... right. What was I talking about?"

"Rent," said Tyrone firmly.

"Yeah, that's it, money," said Majudo, snapping his fingers. "So, like, you remember the story about Jack and the beanstalk?"

Tyrone was all set to get hard-nosed with Majudo about the rent; but this turn of the conversation took him by surprise. "You mean Jack and the *beanstalk*? What's that got to do with anything?"

Majudo continued, "You never heard the story of Jack and the beanstash? Well, now, like, once upon a time there was a boy who lived with...."

"Cut it, dude, I know the story," interrupted Tyrone. "I still don't get...."

"You know the story," Majudo said. "Well, great, like I don't have to run it all down to you. Anyway, you know the part about the moose that laid the golden egg?"

Everybody laughed. "You mean the goose?" said Mona.

"Whatever," Majudo continued, undisturbed by the laughter. "Anyway, the point is, he put one over on that cowboy."

"What cowboy you talking about, sucker?" said Tyrone, who seemed to get angrier every moment. Gabe couldn't understand. Was this Majudo character trying on purpose to get Tyrone mad?

"You know, the fellow that gave Jack the magic beans from his stash in exchange for Jack's cow," said Majudo, as if he were explaining the meaning of the story to a two-year old. "The dude who got rid of those beans was a fool. All he got was that cow, man. And what did Jack get? Magic. Magic beans! Magic beans to get high!" And with those words,

Majudo pulled a baggie from his pants pocket, held it up, and swung it in front of his audience.

“And these, my Venus Flytrap friends, are those magic beans,” said Majudo, looking from face to face.

“Hey, said Mona, slipping off her electric bass and coming over to Majudo, “I know what that is.”

“Me too,” said Okimoto, coming out from behind his drums and joining Mona in front of Majudo. Adam, Tyrone, and Monk came over, too. They went into the front room and sat down around a low table that stood next to Majudo’s sleeping bag. Gabe came into the room last, and stayed back in the doorway.

“Come on in and sit down, brother,” said Majudo, waving Gabe over.

Gabe knew what was going on. “No thanks, not for me,” he said.

The white powder was spread out on the table, and a straw was passed from hand to hand. Okimoto was first, inhaling the powder, then holding his breath. He turned to Gabe and, still holding his breath, gasped out, “What’s with you, man — you a boozer?”

Gabe watched the straw go around and the powder disappear.

“No,” Gabe said. “I’m just not into anything stronger than Dr. Pepper.”

“You can’t do real music without a supercharger,” said Mona, looking directly at Gabe.

“I thought what we were playing in the other room just a while ago was a pretty good start,” said Gabe. He could tell that Mona wasn’t really listening to him. She was looking down at a cockroach that started to skitter across the floor.

"I wonder how it gets those legs to work together so fast," said Mona.

"Dr. Pepper," said Adam, and they all laughed — all except Gabe.

The conversation drifted aimlessly around the table. It seemed to Gabe that sometimes people would laugh at the strangest things. Other times someone would say something that made no sense to him, but everyone else sat there, rocking back and forth, considering what had been said as if it were the greatest wisdom in the world.

Finally Okimoto got up, raised two fists over his head, and shouted out, "Power! Give me some power!" and headed straight for his drums.

The rest of the group got up, stretched, and went back into the music room. Mona stopped in front of Gabe, put her hand on his shoulder, and said, "Come on, get with it, dude! Venus Flytrap is into real heavy music. We've got to get loaded like this to keep up with the other groups."

Gabe looked Mona in the eyes. She was pretty, and she could play that bass like a pro. But drugs —

"Mona, you don't need that stuff to play good music. You can do it all with just your natural brain and fingers," said Gabe. He was aware of the light pressure of Mona's hand on his shoulder — just like the pressure of her words on his will-power. She didn't let go.

"I know we don't need it, Gabe. That's the whole point." She took away her hand from his shoulder and pointed at the band members who were warming up to play again. "We can play without drugs, and we can live without drugs. We choose to do drugs when we want to and where we want to. And we only use it to make our music stronger."

"Aren't you afraid of getting hooked?" Gabe asked. "I've heard some pretty awful stories about what that stuff can do to your mind."

Mona laughed, then said, "Gabe, dude, have you been going to kindergarten assembly meetings? The ones where some dork cop comes in and tells you all those horror stories about marijuana, the weed from hell, or cocaine, the wrecker of minds?"

Gabe had to admit that it was mostly through his school's anti-drug programs that he had learned about the ravages of cocaine. He and his other friends, though, had just never had the urge even to experiment. "Computer programming requires a crisp mind," Mr. Yea was always telling his classes. "If you try it drunk or doped or even just sleepy, you're wasting your time." These thoughts raced through Gabe's mind, but he said nothing.

Mona looked at Gabe one more time, then decided she'd made her point. "Come on in and play when you're ready," she said, then walked over to her instrument and strapped it on.

Gabe stood at the doorway and watched. He felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning, Gabe saw Majudo standing next to him.

"Pretty nice chick, eh?" he said, looking at Mona. "You know, you'll never score with her while you're drinking sugar water."

Gabe moved away slightly. "I don't want to score with her," he said. "I already have a girlfriend." Gabe hadn't really thought about Lena as a girlfriend; but he didn't want this Majudo character to be jumping to the wrong conclusions.

The music was starting up again. This time they seemed to be playing a tune Gabe wasn't familiar with. He looked from face to face: Mona, Adam, Tyrone, and Monk. They all looked happy and intense at the same time.

“Look,” said Majudo, taking Gabe by the shoulder and leading him back into the other room. “I can dig it if you’ve already tried cocaine and just don’t like it. I can dig it! But why knock something you haven’t even tried yet? “

“Hey,” said Gabe, “I haven’t tried murder or bank robbery yet, either. But I’ve got enough sense to know what’s right and what isn’t.”

Majudo took a step backwards, frowned, and replied, “Boy, what you talking about? Murder and robbery and such stuff, that’s hurting other folks. I’d never try to talk anybody into hurting someone else. But drugs — that’s a person’s own business. If I try a hit of powder and I don’t like it, that’s my business. If I do, and I want to try it again some time, that ought to be my business, too. The point is, doing drugs doesn’t hurt anybody else. You’re the one in control!”

Gabe was half listening to the music and half paying attention to Majudo. “I wish I could just go in there and play,” Gabe thought. But he couldn’t — or, at least, he thought he couldn’t. It seemed to him that all the members of Venus Flytrap had gone through a kind of ritual in sniffing the cocaine before they went t back to play. By not taking part in the ritual, Gabe felt he had put himself on the outside.

Would it hurt him to try just one hit?

But Gabe said, “Even if I wanted to try it, the stuff is illegal. Why take a chance with the law?”

Majudo sensed Gabe’s resolve beginning to weaken. “Hey, man, you ever jaywalked?”

The question startled Gabe. “You mean, have I ever crossed a street against a red light when no traffic was coming? Sure.”

“Weren’t you breaking the law?” Majudo continued.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Gabe replied. “But it seemed safe...”

“The point is,” Majudo interrupted, “you did what seemed right to you at the time, even though you knew it was against the law. Life’s full of deals like that, man. You got to decide what’s best for you at the moment. The law don’t tell you what’s right. It just tells you what’s the law.”

“What could it hurt to try just one time?” Gabe thought. Out loud he said. “O.K., man, I’ll try just one hit. But no more.”

“All right, my man,” said Majudo, overjoyed. “Just put one end of this straw into your nose and the other into this mighty fine power powder, and inhale. You’ll be glad you did!”

Gabe inserted the straw. He had one last surge of conscience; but he’d gone this far, he felt, so he might as well go through with it. Gabe inhaled deeply.

The powder burned the inside of his nose like fire. Gabe dropped the straw and clutched his face. “Don’t worry man,” said Majudo, picking up the straw and inhaling some more himself. “It always burns the first time.”

Gabe stood up. He didn’t feel anything — not even dizzy. “That’s all for me, Majudo. Thanks.” He walked steadily into the next room and stood by his keyboard.

Mona looked at him. She shouted over the music, “Did you try it?”

Gabe nodded his head. All of a sudden, he was feeling strange. Everything looked the same, but it was all so much more... intense. Gabe looked around. Everything seemed so clear. The colors were so bright. There was a poster on the wall advertising the concert of the group

Journey. The picture — Gabe just looked and looked. It was really beautiful!

Suddenly he realized that he had been grinding his teeth. “Why would I do that?” Gabe asked himself. “I’ve never ground my teeth together before.” He decided it must be a side effect of the cocaine. Then he turned his attention to the music.

Venus Flytrap was winding down from the last tune. It didn’t exactly end; it just ran out of steam, and everyone stopped when they felt like it. Tyrone turned to Gabe.

“Hey, brother, glad you’re back with us. Anything you’d like to play?”

Gabe looked at him. Tyrone’s smile looked friendly; but who could tell what he was really thinking? Was he trying to trick Gabe into naming some song, then laughing at him? What was this Tyrone’s game anyway?

“What am I thinking?” Gabe said to himself. “Why am I so paranoid about this dude? I hardly know him. Out loud he said, “Well, I’ve got some stuff of my own I’ve written. I could load it into the computer and play it back for you.”

Tyrone looked at the others. Gabe saw them shake their heads one by one. “Uh, not right now, Gabe, my man. I don’t think we could handle it in our present condition. Just name off some popular tunes, and we’ll jam on something we agree on.”

Gabe named off four songs until he finally hit on the Beatles’ “All You Need Is Love.”

“Man, that’s ancient. Hey, Adam, didn’t we used to play that one?”

“Sure did,” said Adam. “The chords go like this.” He tried several times, then finally played off the chord progression. Mona picked it up, and

Tyrone hummed the tune. Okimoto just sat on his stool looking at the ceiling.

“O,K., we got it, group? Then let’s go!” Okimoto came to life, and started off at a fast tempo — too fast for the song, Gabe thought. But soon they were all into the tune.

Okimoto’s drumming seemed too loud at first; but Gabe ignored it as he started loading a new sound from his computer into his synthesizer. On the screen, he looked at the options:

Synthebelltubaelectricfluteelectronicpiano
organelectricbassacousticbass...

Gabe shook his head. What was wrong? Everything seemed to be running together. he shook his head and looked again:

Snhbltbeetifuelcrncinog....

Worse! Gabe decided just to play the synthesizer and not fool with the computer. At the back of his mind was a nagging voice warning him that something wasn’t right. But Gabe was determined to get into the music.

The guitar was taking a solo. Even in his condition, Gabe thought the solo was strange. Adam was bent over his guitar and thrashing away at the strings. But the longer Gabe listened to it, the better it sounded.

“There’s real order here, real beauty,” he said to himself. The bass solo sounded heavenly, too, as did Tyrone’s rendering of the melody.

All you need is love — Yeah! All you need is love!

Gabe thought about the words. Love would do it all, all right. But a strange thought jolted into Gabe's mind: "What about emptying the garbage? How can love do that?" Gabe looked over at Majudo, who was listening to the music, his eyes closed and a smile on his face.

Gabe walked over to him, tapped Majudo on the shoulder, and said, "What about the garbage, man?"

Majudo opened his eyes, then laughed. "Huh?"

Gabe looked at him seriously. "What about the garbage? I mean, if all you need is love, who's going to take out the garbage?"

Majudo threw back his head and laughed. "Man, you're tripping out. Go back there and play your music."

Gabe went back to his instrument and stared at the keyboard. He had already forgotten what he'd asked Majudo.

"Now it's time to play!" he said to himself, and started rapping out five-finger chords on the synthesizer. The others looked at him, then dropped back to give Gabe room to take a solo. He started with the chords, then let his fingers fly along the keyboard. He soared, he zoomed, he floated down, he rocketed up.

"Wow, this is the best I've ever played!" Gabe thought to himself as his fingers flew over the keys. Soon the others were following him, and the music reached a deafening crescendo. Then, just as the volume and intensity reached a peak, everything stopped.

Silence.

The only sounds were the beating of Okimoto on his now-unelectrified drums and the strumming on the unamplified strings of the bass.

Gabe's head was in a swirl.

Everyone looked around at everyone else. Finally Monk rose up from behind his console.

"Sorry, guys. I guess I pulled the wrong cord," he said slowly.

"Aw, man!" shouted Tyrone, who threw his microphone into a chair.

Gabe looked over at Mona. She and Adam were going back into Majudo's room.

Suddenly Gabe felt dizzy. He walked unsteadily through Majudo's room, down the corridor, and opened the door. The sunlight seemed twice as bright as it should have. Gabe sat down on the porch steps and looked around. People were walking up and down the street. "They all think they know where they're going," Gabe thought to himself. "Maybe they do. Where am I going?" He put his head in his hands, then put his forehead to his knees. A swirl of colors exploded inside his eyelids. It was beautiful — but Gabe wished it would all stop moving and just leave him in peace for a while. He tried breathing regularly to bring his thoughts under control.

"Hey, you were great," came a voice. Gabe looked up and squinted. It was Monk, who was handing him something. Gabe held out his hand.

"I made a tape of the last tune, dude," said Monk. "Take it home and listen to it . It's dynamite."

Gabe put the tape into his pocket, then put his head back on his knees. "Thanks," was all he could manage to reply.

