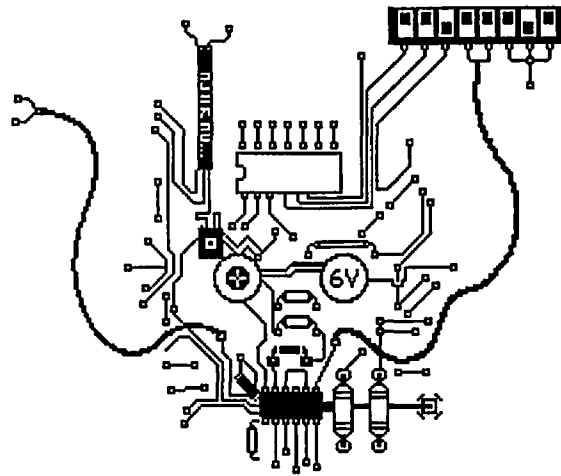


The Digital Demon



by

Arthur Chandler

The Digital Demon

Chapter One Face on the Screen

Devin Orion stared at the demon on his computer screen. It definitely looked like a demon: horns, a pair of strange eyes, and a long, curling moustache. But the demon didn't resemble any drawings of devils or monsters Devin had seen in picture books. This one looked like it was made from computer parts. The mouth was a silicon chip, and the lines of its face were formed by wires and connections branching out from the main chip. A digital demon. The creature was looking straight into Devin's eyes. He could only see the demon's head; but that was enough.

"Where did this come from?" Devin asked out loud. He'd been working on his math homework assignment — no fun, no fun at all.

- 1) What is the karat measurement of pure gold?
- 2) What is the value of pi to the first ten places?

And so on. And so on.

Boring, boring, boring.

It was almost as bad as that essay on Spanish explorers in the new world. Why were teachers always asking him to write about dull subjects? What good was it to know who Coronado was, or what the value of pi was to ten places?

But the demon wasn't boring, even though its head hadn't moved on the screen. The face was incredibly detailed. The left eye was printed with a "6 V" sign — for batteries? — and the wires coming out between the horns connected to another panel of circuits just to the left above its head. "Some kind of bug in my word processing program?" Devin wondered. Possibly. But computer bugs usually caused crashes. The screen would just freeze up, or an error message would appear.

No, not a bug. More likely a joke. Devin checked his computer's modem connections. Nothing had come in over the phone in two days. He studied the demon again. "It could be a virus," he thought. Devin considered that possibility more seriously. The computer world is full of all

sorts of people — all of them bright, but some of them jokers, teasers, or just plain vicious destroyers.

And Devin had to admit to himself that he hadn't always done the right thing with computers himself. These machines were incredibly powerful tools for writing, doing math, playing games, or just creating your own worlds to explore and modify. But you could use them for other things, too. Like snooping. If you were good, you could look into other people's files and they would never know it — *if* you were good at it.

Devin was just getting good at it.

Maybe that demon was some other computer jockey's calling card, an announcement that whoever it was had broken into Devin's files. Maybe the hacker, an expert renegade computer programmer, had broken in, then left behind the demon just to let Devin Orion know that there were other hotshot computer wizards smarter than he was.

Devin reached for the *off* switch. He didn't like the smug look on the demon's face.

Just then a message came up on the screen telling Devin that someone was calling him through the network. As the message began to scroll across and down the screen, the demon shrank, then angled up into the far right corner of the screen. The message kept coming, but the demon didn't go away.

**Dev: Dave and Marly here.
Don't forget the game network at
our place this afternoon at 3:00.
Bring munchies for Lena.**

Devin was glad to hear from Dave and Marly, two of his closest friends. Marly and Dave Chan were twins — not identical, but pretty close in their interests and abilities. Marly was an ace programmer and Dave was a strategy game whiz. The twins had been into computer networking for about two years now — just about the same amount of time as he had been at it. They were all on the same network, which let them play computer games with people all over the world. Any other time, Devin would have shot back some funny reply about the upcoming gaming session or the munchies. This time he only typed in:

Sure. I'll be there.

After a few moments, a reply came back:

**Is there something wrong with
your system, Dev? Your message
came over to us all garbaged. Try
again.**

Devin would have liked to send a voice message, since his machine was equipped with a microphone, speakers, and sound processing software. But Dave and Marly's machine wasn't set up to receive or send sound, so Devin typed again:

**Sorry about the garbage, guys.
There's something weird happening with
my computer. A picture of a demon just
came up, no explanation, and it won't go
away. It's just sitting up there in the ...**

Devin stopped. No, better delete that. The Chans would just think he was fooling around. Instead he typed:

**That's Chinese. Can't you guys read
Mandarin?**

He hit the "Send" button. After a minute, another message appeared.

**Hey there, Dev, either you're
pulling a tease, or there's a
serious glitch in your machine. If
1, ha ha ha. If #2, better check
your disk for bugs. See you later.
- Dave and Marly (make that**

MARLY and Dave).

They signed off. The demon didn't come back to fill up the screen. It was smaller now, lurking in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. Instead, there was his homework assignment — all finished.

1) Pure gold is 24 karats
2) 3.1415926536

And so on. All the problems were answered. A sudden click and buzzing startled him. Devin said out loud, "What ..?"

It was his printer. The answers were being hardcopied on the perforated sheet paper attached to his printer.

But Devin hadn't hit the *Print* command. It was spooky enough just to see that demon smirking up there in the corner of his screen. It was worse to think that something in the real world — his printer — had been taken over by whoever or whatever was pulling this stunt.

What is the matter, Devin Orion? Those
answers are all correct. I have just saved you
hours of boring homework time. Do you think
we could talk now?

Devin stared again. The demon had moved back into the center of the screen, and its lips moved when it talked. Devin's computer was equipped for sound; but it was still startling to hear the sound *and* see the message typed in at the bottom of the screen, just below the demon's face. The sound of the demon's voice was low and raspy; but Devin couldn't make out every word it spoke.

"Whoever's behind this sure knows his stuff," Devin thought. "The animation of this thing is pro quality. O.K., then a pro has hacked into my computer terminal and done me a great big favor. So now what?"

"What do you want to talk about?" Devin asked out loud.

The reply came at once.

You. You, Devin Orion. I want to talk about
you. I want to talk about computers, too. I

want to talk about how good you are at using
computers to look into other people's files.

Devin felt a chill crawl up his spine. What was this guy — or this thing — talking about? Did the demon know something about him? Almost as if it read his mind, the demon's lips moved again, its twin orange eyes sparkling slowly off and on, off and on.

Do not be shy about it, Devin Orion. I know
you took a look into your grade records at
school. Did you find anything interesting
there?

As a matter of fact, he had. Last semester he'd been anxious about his math grade. Devin was a good student; but Mr. Yea was a real shark when it came to testing. Devin had been on the borderline between an A and a B, thanks to a test he'd bombed after staying out late one night at the Middle School dance. A lot was riding on his getting good grades, since his father had promised to help him out buying a hard disk drive for his computer if Devin made the honor roll. About a week after the final exam, he couldn't stand the suspense any more. So he used his home computer to hack into the school records and look at his math grade.

B+

So he didn't do well enough on the final to bring it up to an A-. Even now, sitting in front of a demon on his screen, Devin remembered the sinking feeling of seeing the B+. One more notch would have meant honor roll and the hard disk drive. Dang! And there it was, quivering up there in the middle of all those other grades: B+. No honor roll, no hard drive, no nothing for all the work he'd done in Mister Yea's class.

Devin's faced burned with shame when he recalled what he did next. Three strokes of the keyboard, and the B+ was gone, replaced by an A-. Then, as if that weren't bad enough, he called up some other grades:

David Chan	A
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Marly Chan:	A
-------------	----------

Gabriel Wagner:

C

Lena McLaughlin:

B+

He had considered changing Gabe's and Lena's grades, too, but decided that too many changes might mean someone would get suspicious and check back with Mr. Yea. He logged out of the school records with a strange feeling of satisfaction and guilt.

When the grades came a week later, he got a second shock. He'd made the honor roll in major league style. His English teacher, Mrs. Leonard, had given him an A — flat-out A, no minus — when Devin had been resigned to a B. The bottom line was that he didn't even need the A- from Mr. Yea.

That day, he went with his dad and bought the 80 megabyte hard drive.

That night, Devin hacked back in to the school records and changed his A- back to a B+. The moment he changed the grade back, he felt better, but still guilty. It wasn't fear that someone would find out. It was shame that he had changed the grade — cheated — in the first place. But Devin was sure he had covered his tracks well enough so that no one would know what he'd done.

Or, at least, that's what Devin thought.

But now, things looked bad. "This grinning demon knows I've broken into the school data bank. How much does it know about what I did?" Out loud, Devin spoke to the demon on the screen, "Yeah, I admit it. I took a look at my grades. I was anxious to find out how I did inEnglish."

The reply came from the screen:

Yes. Yes, I suppose you were anxious,
Devin Orion. And what did you find out?

Devin didn't like the way this conversation was going. "They were pretty much what I'd expected," he said.

Yes. Pretty much what you had expected, Devin Orion.

The demon's voice was raspy. It sounded processed, like someone was

giving it a machine-like sound on purpose, just to make it sound creepy. Any other time, Devin would have just laughed at such phony synthesized voice effects. Right now, though, it added pretty effectively to the general weirdness of the whole situation. The demon continued:

You did not care for what you saw, did you,
Devin Orion?

Now Devin was definitely sweating. But how could that thing know? "I changed the blasted grade back again," Devin thought. "He, or she, or it can't prove anything." But Devin couldn't bring himself to lie about it. The whole experience had been bad enough. He didn't feel like tangling himself up in a lie about a situation he'd set aright. But there was no use admitting to something he hadn't been charged with, either.

"Everything came out fine," he said finally. "I made the honor roll. And besides, it's none of your business. Who are you, anyway? I don't have to sit here and listen to this. All I've got to do is flip this switch and you're out of here, Mister Horns."

At once the eyes stopped glittering and shined with a steady, evil-looking light. The smile disappeared from the demon's face in an instant.

I would not do that if I were you, Devin
Orion. I have a printout of your grades from
last semester. Or rather, I have two print-
outs. And do you know something? They are
not the same. One printout shows a B+ in
mathematics. The other one shows an A-.
Now why do you think those grades are
different, Devin Orion?

Uh-oh. Very bad news. Whatever this thing was, it seemed to know everything. Desperately, Devin almost shouted at the screen: "Well, if you know as much as you say you do, you're as guilty as I am. What were you doing snooping into those school records? And how did you get those printouts? Looks to me like you're as bad as I am." All the guilt and shame of the grade-changing escapade came surging up in Devin's mind.

"This thing, or whoever controls him, knows all about what I've done! I'm dead!" he thought.

The rasping voice continued, its tone now mocking:

You are right, Devin Orion, you are quite right. I am as bad as you are. Maybe worse, as you will see in a minute. But there are two big differences between us, Devin Orion. Two big differences.

The demon fell silent for a minute, as if it were waiting for Devin's reply. Devin looked around his room, flooded with early afternoon sunlight. There were his books, his bed, his software, the robots he had made from kits, the half-empty bottle of orange juice — all the world that seemed so ordinary just half an hour ago. Now he felt as if he were being sucked into the cathode ray tube of his computer. Everything around him seemed unreal, like it could go away with the touch of the button.

And maybe it would go away. What if this demon were some kind of computer police he'd never heard of? Devin had read stories of computer hackers who broke into bank accounts and even satellite control systems. He'd also read about the trackers — expert computer operators who figured out how to trace the renegade hackers and turn them over to the FBI for prosecution.

Devin remembered the story of the mil thief. Mr. Yea had told them that one in class. Some minor league bank programmer had figured out that every account making interest earned fractions of a cent — a mil, one one-thousandth of a penny. When you took the money in the bank and multiplied it by the interest rate, the result didn't always come out with an exact dollars and cents figure. Some times there was a leftover mil, which the computer just rounded off to the nearest cent. The bank programmer had an inspiration. Who would miss a thousandth of a penny on their bank statement? So the programmer wrote a little subroutine that funneled all mils into a dummy account he set up in one of the bank's branches.

The first quarter, the programmer was stunned when he saw his balance:

\$267, 897.55

He would have gotten away with it, too, if a bank computer tracer

hadn't noticed his activity. The tracer turned the situation over to some super national computer security organization, and they trapped the mil thief.

The programmer got 6 months probation for his theft. And the bank got back its mils.

Could this demon be the work of one of those tracers? Would his school really have a pro security team just to watch over the school records? Devin didn't think so, but it was a possibility.

Devin's thoughts returned to the screen in front of him. The demon was still silent.

"Differences between us? What differences?" asked Devin, his hand slowly moving toward the on/off switch.

Number one, I did not get caught, Devin Orion. You did. Number two, I discovered how to track you down. You cannot track me, Devin Orion. You are not good enough yet.

Devin's hand stopped moving. First the demon was trying to frighten him. Now it was insulting. What was his game? The demon continued:

And there is another matter, Devin Orion. I have these printouts. They could do you a lot of harm if they fell into the wrong hands.

Suddenly it dawned on Devin. He couldn't believe it, but it had to be true. This was a shakedown, blackmail, a threat. The demon wanted him to do something, and would use the changed grade printouts as the weapon. The sunlit room started to feel like a prison.

"What do you want?" asked Devin in an even voice.

There was another silence that seemed to last a long time. The demon was motionless again. Then the eyes started to sparkle madly.

Help. I want your help, Devin Orion.

Help? This was an unexpected turn. Or was it? "What do you want me to do?" Devin replied.

The demon paused, then whispered:

I want you to look at some grades, Devin Orion.

Grades? Devin couldn't see what the demon was driving at. "Why do you want to look at grades? Seems to me you can get into our school records pretty well on your own."

I do not want to look at your school grades, Devin Orion. I want to get some grades from the California Technology Institute.

"Cal Institute?!" Devin almost jumped out of his chair. "You're crazy. They'll have a computer break-in protection system that makes Fort Knox look like a baby's candy jar. Why on earth do you want to hack into the Institute's records office?"

No hesitation this time.

Because there is someone who went there who claims certain things about himself that I think are not true. And I have my own reasons for wanting to expose this person.

Devin was thinking a mile a minute now. "Who are you talking about? What things? And what makes you think I'd do this for you, even if I could — which I can't?"

The demon face smiled, its eyes flashing at a slower rate now. It seemed to Devin as though it was sure it had him now, and could tell him what it wanted when it wanted to, and set its own terms. "Maybe you think you've got me locked up and packaged real tight," Devin thought. "But let's find out what you want first. Maybe, just maybe, that will be a weapon I can use against you some time in the future."

The demon continued:

Patience, Devin Orion. You have just asked three questions. I shall answer them in reverse order. To begin with, you will fulfill my little request because if you do not, I will turn my records over to the FBI, your school principal, and your parents. Do not believe I am bluffing. I care nothing for you, but I care a great deal about having my revenge on my enemies.

Second, I want you to get the proof that this person did exactly what you have done: broken into the school records and forged new grades. His grades paved the way for research grants and even a teaching position, which he still holds.

"That whole speech has the bad taste of envy or jealousy," Devin thought. "But why does this demon care about some records at the Cal Institute?" So he said, "Now wait a minute, Mister Horns. I may have changed one grade one time, but I changed it back. What I did didn't hurt anybody. But you do want to hurt somebody. You want to get the lowdown on someone and expose him, make his life miserable. Why?"

The demon's voice seemed tighter and harsher as it replied:

Because this person always beat me out -- unfairly, as you will see when you get those records. He always got the grants; I got a polite letter of refusal. He got the teaching job; I received nothing -- nothing but a computer terminal and some excellent ideas about how to make people pay me for what I know.

"Aha!" thought Devin. "Here's the real story. Whoever or whatever is behind this demon came out a loser to a rival. The only way the demon could stand losing out to the rival is to imagine that he or she had started his or her career by changing school grades."

Out loud Devin said, "Pay you? What do you mean?" He was feeling more confident now. That was no demon up there. It was a mask — a computer animation covering up some revenge-bent creep who had it in for one of his old classmates. Devin could think of a dozen people just like him at his own school: Donald Dackles, Greaseball Ferber, or even Yolanda Greenspan, for instance.

The demon face continued:

The person we are talking about is a teacher, Devin Orion. But the teaching job is only a cover. His real job is Director of the National Computer Security Agency.

NCSA! Devin had heard of the group; but he wasn't exactly sure what they did. "You mean he sets up secret codes for the army?"

The demon continued:

He is responsible for computer security in all government agencies, including the armed forces. Every top secret weapon, every top secret mission, even the President's own emergency plans in case of war-- all of this, and more, is protected by the National Computer Security Agency. The Director has devised the most complicated computer security code ever written, and they change it every three days to prevent anyone from figuring it out. Even if enemies could break into the system, they could never crack the

code in a hundred years. And the code changes every three days.

Devin replied, "All this is very interesting. So the guy has an important job and you're jealous. If the information about his grades is like you're telling me, he's probably gone back and covered his tracks; and it sounds like he could cover them completely. And even if you got the information you wanted, what would you do with it? Expose him? Get his job?"

The demon replied:

No, I would not expose him, Devin Orion -- not immediately. But if he knew I had the evidence, he would be willing to cooperate with us to save his skin just like you are doing right now.

"Us?" Devin wondered. "I wonder who this demon works with?" He was about to protest that he wasn't about to cooperate with this maniac, but the voice continued:

Yes, Devin Orion, I would destroy him. I will destroy him-- but not before I obtain the information my employers want. There are people in this world who are willing to pay a great deal for what this person knows. And now that I am in a position to have that information, I intend to get it. Or, maybe I should say that I intend for you to get it for me.

"A real money and ego case," thought Devin. "Who could be the person this demon wants so much? It's worth finding out about that, at least." Out loud he said, "All right, Mr. Horns, let me hear your proposition. Who do you want me to get the dirt on?"

The voice replied immediately:

If you succeed, Devin Orion, I will pay one million dollars into your savings account at First National Bank -- and I will make sure that no one ever finds out about how you got the money, or where.

One million dollars! Devin gasped. But who....

Devin Orion, I want you to get me the grade records of Benjamin Yea. I believe you know him.

Benjamin Yea! Mr. Yea, his math teacher — the director of the National Computer Security Agency? Devin almost fell out of his chair. Sure, Mr. Yea was smart — but what would a programmer of that quality — and earning the kind of money he must be earning — be doing teaching at Middle School?

"You've got to be joking," said Devin. "Mr. Yea's only a Middle School math teacher. No, wait... I didn't mean it that way. He's a great math teacher. He's incredibly tough, but he really knows his stuff and everybody respects him. He even taught me beginning programming. But he can't be the main man at the National Computer Security Agency."

The demon spoke, its voice hard and determined:

I know perfectly well who he is, or who he claims to be, Devin Orion. But I know much more about him than you do. And I want you to get me the records I asked for.

Devin jumped out of his chair. "No way! Mr. Yea's never done anything to hurt me. In fact, he's taught me a lot. I'm not about to trash a good man just to please you. He...."

The demon interrupted.

He gave you that B+, Devin Orion.

"So what? I deserved it. But even if he'd given me an "F," I wouldn't try to break into the records at Cal Institute just so you could scorch him out of his job."

The demon's reply was instantaneous.

Oh yes you will, Devin Orion. You will get me those records. Because if you do not, there will be very serious consequences for you.

Devin swallowed hard. He knew this was coming, and it wasn't going to be easy. "Like what?" he asked in as steady a voice as he could manage.

Devin Orion, if you do not do as I ask, I will do five things to you. Number one, I will send proof of your criminal break-in to your school principal. Number two, I will send the records to the FBI -- and the FBI is being very tough about prosecuting hackers like you these days. Number three, I will send the proof to your parents. You will be disgraced for a long, long time. You might even go to jail.

Devin was silent. Could all this really be happening — just because he changed a grade? And he'd even changed it back again. Surely people would understand and forgive him.

The voice went on remorselessly:

Fourth, I will wipe your own computer records clean, Devin Orion -- all of them.

Every bit of data you have ever created or stored, I will annihilate. If that seems vicious, very well. But I will have my revenge on someone.

Everything in his computer? Two years of work, gone? Devin had the feeling, though, that the demon could make good on this threat, too.

The demon seemed to smile now. Its voice dropped close to a whisper:

And finally, the fifth point, Devin Orion. There is the matter of who I am. You think that I am a human being, since I went to school with Benjamin Yea many years ago. Not so, not so. I made a bargain many years ago with some very powerful forces -- forces that make the combined military might of America and Russia look like kindergarten toys. Those forces now control me. They have been striking bargains like this with men and women for a long, long time, and they know how to have their way. Right now you are in their way, Devin Orion. If you help them, they will reward you. If you fail, they will ruin you, then utterly destroy you. They enjoy destruction, and they can draw it out for a very, very long time.

Think it over, Devin Orion.

And the screen went dark.

Chapter Two

Enemies, Friends, and Strangers

Suddenly, the room seemed very quiet, almost spooky. No birds were singing outside. He couldn't hear any cars passing by. It was as if the whole world had stopped turning and time were frozen.

His heart jumped into his mouth when the phone rang.

"Dev? Dave here. Where are you? We logged into the game network ten minutes ago. We tried to reach your computer, but we couldn't get a message in. Is everything O.K."

"Man, is it ever good to hear Dave's voice!" thought Devin. He looked at his blank screen. He wished he could tell himself that it was all just a bad dream; but he couldn't. The memory was way too real for a dream. Devin started to blurt out his story to Dave, but decided to keep it to himself for a while. It would take some long, hard thinking to figure out what was best to do about the demon.

"Yeah, everything's all right. Just having trouble with a virus in the system. I'm on my way over now. Bye."

Devin went out to the garage and pulled his unicycle off the rack. When he first got the one wheeler, some of his friends gave him a hard time about it, calling him "showoff" or "clown." But he was determined to master it. After two years of practice, he could do several kinds of mounts, ride backwards and one-footed, and even "walk the wheel." First his friends first just smiled and gave him a mild razzing. But when they climbed on and tried to ride, they found out right away how difficult it was. A couple of his friends had even spent a few hours with Devin learning the basic moves of riding. He always performed in the school talent shows — and it was a hit with the girls (some of them, anyway). He jump-mounted, then flew down the street, enjoying the sense of freedom and control that the strange one-wheeled machine gave him.

Then, rounding the corner close by the Chans, his unicycle lurched, wrenched to one side, and spilled him into the street.

"Whatsamatter, hotshot? Can't stay on top?"

Don Dackles — Dumb Don Dackles to everyone who knew him at all — stood smiling over the unicycle and Devin, who lay sprawled in the middle

of the street. Beside Dackles was Matt Diggs — “Destroyer” Diggs to anyone who had seen him playing videogames. They were both holding baseball bats. One of them, or both, had stuck the bat into the spokes of his unicycle.

Devin got up slowly, picked up his unicycle, and inspected the spokes. None was bent, but the seat bore a new scar where it had struck the ground. Devin looked at the smirking faces of Dackles and Diggs. One of them he might have taken on. But two of them, with baseball bats....

“Ought to watch where you’re going. Right, Matt?” said Dackles, trying to balance the end of the bat on the palm of his hand. It toppled over, and fell into the street.

“Right,” said Diggs. He had on his usual sunglasses, so Devin couldn’t tell what his one-word reply meant. Looking at Diggs, Devin thought about the “destroyer” nickname. Dackles was fat: overweight, sloppy, with a gut starting to bulge out over his belt. Dackles was a tub, not a destroyer. Diggs, on the other hand, was big but solid. Devin figured that there was a lot more muscle than fat in Diggs’ weight. Devin figured the Destroyer could take care of himself in a fight, too, if he had to.

“Looks like your sense of balance is about like your sense of humor, Dackles,” said Devin.

Dackles was obviously looking for an excuse to start a fight. But he didn’t know what to make of Devin’s remark.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Dackles, gripping the bat menacingly.

“Maybe he means you’re going to be a big hit,” suggested Diggs.

That seemed to satisfy Dackles, who smiled, swung his bat through the air a couple of times, and stood smirking at Devin.