"Hey, you all right?" Monk asked.

“Sure,” said Gabe. “I guess I’m just not used to the drugs like everybody else is.”

“Well, you did great,” said Monk, heading back into the house. “I hope you’re going to be a part of Venus Flytrap.”

Gabe didn’t reply. He just wanted the spinning colors to stop.

“Need a ride home, Gabe?” came a voice.

Gabe looked up again. It was a black limousine. He squinted at the speaker.

It couldn’t be!

Devin Orion stepped out of the back seat, came over to Gabe, and helped him into the limousine.

“I want to go home,” Gabe moaned, and lay down on the seat and shut his eyes. That was the last thing he remembered that day.

Chapter Five

What Next?

Gabe woke up to the sound of the telephone ringing. He sat up in bed — and a bolt of pain shot through his head! “What a monster-sized headache,” he thought to himself as he reached for the phone.

“Hello?” he said softly.

“Gabe — is that you?” said the voice on the other end of the line.

“I must sound awful,” Gabe thought. Out loud he said, “It’s me — or what’s left of me. What’s up, Lena?”

“I just thought I’d call and find out how things went yesterday with your jam session,” Lena replied. “Are you O.K.?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine — just a bit of a headache. Yesterday? Well, things went.... great, just great,” Gabe said. He didn’t want to get into the details right then. “The sound engineer made a tape of one of the songs we played. Would you like to hear it?”

“Sure!” said Lena. “Do you want me to come over, or do you want to come over here?”

Gabe thought it over for a bit. He felt so terrible right then that he didn’t want to meet anybody. But it would be nice to see Lena. “Tell you what,” Gabe said. “I just got up....”

“Just got up?” Lena interrupted, amazed. “Gabe, it’s two o’clock in the afternoon!”

Gabe squinted his eyes and looked over at the clock. Sure enough: the digits read 2:02 p.m. “Well, we had a kind of intense session, and I slept in. Why don’t you give me half an hour to get ready, then I’ll meet you at Village Pizza. Whoever gets there first order a medium pizza and a pitcher of coke. We’ll meet and do in the pizza, then come on back over hear and listen to the tape.

“Great!” said Lena, obviously delighted. “How about anchovies and green peppers on the pizza?”

“Uh, how about something a little milder, Lena?” was Gabe’s reply. They discussed the toppings, and finally agreed on plain cheese. Gabe hung up the phone, then flopped down on the bed. He thought back over yesterday — the ride with Okimoto, meeting the musicians in Venus Flytrap, the first jam. Then he thought about the drugs and the last number he played with them. Then he remembered getting sick, and someone picking him up and bringing him home. Who....

Devin Orion! The memory came back in a flash. But a question came up at once: what was Devin doing in a black limo? Gabe recalled all the trouble that the whole Pentegram Club had gone through to trace a certain black limousine with the license plates SPD DMN. Surely Devin wasn’t riding in the same car! Gabe didn’t get a look at the license plates. But even if the limousine was a different one, what was Devin doing in a limousine? And on Slayton Street? And just at that time?

“Too many questions,” Gabe thought to himself. “What I need to do is clear my head and go meet Lena.” So he took a shower, dressed in fresh clothes, then headed out the door for Village Pizza.

By the time he arrived, it was 3:00 and Gabe was starved. Lena saw him, and waved him over.

“The pizza was done ten minutes ago, but I saved you some,” she said with a smile.

“Thanks, Lena,” said Gabe, who immediately scooped up two slices at once, gobbled them down, then drank a whole glass of coke at one swallow.

“Whoa!” said Lena with a laugh. “Maybe I’d better keep my hands off the table, or you’ll get them too.”

Gabe laughed too, then grabbed her hand and made as if to bite it.

“Grrrr, I’m still hungry — where’s the catsup?”

“So, I’m not good enough by myself, Gabriel Wagner?” asked Lena with a smile.

“Uh, oh,” Gabe thought, “Better back off.” Out loud he said, “Sure you are. Maybe I’ll save you for dessert. Sorry I’m being such a pig, Lena — I haven’t had anything to eat for 24 hours.”

After that, Gabe ate more slowly and told her about his experiences with Venus Flytrap. When he got to the part about everybody trying the cocaine, Lena broke in with a worried look.

“You mean that all those people take drugs?” she asked.

Gabe looked down at the table. “Well, they say it helps them play better music.”

Lena put her hand under Gabe’s chin and brought up his head so that they were looking into each other’s eyes. “Did you try the drugs, Gabe?” she asked in a quiet voice.

Gabe looked at Lena steadily. He wouldn't have tried to lie to her under any conditions; but he might have tried to dodge the question or joke it away. But that was impossible with their eyes locked together like they were now.

"I did, Lena," said Gabe. He withdrew himself, and took a drink of coke, more to relieve his embarrassment than because he was thirsty. "I know I probably shouldn't have done it, but..."

"Probably!" Lena shouted. "What do you mean, *probably*? You know..."

Gabe put his hand on Lena's arm. In a tense whisper he said, "Lena, don't yell. If you want to talk about it, I don't want to broadcast our conversation all over the place. Do you want to go over to my place and hear the tape? We can talk along the way."

Lena looked angry for a bit longer, then softened. "Look, Gabe, I'm sorry I yelled at you. But I'm worried. Drugs are nothing to fool around with."

"I know, Lena," said Gabe, getting up to go. "Let's get out of here."

As he slid out of the booth, Gabe bumped into someone. He turned to look — and there stood Don Dackles, the worst of the school bullies.

"Sorry, man," said Gabe, starting to move around the larger boy. But Dackles blocked his path. Dackles was big — almost six feet tall — but his size seemed to be made up of more flab than muscle. Still, he was large. He had a reputation for beating up kids smaller than he was, but staying away from anyone who might be a real fighter.

"Sorry don't cut it, nerd," said Dackles, grabbing Gabe by the shirt collar. Gabe could smell the beer on the other boy's breath.

Gabe pushed away Dackle's hand. "You're drunk, Dackles," he said. "Just leave me alone."

Dackles made to grab Gabe again, but he dodged to one side. Dackles lunged around to strike him — when he suddenly found his arms pinned to his side.

"Leave him alone, man" said a voice.

Dackles whirled around — and found himself looking into the orange sunglasses of Matt Diggs — Destroyer Diggs, everyone called him, because he was the unquestioned ace of all the action videogames. Dackles stared into Diggs' sunglasses. No one had ever seen the destroyer with the glasses of. Even inside a dark room like the back of Village Pizza, Diggs kept his glasses on. Around school there was a story that the principal once tried to get Digs to remove his glasses. They went into the principal's office. Fifteen minutes later, Diggs came out with the glasses still on. Once in a while, some wiseguys would try to snatch Diggs' glasses off. No one tried that trick more than once.

"Why're you standing up for this wimp?" asked Dackles belligerently. He scowled at Diggs. Digs was almost as tall as Dackles. But, beneath his Japanese videogame t-shirt, his hard muscles showed through.

Diggs seemed to be looking at Dackles. "You been drinking again, my friend?" he asked in an even tone.

"Sure," said Dackles. "What's wrong with a few beers?"

"Same thing that wrong with any drugs or alcohol," replied the Destroyer. "Bad for your reflexes. Slows down your mind. Makes you lose control of the joystick."

Dackles looked at Diggs defiantly. "Beer don't slow down my mind," he said.

Diggs smiled, then put his arm around Dackles, leading him away. "You're probably right, man. It probably doesn't slow down *your* brain at all. But now Don, let's not get excited," he said. Dackles' face twisted in pain as soon as the Destroyer laid his hands on Dackles' shoulder. "Let's go share a nice pizza and just forget about the whole thing." Dackles found himself dragged away. Gabe and Lena, who was standing up now, smiled at the departing bully. "Enjoy your feedbag, Donald Dack," she said.

Dackles looked back over his shoulder. "You'll get yours yet, blondie," he said between clenched teeth.

Gabe turned to Lena. "You know, I can't figure out destroyer Diggs. Sometimes he's a real creep. Other time's he's a really good guy."

"I know what you mean," Lena agreed. "I guess anyone who spends that much time on videogames is bound to be at least a little weird. But that Dackles — I guess I'll never know what makes him tick."

"A bomb makes him tick" Gabe said, leading Lena to the door of Village Pizza. "Let's get out of here."

As they walked back to Gabe's house, Lena commented, "Don Dackles was drunk, wasn't he?"

Gabe could guess where the conversation was going. "Sure he was drunk. I wonder who got the beer for him? Alcohol can be pretty bad for anybody. But for people with a personality like Dackles', it's really a disaster."

"Do you think cocaine is better?" Lena asked.

“Uh oh. Here we go again,” Gabe thought. Out loud he said, “It’s got some pretty nasty aftereffects. But it can really help you play some great music. Just wait til you hear the tape.”

Lena didn’t reply.

When they got back to Gabe’s house, he went up to his room, dug the tape out of his jacket pocket, and took Lena out to the garage. He popped the cassette into the player, turned up the volume, and said, “Not just sit down over here, Lena, relax, and listen to this.”

Gabe sat down on an old sofa next to Lena, closed his eyes, and listened.

The tape began abruptly in the middle of the song. “Monk must have been too high to remember to put the tape in right away,” thought Gabe. Out loud he said, “Oops, sorry, Lena. I didn’t know the sound man started in the middle of he piece. But just listen. It’ll still sound great.”

First came the hammering of Okimoto’s drums. The snare was too loud, and the bass just thumped underneath like a flat tire. The bass was flat, and the lead guitar was playing in a different key. Then in still another key, and sharp, cam Tyrone’s voice:

All you need is blood, baby!

Gabe opened his eyes with a start. Blood? Blood! It was supposed to be “All you need is love!” Gabe hadn’t heard the new word yesterday.

Then he heard his own synthesizer come in. He was playing quickly and accurately. The notes ran up and down the scale in a beautiful, waving pattern. It sounded great by itself. But it had absolutely nothing to do with

what anyone else was playing.

The whole tape first sounded like a roomful of musicians just fooling around and warming up. But after two minutes of the same confusion, it sounded like a nightmare. The volume got louder and louder. The singer started to scream out his words in order to be heard. When the singer got louder, the drummer poured on the volume. To catch up with everyone else, the guitar player started flailing away in the upper octaves of his instrument. Gabe's synthesizer sounds were still just waving away in the background, slowly buried by all the other noise.

Gabe reached over and pushed the stop button.

For almost a minute, he said nothing. Lena sat in silence, too. Finally Gabe spoke.

"That was really awful," he said, more to himself than to Lena.

"I thought you said it sounded great," Lena said in a quiet voice. She didn't want to hurt Gabe's feelings, but she did want him to accept the facts.

"It did sound great while we were playing," Gabe insisted. "I can't understand it!"

"Maybe it's a different jam session," said Lena.

"No, that's it," said Gabe. "I recognize all of it — especially my part. I can't believe it. It sounded so good while we were playing."

"Maybe drugs affect your judgement," suggested Lena.

Gabe thought about that. "I guess so," he admitted. "I fact, I know so. Lena, if I could get you to feel how I felt yesterday when we were playing this tune...."

"I think I understand, Gabe," she said, putting her arm around him. "I can tell by the disappointment in your voice."

Gabe buried his face in his hands. Lena got up, and went over to the amplifier and speaker stand.

"Gabe," she said. "Where's your synthesizer?"

In an instant, Gabe leaped to his feet.

"Oh no! I can't believe it!"

"What's the matter?" asked Lena. Hearing the tone of urgency in Gabe's voice, she rose to her feet too.

"I left all my stuff at the place in San Francisco!" Gabe shouted. "I've got to get over there right now!"

"Calm down," Lena said. "Why don't you just call them up, make sure your equipment is O.K., then we'll take a bus and pick it up?"

"Because I don't have their phone number!" Gabe moaned, pacing the floor. "In fact, I don't even have their address. But if we could get over to Slayton Street, I'm sure I could find the house."

Lena looked thoughtful for a few moments. Then she asked, "Gabe, how did you get home yesterday?"

Gabe looked embarrassed. "Lena, I'll confess that I was so wiped out that I—" he stopped, snapped his fingers, then said, "— Devin! Devin Orion! Now I remember. I was sitting on the front porch of the house where we were playing, and Devin came along in a black limousine."

Lena looked doubtful. "Are you sure you weren't just having a fantasy daydream, Gabe? Don't you remember all the trouble that Devin got into with a black limousine several months ago?"

Gabe suddenly seemed less sure of himself. "Lena's right," he thought. "What would Devin be doing in a black limousine? And why would he just happen to be driving by the house on Slayton Street just then?" Out loud he said, "I'm afraid you may be right, Lena. But the memory is so real! "

"There's one way to find out," Lena suggested.

"Right!" Gabe agreed, and picked up his phone. It rang three times, then the message machine clicked in. Gabe's face showed disappointment and frustration. He almost hung up; but he decided to leave a message just in case. So he waited for the message to finish:

Hello, this is Devin Orion. I'm not in now,
but you can leave a message after the beep.
Pentegram Club members, press code for
further messages.

Gabe smiled at that part of the message. Right after the trouble with the black limousine and the demon on Devin's screen, his friend had set up a special message system for Gabe, Lena, Dave and Marly Chan. That way, Devin could leave personal messages to his friends, while reserving his other tape for messages from anyone else.

Gabe punched in STAR# on his phone. He heard a click, then Devin's voice:

Gabe, this message is for you. I hope you're feeling O.K. today. I would have stayed with you yesterday, but I thought you just needed the sleep. You'll be happy to know that I went back in and fetched your computer from the house on Slayton Street. There were some

pretty weird dudes in there, Gabe! They didn't much want us to take out your computer, but we convinced them that was the best thing to do. I'm going to be gone all day today, so I left your machine with Dave and Marly. I told them if you didn't claim it in 24 hours they could sell it for junk at the thrift store — just kidding! See you later. Oh, and tell Lena hello!"

Gabe was so delighted that he did a little dance around the room. He grabbed Lena by the hands and swung her around. "Hooray and three cheers for Devin Orion, star programmer and saver of his friend's computer!"

Lena let herself be swung around, laughing. When they stopped, she said, "That's really great, Gabe. But a few things puzzle me."

"Like what?" said Gabe, dialing the Chans' phone number.

"Like, how did he know you would be at that address on Slayton Street? Did you tell him?"

Gabe thought while the phone was ringing. "No, I don't think so. Wait a minute. Maybe I did. He came over yesterday just before the drummer picked me up."

But Lena still wasn't satisfied. "Did he..."

But she was interrupted as Gabe said, "Yo, Marly! Dev said that he dropped off my computer at your place yesterday. You haven't sold it yet have you?"

"Who would buy that piece of junk?" came Marly's mocking reply.

"You would, if you had the money, Marly. But you and Dave will just have to save up until you can hock that old pile of chips you call a computer

and buy a real class act like mine.”

They both laughed and chatted a bit more. Finally Gabe said, “How about if I come by to pick up my machine in half an hour?”

“See you then,” said Marly. “Take care.”

Gabe hung up the phone. “Lena, I can’t tell you...”

“I know, Gabe, and I’m really glad for you. But can we get back to what we were talking about before?”

“You mean about Dev knowing where I was on Slayton Street?” Gabe thought for a moment. “You know, I didn’t even know the address of where I was going myself until the drummer picked me up.”

“Did the drummer tell Dev the address?” Lena asked.

Gabe thought again. “No, I don’t think so. No, I’m almost positive he didn’t. But, darn it Lena, he must have told him. How else would Dev know where I’d be?”

“That’s what I’m wondering, too?” said Lena thoughtfully.

“Wait a minute,” said Gabe. “You sound like you’re suspecting Dev of something.”

“No, I’m really not,” protested Lena. “I’m just trying to get some answers. The second question is, what was Devin doing in a limousine — black limousine? Was it the same limousine that the couple rode off in from the Pacific Ocean concert?”

Gabe hadn’t thought of that angle. “That’s a good question, Lena, but I can’t tell you. I don’t have any memory at all of the inside or outside of the limousine that took me home, except that it was black.”

“Very strange,” was all Lena would say.

Gabe looked at her. "You know, Lena, I have a question of my own. I'm going to call up Dev again, and this time I want you to listen to his message for me." Gabe dialed, and Lena listened.

"What's your question?" Lena asked.

"Who's the *w e* that Dev is talking about? I only remember seeing him in the limo. But it seems that Dev and someone else — or more than one other person — went in to get my machine."

"What I want to know," said Lena, "is how he knew I would be here when you phoned in for that message."

Before Gabe could answer, the front doorbell rang.

Gabe said, "I wonder who that is?" He and Lena went to the front door and opened it.

There stood Mr. Yea, their math and computer science teacher.

"Mr. Yea! What are you doing here?" Gabe asked in surprise.

"Don't you remember?" replied the man at the door. "You asked me to bring back your music disks when I was through listening to them."

"Oh, sure, uh, thanks," Gabe stammered. He was caught completely by surprise. He had forgotten all about the arrangements with Mr. Yea.

Mr. Yea stood smiling at the door, as if waiting for something. Like Devin said once, Mr. Yea reminded people of a wizard out of *Lord of the Rings*. He was around sixty years old, with a medium length beard and gray hair the color of steel. He was tall, and carried himself like a military man. Some of Gabe's classmates said that Mr. Yea had fought in World War II or Korea, but no one knew for sure. He was the toughest teacher at the school — and the most respected. Gabe always struggled just to get C's in his class; but Benjamin Yea had taught Gabe just about everything

he needed to know about using computers to make music.

“Gabe,” Lena whispered, “you’re supposed to invite guests to come inside.”

“Oh right!” he said. “I’m sorry, Mr. Yea. Won’t you come in and stay for a while?”

“I would like to,” said Benjamin Yea, “but I have an appointment in about fifteen minutes — with your friend Devin, in fact. We are working on a new project together.”

“Wow!” was all Lena could say. It was rumored that Mr. Yea was not just the best programmer the Pentegram Club knew about: he was one of the best in the country, and the United States government flew him to Washington and New York for some kind of official business. If Devin was working with Mr. Yea on some project, that must mean that Devin himself must have gotten really good with computer programming. Gabe decided to talk to Devin sometime soon about his work with Mr. Yea. Maybe the two of them were working on something that the whole Pentegram Club could get involved with! But for now, Gabe decided to stay on the subject of his music.

“What did you think of my disk, Mr. Yea?” Gabe asked hopefully.

Benjamin Yea frowned. “I looked into the programming code you wrote for the first two songs on the disk. Terrible stuff. I can’t seem to teach you write logical, straightforward programs.”

“Pretty bad, I guess,” Gabe replied, crestfallen. “I guess I’m just not cut out to be a musician.” Gabe’s feelings were really hurt. He respected Mr. Yea’s opinion highly; and this criticism....

“Just a minute, Gabriel,” said Mr. Yea, holding up his hand. “I said nothing about the music. Your programming is sloppy, as I said. But the music itself is glorious — truly enchanting. As you know, I usually prefer classical music. But your compositions have a genuine magic. In fact, I would love to hear some more. Do you have any more of your music disks that I might borrow?”

Gabe hesitated. “Uh, well, I do, but I left them at a place in San Francisco. But I’m going over there to get them back this afternoon. As soon as I have them, you can borrow the disks.”

Benjamin Yea looked at Gabe for a moment. “Gabriel,” he said finally, “you seem troubled. Is anything the matter?”

Gabe looked at Lena, then back at Benjamin Yea. “Uh, no, Mr. Yea, not really. I, well, I just left my synthesizer at the house I was playing at yesterday, and I’m sort of anxious to get it back.”

Benjamin Yea looked at Gabe for a moment. “I see. You’re not in any trouble, then — nothing I might be able to help you with?”

“No, No, Mr. Yea,” Gabe replied. “I’ll be fine — I mean, I *am* fine, no problem. But thanks for your offer.”

“Very well,” Benjamin Yea said. “Good-bye, then.” He started down the stairs, then turned. “Gabriel, when you come back to class, let me show you a more elegant way to program a complex rhythm for your drum machine.”

Gabe smiled. “Sure thing, Mr. Yea. And thanks again.”

After Benjamin Yea had driven off in his Mustang Classic, Gabe said, “That Mr. Yea is amazing. How could he tell something was bothering me?”

“Because you can’t hide your emotions very well, Gabe,” she said with a smile. “But it was great that he liked your music so much.”

Gabe and Lena then walked over to Dave and Marly Chan’s house. Gabe rang the doorbell, and Marly answered.

“Come in, you two!” said Marly, holding open the door. Marly Chan was tall, with long, straight black hair that cascaded down her back. Her specialty was writing simple, elegant programs. It didn’t matter what the programs were about— spreadsheets, games, graphics generators, you name it — as long as the program itself was neat and did everything it was supposed to do.

“Yo, Gabe and Lena, good to see you,” said Dave Chan as he came out to meet them. Dave looked a lot like his sister; but he always wore a smile that looked like he was about to get into mischief. Dave was a game fanatic. He played chess with friends in Tokyo, exchanged puzzles with an acquaintance in Africa, and traded games and game hints with people all over America. He wasn’t the ace videogame player that Destroyer Diggs was, but he was a first-rate strategy player. There wasn’t a dungeons-and-dragons or simulation game that he couldn’t win in three days or less.

Dave pointed to a box by the front door. “Here’s your machine, Gabe. Dev said you left it at some place in San Francisco? Man, I can’t believe you just walked out and left your computer behind!”

“Uh, well, I wasn’t feeling too well, so Dev picked me up and brought me home,” said Gabe.

“I wonder why he brought your machine over here, instead of just dropping it off at your house,” Marly said.

Lena looked at Gabe. "Maybe Dev wanted you to tell Dave and Marly what's going on," she said.

Gabe said nothing for a moment. "Should I just keep this whole business to myself?" Gabe asked himself. But there was Lena. She knew all about the affair with Venus Flytrap. What would she think if Gabe just put Dave and Marly off with some vague excuse, then went home without telling them what was really the matter?

Gabe looked back at Lena. "Do you really think I should get Marly and Dave involved in this?" he asked.

"Aren't they your friends?" was Lena's reply.

Gabe nodded, then turned to Dave and Marly. "The truth is," Gabe said, "that I got high on cocaine at a place in San Francisco. I got so stoned, in fact, that I forgot to pick up my computer and my synthesizer."

Marly and Dave gave him a look of surprise. Before they could say anything, Gabe continued: "Yeah, it was a really dumb thing to do. Everyone else was getting high, so I did too. That's no excuse, I know. But I did it. After we played, I got so mixed up that I barely knew which end was up. I wound up sitting outside the house where we played, when Dev drove up in a limousine...."

"A limousine!" Dave interrupted. "What was Dev..."

"No idea," Gabe interrupted, "but I'm sure glad he came along when he did. He must have driven my home, then taken my computer over to your house. But my synthesizer is still in San Francisco."

"You left your synthesizer in the City?" exclaimed Marly. "Why don't we all go together and help you carry it back?"

“That’s really nice of you, Marly,” Gabe replied. “But this is my problem. I don’t want to drag you into this.”

“Who’s being dragged?” said Dave as he and Marly pushed Lena and Gabe toward the door. “It sounds like an adventure. You wouldn’t want us to miss out on the adventure would you?”

Gabe laughed. “Great — I’m glad you’re coming. Should we call Dev and see if he can make it? Then we’ll have the whole Pentegram Club together.”

They all agreed it would be a good idea. But when Dave called Devin, he only got an answering machine. Gabe got on the line and left a message, telling Devin where they were going. Then they all headed down to the bus stop.

* * *

An hour later, the four friends left the bus three blocks from Slayton Street in the Haight-Ashbury district. Lena rarely came into the city, and Marly and Dave had never been to this part. Even Gabe, who had been here before, still couldn’t help staring at the people they passed by on the streets. The weirdness started on top with strange haircuts: shaved heads, Mohawk haircuts, and cropped hair with words like “No Bad Drugs” or “Out Of It” cut close to the scalp. One couple, somewhere around 25 years old, was dressed entirely in green leather. Their hair was dyed to match. One Afro-American had his hair worked into dreadlocks, with razor blades swinging from the end of each lock.

It began to seem like every step they took presented a scene out of a movie. One old man, wearing only one shoe, was pushing a shopping cart entirely filled with shoes. Two policemen were questioning two very young girls who were

clutching big paper sacks to their chests. An old woman was standing on a street corner screaming out passages from the Bible at everyone who passed by her. Two little kids were violently shaking a parking meter. A roller skater with Walkman earplugs glided down the middle of the street, ignoring the yells and honks from motorists.

“We’re not in Kansas anymore,” Dave whispered to his sister.

“Are we still on planet earth?” she replied.

Soon they came to Slayton Street and turned south.

“This is it,” said Gabe, leading them to the door of the house. He rang the bell as the other three waited on the sidewalk.

While Gabe was waiting, a teenager with a scraggly beard and bleary eyes came up to Marly. “Spare change, baby?” he said with a smile that revealed two missing lower front teeth.

“No, not today,” she said, and looked away from the man.

“If not today, how about tonight?” he continued, moving closer to her.

Marly looked at him. The panhandler saw the fear in her eyes. He put his hand on her arm. “You just down here to have good time, baby? Maybe check out the local action? Well, check me out. I...”

“Bug off,” said Lena, removing the man’s hand from Marly’s arm.

The man took a step back, glared at Lena, then snarled, “You want a real experience, girlie? You want to see how the poor dirty hippies live?” Then he let loose a stream of swear-words.

“Gabe,” shouted Dave, “let’s get out of here.”

Gabe looked back, and started to come down the steps to the sidewalk. A crowd was starting to gather — passers-by wanting a ringside position if there was going to be trouble.

But Lena took action first. “We’re not tourists, buddy, we’re down here to see some friends of his” — she pointed at Gabe — “and if you’ve got a problem with that, what are you going to do about it?”

The confidence in her voice stopped the boy cold. He looked her over, spat at her feet, then ambled unsteadily down the street away from them.

“Lena,” Gabe said as he came up to his friends, “it just seems you’ll never let a guy rush up and protect you.”

“In a neighborhood like this,” said Lena, looking around at the crowd, which was fast breaking up now that it seemed there would be no fight, “everybody needs protection.”