“Old Devin here is a regular demon for speed,” Diggs continued.

“Maybe he gets it from that fancy computer of his.”

What was that? Devin suddenly forgot about the spill and stared at Matt Diggs. What was that he said about a demon? Devin looked Diggs in the eyes — but no one could see through those dark glasses he wore. One-way sunglasses were sort of Matt Diggs’ trademark. Devin couldn’t remember ever seeing him without the dark glasses.

Could it be that Destroyer Diggs was the demon? Diggs was an ace videogame player — none better on the shoot-em-up games, and not too bad in action-strategy. Dackles was out of the question, of course. That lunk couldn’t punch a calculator without moving his lips. But Diggs was a real possibility. Devin was about to say something when a mini-van pulled

up. It was Coach Reeves.

"Can't you fellows ever show up on time for practice? Get in, get in." The Coach opened the rear door to the van, where three other members of the Bobcats sat hunched together in baseball gear.

"Yeah, sure," said Dackles with a parting smirk at Devin. "We were just watching the klutz here show us how to fall off a unicycle."

"Better go home and get the other half of your bike," said someone inside the van as Dackles and Diggs piled into the back seat. The door closed, and Devin was finally rid of the threat.

Devin had pulled over to the sidewalk to let traffic by. Just as he mounted to ride off, a large black stretch limousine roared past him.

Devin didn't notice the traffic. He was lost in thought. Destroyer Matt Diggs. Could it be? Why had he dropped that remark about demons? Or was it just a coincidence? But the more Devin thought about it, the less likely it seemed that Diggs could have been the one behind the demon. The Destroyer was fast with the joystick; but he was nowhere in the computer class. It seemed like Diggs just couldn't keep his brain still long enough to enter even an easy program into the computer. Devin heard that Diggs did have a powerful computer at home, but that he only used it to play games. No, it just couldn't be the Destroyer.

But Devin couldn't let the thought go. Diggs did talk about a demon and a computer together. Besides, Diggs himself may not have been able to pull off the demon stunt, but he knew plenty of cyberpunks who could. A lot of the renegade computer hackers liked to hang around the video arcades. Diggs was something of a star to them. He just might be able to persuade someone to hack a demon program like the one that had invaded his computer.

But why? Devin didn't know Matt Diggs all that well.

"It's all just guesswork. I don't have any real answers," Devin thought.

With suspicions like these churning through his head, Devin pulled up in the Chans' driveway. He propped up his unicycle on the front porch and rang the doorbell.

Marly Chan opened the door. She was tall — almost as tall as Devin — and had long, glossy black hair that fell down her back in waves. Marly was a computer programmer pure and simple. She liked logic, and the no-nonsense quality of computer programming appealed to her sense of order. To Marly Chan, beauty was a complete program with no bugs, not one more line of code than necessary, and which did the job it was written to do.

Right behind Marly, Devin could see the curly and bouncing blond hair of Lena McLaughlin. Lena was a martial arts expert and a math fanatic. In spite of her fighting skill, she wasn't mean at all; but she could be pretty tough if people provoked her. No one provoked her more than once.

Lena was into geometry — fractal geometry. She had made some absolutely incredible t-shirts by printing the kaleidoscope-like fractals in full color all over the fabric. Devin had one, and wore it only on special occasions. But Lena liked to spend most of her time zooming down, down into the neverending detail of fractal patterns on her computer screen. "It's like being Columbus and Neil Armstrong and Benoit Mandelbrot all at once," she liked to say.

"So now the Pentagrams are all here," Lena said with a smile.

The five of them — Devin Orion, Marly and Dave Chan, Lena McLaughlin and Gabe Wagner — sometimes called themselves the Pentagram Club. "There's five of us, and that makes a pentagram. Besides, 'Pentagram' sounds Greek and classy," said Lena, who first thought up the name. Gabe thought it sounded too much like 'Pentagon,' and Dave asked if pentagrams didn't have some kind of connection with witchcraft. But in the end, Lena had her way, and so they were the Pentagram Club.

Devin stepped in and saw Dave at the computer terminal with Gabe Wagner looking over his shoulder.

"What's up, Dev?" asked Gabe without looking away from the screen. Gabe's main interest in the computer was music. He had a full blast MIDI setup at home, with two keyboards linked through software to an amazing variety of music software and sound patches. Gabe had even made an entire tape of rap music without using a single live performer. When Devin first heard it, he thought Gabe had gone out and hired a whole troop of rappers. No one — not even Dave, who had a very good ear — could tell that the voices were generated by sound samples mixed, processed, and stored in Gabe's computer.

Devin looked around the room. "I thought Mr. Yea was going to be here," he said. Devin wasn't at all eager to see Benjamin Yea just right now; but he hoped that maybe he might be able to talk to him privately at some point.

"He didn't get back from Washington yet," said Dave, his eyes still on the computer. "He called and said... Oh wow man! Gabe, did you see that move? Where did Izumi come up with that one? I don't believe it!"

Pushing his worries to the back of his mind, Devin looked at the screen. Dave was engaged in a strange kind of chess game with Izumi Watanabe

from Tokyo. The phone bill would cost a fortune, but Izumi did the telephone linking from his school network station. The Tokyo school wrote off the costs of these matches as educational expenses, and didn't seem to mind if their students spent hours hooked up to other terminals all over the world.

Gabe just shook his head. "Know what I think, Brother Dave? I think Izumi's got another terminal in the room with him — maybe a Japanese Cray or something. He's got a duplicate board set up on the supercomputer, and he feeds all your moves into it. Then he just enters the supercomputer's moves like they were his own."

Dave looked up at Gabe, then back at the terminal. "Maybe so," he said. But I did beat him last week."

"Maybe you're just smarter than a Cray, Wavy Davey," said Lena, walking over with a Coke in one hand and a handful of pretzels in the other. She was always eating, but she never got fat. "Computer-speed metabolism," Dave remarked to Devin once. "She just burns off the calories as fast as she takes them in."

Devin looked at the screen. It was no ordinary game of chess that Dave and Izumi were playing. It was an ancient, forgotten game called Byzantine chess that was played back in Constantinople a thousand years ago. Someone had dug up a whole treasure trove of old and forgotten forms of chess and put them on a computer program. You could play Chinese chess, Indian chess, 3-D chess, Mr. Spock chess — you name it. Devin, Marly and Dave had even worked up a variation themselves which used only a king, eight pawns and eight knights. But in the end, Devin had to admit that straight chess was the best of them all — in fact, the best game of all time, anywhere, period.

Dave typed in:

**Not a bad move, Izumi. Let me
have a couple of days to think
about it.**

In a few seconds, the message came back:

Mate in 8 moves. Sayonara, American friends.

Lena looked over Dave's shoulder at the screen. "I could almost see him smiling on the other end," she said.

"Mate in eight!" snorted Gabe. "You know he's getting extra processing help to be able to call the game that far ahead."

"Maybe he's bluffing," said Dave with a smile. "I'll work on it. Maybe I can even get some time on the Cal Institute mainframe to give me a hint or two." Dave looked up at Devin and smiled. "What do you think about that, Dev?"

Devin caught his breath and stared. Cal Institute! The place the demon wanted to hack into! Could it be that Dave Chan....?

Dave gave him a funny look, then turned back to his terminal. Marly looked concerned? "Do you feel all right, Dev? You look kind of pale."

"I'm O.K.," Devin replied. "Who are you calling up now?"

Dave finished typing. "Ngiao," he replied.

Ngiao was their puzzle network partner from Togo in western Africa. Devin and Dave exchanged puzzles and chase-games with Ngiao by modem. Ngiao would download the puzzles, then send back his own. Ngiao's creations were great. He made up these gigantic cubes that were honeycombed with maze pathways. What you had to do was figure your way through the maze within a certain time limit. Fifteen minutes after you began, a boulder started rolling slowly down the maze pathway. At first it moved slowly; but it gradually picked up speed as it headed for the exit. You had to get through the exit before the boulder, or your baboon — your character in Ngiao's cube maze — got flattened and bounced to baboon heaven (there was a funny end-screen for losers). Winners were treated to a burst of complicated African drum music, along with simulated applause from a thousand cheering spectators.

Ngiao's mazes were just what Devin needed to take his mind off his suspicions of Dave. Devin, Dave and Ngiao had traded puzzles for a long time, and Devin had a brand new version of Rubik's cube to show their friend in Togo.

"Hey, Dave," asked Devin, "Do you still have a copy of that Snake Attack maze I made up last month?"

"Sure," said Dave, reaching into his box of disks. "Want to send it along to Ngiao?"

"Definitely," said Devin, taking a seat at the terminal. He put in his Snake Attack disk, then typed a message to send with the maze. What he typed was, "Bet you can't figure this one out in a week!"

What came out on the screen was:

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"Whaaaaat?" exclaimed Gabe in a rising voice.

"Hey, man, what did you do?" Dave cried out.

The screen flashed white, then went blank. The connection was broken, and the system went dead. The autoboot light came on, the hard disk whirred, and the desktop reappeared. The link with Ngiao was gone.

Marly was the only one who stayed calm. She looked at the newly rebooted screen, and said, "I've never seen a crash like that before."

"Right," added Gabe. "Just garbage, except for those last six letters. What did you type in, Dev?"

Devin was too stunned to reply.

"Tough break," said Lena through a mouthful of pretzels. "I hope Ngiao isn't mad."

Dave, though, seemed angry. He turned to Devin and shouted in a harsh voice, "What did you do, man?" he asked, stabbing at the controls of his computer. "You majorly crashed it out. I can't get back through to Ngiao." He pushed himself away from the console. "Rats, double rats, rats times a thousand! I never had a chance to send him my latest puzzle."

Devin went through emotions like a strobe. First he had been suspicious of Dave for the remarks about Cal Institute; then he felt like apologizing to Dave because of the crash; then felt angry that Dave seemed to be on his case about something that wasn't his fault.

"Hey, lighten up," said Gabe. "Dev didn't do it on purpose."

But Dave was on the warpath. "First he screws up his own system, then he comes over and crashes mine. Way to go, Star Hacker!"

Anger surged through Devin. "Right, Dave, right. It's my favorite hobby, going around and trashing programs. You ought to try it some time." Then he turned around, stalked to the front door, shoved it open, and stormed out. The last thing he heard was Lena shouting, "Hey, come on back, sourpuss," and Dave shouting at Marly, "You're just sticking up for him because you like him!"

Devin snatched up his unicycle and started to mount, when he saw a large black stretch limousine parked across the street. A quick, vague

memory flashed through Devin's mind. Didn't that limo pass him as he was cycling over here? He pretended to be adjusting the quick-release on his seat. "That may not be the same limo, but it sure looks like it," he thought to himself. The windows were tinted so dark they were almost black, but not as jet black as the car itself. Devin could just barely make out the figure of a driver in a red cap sitting in the driver's seat.

Suddenly Devin panicked. He wanted to rush back inside, but his pride wouldn't let him go back in there just now, not after he'd stormed out like that. So he mounted the cycle, then pedaled off furiously down the street back toward his own house. He heard the limo's engine start up; and as he looked back he saw the huge vehicle moving up on him like a big cat. It wasn't moving fast, but it was definitely gaining on him.

Devin came to the intersection as the limo pulled up right behind him. It was only a foot or two away when Devin thought, "It's going to ram me!" He leaned to the right and arched the unicycle around sharply in a 90 degree turn. The unicycle turned on a dime, then shot up the street. The limo couldn't brake fast enough, even though the driver jammed on the brakes so hard the tires screeched. The black monster backed up into the intersection. Then Devin heard the tires squeal again as the car shot toward him. It was no cat and mouse game now. The limousine was definitely going to flatten him if he didn't...

Devin headed for the curb, put his right hand fingers under the seat, and leaped upwards. The curb was high, but hopping was one of Devin's special tricks. He landed on the grass between the sidewalk and the street, then sped away from the limousine. The big car swerved toward the curb. The car's tire struck the high curb, then was thrust back with a lurch. Devin smiled as he heard shouting and swearing from the limousine. Before he took off, Devin took note of the license plate. It read:

SPD DMN

The vehicle roared off again, this time looking and sounding like an enraged beast. But Devin knew he would be uncatchable now. As he flew past the Wilson's house, he turned sharply into the narrow dirt alleyway that separated the houses along the creek. The alley was so narrow that only two people could walk side by side. No limousine was going to run him down here! Two blocks later, Devin emerged on Paris Avenue, one of the town's main business streets. Not even the big black limousine people would dare try to run him down here!