Just then the door to the house opened. Gabe turned around to see Majudo stick his head out the door.

“Hey, Majudo!” said Gabe, going back up the steps. “I came back to get...”

Majudo slipped outside and shut the door behind him. He was wearing only a dirty pair of khaki pants — no shoes or shirt. His hair seemed even more scraggly today. “What you want, man?” he said in a menacing voice. Majudo was standing in front of the door like a guardian. Gabe stopped in front of him.

“I came back for my synthesizer,” said Gabe evenly.

“Synthesizer? Synthesizer!” Majudo said, looking Gabe in the eye. “Who the hell are you?”

The unfriendliness stopped Gabe short. “I’m Gabe Wagner. Don’t you remember? I was jamming over here yesterday afternoon.”

“Yeah? I don’t remember you,” replied Majudo, looking Gabe over from head to foot. “Who was you jamming with?”

“Venus Flytrap,” Gabe answered. Then his own voice took an unfriendly turn. Just what was this guy trying to pull? “Man, you know I was here yesterday. What’s wrong with you?”

Majudo regarded Gabe as if he were on trial. "Maybe you were," he admitted finally. "But you didn't leave no synthesizer here."

Gabe saw at once that he wasn't going to get anywhere dealing with Majudo. "Are Adam and Mona here?" he asked.

"They don't live here," was Majudo's reply.

"How about..." Gabe began.

"Nobody here but myself," Majudo interrupted. "And I got business to attend to." He turned to go back into the house.

Gabe began to feel desperate. Was Majudo trying to rip off his synthesizer? "When is Tyrone going to be back?" he asked.

Majudo stepped inside the house, then said over his shoulder. "Sometime, maybe tomorrow." Then the door shut Gabe could hear the click of the lock.

Gabe walked back down the stairs to his friends.

"Uh oh," said Dave. "Gabe, I can see the steam coming out of your ears."

"You'd be steamed too," Gabe shouted, "if someone had just ripped you off like that!" He looked up at the window, but the curtain was drawn. It was clear that Majudo wasn't going to let him into the house.

"I'm really sorry, Gabe," said Marly. "Is there anything we can do to help you get your equipment back?"

Before he could answer, Lena said, "We passed a coffee shop on the way over here. Let's get off the street and sit down to discuss this mess. I don't like standing around out here."

So they went back to the main street, found the coffee shop, ordered some drinks, then sat down at a long table.

"Now what?" said Gabe when they were all seated. "My synthesizer's in that house, and I can't get to it. "

“I wouldn’t push that Majudo character too far, either,” added Dave. “He looks weird enough to do something real crazy if you bugged him.”

“But Gabe can’t just let them have his synthesizer,” said Marly.

“I think Dave may be right,” said Lena. “At least you got your computer back. You can always get another synthesizer.”

“Synthesizers are expensive,” Gabe replied. “And why should I let him have something that’s mine? “

For another half an hour, the four of them discussed, debated, and argued about what course to take. Finally Gabe said, “Look, Pentagrams, we’re not getting anywhere. We still don’t have a good plan for getting my synthesizer back, and I don’t want to contribute it to Majudo.”

“Why not take your computer back and let him steal that, too?” said a voice from the other end of the table.

They all turned to look at the speaker. There, sitting at the other end of the table, was an old man with a thick beard and very long silver-white hair. Several strings of brightly colored beaded necklace were draped around his neck and over his shoulders. On the table in front of him stood a large glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice.

The whole statement, and the person who made it, seemed so off the wall that none of the Pentagrams knew what to say. So the man continued.

“I couldn’t help overhearing your story, friends. Bad scene, bad scene” — here he shook his head, and the long hair flowed back and forth in waves — “but that’s how it comes down these days in the Haight. Not like the golden 60s when hippies believed in love and took care of each other instead of ripping each other off.” He paused to take a big swallow of orange juice, then continued. “But that’s the way it’s been ever since the hard drugs hit the scene. No more *all you need is*

love. Now it's all you need is money, and I'm looking out for number one. Bad scene, bad scene."

The four friends were still silent and continued to stare, so the man concluded: "But you got ripped off. That's no good. Upsets the cosmic balance of things. So, to get it back, you need to risk your computer."

"I don't follow you," said Gabe. "How is giving Majudo my computer going to help?"

"Aha!" laughed the man. "At least you're interested now! Well, to begin with, I know Majudo. He's a sleazeball pure and simple. He's probably already taken your synthesizer and sold it. If you let him get his hands on the computer, he'll sell it to the same buyer."

"So how does Gabe come out a winner in that one?" asked Dave.

The man looked at each of the four friends. "Are any of you good at electronics?" he asked with a smile.

"Pretty good," Dave replied.

"Then here's the plan," said the man, still smiling. "You put a tracking device inside the computer. Go back and play music with your friends. Leave it at the same place, and Majudo's sure to steal it. You follow him with the tracking device, find out where he's hidden his stuff, then get you equipment back."

"Wait a minute," said Gabe. "In the first place, how do we know for sure it was Majudo who stole my synthesizer? And in the second place, how do we know he hasn't sold it already?"

The man took a long drink of orange juice, wiped off his beard, and said, "Same answer to both questions. Majudo was in here just an hour ago asking around if anybody wanted to buy a synthesizer. He's done that kind of thing before. But some times it takes him a while to come up with a buyer. No one seems to know where he stashes what he steals. If you folks are successful with

that tracking device, you may turn up a lot of stolen goods. You might be doing a lot of Majudo's victims a favor."

"Sounds like a great idea!" Gabe agreed. "When...."

But Lena cut in. She was looking hard at the older man. "Just a second, Gabe. Look, Mister, we all appreciate your advice. But why are you so interested in helping us? We don't even know your name."

Marly Chan added, "Lena has a good point. We don't want to seem impolite, but our good friend has just lost a valuable piece of equipment...."

"And you want to be sure that I'm not just setting him up to get ripped off a second time — correct?" said the man with a smile.

"That's about the size of it," Lena agreed. Gabe noticed that she wasn't smiling.

But the man still wore his grin. "Fair enough — and, given what's happened to your friend so far, your attitude is smart, too. Around here, I'm called Sunburst. I've got a straight name on my driver's license, but Sunburst is what I'm called by my friends and enemies, so Sunburst is my name. I've been in and out of the Haight-Ashbury scene since the Summer of Love back in 1967. The Haight and I have been through some pretty tough times since those days. But I still believe in the old Hippie ideal of the Flower Generation. That's the main reason I'm trying to help you."

"What ideal are you talking about?" asked Dave.

"That's right — you kids probably weren't even born when we were celebrating the summer of love —" he looked at the four friends — "In fact, I'm positive you weren't born yet. Well, there were a lot of people of all kinds here back then. But the basic hippie philosophy could be summed up in one phrase."

"What's that?" asked Gabe.

“All you need is love,” replied Sunburst. As he spoke the words he spread out his arms, palms upward, in a gesture that seemed to include everyone and everything.

Lena, Dave, and Marly smiled. The sincerity of Sunburst’s words touched them deeply, and all suspicion was gone from their faces. But Gabe wasn’t smiling. Sunburst seemed to sense Gabe’s state of mind.

“Gabe — is that what they call you? — you look troubled. If you can’t believe the words, then maybe you can at last respect the idea behind them.”

Gabe was silent for a while, then spoke. “It’s not the words, Sunburst — that’s a great name, by the way — it’s just a memory I have connected to those words. You see, yesterday I was playing that song with Venus Flytrap over on Slayton Street. I’d taken some cocaine from Majudo for the first time in my life just before we jammed on that tune. We all played terribly. When I went home after that, I left behind my computer and synthesizer. So you see, I’ve got a bad feeling about that tune right now.”

For the first time, Sunburst didn’t smile as he answered. “There, now. You’ve just put your finger on why I’m willing to help you. People like Majudo were the ones who destroyed the good vibes that were here in the Haight years ago. They took a beautiful idea and turned it into something evil. They say only one bad apple can spoil a barrelful. Well, only one Majudo can spoil a whole household full of good people. And just a few more like him can spoil a whole neighborhood. And they did.” He looked grim, like he was remembering something that had once caused him pain. Then he smiled again, took a sip of orange juice, and said. “So I’ve got my reasons for wanting to stop Majudo. And you want to get your synthesizer back. What do you think of the plan?”

Dave, Marly, Lena and Gabe talked over the idea for half an hour. At last, they agreed that it was risky, but worth a try.

“I’ll leave a note on the door with my phone number, and tell them I want to come and jam with them again,” said Gabe.

“Maybe the synthesizer will still be there,” said Marly hopefully.

“I doubt it very much,” said Gabe. “But I’ve got a back-up keyboard that I can use. The main thing is to leave behind my computer with the tracking device in it.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” said Dave. “We’ll loan you an old computer of ours. That way, if something goes wrong, you won’t lose your good computer.”

“Will your music program run on your friend’s computer?” Sunburst asked.

“No way,” Gabe replied. “The program is custom-made for my computer.

“Then I’m afraid you’d better take your own machine, Gabe,” said Sunburst. “Otherwise, Majudo, or whoever took your synthesizer, might get suspicious that you’re setting him up.”

Gabe thought for a moment. “I appreciate the thought, Dave,” he said, “but Sunburst has a good point. We’ll just have to make sure that tracking device really works.”

After some more discussion and plan-making, the four friends got up to leave. Sunburst stood up too.

“Gabe,” he said, taking a large medallion from around his neck, “I’ve got a parting present from you. This is my own good luck medallion. The stone in the center came from Egypt. The woman I got it from said that it one belonged to an Egyptian sorcerer. It’s always brought me good fortune. Wear it while you’re playing music. I bet it make you feel better than that cocaine Majudo gave you.”

Gabe was speechless. “It’s beautiful, Sunburst. But I can’t accept a gift like this.”

Sunburst smiled again. “Oh, I’m not giving it to you, Gabriel. I’m passing it to you. The tradition that goes with this medallion says that you can wear it until

you find someone who seems to need it more than you do. Then you pass it on. Right now you need it more than I do. When you find someone who needs it more than you do, you have to give it up.”

Gabe and his friends gathered around and gazed at the medallion. The chain that held it was some dull grey metal — probably steel, Gabe decided. The chain hooked into a circular setting that held the stone. It was a highly polished rock, a perfect circle maybe three inches in diameter. Several colors swirled around in a creamy, cloud pattern. In the very center was a smaller circle of intense yellow.

It was the most beautiful stone Gabe had ever seen.

The backing of the stone was in the shape of a flaring sun, with rays made of yellow metal shooting off from the center. Gabe picked up the medallion by two of the rays, then slowly put it around his neck. It was heavy, but not uncomfortably so.

“Wow!” was all that Dave could say.

“It’s really stunning,” said Marly, still staring at the medallion, which now hung down to the middle of Gabe’s chest.

Lena studied the medallion with different eyes. “I wonder if I could generate a fractal pattern to look like that?” she said out loud.

Sunburst got up to leave. As he headed for the door, he turned and said to Lena, “Try binary decomposition on level sets.” He then stepped out the door, and disappeared into the crowds of people that thronged the sidewalk.

“Strange guy,” said Dave, looking out into the street.

“But nice,” his twin sister added.

Gabe, though, was looking at Lena. Her expression was pure amazement. Her mouth was partly open, and her right hand reached up to brush back her curly hair.

“What’s the matter?” said Gabe, suddenly concerned. “What did he say?”

For a while, Lena didn't speak. Finally she said, "What he said was *binary decomposition on level sets*."

"Doesn't make any sense to me," said Dave.

"Does it make sense to you?" Marly asked Lena.

She smiled. "It sure does. He's right. If I want to make a fractal to look like that stone, I might be able to do it using binary decomposition on level sets."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Gabe, taking Lena's arm and heading for the door. "But I do want to get started on that plan. Let's get going."

The four friends went back to the Slayton Street house where Gabe had played music the day before. He took out a pencil, and wrote out a note:

Dear Adam/Mona/Tyrone/Okimoto/Monk:

Had a great time jamming with Venus Flytrap yesterday. Am I still invited in? Give me a call at home when you want to play again.

Gabe

P.S. : I can't find my synthesizer. But don't worry: I've got another one. Next time I'll bring along some dynamite sound patches for Monk to play with.

He folded the note twice, then slipped it under the door of 610 Slayton. Then the four Pentegram Club friends caught the next bus home. They agreed to meet next morning, 10 o'clock, at the Chans.

Gabe got home early. He asked Lena if she wanted to out out for a hamburger; but she said she wanted to go home and “try out some stuff.” Gabe was disappointed; but he knew exactly what was going through Lena’s mind.

“She’s going to try out those fractal patterns,” he said to himself with a smile. To Lena he had said, “Well, now I know where I stand. You’d rather spend your time with a computer than with me.”

Lena gave him a look of make-believe anger. “Well, I like that! I spend the whole day protecting you from the weirdos in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, and now you won’t even let me go home to work.”

Gabe smiled, and ran his hand over Lena’s hair. “O.K., Lena, you’re right. I want to write some music myself. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye,” she said with a smile and a wave of her hand, and walked off toward her house.

When he got home, Gabe went to his computer and loaded up the Music Maker program. With his main synthesizer gone, he had to use an old keyboard he hadn’t used in months. But it would do. He opened the file called *Lena*, then listened to the drums, bass, keyboard, and flutes weave the melody together. The whispered words came forth in a gentle wave of sound:

Please don’t do anything wrong.
Don’t spoil the ending of the song.

Gabe put in a brief bass solo, then brought up the flute again to play harmony to the synthesized voice. This time it sang:

We can make it right,
We can make it bright,
And make the sun burst through the night.

Gabe listened to the results; changed two notes in the bass solo, saved the results, and switched off his equipment. By midnight he was asleep.

CHAPTER 6

The Plan: Step One

The next morning, Gabe got dressed and headed out the door for the Chans' house. But as soon as he reached the front steps he paused, thought for a second, then turned back. In his room, he picked up the medallion from his night table, looked at it, then put it on. He wasn't used to wearing medallions or any other jewelry. But this one — "Well, like Sunburst said," Gabe thought as he headed out the front door again, "Maybe it will bring us luck."

And the more Gabe thought about it, the more he realized that he would need some luck for the plan to work. What if Venus Flytrap didn't call him back again? What if Majudo was gone? Or, if he was there, would he take the bait? And if he was there, and if he took the bait, could he and his friends get his synthesizer *and* his computer back again safely? The more he considered the matter, the less sure he became.

But Dave Chan hadn't lost any confidence. If anything, he was bubbling over with it.

"Gabe, old friend, you're looking at the genius of the century," said Dave Chan, pulling him into his computer room.

Marly and Lena were there waiting. "More like the genius of the last thirty minutes," said Marly. "But I've got to admit that my goofy twin brother actually made something pretty well." She looked at Dave and curled her upper lip in a mock sneer. "I do hate to admit it, though."

Dave smiled at his sister. "I wish I could tape record that admission and play it back for you the next time you call me an orangutan for messing up some

computer problem. But now," he said, turning to Gabe, "for a little demonstration. Where's your computer?"

"Uh oh," said Gabe, slapping his forehead. "I left it at home. I'll run back and get it."

"No problem," said Dave. "It's small, and we can all just zoom over to your place and install it there."

They set off for Gabe's house, Lena talking in whispers to Marly, while Dave enthusiastically explained the workings of the tracer device to Gabe. Suddenly the girls stopped.

"Look!" exclaimed Marly. "Look at that, will you?"

They all looked — and none of them could quite believe what they saw. There about a block away, were Destroyer Diggs and Devin talking together. Diggs was doing the talking just then. Devin was nodding his head, then counted off something on his fingers.

"I don't believe it," said Dave.

"Neither can I," Gabe agreed. "I thought those two never got along."

"Well, they're..." Marly began.

Just then, the second surprise took place.

A big black limousine turned the corner and pulled up to the two boys. Destroyer Diggs said something to the driver, shook Devin's hand, then got in. The black car drove off.

But not before all four friends had noticed the license plate:

SPD DMN

"What is going on here?" Gabe exclaimed. "Come on, Pentegrammers. Let's catch up with Devin and ask him to explain all this."

Devin had just mounted his unicycle as was beginning to pedal off in the opposite direction. The four friends were about to chase him down, when a voice

stopped them.

“You folks aren’t spying on your friend, are you?”

They all, stopped and turned. It was Mister Yea.

Mister Yea stood smiling at them, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

Lena spoke first. “Well, not exactly, Mister Yea. It’s just that we saw Devin with Dest.... — with someone he usually doesn’t get along with, so we wanted to find out what the story is.”

“I should think you would be glad he is making new friends,” Benjamin Yea replied. “It’s especially good when we can turn an old enemy into a new friend. But what are the four of you doing together?”

Lena looked at Gabe. After a second’s hesitation, Gabe replied, “Uh, we’re working on a computer music project right now, Mister Yea.”

Benjamin Yea looked surprised. “Why, I didn’t know that Lena and Dave were interested in computer music. How did you get their attention, Gabriel?”

Gabe felt uncomfortable. He didn’t want to lie to Mister Yea. But he also didn’t want to bring up the whole mess of the lost synthesizer and the cocaine. So he answered, “Well, there are some technical problems that Dave is helping me out with, and Lena’s just sort of along because she’s interested.”

“Interested in what?” Benjamin Yea persisted.

Gabe hesitated again. This time Lena came to his rescue.

“Interested in Gabe, Mister Yea. We went to a concert together last night, and were going together now.”

Gabe was astonished at this response. Marly and Dave looked just as amazed. Mister Yea just smiled. “Well, now, that’s really nice. It’s good to have boyfriends and girlfriends with similar interests. I must be going now. Keep me posted on how your technical problem turns out.” He waved back, turned the corner, walked down the street.

Gabe was staring at Lena. "Lena...."

She interrupted him. "Don't even say it, Gabe. I was just saving you from those embarrassing questions. You're a terrible liar. Mister Yea would have found you out in a minute."

"But you told him...." Marly started.

"That I was interested in Gabe," said Lena with a wink. "Well, that's not a lie. I am interested in him."

Gabe's started to smile.

"And I'm interested in you, too, Marly, and in Dave, Mister Yea, and all of my friends," she continued.

Gabe killed the smile.

"Wait a minute," said Dave with a frown. "You also said you went to a concert with him. You also said you were going with him now."

Lena tossed her head. "Let's get going." As they walked, she said, "It's true. We did go to a concert together a couple of nights ago. And it's also true that I'm going with him now. We're going over to his house to put the tracer in the computer. So we're all going with him."

"Pretty clever," Marly admitted.

"Pretty sneaky," mumbled Dave.

"Pretty disappointing," said Gabe before he could stop himself.

Lena looked at him seriously. "Why Gabe, you know I like you. I was just trying to help us get away from Mister Yea without having to tell him a lie."

"I know Lena," said Gabe, recovering himself. "And thanks. You handled it really well."

When the four friends assembled in Gabe's music room/garage, they saw a note posted on the door.

“My sister left me a message,” said Gabe. “It’s from Mona in Venus Flytrap. They want me to come over this afternoon for a jam session.”

“From Mona,” asked Lena in a cold voice. “So she’s the one inviting you?”

Gabe didn’t take the bait. “Sure. Why not? She’s a member of the group too.” Then he turned to Dave, ignoring the pout on Lena’s face. “O.K., genius electronics expert. Here’s my computer. Now what have you got?”

Dave took out a small, circular device from one pocket, and what looked like a remote control operator from another. “This is it,” he said, holding up the round black piece. Gabe took it and looked it over. It was no bigger than a quarter, blank on one side, and a piece of tape on the other.

“How does it work?” Gabe asked, handing it back to Dave.

“Simple,” his friend replied. “Inside this is a radio signal sender. You attach it by peeling off this tape on the back and just sticking it wherever you want it to go. But this —” he held up the other device — “is the real secret to making it work. You press this button, and it activates the signal. Then you look here on the front panel, and you can see a circular map. The sender makes a flashing red dot on the map. So you just follow the red dot, and it will take you to the tracking device. Pretty nifty, eh?”

“Pretty nifty!” Gabe agreed. “So let’s put the sender inside my computer and activate it right now. It won’t interfere with the computer functions, I hope.”

“No way,” said Dave. “I made sure of that.”

Marly took off the cover of Gabe’s computer. Dave applied the signaling device firmly to the bottom. Marly then put the cover back on.

“All right,” said Dave, holding the remote controller. “Here we go.” He pushed the button, and immediately a red light began flashing in the middle of the screen map.”

“Looks like we’re ready for that Majudo character,” said Lena.

The four friends spent another hour discussing the next stage of their plans.

The Plan: Step Two

That afternoon, Gabe, Lena, Dave and Marly all took the bus over to Haight Street in the City. Gabe held a box with the processing unit, keyboard and monitor of his computer, while Lena carried the small synthesizer in its hard plastic case. When they stepped off the bus, the streets were practically empty. The sky was thick with fog, and a sharp wind added a bite to the air. Gabe saw the same man who had hassled Lena the day before huddled up in a ragged overcoat and sleeping in the doorway of a closed bookstore. From somewhere out of sight came a long cry: "Oh no, no!" Then the street was silent, except for the muffled sounds of passing cars.

The four friends went to the same coffee shop they had visited the day before. Gabe looked around hopefully. "I sort of wish Sunburst were here," he said, touching the stone of the medallion.

"I know what you mean," said Dave. "Like, this whole plan is basically his idea."

"It's our plan now," said Lena. "So are we all ready?"

Marly and Dave ordered drinks, then sat down together and took out the tracking device. Gabe and Lena gathered up his equipment and headed for Slayton Street.

When they got to the door, Gabe and Lena could hear the thundering sounds of the music from inside. Gabe knocked, then knocked again even harder, and finally banged on the door with his fists. No one came.

“They’re making quite a racket in there,” said Lena. “I guess they can’t hear us. Try the door.”

Gabe twisted the doorknob — and the door opened. A solid sheet of electronic sound crashed into them.

“Maybe we should have brought the earplugs!” Lena shouted.

“What?” Gabe shouted back.

“I said...” Lena began, but Gabe waved her off, then motioned for her to follow.

They walked into the back room where Adam, Mona, Tyrone, and Okimoto were jamming away on their instruments. Everyone seemed to be unaware of anyone else. Tyrone was singing words, Mona and Adam were playing in different keys, and Okimoto was driving his drums as hard as he could.

Monk Warren saw Gabe from behind the control console. He waved, then shouted something. Gabe put down his equipment, then made a “turn it down” gesture with his hands. Monk nodded, and immediately cut the volume down by half. Adam and Mona immediately looked up at Monk, their expressions seeming to say, “Why did you do that?” Then they saw Gabe and Lena. Okimoto saw them too. The music dribbled to a stop.

“Hey, man, good to see you!” said Adam. “Set your stuff up and let’s jam!”

Mona came over to Gabe and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “I’m so glad you could make it,” she said with a smile. “We all really liked your playing.”

Gabe looked over at Lena, who was staring unsmilingly at Mona. “Uh, Lena, you remember Adam and Mona here, don’t you?” he said.

Lena gave Mona a frosty smile. “Of course I do. You’re both part of the group Venus Flypaper aren’t you?”

“Venus Flytrap,” Mona corrected her.

Lena laughed. “Oh, right. It slipped my mind. Flypaper only catches flies.

The Venus Flytrap eats living things whole.”

Gabe saw where this wordplay was heading, so he cut them off. “Say Monk,” he called over. “Could you help me jack into the sound system?” Then turning to Lena, he added, “Could you help me find the sound patch disks for my computer?”

Just then, Majudo walked in. He was wearing only a pair of faded, ripped bluejeans. His hair looked as if it hadn’t been washed in a year. But he came right up to Gabe and said, “Say, I remember you. Didn’t you come over here to jam the other day?” Then he looked down at the computer and the synthesizer. “Righteous equipment!” he said admiringly.

Gabe’s first impulse was to grab Majudo by the shoulders and shake him until he confessed to stealing the synthesizer. But instead, Gabe said, “Yeah, this is top of the line, Majudo.”

“I can see that,” Majudo replied. When he first came into the room, his eyes had the glazed look of a stoned man. But now there was a crafty calculation in his look as he admired Gabe’s equipment.

“Hey, Majudo,” said Mona. “You got any more powder? Maybe we can do a hit or two while Gabe sets up.”

“Sure thing!” he said. Majudo, Tyrone, Adam, Mona and Okimoto left the room. Monk was uncoiling the sound cables as Gabe set up his computer and synthesizer. Lena came over to Gabe.

“That Majudo is one sleazy character,” she said with disgust.

Monk looked up at her. “You’re right about that,” he agreed. “But no one seems to know how to get rid of him. And besides, he brings in the drugs that the musicians seem to like.”

“How about you?” Lena asked. “Do you take drugs.”

Monk didn’t look at her. He just kept on putting input and output jacks into

place. “Last year my best friend died of AIDS he got from an infected needle. I stay away from that stuff.”

“But the others....” Lena began.

Monk interrupted. “The others do what they want. I’m not the cops or their mother. I think it’s dumb and dangerous. But if they want to take Majudo’s powder, I’m not going to stop them.”

“Hey Gabe!” came Mona’s voice from the next room. “You want to try some of this?”

Gabe glanced at Lena. This was a part of their plan — but it seemed awfully risky just then. “Sure. Be right in,” he called back. To Lena he said, “Could you help Monk setting up? I’ll be right back.” Then he left the room.

Monk gave Gabe a puzzled look as he walked out. To Lena he said, “That’s a surprise. After last time I thought for sure he’d stay away from the cocaine.”

Lena looked down at the computer. “He does what he wants to,” she said evasively. She didn’t want to lie to Monk; but she couldn’t trust anyone else until the plan was completed.

A few minutes later, the musicians and Majudo straggled back into the room. Lena looked at their faces. They all wore smiles. Okimoto was laughing. Even Gabe seemed to be in high spirits.

“Let’s jam on!” shouted Tyrone. Monk went to the console, and the music began.