But Devin looked around anxiously anyway, breathing hard from his fast escape. The black limousine was nowhere in sight. Slowly, looking around carefully at every intersection, Devin cycled home.

Chapter Three

Visitors

That night Devin dreamed about black limousines. The ghost car seemed to be floating toward him; and no matter where he ran, the limousine moved silently through the air just behind him. Finally it trapped him in an alley. Devin tried to run, but his feet seemed covered with glue. He strained to lift his legs, but they moved so slowly! The back door opened up. Ngiao got out, carrying an armful of cardboard puzzles. His friend seemed to be staggering under the burden. But when Devin started forward to help him Ngiao's face turned into.....

Devin woke up bathed in sweat. He looked over at the computer. There was the demon, its silicon chip face as still as a painting.

A cold chill went down Devin's spine. "How can that thing be there? I turned off my computer last night. There's no way someone could start up my machine by remote control!"

What was it that the demon had said about people making pacts with "dark forces?" Devin liked to read fantasy. But he never believed for a minute in all that Halloween stuff about ghosts and goblins and witches and sorcerers. The demon was just a mask some clever hacker was putting on to give his blackmail and extortion pitch some visual jazzing up. There were no such things as demons....

But no one could turn on another person's computer by software, hardware, or any other means unless they were right there in the room with the machine.

Now another chill went through Devin. Either someone had been in his room during the night, or else that demon was what it said it was: a slave of the forces of evil that were commanding him to do their bidding.

Devin couldn't decide which explanation he didn't like more.

But there was the demon.

Devin went over to the terminal and felt for the off/on switch in the back. It was toggled on. Devin felt a little relief to learn that. If that face was there while the computer was off, the demon would either be the product of the most advanced and sophisticated computer hacking anyone had ever dreamed of, or it would have to be a real, up-from-the-underworld demon.

Devin flipped the switch off. The screen went dark and the demon disappeared. Devin turned around to get dressed when he heard the telltale whine of his hard disk drive. He whirled around. The machine was booting up on its own! He stood frozen as he watched the familiar icons line up on his screen. And there, in the middle, was the demon head, smiling now.

Good morning, Devin Orion. Have you come
to a decision about my offer?

Fear stormed through Devin's brain. He hurled himself at the terminal and pushed down the power switch again. Darkness — then, after five seconds, the On-light blinked, and the computer began loading again. Devin stared unbelieving as the demon took shape again, larger this time.

That wasn't very polite, Devin Orion. Don't
do that again or I will have to wipe out the
entire memory of your computer and visit you
in person. Are you ready to talk yet?

Frantically Devin double clicked on his word-processing icon. The icon zoomed open and started to load. But in mid-boot, a message appeared on the screen:

SYSTEM ERROR NUMBER 666
RETURNING TO DESKTOP

A few seconds later, Devin found himself right back where he started: looking at the demon on the screen desktop.

Are you still using that antique word
processing program, Devin Orion? You really
should invest in something more sophisticated.
Yours does not even have a thesaurus.

"I don't want one. I never use them anyway," said Devin. Then he caught himself. What was he doing, sitting here talking to this monster about word processing programs and thesauruses? He needed to think of some way out of this!

But Devin couldn't think of anything — at least, not anything that sounded workable. He could call the police — but who would believe him? The police would just laugh at him. And even if they did send someone out to investigate, Devin was pretty sure that the demon wouldn't be there when the squad car arrived.

But it might be even worse if the demon *were* still there. Devin considered the possibilities. The demon might tell the police everything about the school records break-in. With that thing's power, it might even be able to turn on the printer and supply the cops with hard-copy evidence! Then the demon disappears, and what happens? The police can't find the demon; or, even if they can, so what? They couldn't prove anything.

But they would have a very good case against Devin Orion for unlawfully entering the school records data bank and changing a course grade.

It was almost like the demon was aware Devin was going over the possible escape routes in his mind — and there was no way out. As Devin thought, the demon said nothing and did not move. While most of his mind was occupied with the problem of how to get out of this trap, a small part of Devin's attention was taken up in admiration of the demon's on-screen image.

"That thing is incredibly well done," thought the part of his mind not working on escape plans. "Check out the detail in the circuits around the mouth. When it talks, the lips and skin move just like they would if it were a video image of a real demon. It's got to be a simulation. But it's the best animation imaging I've ever seen!"

Finally the demon spoke, its low, rasping machine-like voice soaked in tones of pretend-compassion:

Well, Devin Orion, I know you face a difficult choice, and I feel sorry for you -- really I do. As for me, I am certainly prepared to wait as long as it takes. But my employers are getting impatient. If you delay much

longer, I shall have to take the action we spoke about yesterday.

Then the false pity vanished.

You have got five minutes to make up your mind, Devin Orion.

Devin looked at his watch: 9:15. What should he do? He decided to stall for time.

"Look, Mister Horns, if you're such an ace hot shot one-of-a-kind computer star, why don't you just hack into the Cal Institute records yourself? I've never done anything like that, and you seem to be the expert on breaking into other people's sets."

The demon replied, its face expressionless.

Four minutes and twenty five seconds. You are that good, Devin Orion. I reviewed the technique you used to get into your school records. It was like using an elephant gun to shoot a butterfly. You did not need such a sophisticated approach. But the method you used before should get you into Cal Institute without a problem. Three minutes and fifty seconds.

"But why don't you do it?" asked Devin, almost pleading. "You're a better programmer than I am."

Three minutes and thirty seconds. No I am not, Devin Orion. My employers have given me the abilities to invade your system. But I personally could never crack the Cal Institute security code. Three minutes and five seconds.

"But then they have the ability — they, your employers. Why don't they just give you the technique and let you do it for them? Why do they need me?"

Two minutes and forty seconds. Because they do not want me to do it, Devin Orion. I am only here to make sure that you perform the task for them. My employers have ... other uses for me. Two minutes even.

This didn't make any sense. There was no logic to it! Devin stood in front of the screen and shouted at the demon's image: "Then have them get someone else to do it. Anyone else. Why me, and not someone in your own evil organization?"

In a calm, reasonable voice, the demon replied:

Because, Devin Orion, there is a risk involved -- the risk of getting caught. And, to be blunt about it, if someone has to get caught, we would rather it be you. One minute.

"There it is, the bottom line," Devin thought. Well, at least that made sense — from their standpoint. But something clicked in Devin's mind. Rather than commit another mistake on top of the first one, he was going to have to draw the line right here — even if it meant exposure for his break-in to the school records data bank.

Before he could reply, a light began flashing at the top left of his screen, telling him a message was coming through. The demon head shrank, and zoomed back into the upper right corner of his screen, which now filled up with a familiar face.

"Mister Yea!" Devin shouted at the screen. "It's really great to see you!" and Devin meant it. Even though Mr. Yea was indirectly responsible for the fix he was in right now, Devin liked Mr. Yea — liked and respected him. Of all his teachers, Mr. Yea had taught him the most. Mr. Yea helped him get started on computer programming, convinced his parents to help Devin buy his present computer, and even got him a part-time summer

programming job with a local software firm.

A lot of kids made fun of Mr. Yea; but Devin always felt the joking was based on real respect, maybe even love, by everyone who knew Benjamin Yea well, even people who had flunked his class. He was the toughest teacher in school, and A grades were as rare as bald eagles in his advanced programming class.

Sometimes Benjamin Yea reminded Devin and his friends of a wizard — a white magic wizard. He was at least sixty years old, with a medium length beard, and steel grey hair with a few streaks of brown left — “the last of autumn,” Mr. Yea used to quip. He was tall, and carried himself erect, but not stiffly. His smile would melt cold steel.

Was this really the man the demon wanted to destroy?

“Hello, Devin,” said Mr. Yea. He had a video and audio transmitter hooked up to his modem, so you could see and talk to him in real time. It must have cost a lot to buy and use that kind of gear. For the first time Devin found himself wondering about this fact. How could Mr. Yea own and operate all that sophisticated equipment on a teacher’s salary? Devin had heard that Mr. Yea spent a lot of time flying to different cities, giving talks to big audiences about computers. Devin and his friends always assumed that the fees for these talks gave him the money to buy first class equipment. Was the government paying him a huge salary to write and keep up the national computer security code? It was possible, Devin had to admit. Mr. Yea was certainly smart enough; and a secret government job could explain those frequent out-of-town trips.

“I’ve brought back a present from Washington for your Pentegram Club,” said Mr. Yea. He held up a disk to the screen. “My friends call it *Do It Yourself Fantasia*. It lets you create moving patterns and link them to a musical score, so the patterns move in exact time with the sound. Or you can let the sound generate the patterns. There’s even one for fractals that Lena should find very challenging.”

“Challenging!” Every time Mr. Yea used that word, it meant that the five of them in the Pentegram Club would have to spend 20 or 30 hours figuring out how to get the program to behave the way it was supposed to.

With a blackmailing demon lurking in the corner of his screen, Devin couldn’t work up much enthusiasm for *Do It Yourself Fantasia*. But he tried to put on a brave face.

“Hey, that sounds great, Mr. Yea. Thanks a whole lot. Can I download it now, or should I come pick it up? And how much does it cost?”

“At this point it’s shareware, but I think you should send the

programmers at least \$10 for this Beta version." Mr. Yea was very firm about insisting that all computer programs be paid for. Copying software without permission from the programmer was, in Mr. Yea's eyes, just like reaching into the programmer's pocket and stealing the money. Devin and the Pentegram Club agreed. They always sent shareware programmers something, even if the software wasn't that good.

"I'll send it over now. Transmitting," he said, and his disk drive purred into action to take the new program in.

"Say, Devin, you don't sound like yourself. Are you sick or worried about something?" Mr. Yea asked with concern in his voice.

Devin suddenly felt ashamed. Some people could detect his state of mind even through the medium of a computer screen. For a moment, Devin felt like blurting out everything, and getting Mr. Yea's advice. But the sight of that demon in the corner stopped him. He didn't want Mr. Yea to get involved in this mess yet — and he wasn't ready to tell his teacher about changing the math grade. So Devin said, "I've just got a lot on my mind right now, Mr. Yea. But thanks for asking."

Mr. Yea gave him a searching look — or seemed to. Devin didn't have a video transmitter, so his teacher couldn't see him, even though Devin could see Benjamin Yea. But the look in his teacher's eyes made Devin feel like Mr. Yea could see right at him — or even right into him!

"O.K., Devin. Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

"Sure thing, Mr. Yea. And thanks for your offer," said Devin.

Mr. Yea's picture vanished abruptly from the screen. Devin looked over to the upper right corner — he had to deal with that demon now. But it was gone! The demon was nowhere to be seen. Devin tried to think: was it there while he was talking with Mr. Yea? He thought it was; but he couldn't remember. One thing Devin was sure of, however: whenever the demon wanted to return, it would.

For now, though, he was free. Devin felt a surge of relief as he got up from his chair and went over to the window.

His relief was over.

There, parked across the street and down one house, was the black stretch limousine.

Devin's heart started to pound, and his mouth went dry. They found him! Or maybe they knew where he lived all along. Devin didn't doubt for a minute that the limousine was connected with the same people — or forces — that sent the demon into his computer.

Devin leaned back behind the window curtain, then peered out. What should he do? Call the police? But there wasn't anything illegal about parking a limousine on the streets. He could sneak out of the house the back way, hop the fence into the McEwen's yard, and get away, he was sure. But get away where? He had no place to go, no plan of action.

Then an idea came. If he couldn't do anything about the limousine out there, he could at least find out about it. Devin had never checked out a license plate before. How did they do it in the movies? He couldn't remember. So he picked up the phone and dialed the police station.

"Officer Buckle speaking," said the voice on the phone. "How can I help you?"

"Hello, this is Devin Orion. I'm, uh, working on a story and I need some information," he said uneasily, not feeling comfortable telling fibs to the police.