From the fist bar, it was obvious to Lena that the musicians were too stoned to play together. Mona kept thrumming one low bass note in no particular rhythm. Adam played fast riffs at the top of his fretboard, while Okimoto played a monotonous funk beat. Tyrone was singing some words; but his sound was turned down so low that Lena could only see his lips move. Gabe, she saw was playing another song altogether, She strained to hear what he was playing. To

her surprise, she recognized the song that he had composed for her just a few days ago. Its sweet melody stood out like a rainbow in the middle of the swirling, thrashing sounds of the rest of the instruments. Tears came to her eyes.

Just then, she felt a tap on her shoulders. It was Majudo, making a beckoning motion with his index finger. Curious, Lena followed him into the next room, where the sound was a little less deafening.

“My lady, that is one fine coat you’re wearing” he said, staring with admiration at Lena’s fractal jacket. It was the same one, with flaring purples and bursting oranges and rocketing reds that she had worn to the concert with Gabe. There was still a slight drink stain that she had been unable to clean out.

“Thanks,” she said, and started to go back into the music room. Majudo put out a restraining hand. “Want to sell me that jacket?” he asked with a smile. Lena could smell his bad breath. It took an effort to keep from knocking his hand away. Instead, she replied. “Sure. One thousand dollars.”

Majudo let his arm fall. “One thou...” Then he smiled. “That’s kind of steep, little lady. How about a trade?”

Lena wanted to say, “If you’ll give Gabe back his synthesizer, maybe we can do a deal.” But she knew that would never work. And besides, why should she let this grunge have one of her jackets., just for returning some stolen property. But she only replied, “Trade for what?”

Majudo pulled out a baggie half full of white powder. “Trade for this!” he said with a leer.

Lena shook her head and pushed past him. “No trade,” she said.

Just then, Gabe lurched through the doorway. His face looked white as a sheet, and his eyes were half-closed. “Lena” he said faintly. “I don’t feel good.” He sank to the floor. Lena knelt down to cradle his head. Gabe took a deep breath, then slowly rose to his feet.

“Let’s go,” he said faintly. “I need some fresh air.”

“But what about your equipment?” said Lena as she supported him.

“We’ll come back later to get it,” he said. “Right now, let’s just go.”

Majudo was watching the whole scene with a big smile on his face. He came over and said, “Man, you just can’t handle the stuff. You need more practice. Come on back here tomorrow and try it again. You’ll get used to it.”

Once again Lena had to restrain herself. What was wrong with this man? She looked back one last time into the room where Venus Flytrap was playing. It was chaos. They were laughing and whooping it up. But as music, it was a total disaster. No one seemed to be aware that Gabe had left the room.

Lena helped Gabe to the front door. Majudo opened the door as they went through, Gabe leaning heavily on Lena’s shoulder. “If you want to do that trade, little lady, I’ll be here waiting.” He gave a last smile, then shut the door.

CHAPTER SEVEN
The Plan: Step Three

The father down the street they went, the less Gabe leaned on Lena's shoulder. By the time they got to the coffee house, Gabe was walking on his own.

"That was a pretty convincing act, Gabriel Wagner!" said Lena as they walked through the door.

"I hope you're right," Gabe replied. "If Majudo suspects I'm trying to trick him the whole plan could fall to pieces."

The Chans waved to Lena and Gabe, who sat down at their table.

"How did it go?" Dave asked. He has the tracking monitor set out in front of him on the table. The red dot was centered just a bit southwest from their location — right where it should be, at the Slayton street house.

"Now all we have to do is wait until Majudo makes his move," said Dave with a smile. He took a sip of his drink and settled in to watch the screen as Gabe and Lena got something to eat.

Fifteen minutes went by, then thirty, then an hour. The red dot stayed in the middle of the screen.

"We should have thought of this," said Marly, brushing back her long hair. "That Majudo character may be too stoned to move right now. It may be midnight before he makes his move."

"Or even tomorrow," Dave added.

"I wish Sunburst would show up," added Gabe, fingering the medallion. "Maybe he'd have some idea about how to flush Majudo out."

The time passed slowly. Soon it was evening. The people coming into the coffee shop seemed weirder and weirder to the four friends.

Finally Dave said, "Look, guys, I hate to leave you here, but Marly and I have to get home."

"I understand," said Gabe. "You've been really good to stay with us this long. Why don't you two and Lena head on back? I'll call my parents and tell them I'm going to a concert tonight."

"So you're trying to get rid of me now, Gabriel Wagner," said Lena. "I'll bet you're just waiting to go back to that house and talk with Mona again."

Gabe stared at her. "Are you kidding, Lena. I'm...."

But the laughter cut him off. "Of course I'm kidding about Mona," said Lena. "But I'm not kidding about staying here with you. I'll call my parents and tell them we're going to listen to a Pacific Ocean Concert again tonight."

Marly looked at her. "Lena, I don't think you should lie to your parents — even if it's for a good cause."

"I won't be telling a fib — exactly," said Lena as she reached into her purse. She pulled out a small Walkman-type tape recorder with two sets of earphones and a cassette tape. "Here's a little present for you — or for us, if you want me to stay here with you." She handed over the tape to Gabe.

"Oh wow!" he exclaimed. "The new Pacific Ocean tape. When did you get it?"

"Just last night," said Lena with a smile. "Of course, if you want me to go home, I'll just have to take this tape with me." She started to put the recorder and tape back into her purse.

Gabe put his hand on Lena's arm. "Not so fast. It would be nice to have some company while I'm waiting to track Majudo down." He smiled. "And thanks, Lena. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"She'll think of something, you can bet on that," said Dave. "Now come on, sister, we've got a bus to catch."

“Call us if you need anything,” said Marly as Gabe walked them to the door of the coffee house.

Gabe called his parents, then returned to the table. After Lena had called her folks, the two of them sat down with the tracker. Gabe looked into Lena’s eyes.

“It may be a long wait,” he said. “I’ll understand if you want to go home any time.”

Lena looked right back at him. “I don’t think we’ll be bored, Gabe,” she said.

There was a moment of embarrassed silence. Neither friends seemed to know what to say. Finally Gabe said, “Want to listen to some of that tape?”

“Sure!” said Lena.

For the next half hour, the two friends listened to the Pacific Ocean tape. from the smiles on Gabe’s face, Lena could tell he liked the music a lot. After the first side was over, they took off the headphones.

“That’s really good music, Lena. Did you like it?” said Gabe.

Lena hesitated for a moment, then replied. “I liked it pretty well,” she said. “But, to be honest, I like your music better. You have a really fine sense of melody. And the sounds you use are... well, prettier than theirs.”

Gabe blushed a little. “Well, thanks, Lena. I’m really glad you like my music. But I wish I could find some place to play it.”

“What do you mean?” Lena asked.

“What I mean is that music is for people, for audiences. It’s fun just sitting in front of a computer or a synthesizer all by yourself and composing music. But in the end it’s not satisfying. Music is meant to be heard by other people —lots of other people. I guess that’s why I was so anxious to join Venus Flytrap. They’re a band, and bands play for crowds.”

“But they were just jamming in their living room, Gabe. I didn’t see any crowds around.”

“I know that. But they seemed to be heading for playing in the clubs and concert halls. Too bad. There’s a lot of talent there. Adam’s a good guitar player, Tyrone has a powerful voice, Okimoto can really play the drums....”

“And what about Mona?” Lena asked.

“She’s pretty good, and she could be a lot better if she practiced. And Monk’s a fine sound man. But unless they kick out that Majudo sleazeball, they’ll never get anywhere,” Gabe said bitterly.

“What do you think it will take to pull them out of their rut, once Majudo is out of the way?” Lena asked.

“Discipline,” Gabe replied simply.

“What kind of discipline?” Lena asked. “You mean, practice?”

“That’s part of it,” Gabe replied. “The other part is keeping your eye on your goals. If you want to be a real band, you have to want to be good enough to get playing jobs, and you have to get out and hustle them up. That’s why the really successful bands have managers — people who spend major energy on just getting gigs and working out the arrangements.”

“Is that what you want, Gabe — to be in a band and play for big audiences?”

“Not necessarily,” said Gabe “That kind of life takes a lot of traveling and a full-time commitment. I’m not ready for that yet. You know, Lena, in my heart I’m a real Pentegrammer. I love working with the computer, and I want to explore all the things it can do. Music is my main interest right now. But I don’t want to get into music so far that I cut out everything else. I’m still young, and I’ve got a lot to learn.”

Lena smiled. “You’re a good man, Gabe. You know what you want, and you’ve got your priorities straight. If you....”

Just then, they both noticed the red dot on the tracker. It was off the center, and moving east.

“Let’s go!” shouted Gabe. They both ran through the door and out into the street.

* * *

The Plan: Step Four

Gabe and Lena stood on the corner of Haight and Ashbury. Gabe was looking intently at the tracking readout in his hand.

“Definitely east and south,” he announced.

“Do you think Majudo is headed for the warehouse district?” Lena asked.

“That’s the direction he going in,” Gabe replied. “Now all we have to do is follow him.”

“O.K.,” Lena agreed. “How?”

Gabe thought a moment. “Hmmm. Seems we left this little detail out of our plans. I suppose we’ll have to take a bus.”

“How late do the buses run?” Lena asked. “I mean, if we get down to the warehouse district, could we be stranded there?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Gabe admitted. “Do you want to give up and just go home?” he was thinking that it wouldn’t be fair to jeopardize Lena just to get his computer and synthesizers back. “Maybe it isn’t worth it.”

“It’s worth it, all right,” Lena replied. “We just have to be careful. Now where can we catch a bus?”

As they were looking around for a bus stop sign, Lena and Gabe heard the honk of a horn. They turned to look — and there was a 1932 Ford pickup, lime

green with orange flames flaring down the sides. A powerful engine throbbed under the hood. The tinted window rolled down and a voice said:

“You kids need a lift somewhere?”

It was Destroyer Diggs!

“Dest....! I mean, Matt Diggs? Is that you?” Gabe asked in amazement — though he knew it had to be the videogame ace. No one else would be wearing orange sunglasses at night in the Haight-Ashbury district.

“No, I’m the Goodwill truck collecting stuffed teddy bears. Of course it’s me! Now, do you need a lift or not?” Diggs voice sounded impatient. He gunned his engine, and the roar seemed to fill the street.

“Uh, sure,” said Gabe as he and Lena went around to the passenger side.

“Where are you going?”

“Down to the Mission District. Where can I drop you?” Diggs asked, zooming off as soon as the door was closed.

Lena was sitting in the middle between Destroyer Diggs and Gabe. Gabe took out the tracker, and consulted it. “How about eighth and Harrison?” he said.

Diggs snorted. “What ^{is} the world are you doing going down there at this time of night? That’s a pretty scary place even in the daytime.” ✓

Gabe started to explain; but he stopped. He didn’t entirely trust Matt Diggs, even though the older boy was giving them a lift. So he replied cautiously, “We’re going to pick up a computer.”

Diggs pulled up at a stop sign and looked at Gabe. For a moment, Gabe could have sworn he saw an orange light blink behind the left lens of Diggs’ sunglasses. But he decided it must have been a reflection from an outside light.

“If you’re getting a computer from that part of town at this time of night, it must be stolen,” Diggs said. “You ~~kids~~ aren’t dealing in stolen stuff, are you?” gvs

“Uh oh!” Gabe thought. “Now what do I say?”

Lena came to the rescue. “Not at all. Gabe knows the buyer, and in fact Gabe has already paid for the computer and the synthesizers that go with it. This is the only time we could pick it up.”

Diggs seemed to give Lena a look — Gabe couldn’t tell because of Diggs’ sunglasses — then zoomed off down toward the warehouse district.

In a few minutes they were at 8th and Harrison. The streets were poorly lit and almost deserted. An old man sat on a curbstone staring at the gutter and waving his arms wildly in the air. A man and a woman huddled closely together, heads down, hurrying up 8th street. Diggs stopped the truck.

“Here we are,” he said. “Watch your step!”

Gabe and Lena got out of the truck. It seemed like stepping from an island of safety into a dark swamp of danger.

“Thanks a lot, Matt!” Gabe replied.

Without answering, Diggs reached over, pulled the passenger door shut, and shot off down the street.

“He doesn’t act very friendly,” Lena said, watching the truck as it receded into the distance.

“He gave us a ride here, didn’t he?” Gabe replied. “But I know what you mean. I can’t tell whether he’s a good guy or a bad guy.”

Lena thought a moment. “Good guy,” she said finally.”

Gabe was looking at his tracker again. “According to this, we’re practically on top of Majudo now.” He pointed the tracker at a deserted building on eighth street. “He’s directly west of here. But according to the tracker, he not in this building.”

“Then let’s head over to 9th street,” said Lena. They turned north and circled the block. Gabe stared at the tracker map. “Now he’s due east of us,” he said. But he can’t be in this building.” In front of them stood a video rental place,

closed for the evening. All the lights were out, and steel bars protected the door and windows.

“Let’s go around the block again,” Lena said. “But let’s try south to Harrison this time.”

As they walked down Harrison, they came to a small, dead end street running parallel to 8th and 9th.

“No wonder we couldn’t find him before,” Gabe said. This little alleyway is hard to find.”

“Did you see the name of the street?” Lena asked.

“Gordon,” Gabe replied.

Slowly they walked down Gordon. On their right was a municipal bus parking lot. It was deserted. The lights from the lot gave some illumination to Gordon, which had no streetlights. The shadows were deep. Trash bins lined both side of the street. A car was parked halfway on the sidewalk, halfway on the street.

Gabe stopped before a building. He peered at the number: 60. He looked at the tracker. The red dot was directly in the center.

“This is it,” he said.

Number 60 Gordon was a faded gray, three story building. On the ground floor was a front door and a garage. A sign on the door read “NO Parking!” slapped on with dripping paint strokes. Under the sign was a crude picture of a junkyard dog with a severed human leg in its mouth. There were no lights to be seen in the upper stories.

Gabe and Lena went to the garage door and listened. They could hear sounds inside. Gently, Gabe tugged on the garage door. It was locked. He motioned Lena to the front door. Very carefully, Gabe twisted the doorknob. No luck.

“What now?” said Lena as they huddled in the darkness.

“We’ve got to be sure that Majudo’s really here,” said Gabe. “You get behind that trash bin. I’m going to ring the doorbell.”

“What?” Lena exclaimed in a loud whisper.

“Can you think of any other way of finding out if Majudo’s here?” Gabe asked.

A moment later, Gabe gave the doorbell a push, then darted behind the trash bin with Lena. For a minute, nothing happened. Gabe fingered the medallion around his neck nervously. He squeezed Lena’s hand, and she returned the pressure gratefully.

Then the door opened slowly. They could hear the sound of an inside chain being slipped aside. A man’s head peered out. Then he stepped out into the street and looked down toward Harrison.

“That’s not Majudo!” Gabe whispered to Lena.

“Maybe....” she began. Then a voice came though the door.

“Who the hell is it, Shark?”

It was Majudo’s voice. A moment later, his scruffy head poked out.

The man called shark was big, with frizzy, long hair and a heavy beard. There was a long scar running down his left cheek. He looked mean. After scanning the street for a few moments more, he called back, “I don’t see nobody. Must’ve been some joker or a bum.”

Majudo wasn’t convinced. “Bums don’t ring the doorbell and run away. Let’s do a thorough check of the street. I want to make sure nobody’s following us.”

Shark pushed Majudo back through the doorway. “You got a bad case of the nerves, Majudo,” he said with a gruff laugh. “Maybe all that cocaine’s turning you into a chicken. Let’s get going. The man’s expecting us in half an hour.”

The two men went back inside, and the door shut. Gabe breathed a sigh of relief. “Man, that was close!”

Lena was shaking. “I was sure they were going to find us out here. Now what?”

“We try that door again,” said Gabe. “I didn’t hear them put the chain back up.” Cautiously Gabe crept back to the door. This time he could hear heavy scraping and shuffling sounds, like big boxes being moved in the garage. He twisted the door. Still locked. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his student I.D. card and carefully slipped it between the door and the door jamb right above the lock. He carefully worked the card down until he felt it touch the top of the lock. It was a simple turn-lock. Wiggling the card and pressing it downward, he worked the card past the locking mechanism. Then he twisted the doorknob and pushed. The door swung open.

Gabe motioned to Lena. She came up quietly and slipped through the door. Gabe closed it carefully. Stairs led upwards to the second floor. To their right, the door to the garage was open. Gabe and Lena flattened themselves against the wall, then carefully peered around the corner.

What they saw almost made them cry out in amazement.

The garage was piled almost to the ceiling with computers, stereo speakers and amplifiers, electronic keyboards, videogame consoles, cellular telephones — every kind of electronic gear imaginable. Some of the equipment was sitting on the floor. Other items were in brand new boxes. Majudo and Shark were careful placing the equipment in the boxes.

“Wow!” said Gabe softly to Lena. “They’ve got a whole stolen electronics operation going here. I thought Majudo was just a small time thief.”

“You’re right,” said Lena. “Whoever’s behind all this is a major league criminal. Look,” she pointed to the far end of the room. “There’s your computer,

Gabe.”

Just then, a light came on in the hallway where they were standing. A woman came down the stairs. She say Gabe and Lena at once. “Hey, who.... well, well, if it isn’t Gabe Wagner and his little girlfriend. You shouldn’t have come here, you know. Now we’re going to have to get rid of you.”

There was a wicked smile on the face of Mona Tessler as she looked down at Gabe and Lena.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Plan Breaks Down

“Majudo! Shark! Come out here now!” Mona called out. She didn’t take her eyes off Gabe.

Majudo came in first. He looked at Gabe, then Lena, then back at Gabe. “How the hell did they get here?”

Shark came in next. “Who are they?” he asked Majudo in a sharp voice.

“This is the sucker I ripped off the computer and synthesizers from,” said Majudo with a sneer. “And the chick’s his lady-friend.”

With Shark and Majudo on one side and Mona on the staircase, Gabe and Lena were trapped. Just as Gabe thought of making a break for the door, Shark slipped around behind them, blocking their escape route. Lena glared at Mona.

“So you’re not just content with taking drugs and playing bad music. You’re into major league theft, too,” Lena said with contempt.

“It’s a living, honey,” said Mona with a superior smile. “Anyway, you’d better be more polite. My friends here might lose their tempers with you. I couldn’t stop them if....”

Gabe flared out in anger. “Knock it off, Mona. What do you want?”

She regarded Gabe thoughtfully. “We’ve got what we want — your electronic gear, and a lot more besides. What we don’t want is you.” She turned to Majudo and Shark. “What do we do with them, boys?”

Majudo looked nervous. “Mona, we’ve got to get rid of them. We’ve got a sweet operation going here. If they tell the police, we’ll spend the next ten years in jail.”

“Longer for me,” added Shark. “I’ve already spent six years in the slammer. And I’m not going back — never!”

Mona looked back at Gabe and Lena. "Sorry, kids," she said with mock sympathy. "I guess you've just made a big mistake."

"Look," said Gabe, "Just let us go. We won't say anything to the police about this place."

"Oh yes we will," Lena shouted.

"Lena!" shouted Gabe. "Let's just get out of this alive for now, O.K.?"

"Save your breath," said Mona. "You won't get the chance to talk to anybody. Shark, tie them up."

Shark grabbed Lena with one hand and Gabe with the other. They struggled hard, and Lena gave him an elbow in the stomach so hard that the big man let out a grunt. But they were no match for the three crooks. In minutes, their hands were bound behind their backs.

"Load them into the truck," snapped Mona. She had suffered a right hook to the jaw from Lena in the struggle. "We're already late for our drop-off date at Fort Point. Is the rest of the stuff on board?"

"As much as we can carry," Shark replied.

"Then let's go," said Mona.

Shark and Majudo pushed Gabe and a kicking Lena into the back of a large brown van. Mona opened the garage door, then jumped into the driver's seat. Majudo sat next to her. Shark sat in the back. He now had a large, 45-caliber pistol aimed at Gabe and Lena.

"We're going to make this drive real quiet," he said with menace in his voice. "One scream out of either one of you and I pull the trigger."

The next twenty minutes were p[agony and terror for Gabe and Lena. Seated on the floor of the van, they could see only the boxes of stolen goods piled to the roof, and Shark glaring at them, his pistol aimed first at one, then the other.

"What are you going to do with us?" said Gabe finally.

“We’ll think of something, won’t we Mona?” said Shark with an evil leer.

“I’ve already decided what to do,” came the answer. Mona’s voice gave Gabe chills.

Finally the van pulled to a stop. Gabe could hear the sound of the ocean lapping at the shore outside. The back of the van opened.

“All right, get out!” Mona commanded. Majudo stood behind her, a worried look on his face.

“Hey, Mona, I don’t know about this,” he said. His voice was wavering as if he were as frightened and Lena and Gabe.

“I do,” said Mona. “Come on! Out!”

As Gabe and Lena got out of the van, they could see a large truck parked close by. Two men came over from the truck. They were as big as shark and, it seemed, even meaner looking.

“Who are they?” asked one of the men.

“A problem we’re going to solve in just a minute,” Mona replied. “Here’s the stuff.” She pointed to the equipment in the van. “And here’s a list, plus the prices we agreed on. Have you got the money?”

The second man leapt inside the van and began piling the boxes outside on the ground. In a few minutes, everything was inspected. The first man pulled a fat envelope from his inside pocket.

“Five thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills,” he said, handing the envelope over to Mona. “Next shipment tomorrow night?”

“Right,” said Mona, slipping the envelope into her handbag.

The two men, Majudo and Shark transferred the boxes to the large truck. After the loading was completed, the two men drove off down the narrow road with only their parking lights on.

There were no lights by the Fort Point parking lot. The old Civil War structure was dark and deserted at this hour. The only light came from the bridge high above them. Gabe and Lena stood at the side of the van while Mona, Majudo and Shark conferred a few yards away. They seemed to be arguing.

“Lena, I don’t know what to do. I’m really sorry I got us into this mess,” said Gabe.

“Lena gave a brave smile. “Well, if you’re going to get into trouble, Gabriel Wagner, I guess I’m glad to share it with you.”

Tears came to Gabe’s eyes. “Lena, that’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard anyone say to me. But I wish we could think of a way out of this. can you get your hands loose?”

“No, the knot’s too good,” she said. “Maybe we can just run for the hill. It’s pretty dark. Maybe they’ll lose us.”

Just then, their captors returned. Mona looked triumphant, Shark looked determined, Majudo looked worried.

“If we get caught, it’s life behind bars,” said Majudo.

A chill went through Gabe. What were they planning to do to them. “Shut up, Majudo,” Mona commanded. “Shark, heave them in. No, wait a minute.” She walked over to Lena and pushed her toward’s the edge of the road. Ten feet below them were the chill waters of San Francisco Bay. “I’ve wanted to do this ever since I met you,” shouted Mona, who then gave Lena a shove.

With a yell, Lena toppled over backwards. Gabe heard a splash as she hit the water.

Suddenly a blind rage came over Gabe. He gave a tremendous tug at his the rope — and one hand came free!

Then everything seemed to happen at once.

A searchlight illuminated the whole area around them. Three figures rushed out of the darkness straight at the van. But Gabe rushed over to the edge of the road. Majudo stood there, a knife in his right hand. "You're next, kid," he said. But Gabe didn't even stop. He faked a punch with his right hand. When Majudo brought up the knife to ward off the blow, Gabe ducked low and rammed him with his head. Majudo dropped the knife and fell backwards. He teetered for a moment on the edge of the road, screaming, "No, no!" Then he dropped down into the water. Gabe immediately dived in.

The cold of the Pacific Ocean jarred him like a hammer blow. He knew in an instant that he had only a few moments before he would drown. He looked frantically around for Lena. He saw her, thrashing with her feet and her bound arms. Then her head began to sink beneath the water. Furiously Gabe swam over and grabbed her under the arms. He pulled her up, and heard her gasp for air. Slowly he swam with one arm to the edge of the road. But the embankment was too high to reach. In the dim light he looked right and left. There, about twenty yards away, were some boulders. If he could only reach the rocks, he could drag himself and Lena to safety.

But the cold was beginning to eat into his limbs. His legs felt like lead as he kicked and stroked toward the rocks. A numbness came over him. Vaguely he heard shouting from back at the van. But it seemed a thousand miles away. The waves pushed and pulled him and Lena, slowing their progress toward the rocks. Gabe didn't even think now. He just kicked and stroked. Finally, his strength was gone. "It's all over," he said to himself. "We're going to drown." Just then, he felt his hand strike rock. They had reached the boulders! But when he reached out to pull himself up, he didn't have the strength. Just before he lost consciousness, he felt strong arms reach down and pull him ashore.

CHPATER NINE

Some Surprises

Gabe shook his head. He was shivering with cold; but he was wrapped up in a warm blanket. He looked around. He seemed to be inside a car — a car with a huge back seat. Across from him, lying on another seat, was Lena. Suddenly Gabe was fully awake. He knelt down on the floorboard and put his hand on her forehead.

“Lena?” he asked softly.

Lena opened her eyes. She smiled. “So you finally decided to wake up,” she said, putting her hand on Gabe’s.

“Where are we?” Gabe asked.

“Don’t you know?” Lena replied.

“No. All I remember is swimming with you to the rocks. Then I guess I passed out.”

“Everything’s all right now, Gabe,” she said. “Thanks to you.”

“Thanks to me!” Gabe burst out. “How can you say that? I almost got us killed with that dumb plan to get my computer back.”

“It wasn’t your plan, and it wasn’t so dumb,” came a voice from outside the car.

Gabe turned. He opened the door and stepped out. “I’ll be back in a minute, Lena,” he said. “I’ve got to find out what’s going on around here.”

The scene outside was hard for Gabe to believe. There were Majudo, Shark, and Mona — in handcuffs. Shark had a swelling under one eye, and Majudo had the look of a beaten dog. Standing behind them were Ellen Blackhawk and Rodger English.

“Hello, Gabriel,” said English. “Glad you decided to join us. If you hadn’t led us to these crooks, we might never have cracked their ring.”

“I led you to them?” Gabe asked, puzzled. “But how?”

“Two ways,” said the voice behind him.

Gabe turned. It was Sunburst! There he was, a kind smile spread over his bearded face.