"Sure thing," said the woman on the other end of the line. "What do you want to know?"

"If I had the license number of a car and I wanted to find out who owned it, could I get the information from you?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not," Officer Buckle replied. "You'd have to get that information from the Department of Motor Vehicles."

"O.K. Great. Do... I mean, would I just call them up and have them give me the information?" Devin asked.

"No, it's not that simple," Officer Buckle replied. "You have to fill out a form and send it to the main office at the state capital. Then they determine whether or not you have a good reason to have the information."

Devin didn't like the sound of that. "And how long would it take to get permission?" he asked.

"About seven to ten working days," came the reply.

Seven to ten days — working days! That meant weeks.

"Well, thanks a lot for your help, Officer Buckle," said Devin.

"Glad I could help," said the officer.

Devin was about to hang up. "Oh, one more thing, Officer Buckle. How are the license plate numbers cataloged in the main headquarters?"

A pause. "I'm not sure what you're asking," came the reply. "Do you mean, what system do they use for cataloging license plates?"

"No, how are they stored? I mean, are they in file cabinets in a big room?"

"No. They're kept on computer storage disks."

Bingo!

"Thank you very much, Officer Buckle," said Devin almost gleefully.

Two weeks by mail, two minutes by computer. Devin was sure he would have no trouble with the Department of Motor Vehicles computer security system. Password guardians, like the ones used by most systems, were easy to crack if you had the right system software. Way back in the Stone Age of computing — around 1980 — a legendary Hacker called Lieutenant Lunch figured out how to crack the security codes that guarded the use of 800 numbers. What Lieutenant Lunch did back then, Devin Orion could do now — do it faster, and more quietly.

Devin started to log into the modem network — then paused, What was he doing? Wasn't this committing another crime? Wasn't this breaking and entering just like his tampering with the school grades?

"But it's not tampering", Devin argued with himself. "I'm just getting information — information that would just take too long to get by going down to the Department of Motor Vehicles. I'd have to fill out forms and wait for weeks. I need that information now! Whatever or whoever is in that limousine has invaded my computer and tried to strongarm me into betraying my favorite teacher. They've even tried to run me down in the streets. Doesn't that give me the right to protect myself?

But the rules said he had to go down and fill out those forms.

What should he do?

Devin remembered watching a program on Chuck Miles, one of the great heroes of aviation. The interviewer asked Miles if he hadn't broken some rules in his time. Miles admitted he had, but added, "Rules are just there for the general case. In any situation, you have to decide whether those rules apply or not. After all, the real object is not to obey the rules, but to get the job done. But if you do break the rules, be sure you get the job done right!"

Devin logged into the Department of Motor Vehicles license plate information database.

The limousine turned out to be registered to Rhino Rentals, located at 375 Third Street. That was downtown. He then tried to find out whether Rhino Rentals had any computer connections, but nothing turned up. He would have to go down there himself.

But not necessarily by himself.

Devin picked up the phone and called Gabe Wagner.

"Yo, Dev!" came Gabe's cheery voice. "Good to hear from you! Sorry about that blow up at the Chans. They feel really bad about what

happened."

"Yeah, so do I," said Devin. "We'll get back together soon though, no problem. But what I called about is, I wonder if you'd go downtown with me to find out about renting a limo."

Gabe whistled. "All right! Devin's struck it rich! Do we go to the Grateful Dead concert first, or are you taking us all to the airport so we can drop in on Izumi at Tokyo Tech?" Devin had to smile in spite of his troubles. "Right, you got it. But I'm hiring you as the driver, so you have to wear a little red cap and wait at the airport for me until I fly back from Tokyo. No, seriously, uh, my sister and I are thinking of renting a limo for my Mom and Dad's wedding anniversary. It may cost too much, but I'd just like to go down and check out the prices."

"Sure, sounds great, let's jam!" Gabe replied. "Where are we going?"

"To a place called Rhino Rentals," Devin replied.

"Pretty weird name. What do they rent — tank limousines?" asked Gabe.

"They might, considering where their business is," said Devin.

"Where's that?" Gabe asked. Devin told him. "Wow, man, that's a pretty heavy part of town. Are you sure you want to go down there? It can't be a very classy limo if this Rhino Rentals is socked away down there in sleaze city."

Devin paused. He didn't like deceiving his friend. Why did this whole business seem to lead him to lies and bad feelings with people he liked? Besides, this whole trip could involve Gabe in real danger; and Devin became more and more convinced he had no right to let his friend in for this amount of trouble. So he said, "Look, Gabe, I've got to be straight with you. I'm not going down to Rhino Rentals to check out a limousine for Mom and Dad. I'm trying to get some information on a big black limo that tried to run me down today. It's parked outside my house right now. This whole thing may be major serious bad news, and I don't have the right to pull you into this."

Gabe was silent on the other end of the line for a moment. Then he said, "Dev, are you being straight with me? No jokes?"

"No jokes, Gabe. This is real scary stuff. There are other weird things happening, too — things I haven't got all sorted out yet. But the limo I've got to deal with right now."

"I don't want to pry, man, so I won't. But just tell me one thing: are these weird things connected in some way to your computer acting up?"

"I think so," said Devin. "I'm not sure, but I want to get to the bottom of it."

"All right. I'll be right over." Gabe started to hang up the phone.

"No wait!" Devin shouted in a tense whisper. "Don't come over here. That limo is still parked across the street. I'll sneak out the back door and climb over our neighbor's fence. We'll meet at your house and take the bus down to the rental place."

"O.K. Sounds like a good plan," Gabe agreed. "Say, why don't I call the other Pentegram hotshots to come with us?"

Devin considered that for a moment. He would be safer if four of his friends went with him. But it could mean that all of them could be in hot water together. "I can't ask the Chans and Lena to risk their necks for me," he said. "Besides, Dave is probably still mad at me for crashing his computer."

"No he's not. I've talked with Dave and Marly both. Dave's pretty upset with himself for blowing up over something that wasn't your fault. Anyway, what if I call them up and run down the situation to them? If they don't want to get involved, you'll understand. All right?"

"All right," Devin agreed. "But be sure to tell them this could be dangerous, and that I won't feel hurt or mad if they don't want to take the risk."

"Got it. Catch you in a few minutes." Gabe hung up.

One minute later, Devin was over the fence and running down the block toward Gabe Wagner's house. As he turned the corner to Gabe's, Devin went crashing into a large figure. The person went sprawling, then looked up.

It was Don Dackles. Don Dackles was still carrying the baseball bat. It was an angry Don Dackles who picked himself up off the ground — still holding the bat. Devin started to go. "Glad to run into you, Don, but I've got to go."

"Not so fast," said Dackles. He stood up, almost 6 feet tall, almost 200 pounds heavy. It was more flab heavy than muscle heavy. But he was a lot bigger than Devin — a whole lot bigger.

Devin started to go around him, but Dackles moved to block the way. "Why don't you look where you're going, smart guy?" demanded Dackles, his lips curling in a sneer, his hands gripping the bat tightly.

"I was watching," said Devin taking a step backwards but squaring up with his left foot forward. If this was going to be a fight, he was going to be ready. "I didn't see you coming. Sorry about the crunch."

"There'll be more crunching than that when we're finished," said Dackles, gripping the bat even tighter.

"That's for baseball, not your schoolmates, Dackles. You do know how to play baseball, don't you?" asked Devin with a smile. He knew he was taunting the other guy; but he was anxious to get it over with and get to Gabe's house. He started to go around Dackles again, but the heavy boy blocked his way once more, shoving the end of the bat into Devin's stomach.

"Yeah, I know how to play, smart guy. I can swing this bat pretty good." Dackles didn't move.

"So, how did the ball game go — did you score any runs, or just run into people?" asked Devin.

"We lost," said Dackles, frowning even more deeply.

"How much?" asked Devin with a faint smile.

"Seventeen to nothing," came the reply.

"A real blow-out, all right," Devin said, bracing for the attack. "Well, no pain, no gain."

"I'll teach you pain!" Dackles shouted, and raised the bat. Devin braced — but the bat disappeared behind Dackles' back. With his elbow jutting straight upward, Dackles sagged to his knees, face contorted in pain. Over Dackles' head, Devin saw the figure of Lena, who seemed to be pinning Dackles' right arm over his shoulder with no effort at all.

"You're too dumb to teach anybody anything, except how to be dumb," said Lena in a calm voice. She wrenched the bat out of Dackles' hand. "But if you really want to learn, why don't you just go home and fix this?" she asked. She took the bat over to the curb, placed one end on the curb and the other in the street, shouted something in Japanese, then karate-chopped the bat. It broke in two like a rotten twig. She then handed the pieces back to Dackles. "Ordinary glue ought to do just fine, since you can't hit anything anyway," she said.

Dackles picked up the pieces, stared at them and shook them at Lena and Devin. "You've broken my bat. That's against the law. I'm going to go to the police!" he shouted in rage. But Devin noticed that he was backing away from them down the street in the direction of his house.

"Go right ahead," said Lena, brushing her curls away from her forehead. "I don't think you could read the phone directory and find their number. If you do, ask them what 'intended assault and battery' means. You probably think it's something that comes out of a shaker and something to start cars with. But they'll set you straight."

Dackles lumbered off down the street swearing under his breath.

Devin turned to Lena. "Thanks Lena. You probably saved me a broken skull."

She smiled a winning smile at Devin. "Well, I guess you guys just need a strong woman around to protect you from the bullies."

They laughed and joked the rest of the way to Gabe's house.

As soon as Gabe opened the door, Dave Chan stepped forward and held out his hand for Devin to shake. "I'm really sorry I blew up at you, Dev," he said, looking Devin straight in the eyes. "I was really out of line. And now that I hear you're in some kind of trouble, I'm double sorry."

Devin shook Dave's hand. "Forget it. If you're willing to go with me on this adventure, consider me in your debt. Are you sure you and Marly want to get dragged into this?"

"Absolutely, Dev," said Marly. "What are friends for? We're not going to leave you to face whatever it is by yourself while we go home and play computer games."

"So we're all together with Dev on this," said Gabe with a smile. "But before we hit the trail looking for rhinos, I've got just one question, Dev: how did you find out the limo belonged to Rhino Rentals? Limos don't have bumper stickers advertising themselves for hire."

Devin was suddenly uncomfortable again. "Uh, I got the owner registration from the department of Motor Vehicles."

"I didn't know you could just call them up and ask who owned a car with a certain plate number," said Marly.

"You can't," Devin admitted.

"Then how did you find...." Dave's eyes lighted up. "Ah ha, now I know! You hacked into the DMV records databank, didn't you?"

Devin blushed — or, at least, his face felt hot. "Yeah, sort of... I guess I did."

He expected his friends to unload on him. Instead, he saw only admiration in their eyes.

"Hey, man," said Gabe, taking a step backwards and regarding Devin with a smile, "not bad, not bad! You may be the next Lieutenant Lunch!"

"Now wait a minute..." Devin started to protest. But Lena chipped in:

"And I thought he needed protection! Maybe I'd better go home and put another security code layer on my system disk."

"Oh, lay off, Lena. Can't you see Dev's upset?" said Marly, putting her hand on Devin's shoulder.

"No, no, she's got the right attitude!" said Devin with intensity. "I did break the rules. Maybe I shouldn't have done it. If I'd done it to give myself a driver's license or just to mess around with their data or even just to look at records I shouldn't be looking at, it would've been wrong. No one has the right to invade another person's computer files, just like no one has a right to break into your house."

If anyone thought about arguing the point with Devin they kept it to themselves. Devin was obviously upset, and there was no use teasing or arguing.

"O.K., you're right, I'm convinced," said Gabe finally. "But you got the information you needed, didn't you?"

Devin calmed down. "Right. I did. I finally decided that my own personal safety was at stake, and I had to have those records right away. So it's done, and here we are. Anybody going to help me track down the party who rented that limo?"

"We're all going. The game's afoot, Pentegram! Let's go!" shouted Gabe.

"Wait a second," Devin held them back and peered cautiously out the window. "This isn't a movie, and we're not superheroes. Let's watch our step."

With Devin in the lead, they all left the house and walked together two blocks to the bus stop, Devin looking back over his shoulders and down intersections at every opportunity.

The bus took them downtown into an area with paper-littered streets, boarded up buildings, and people bundled up in heavy, worn overcoats. Some were pushing shopping carts heaped with everything imaginable — clothing, pillows, stereo sets, empty aluminum cans. Devin saw one cart with a human leg sticking out of the top, a beaded necklace dangling from the toes. With relief, he saw it was a part of a dismantled department store dummy.

"What do these people do with all that stuff?" asked Lena as their bus inched along in a traffic jam.

"That's everything they own," replied Marly.

"But why would you want a dummy leg?" asked Dave.

"Well, if that's all you had that was special, if it was all you had that wasn't something to eat or wear, you might want to hang on to it, too," said Marly.

Devin was thinking over what Marly had said when the bus turned off down a side street and halted at a stop.

"Hey, this is it, you guys," said Devin getting up and heading for the door. "Let's go."

Through the mirror, the bus driver watched them get off, shook his head as if to say, "Big mistake, kids." Then the door closed, and they were alone in the most run-down district of the city.

"I don't know this part of town very well, but we're on the right street. The place we're looking for should be over this way about two blocks," said Devin. The five of them drew closer together as they walked down the street.

A light mist started to drift down from the grey sky. Half the buildings on both sides of the street were deserted. There were people, men and women, wrapped up in coats. Some people were curled up in a doorway sleeping. In front of the doorway of one building that used to be the "Galaxy Adult Entertainment," but now stood dark and empty, a young boy was pulling the stuffing out of an old sofa cushion. The white cotton flew into the air, then sagged onto the sidewalk and into the gutter. The boy looked up as Devin and his friends passed in front of him. The boy stared at them for a moment. Then he returned to his unstuffing.

They came to a street corner and waited for the light to change, even though no traffic was coming. Behind them three men came up: one Euro-American, one African-American, one Asian-American. All three were unshaven and bleary eyed. Though they seemed to be together, they said nothing as they came up beside Devin and his friends. "Hey, dudes," said one of the men, "Look what's here. It's the scout patrol. Hey, scouts, got any cookies for us?"

There was thick laughter from all three men. One of them coughed and spat into the street. "Little young for the action, aren't you?" said another man.

"Never too young for some action," said the third man. They all laughed again.

The light signaled go, and the five friends hurried down the street.

"Hey, don't go," one of the men shouted, "We just met. Come back and let's talk."

Devin and his friends just kept on going. It was hard, really hard, for Devin not to look over his shoulders. He felt like breaking into a run, and he knew the others felt the same. But they kept their cool and just kept on walking.

"There it is," said Lena, pointing at a flickering red light. About half a block away on their right was Rhino Rentals.

Rhino Rentals was a big garage with a small office in the back. The garage was huge, dark, and practically empty. Devin guessed it must have been a warehouse at some time. A red 1977 Mustang, a White 1980 Corvette, and a plain green 1983 Plymouth sedan with no license plates were parked to the left of the office. A pair of legs stuck out from the passenger side of the Mustang, where someone seemed to be removing the stereo and tape deck from the dashboard. To the right of the office were two stretch limousines, one white and one black.

"Is that the one right over there?" Dave whispered to Devin, pointing to the big black car.

"The one that chased me looks just like that, but the license plate number is different," Devin replied.

"They could have changed the plates," said Gabe.

"Could be," said Lena. "But the only way we're going to find out is to go in there and ask questions."

So they went up to the office door and knocked.

"It ain't locked," came the gruff voice on the other side.

Devin opened the door. The room was small, lit by fluorescent bulbs that flickered. The walls were covered with lurid calendars and bulletin boards cluttered with business cards. There was a scratched-up counter, and behind it stood a heavy-set, unshaven man with oily black hair. He was smoking the stub of a thick, black cigar. Behind the man, on a desk at the back of the room, was a desk covered with magazines and newspapers. Devin could see he was reading some kind of magazine with pictures of guns.

In the center of the desk was a brand new computer.

The unshaven man took the cigar from his mouth, spit at the wastebasket in the corner of the room, missed, grunted, and shoved the cigar back between his teeth.

Gabe whispered to Devin, "Now that I've seen the owner, I know why they call this place Rhino Rentals."

The man behind the counter looked up, then went back to his magazine. Without looking at Devin and his friends, he said, "We don't want no magazine subscriptions. Beat it."

"Good idea," said Dave, who had looked nervous ever since they entered. "I'm out of here."

"Wait a minute," said Devin, putting his hand on Dave's shoulder. To the man behind the desk he said, "We're not trying to sell subscriptions. We want to rent a limousine."

The man looked them over without raising his head. "You're too young to drive."

So the man was a little interested, anyway. Devin said, a little more boldly. "Do people usually drive the limos they rent here? I assumed you'd have drivers."

The man put down the magazine and looked at them straight on. The phone rang, but after one ring, the answering machine clicked in.

But wait a minute! Didn't he see the disk drive light go on at the computer terminal? Devin took a step to the side. There it was, sure enough: the computer of Rhino Rentals was connected to a modem!

"What are you looking at?" asked the man behind the counter.

"Nice computer you've got there," said Devin, looking back at the man. "What kind is it?"

"I couldn't tell you," said the man. "Now, you interested in a car and a driver?"

"Uh, sure," said Devin. "How much does it cost?"

"Fifty-five dollars an hour plus a fifteen percent gratuity for the driver," came the reply.

"Can I rent any kind of car I want to?" Devin asked.

"Sure," said the man, warming up now that he thought he had a potential customer. "What do you want: Corvette? Mustang classic?"

"No," Devin replied, "I want a limousine — a black limousine."

"Sure thing kid," came the reply with a smile that showed two missing teeth on the right side. "There's one right outside there." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. A crafty look came over his face. "Course, that one's a deluxe model. Cost you seventy-five bucks an hour, or sixty if you take it for a whole day."

But Devin wasn't thinking about prices. He was thinking about how he was going to ask the next question. Slowly he said, "Actually, I was thinking of one limo in particular. I saw it going down the street and I really liked it. It had custom license plates. In fact" — here Devin decided to cover his tracks — "I'm not sure it's even your limo. But I called some other companies and it wasn't theirs. So I'm here on a long shot it might be yours."

To himself Devin thought, "If this guy has half a brain he'll see the holes in that story. But I can't think up a better one right now."

The man behind the counter didn't seem to find anything wrong with Devin's explanation. "What was the plate number, kid?"

"SPD DMN," said Devin. He held his breath. Would this bozo get suspicious and kick them out — or do something worse?

"Yeah, that's ours, all right," said the man with another gap-toothed smile. "You like that one? It's our best — real comfortable, real fast. You know what those letters stand for?"

Devin hadn't even thought of that angle. "No— what?" he asked.

"SPEED DEMON! We got one customer who rents it from us twenty, maybe thirty times a year. He liked it a lot, and said he'd give us the bucks to buy those special plates if we'd put 'em on the car. Hell, yes, I said. So that's our Speed Demon."

Devin broke out in a cold sweat. He looked at his friends, and they all looked at Devin as if to say, "O.K., now what?" His mouth was dry, but he managed to ask, "Who usually rents Speed Demon?"

The man's look went hard again. "Sorry kid, we never let out our customers' names. Some of them are real fussy about their privacy. We want their business, so we don't talk about who rents the cars. You'd be surprised, though. We got some big rock star and a couple of boxing champs on our customer list. You're renting from a real quality organization," he said, the smile pasted back on again.

Devin looked at the peeling paint on the walls and the ceiling tiles hanging loose, then back at the leering gorilla behind the counter who was picking his teeth with a pocket knife now. A real quality organization, all right!

"Better be careful," said Gabe. "You could be dealing with the demon right here and now!"

But Devin didn't think so. This guy obviously couldn't tell a computer from a cash register, even if there was a good machine purring away on his desk. But if it didn't belong to the gorilla, who did operate it? Devin wanted to ask, but held back. He's already pushed his luck by asking about the license plates and the renter of the Speed Demon. If he started asking questions about the computer — after the guy already said he didn't know anything about it — he might get suspicious. So instead Devin said, "O.K., you've convinced me. What are the chances of renting it tomorrow?"

"No good, kid. It's still going to be down there in Cupertino with the man who's got it rented now."

Cupertino — Silicon Valley! That was information he could use. And if he could get the same driver when he and his friends checked it out, maybe the driver would talk about the man who bought the plates for Speed Demon.

"Any chance we could get the same driver as this Silicon Valley big shot?" Devin asked, hoping the question wouldn't make the gorilla suspicious.

"Not a chance. The guy uses his own driver. We got good drivers, though — good safety record and real polite."

"And you can tip them with raw meat and bananas," whispered Lena. Then the computer started beeping.

The man behind the counter turned around, and to the horror of Devin and his friends, gave the monitor a bang with his hairy fist.

"Shut up, blast you!" he said, giving it a rude shove with the flat of his hand.

"What's the matter?" asked Devin.

"Every day, same time, this thing starts beeping and I can't shut it off." He gave the screen another bang.

Devin started to ask why the man didn't just get whoever operated the computer to do something about it, when Dave cut in.

"Uh, sir, I believe I know what the problem is, and I can fix it."

The man looked up at Dave. "What do you know about it? You're too young."

But Marly saw where Dave was going. "No, sir, my brother is the best computer programmer at our school — maybe one of the best in the whole city."

"That's stretching it," Devin thought. But he saw what the Chans were up to, so he let them go on.

"I'm sure I know what the problem is, and I'll fix it for you," said Dave.

"For a dollar," Gabe added.

Good thinking, Devin thought. Make it seem like a money proposition, and he won't get suspicious.

The man looked Dave over. "You won't screw anything up, will you?"

Dave looked indignant. "I never make mistakes on the computer!"

Devin thought it took real self-control for all of them not to burst out laughing and start razzing Dave for that one. But no one said a word, and they all kept straight faces.

The man reached into a drawer, pulled out a greasy dollar, and laid it on the counter. "Fix it, and it's yours," he said.

The five friends went behind the counter and stood behind Dave as he sat down at the terminal. The man came over too, but he had a hard time seeing over all the backs and heads. "Just don't screw anything up," he said, and went back to his gun magazine.

"What an idiot!" whispered Dave, pulling up the computer's control panel to the desktop.

"Is it the alarm clock?" asked Gabe.

"That's it," said Dave, and started to flip it off.

"No, wait!" said Devin in a tense whisper. "Remember what we're here for. Let it beep, and call up the company records."

Dave slapped his head. "Right, right! I'm the idiot! What was I thinking of?" He sent the control panel to the background and pulled up a spreadsheet program.

"Here we go!" said Dave, and typed "List customers: SPD DMN."

The disk drive paused, then printed the message on the screen. It said:

You did not think it would be that easy, did
you, Devin Orion?

Chapter Four

Chasing the Demon

"Oh wow!," was all Gabe could say.

"How did it know?" asked Lena, turning around and looking over the room for video cameras. She saw none.

"That's some super hacker," said Gabe in admiration.

"What kind of program could possibly let it know we're here?" asked Marly.

"He could be watching us directly," said Devin "or he could have set up the computer in advance to spring this message if anyone came in here trying to call up the Speed Demon."

"The question is," said Dave, still staring at the terminal, "what are we going to do now?"

"You kids got it figured out yet?" came the voice from the counter.

"Uh, just about," said Lena. "We're checking out the manual just to make sure we don't screw anything up."

"Good toss with that banana," said Gabe.

"No manual," said Lena, squirming in and hunching down beside Dave. "But we might take a look at this."

"This" was a beat-up ledger book with Rhino Rentals scrawled in red ballpoint on the cover. Devin opened it up. It was set up by calendar date, so he turned to today.

Lots of rentals, but nothing for Speed Demon.

"Rats," said Devin. "Another dead end."

"Let me see that," said Marly, taking the book. "Maybe he's had it rented out for more than today." She scanned backwards through the ledger. "Aha! Here it is: Speed Demon, charged out to — listen to this — The Faust Group!"

"Never heard of them," said Dave.

"Haven't you ever heard of Faust?" asked Marly in surprise.

"Never heard of him either," said her brother.

"Isn't he the wizard who sold his soul to the devil?" asked Lena.