“Sunburst!” Gabe blurted out. “Did you follow us? How did you do it? Do you know English and Blackhawk? Are you working together? And isn’t this the limousine that....”

Laughing, Sunburst held up a hand. “One thing at a time, Gabriel.”

Suddenly Gabe thought there was something in Sunburst’s voice that he recognized. Could it be....?

“To begin with, yes, I have known and worked with Mister English and Ms. Blackhawk for many years. We belong to the same organization. We have wanted to stop these people” — he motioned to the three captured criminals — “for a long time. We were able to do it when you agreed to be our inside man and let them take your computer. You tracked them, and we tracked you.”

“But how?” asked Gabe. “You didn’t stick a tracking device on my t-shirt.”

“No,” sunburst agreed, “But you did agree to wear one around your neck.”

The light of understanding spread across Gabe’s face. “This medallion — it has a tracking device inside?”

“Better than that,” Sunburst replied. “It is both a tracking device and a microphone. So you see, we heard every word you said, and every word that was spoken to you. When the crooks said they were taking you to Fort Point, we arranged to greet them here. Ah,” he said, looking down the road, where two police cars were driving up to meet them. “This should be the rest of the gang

right here.”

The two police cars pulled up alongside the black limousine. Gabe could see the two men from the big truck sitting glumly in the back seat of one of the cars.

“Here they are, officers,” said Rodger English. “All tied up in a neat package and ready for delivery.”

One of the police officers spoke. “Thanks again for all the work you’ve done. We’ve tried for years to catch these fellows. Come on” — he took Mona by the arm — “Ladies first.”

“Just a minute,” Gabe said. He went up to Mona. “Does Adam know about all this?”

Mona gave Gabe a look of pure hatred. “That twit doesn’t know his left foot from his right. You’re the one responsible for us getting caught,” she hissed. “You’ll regret it when I get out of jail.”

“Mona,” said Gabe gently, “You really have talent playing that electric bass. When you get clear of all this mess get back into music. Don’t let stealing and drugs break your life.”

Mona only turned her head away. The officers ushered her into the back seat of the police car, then put Majudo and Shark on either side of her.

The driver started his engine. “Thanks again for your help. You’ve really done the community a great service, Mister Yea.”

Gabe’s mouth flew open. “Mister Yea?”

Sunburst smiled. In one movement, he drew off his fake beard and hair. The clothes still looked strange. But there was no doubt about it. The man in front of Gabe was Benjamin Yea.

Before Gabe could speak, Mister Yea said. “We have one more surprise for you, Gabriel. And I think you’ll like it. But it will have to wait until tomorrow evening. First we’d better get you and Miss McLaughlin home.”

Rodger English drove the black limousine back to Mill Valley. Ellen Blackhawk sat in front with him. Gabe sat in the back, holding the sleeping Lena's head on his lap. Mister Yea sat across from him. Gabe asked questions; but Mister Yea avoided them.

"Wait until tomorrow. We're all tired, and we need to be thinking clearly to sort matters out," he said.

The limousine pulled up in front of Lena's. Gabe helped Lena to the doorstep.

"Will you be all right?" he asked.

Lena smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I'll be fine. I just want to sleep for a long time. You were wonderful, Gabe, risking your life to save me."

Gabe just smiled and kissed her back. "I'll call you tomorrow, but not too early," he said, then walked back to the car. ✓

The limousine finally pulled up in front of his house.

"If it is agreeable with you, we'll come by to pick you up tomorrow evening," said Mister Yea. "Would you bring some of your music disks with you?"

"Oh no!" said Gabe. "My computer...."

Mister Yea laughed. "Don't worry," he said. "We have your computer and your synthesizers in the trunk. We'll help you carry them in. But can you bring, say, an hour's worth of music with you tomorrow?"

"Sure," Gabe replied. "But why?"

"You will see," said Benjamin Yea.

They all unloaded Gabe's equipment, then said good night.

* * *

By 4:30 the following afternoon, Gabe was waiting on the curbside for Mister Yea. Gabe was disappointed that Lena couldn't come. He had telephoned her earlier; but she was still asleep when he called. Then Mister Yea had called him, and told him that it would be better if Gabe could come alone.

As Gabe waited, a number of questioned still flew around and around in his mind. Just what was Mister Yea doing when he posed as Sunburst? And he obviously knew Rodger English and Ellen Blackhawk. Who were they? Was it just coincidence that Gabe and Lena had met them at the Pacific Ocean concert? And that black limousine — Gabe hadn't noticed the license plate; but he was sure it was the same one that had caused him and Devin so much trouble.

Just then the limousine drove up.

The license plates read:

SPD DMN

Mister Yea got out of the back seat. "Please get in," he said. "We're going into San Francisco for a concert."

Gabe looked at the limousine with suspicion. Benjamin Yea laughed. "I think I can read your thoughts, Gabriel. But if you'll just come with us, all will be explained."

"Here are the disks," said Gabe, handing them to Benjamin Yea. "Should I pack up my computer, too? Those disks won't do much good without the right machine."

"I'm sure they have some piece of junk that will run your stuff where we're going," came a voice from inside the limousine.

Gabe almost jumped with surprise. He peered into the back seat.

It was Devin Orion.

"Dev!" Gabe exclaimed. "What..."

“Just get in, Gabe, old buddy,” said Dev with a smile. “Unless you’d like to try riding my unicycle over Golden gate Bridge.”

Gabe got in. Then he had yet another surprise.

The driver turned around. “Dest... I mean, Matt Diggs. What are you doing here?”

Diggs just laughed. “You’re inside a videogame machine, man, and I’m about to take you through pole position!” When Gabe continued to stare, Diggs added, “I’m just driving you into the city. I need the limo for some serious business after I drop you off.”

Gabe got in to the back of the limo, and sat across from Mister Yea and Devin. They talked about Majudo and Mona and the interstate electronics burglary and theft ring. Gabe learned that Majudo was only a small-time thief. Mona was a step up, but still only a local operator.

“We have a ways to go before we can crack the head of the operation,” said Mister Yea. “But you helped us make a good start, Gabriel.”

Out of the dozens of questions that still bothered Gabe, he asked only one. “How closely have you been following me?”

“From the beginning,” said Devin. “We didn’t actually plan to have you set up Majudo and Mona. But when Rodger and Ellen told us about your meeting up with Venus Flytrap, we figured we had a chance to break through.”

“But why didn’t you tell me about Venus Flytrap?” asked Gabe. “You’re my friend, Dev. Lena and I might have gotten hurt.”

Devin looked at Benjamin Yea, then spoke. “It was a tough decision, Gabe. We weren’t sure about Mona and Majudo or any of the other members of the group. And we had no right to involve you in a plan of ours unless you really wanted to get involved. If Venus Flytrap had turned out to be an all right group,

then we would have been very wrong to tell you our suspicions. You might never have trusted any of them.”

Benjamin Yea looked at Gabe. “Devin is telling you part of the story, Gabe. There’s another part, too. You see, Devin Rodger English, Ellen Blackhawk, Matthew Diggs and I all belong to a group called the Faustians. I established this secret society at the request of the United Nations several years ago. We are dedicated to stopping computer crime around the world. All of us have projects in many countries. But we are all dedicated to using the computer to help the human race, and to stop those who would use it for evil.”

“Faustians?” asked Gabe. “I thought Faust was some mythical guy who sold his soul to the devil.”

“That’s one version of the story,” said Devin. “That’s the version of the Faust who goes wrong. In another version, he is saved because he dedicates his life to helping others. That’s us.”

“If you’re a secret society,” Gabe continued, “why are you telling me all this?”

“Because,” said Benjamin Yea, “we want you to join us. You have shown great courage in dealing with the electronics thieves. And your talent for musical composition could be a great asset to our group.”

“I don’t see how.,” Gabe replied. “Music is for enjoyment, not catching criminals.”

“No,” Benjamin Yea agreed, “it’s not. Your work would be in the positive, creative side of the Faustians. We could help you a great deal with the technical side of your music, Gabriel. And you could help us with the beauty and power of your music.”

“I see,” said Gabe.

“It’s a major decision, Gabe,” said Devin, “and it involves some risks, since we have enemies out there in the world — enemies much smarter and much stronger

than Shark or Majudo or Mona. So think it over.”

“What about Lena?” Gabe asked.

“We’re also considering Lena,” said Devin, “But she’s have to prove herself on her own before we could offer her membership.”

Gabe was about to reply, when Benjamin Yea said, “Aha! Here we are. I see we have arrived at our destination.”

Here was a place Gabe had heard about, but never visited. It was called **SoundSpace**, and it features electronic music. Gabe, Devin, and Benjamin Yea entered through the main lobby, where some forty or fifty people were waiting for the doors to open.

“Just go on in without me,” said Benjamin Yea. “I need to say a few words with the management.” He then disappeared through an office door.

Gabe looked around him. “I’ve heard of this place, Dev, but I’ve never been here. I understand they play the best music by contemporary composers.”

“That’s what I hear, too,” said Dev. “But I understand that... Hey, here we go. They’re opening the doors.”

Gabe and Devin walked through, and into the strangest concert hall they had ever visited. There were about seventy five comfortable chairs arranged in a circle. Overhead, the ceiling was a huge hemisphere, like the inside of a planetarium. Hanging from the ceiling were dozens of hi-fi speakers. At one side of the room was a console.

“What’s the setup here?” Dev asked.

“I’ve read that the control person sits up there in the console and puts in the music — tapes or computer disks. Then he controls where the sound goes with a joystick.”

Just then, the lights dimmed, then went out. The concert hall was in total darkness. When the quiet preconcert chatter came to a stop, the silence was

almost as complete as the darkness.

Then the music began.

Gabe heard the low string bass sounds singing their deep song together. The sound was joined by a flitting, skittering sound like an electric guitar playing rapid scales.

A wave of amazement came over Gabe.

This was his music!

The two sounds played against each other, like wind flying over the waves of the Pacific Ocean. Tears came to Gabe's eyes as the single clear trumpet sound sailed over the top, accompanying the clean, pure melody.

The words soared out and over the audience, cascading down from dozens of speakers hanging from the ceiling:

The words are right, the sound is strong.

This is the beginning of our song!

The bass sound began to thrum in rhythm, and the guitar, too, fell in with the beat. For a minute, the sounds rose steadily toward a single climax, then declined into silence. Just as the three voices were about to fade away entirely, a harp-sound seemed to echo from far away. The female voice chanted:

Please don't do anything wrong.

Don't spoil the ending of the song.

Then the music built up, stronger and more emphatic. The guitar flew upward, chased by the flutes playing a counter melody behind it. The bass was

steady, and the drum energized the whole song with its driving rhythms. New words, sung by the male and female voice together, arched over the top of the instruments as the song ended:

*When love is strong,
There is no ending to our song!*

The music ended. For a moment, the silence returned to the darkness. Then the applause began — wild, cheering applause. The lights gradually came back on. Benjamin Yea was standing at the console, and spoke into the microphone, his voice only barely carrying above the applause.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the composer of the music you just heard: Gabriel Wagner!”

The applause grew even louder as all eyes turned to Gabriel. He looked at Devin, who gave him a wink as he applauded.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Benjamin Yea continued, “I have been informed by the management that, beginning in September, SoundSpace will feature the music of Gabriel Wagner every Friday night. Advance tickets may be purchased at the box office.”

Abruptly, the applause died away as the audience made a dash for the box office. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to be assured a seat for the music of the rising young star.

Devin laughed, and put his arm around Gabe’s shoulder in the now all-but-deserted room. “I bet not even Pacific Ocean has had a rush like that for tickets!”

Several people came up to Gabe to shake his hand and express admiration for the music. Gabe himself was still in a daze. When Benjamin Yea came down to meet him, Gabe could only stammer out, “I don’t know how to thank you, Mr.

Yea.”

“You can thank me by writing your computer programs in more elegant language, Gabriel. But actually, your gift of music is thanks enough for me. If I have been of any small help in assisting you to learn about computer, that is my reward. Any good teacher loves to see his pupils pass him up.”

“I’ll never pass you up, Mr. Yea,” Gabe said with feeling.

“In music, you already have,” Benjamin Yea replied. “If your computer skills stay up with your imagination, there is no limit to how far, or how deep, you can go with your music.”

“His music almost came to an end out there at Fort Point,” said Devin. “I’m just glad to have my friend back.”

“The whole affair with Venus Flytrap seemed to be a disaster,” said Gabe. “But look at the good that came out of it: we broke up the theft ring, my music is playing at SoundSpace — and there’s Lena...”

Devin laughed. “Gabe, old friend, you’re going to have to tell me all about that one of these days soon.”

“Soon, Gabe agreed. “But for now, I just want to think about the main lesson of all this.”

“And what is that main lesson, Gabriel?” Benjamin Yea asked with a smile.

“That even discord can lead to harmony in the end,” Gabe replied. “Broken music can be made whole again.”

Devin gently pushed Gabe toward the door. “That’s too deep for me, Gabe. Now, if you were to buy me some food at Village Pizza, I might actually understand what you’re talking about.”

The black limousine was waiting. Benjamin Yea stayed behind to talk with the manager of SoundSpace. The two friends got in, and they talked about girls and computers and music as they drove away.

THE END