"I think he made a bet with the devil or something like that," Gabe said.

"It depends on whose version you read," said Marly. "What he did was

to wager or trade his soul in exchange for unlimited knowledge and power."

"Too deep for me," sighed Gabe.

"Hey, we're not here to talk about old stories," said Devin. "Isn't there a name by The Faust Group?"

"No," Marly replied, "but let me check in the back. Here we go: The Faust Group. John Smith, Cupertino."

"John Smith? A phony name for sure!" moaned Gabe.

"Maybe his name really is John Smith," said Lena. "How can we check him out?"

"Not in here," said Devin. "Dave, stop that alarm and let's get out of here."

Dave pulled up the control panel again and switched off the alarm. Lena quietly put the book back on the desk.

"O.K. kids, thanks a lot. Here's your dollar," said the man, handing Dave the bill.

"Gee, thanks. Now I can buy my own mainframe," said Dave, picking up the dirty bill as if it were a squashed insect and pushing it into a front pocket.

The man looked at Dave, not knowing if Devin's friend was making fun of him or not. He turned to Devin and said, "Well, how about it — want to rent that limo?"

Devin and his friends headed for the door. "Uh, we're real interested, but a hundred dollars plus extras is a bit steep for us. We'll talk about it later."

The man sneered. "Don't let mommy catch you breaking your piggy-wiggy bank." He picked up his cigar and resumed his reading.

"That guy didn't have a mommy," said Gabe as they came out into the street. "He was spawned right in the city dump when his father married a garbage truck."

"Hey, don't be too hard on him," said Devin. "He was only doing his job, and we weren't exactly being straight with him."

By now it was twilight. The streets were deserted, and the only light was a street lamp in the next block. Two other lights had been trashed by vandals. The Pentegram Club started walking to the bus stop. Their footsteps echoed ominously in the quiet empty street.

"Whoever that John Smith is must be a true computer wizard," said Gabe. "I still don't see how he could have known we were in there."

"Maybe he did sell his soul to the devil," said Dave.

"Halloween is over now, brother dear," said Marly.

They continued discussing and arguing until they came to the intersection.

Then they saw it.

Parked down the block was a black limousine, license plates SPD DMN. As soon as they saw the big car, they heard its engine start up with a deep roar. Nobody wanted to wait around to see how fast it was coming. Devin and his friends tore down the street, rushed down an alley, and came flying out into the next street. As they left the alley, they saw the black limousine turn into the narrow passageway, and slowly advance. Its movement was hampered because of the narrow width of the alley and the overflowing trash bins flanking both sides of the narrow passage.

They were still too far from the main street to make a run for it. "Down here!" Devin shouted, and they ran down the next alley. They were halfway down it, panting with excitement and exhaustion, when they heard the squeal of tires. The limo was out of the other alley and heading toward them.

"In here!" shouted Devin, pointing at a partly filled trash bin. He didn't know what kind of muck might be inside, but better to face the muck than whoever or whatever was in that limo. One after another in quick succession, they scaled the sides of the dumpster and hunkered down in the darkness inside. Outside they heard the tires squeal again as the big car made a sharp right turn into the alleyway.

Devin and his friends listened intently as the limousine drove slowly down the alley. They hardly dared to breathe. Devin saw Gabe reach down and pick up a broken bottle and grip it tightly by the neck. Lena's eyes were closed, and Devin knew she was preparing her body and mind for an aikido attack. Dave had his hand around his sister's shoulder, and both were looking up towards the opening of the dumpster.

The car slowed down, then stopped. They could hear a muffled conversation going on inside the car. Devin thought one of the voices sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. Then the conversation stopped, and a door opened. Someone was walking around right in front of the dumpster.

"I don't see them, Mr. Smith," came a voice. "You want me to check into these big garbage bins around here?"

Devin didn't hear a reply. The footsteps faded away, then returned. "I still think you should let me check these bins, Mr. Smith," came the voice.

There was a conversation that Devin couldn't quite make out. Then he heard the sound of a lid being raised on a trash bin across the alley. Far away, Devin could hear the wail of a siren. The sound seemed to be getting closer.

"Maybe someone phoned the police!" Lena whispered.

There was a scuffle of feet outside, then silence.

"O.K., Mr. Smith," said the voice. "Just let me get rid of this." A moment later, a half-finished styrofoam cup of coffee came sailing up and over the lid into the trashbin where Devin and his friends were holding their breaths. The hot coffee sloshed out and onto Gabe's lap. Gabe opened his mouth to yell, then clamped his jaws together and squinted his eyes shut. He didn't make a sound.

The car door slammed shut, and the limousine drove slowly down the alley. Finally there was silence. The car was gone.

Devin and his friends waited another minute just to be sure. Then Gabe poked his head out through the opening of the dumpster.

"The coast is clear," he shouted down to his friends. "Let's get out of here!"

The Pentegram Club didn't linger. In less than a minute they were speeding down the street toward the bus stop.

* * * * *

Back at his house, Devin started up his computer. There was a look of grim determination in his eyes as he called up the network connection:

```
Login: Name?  
Devin Orion  
Password?  
D.O.  
Password Accepted.  
Request?  
Fileuser  
Name and Location?  
John Smith, Cupertino  
Processing. Please wait.  
*****
```

The wait message stayed on the screen for several seconds. Then the reply printed across his screen.

```
Name unknown.  
Request?
```

Devin wasn't surprised. Even if there were a John Smith in Cupertino, he probably wouldn't use his real name on the network. So Devin returned to the screen and typed:

```
Faust, anywhere
```

This would give him the name of anything or anyone, a person or a group, with the name "Faust" in the title.

```
Processing. Please wait.  
*****  
Faust, Dan, Lubbock, Texas, Texas Tech University,  
Department of Physics.  
Faust Group, The. Cupertino, California.
```

**End.
Request?**

The first one wasn't it. But the second one: bingo!
"Looks like you nailed them, Dev!" said Lena, patting his shoulder.
"Can you find out their address?" asked Marly.
"I'm sure going to try," said Devin, and typed:

Faust Group, The. phone/modem/fax/ address.

The computer sent the information, and the network processed it. Once he had their address and phone number, Devin could do a lot of checking up on them. But first....

The screen printed the message.

**Information security password coded. Access denied.
Request?**

Password coded? Devin had never seen that one before. Usually, if someone wanted to be on the network, they wanted to communicate with other users. And that meant letting them get in touch with you by electronic mail, phone, fax, or even an old-fashioned letter.

The Faust Group's setup was like having a phone where all they could do was call out, since they didn't want anyone calling them. Strange — a one way computer link on the network! Someone just might want to get onto the network to snoop around in other people's electronic mail, or get into the databanks of the mainframe computers owned by big businesses, universities, and the government.

But Devin realized that didn't have to be the only explanation. Someone might want to communicate just with certain people — people who had been given the password. No one else could drop in uninvited.

Of course, both answers might be true: a one way hacker line that only other hackers he or she knew could log in to.

"Why don't you try guessing the password?" Dave suggested. "With only four letters, you might get lucky."

Devin doubted that. Anyone smart enough to be on the network and rent limousines for a week at a time wouldn't have an easy password.

But there was a way to get that password by brute force. Devin pulled up the program that had gotten in to the school records office. It was a simple but effective little piece that took time; but at computer speed, the process would take only a few hours. So he opened a file labeled "Password Snooper" and typed "Run." The computer prompted:

Login: Name?
Supersnooper
Password?
Star
Password Accepted.
Request?
User Connect: Faust Group, The.

Devin waited until the message appeared:

Password protected line.
Password?

Devin's Snoop program entered:

AAAA

The reply came:

Password invalid.
Password?
AAAB
Password invalid.
Password?
AAAC.

Devin got up and walked around the room. It would take about three hours for his program to try every four-letter combination in the alphabet. If the password was "ZZZZ," he'd have to wait the full three hours. If it was "ABCD," like the school records office databank, it would only take a couple of minutes.

"Very interesting," said Dave, looking thoughtfully over Devin's shoulder as the program was running. "Where did you get the idea for that

program?"

Devin was suddenly uncomfortable. This was the program that started all the trouble. If he hadn't hacked into the school records office, none of this would have happened. Probably. Or would it?

"I got the idea from an old James Bond movie. Say, why don't we all go out and get something to eat at the Village Pizza?" Devin was sure the best way to shift attention away from his hacker program was to suggest food. And he was right. Lena bounded out of her chair, grabbed her fractal jacket, and headed for the door.

"This may be the only good idea Dev's had all day. Running away from goons works up my appetite. Anyone want to split an anchovy and green pepper pizza?"

Gabe got up, put his arm around her as they walked out the door, and said, "Sure — as long as they don't put on any anchovies or green peppers."

Later at Village Pizza, with the remains of three pizzas and five soft drinks scattered around the table, the Pentegram Club tried to figure out what was behind the attacks.

"Dev," asked Marly, "why do you think all this is happening to you?"

Before Devin could answer, Lena said, "Looks to me like it's some sort of Satanist group. I mean, check it out. A black limousine rented to the Faust Group tries to tail him, then tries to run him over, then tries to run us all over. I think some group of religious nut has got it in for you."

"Dev," said Gabe, "you told me on the phone that there was some connection between that limo and what was happening with your computer."

They all looked at Devin. How much should he tell them? He decided to be cautious, at least at first.

"Fair enough. But I warn you, you're not going to want to believe what I'm going to say," said Devin.

"Try us," said Lena, "After spending time at Rhino Rentals and inside a dumpster, I'm ready for just about anything."

"You may not be ready for this," said Devin. "Yesterday, a demon appeared on my computer screen."

Dave and Gabe smiled, Marly frowned, and Lena just looked interested.

Devin continued, "This isn't a prank or a joke — any more than that black limo is a joke. This demon — or, at least, it looked like a demon — appeared and told me I had to break into the Cal Institute records office

and steal some data. I wish you could see that demon right now. He appeared this morning, even though my computer was turned off all night!"

"Impossible!" snorted Lena. "No one can reach through a dead screen and turn on your computer."

"I don't know how it was done; but believe me, Lena, that computer was turned off when I went to bed and turned on when I woke up."

"What kind of information did they want you to get?" asked Dave.

"Uh oh. Here we go," thought Devin. "Now they're going to want the whole story." Out loud he said, "They wanted the grade records for Mr. Yea. The demon, or whoever was controlling him, has it in for Mr. Yea, and wants to use some of the information locked up in the data banks at Cal Institute to ruin him." Devin didn't want to go into any more detail than that about what the demon wanted, and why.

"What I don't understand, Dev," said Marly, looking thoughtfully at Devin, "is why the demon chose you. Did he threaten you? What made him think you could or would hack into the Cal Institute data bank?"

Devin was silent. He could see this moment coming, but he couldn't decide how to handle it. It wouldn't be too hard to make up a reasonable-sounding story and get on with the search. But a "reasonable-sounding story" would be a lie; and Devin was through trying to twist the truth. So he took a deep breath and told them everything: his worries about his grade, breaking into the school records office, changing the grade, changing it back, the blackmail attempt by the demon, and the first encounter with the black limousine.

Gabe was the first to speak after Devin had told his tale. "Wow, pretty impressive, man: hacked your way into the school records office! You're turning out to be one ace programmer."

"But one deuce human being," replied Devin.

"I don't think so," said Marly with an intensity that surprised them all. "I don't think so at all. You did something wrong, but you went back and made it right. You did it, even though you thought nobody had noticed. Most people would have let that grade stand."

"Ha!" Lena added. "Most people would have given themselves all A grades, or maybe have even sold good grades to their friends."

"Right," Dave agreed, "and maybe changed their enemies' grades to D's and F's!"

"You're an honorable person, Devin, and I respect you for it," said Marly, putting her hand on Devin's shoulder.

"She's right, Dev," said Gabe. "Changing the grade was a mistake, but you put it right."

Devin had thought that the confession would make him feel even guiltier. He was also afraid that his friends would look down on him when they learned what he had done. But they didn't put him down. He felt like they understood him and forgave him. It was a great feeling! Devin felt like he had been carrying an enormous weight around on his mind, and tremendously heavy load of guilt. He didn't even realize just how heavy it was until his friends took it away and replaced it with understanding.

"Say," said Gabe, "do you guys think there's a connection between the demon on the screen and the Speed Demon that chased us?"

"No doubt about it," Devin replied. "The question is, who are they, and what do they really want?"

"I thought you said they wanted to get some damaging information about Mr. Yea," said Lena.

"Yes, but why?" asked Marly. "Why would someone want to destroy Mr. Yea?"

Devin remembered he'd left out a crucial part of his conversation with the demon. "The face on the screen said something about employers who would pay a great deal to get at information that Mr. Yea has."

"If Mr. Yea really does work for the National Computer Security Agency, then the people who want this information might be foreign spies," Dave suggested.

"Or just greedy people," added Lena.

For the next half hour, the Pentegram Club discussed and argued over why someone or some organization wanted to get Mr. Yea. Finally Marly said, "We're just guessing, and we're never really going to find out anything for sure until we do something."

"Well, sister," said Dave, "what do you suggest?"

Marly frowned and looked thoughtful. She brushed back her hair, and said, "I really don't know, Dave. We've gone about as far as we can with that Rhino Rentals place, and the network won't let us hook up to the Faust Group's computer without a password. I really can't think of anything else right now."

"Hey," said Devin, "the snooper password program! Don't you remember? I set it to run while we were down here. Let's go back and see if we've had any luck."

They paid for their meal and rushed back to Devin's house. It was getting late, but they were fired up about the idea of breaking the

password code of the digital demon.

As soon as they saw the screen, they all let out a whoop of triumph.

Password?

DMON

Welcome to Faust Group.

Login Name?

Devin sat down and typed: STAR

All the Pentagrams were looking eagerly over his shoulder. Devin hit the return button. The screen read:

**STAR, What can surpass the stillness of
silence?**

Answer:

Marly and Dave just stared at the screen. Gabe laughed. Lena got up and stretched.

"It looks like it's going to be a long night, Dev," she said, putting on her fractal jacket, "and I've got to get some sleep. Want us to come over tomorrow morning?"

Devin scarcely heard her. "What's with this thing, anyway?" he shouted, waving his hand at the computer screen. "A demon hacks into my own computer, bullies me, tries to blackmail me, then tries to run down me and my friends. Now that I'm almost in touch with the blasted thing, it wants to play riddle games with me!"

"Hey, man," said Gabe, rising and going toward the door, "Lena's right. We've all been through a lot today. Let's just sleep on it, and things might look different tomorrow."

Devin jumped up out of the chair, exclaiming, "But we can't quit now. I'm just..."

"Just about to collapse from exhaustion and tension, Dev," Dave interrupted as he got up to leave. "You really need to get some rest yourself."

Marly smiled at Devin and kissed him on the cheek. "For once, my brother is right. We can't stay here all night, and we're all exhausted. That little rest we had in the dumpster didn't seem to relax us at all."

Even Devin had to laugh at that. "I guess you're right. Just come on over when you can tomorrow. Don't even bother to call, because my modem might be tying up the phone line." Devin saw them to the door, and wished them good night.

Then he went back to his room and stared at the screen.

Star, What can surpass the stillness of silence?

Answer:

What was this Faust Group doing? Did they have a multiple password security system to keep out sightseers? Or was this a little game cooked up especially for Devin Orion?

"What does surpass the stillness of silence?" he thought, getting interested in the riddle in spite of his fatigue and worry. "Silence is the total absence of sound. How can there be anything quieter than silence? The question doesn't make sense. Nothing surpasses the stillness of silence."

Aha!

**Star, What can surpass the stillness of
silence?**

Answer: NOTHING

Correct, Star.

RATS. 2 LEVEL 2, STAR?

"All right!" Devin shouted out loud. "I guessed their riddle!"

His elation quickly faded. What was that about level two? It was a strange message; but the meaning seemed clear. He had to guess the level 2 password. "Rats yourself! The security password protection for this Faust Group is like moats around a castle," thought Devin. This was going to be a long night. Devin fired up the password cracking program again.

AAAA

Password invalid.

Password?

AAAB

Devin turned off the light to go to sleep. Then an idea occurred to him. He switched on the light, pulled up his chair to the computer, and stopped

the password cracking program. He called up another program he had written as a joke last year for the Pentegram club. "The Cheesy Fade-Out" he had called it. Everybody laughed when they saw the results. Devin himself was pretty pleased with it; but it wasn't terribly useful, so he stored it away on his hard disk drive and forgot about it. He added a few more lines of code, smiled, then let his password cracking program start up again.

"If that demon comes back to bother me, he'll be in for a surprise. Two surprises, if I'm lucky," thought Devin. He switched out the light and went to sleep. He dreamed about pizzas and Lena spinning Dackles over her head like a professional wrestler.

* * * * *

When he awoke, the screen had stopped scrolling through the four-letter guesses at the password. The message now read:

Z0Z0

Password invalid.

Password?

Now what? His program had gone through all possible combinations of four letters, and nothing worked. But why had the program stopped at ZOZO? He took a closer look, and realized that the "O" was in fact a zero. His program had gone through the entire alphabet, checking every possible combination of four letters, then gone to numbers, tried them all, then tried all combinations of letters and numbers. Devin was not entirely surprised that his program hadn't worked this time. He had a feeling that the brute random force attack would not work this time. Whoever set up the security gate on this Faust group had given some serious thought to keeping people out.

But there had to be a way in. "Every system has a way in," he thought. "It's just a matter of finding the right key." But a simple password on this network had to be just four characters long. His program had just tried every combination possible, and none worked!

What was the trick he needed to get the second level password?

He thought the matter over. Suddenly the screen changed. His last password attempt disappeared, and the familiar face of the demon appeared. It spoke in a mocking voice:

I am disappointed in you, Devin Orion. I would have thought you would have cracked that password system by now. The first one was easy, was it not? But you will never get the second one.

Now Devin was more annoyed than frightened. What gave this guy the right to charge into his computer and criticize his programming ability? So he shot back: "Well, Mister Demon, since you seem to know something about the password system that I don't, I'll just have to assume you're connected with the Faust group. That wasn't very smart of you to tell me that. And if you're responsible for that black limousine trying to run me down, that was a bungled job, too. There were five of us, all alone in a deserted part of town, and you couldn't find us, even when we were hiding only two feet away. I'll bet...."

But Devin didn't finish the sentence. The image of the demon ballooned up and filled the whole screen. The top of its head and the bottom of its chin was cut off, leaving only two huge eyes at the top and a gaping mouth at the bottom of his screen. When the demon spoke, its voice seemed an octave lower, and the volume increased to a shout.

You may think you can taunt us, Devin Orion, but you cannot. You are a puny boy, and I am the representative of a great power. You will do what we ask of you or we will destroy you and all of your friends.

The intensity of the image and the voice startled Devin. For a moment, he backed away from the computer screen. Then his sense of pride overcame his fear, and he retorted, "I'm not going to steal those records and I'm not going to let you destroy my friends. But I am going to get to the bottom of this and expose you and this Faust group you work for. You may think those passwords have stopped me; but let me tell you, they haven't. I'll be walking around in the Faust group, picking up everything I need to know, before the sun goes down. But that's for later. Right now,

it's good-bye, so long, and get lost." Devin clicked on the "Cheesy fade-Out" icon.

The face of the demon still filled the screen; but its color was slowly changing from red to yellow to pink. Then the pink developed blue polka dots, making the face look like a clown with a bizarre strain of measles. The demon's head started to shrink. As it shrank, it began to melt like hot cheese. The horns drooped forward, and the demon's whole face started to cave in like a lopsided cake. The sagging lips spoke, but even the voice sounded like it was underwater and far away.

You think you can get rid of me by some
cheapschool programming prank, Devin Orion?
We shall see who's the stronger. I am
launching a worm program to destroy your
files. When I am through you will have nothing
left! We are going to wipe....

Devin couldn't make out the rest, because the demon's face had shrunk to a point, then vanished. The screen was normal now, showing his desktop and the icon for his "Cheesy Fade-Out" program. Whoever was on the other end of that program had another unpleasant surprise waiting for him. Devin had modified the code so that all changes in the projected image of the demon's face were sent back to the computer at the place of origin and saved to that computer's disk — replacing the former image. There would be nothing left of the demon, wherever its home was. The person — if it was a person — on the other end would have to rebuild the image from scratch: voice, facial expressions, and all. The demon was a highly sophisticated, complex bit of programming. Its creator would have to spend hours redoing it, unless he or she had it saved on a backup file. Unlikely, Devin thought, because no floppy disk could hold the enormous amount of information. And if his enemy did have it stored somewhere and did try to send it again, well, Devin would melt the face again. He was determined not to talk to the demon again — at least not until he had the answers that would let him turn the tables on the monster.

And there was one more little hook to his Cheesy Fade-Out hack. Devin typed in "List origin of captured image" and hit the return button. The computer took a long time — almost a minute — to complete the trace.

But Devin smiled with satisfaction when he saw the answer printed on his screen:

Cheesy Fade-Out origin trace
complete.
Source of captured image: Faust
Group, The.

Aha! So the demon did come from the same people who rented the Speed Demon limo from Rhino Rentals! Devin had suspected as much; now he was sure.

But there still remained the problem of getting into the Faust Group itself. His boast to the demon was just that — a boast. In truth, Devin had no scheme to crack the second level password.

As he was mulling over his problem, Gabe came to the door.

"Come on in," shouted Devin, recognizing Gabe's unusual knock. Gabe was into music, and liked to beat out strange rhythms on the door whenever he knocked. This one was three-against-two: for every three knocks of one hand, the left knocked twice at the same time.

Gabe strolled over, taking off a light raincoat. "Man, it's wet out there."

"Raining?" asked Devin. He'd been so preoccupied with the demon that he hadn't even noticed the weather.

"No, just heavy fog," Gabe replied. He looked at the computer screen. "Any luck with that password cracker?" he asked.

"No luck," Devin replied, still staring at the screen. "But I did manage to trash the demon. I ran that Cheesy Fade Out program, and he looked like a cheap pizza before he disappeared. You would have laughed."

Gabe smiled. "Yeah, I wish I could have seen that. But let's get back on track. Pull up that password riddle again."

"You mean the one about silence?"

"That's it. Maybe we missed something the first time."

So Gabe went into the net work, dialed up the Faust group, gave the DMON password, and found himself back where he was yesterday:

Star, What can surpass the stillness of silence?

Answer: NOTHING

Correct, Star.

RATS.2 LEVEL 2, STAR?

"Hey, you got the next password? Nifty thinking, dude!" said Gabe. Then he leaned forward and studied the latest message. "That's a pretty weird message about level two."

"I agree," said Devin, "but we're dealing with some pretty weird people."

Gabe wouldn't let go of his concern. "For example, why would it say '2 level 2' instead of just 'to level two' or 'Password for level 2, please,' or even 'Are you ready for level two?' It doesn't make sense."

Devin saw his point. "And why the 'rats'? It's like someone programmed the security system to express disappointment when someone put in the right password."

"Yeah, maybe," said Gabe, who sounded unconvinced. "But it addressed you by your hacker name. I wonder if it does that with all people who log in?"

"Probably," said Devin. "It's not too hard to...." Devin stopped in mid-sentence, snapped his fingers, and laughed out loud.

"What's the matter, Devin?" asked Gabe. "What are you thinking about?"

Devin stopped laughing; but a smile remained. "I've got the next password," he said. "I can't believe I didn't see it."

"O.K., Ace, what's the trick?" asked Gabe, taking a step backward and putting his hands on his hips.

"Take a look at that message. Notice anything unusual about it?"

"Yeah, everything. It just looks bizarre. What else?" Gabe asked.

"It's a palindrome," Devin replied.

"What's a palindrome?" Gabe asked.

"A word or a sentence that's spelled the same backwards or forwards, like *dad*, or *radar*, or a *Tyota*, or *Able was I ere I saw Elba*."

"Able was I ere I saw Elba? What does that mean?" Gabe asked, scratching his head.

"I'm not sure," said Devin. "Something to do with Napoleon I think. Anyway, the computer message is a palindrome. It spells the same backwards and forwards."

"So?"

"So all I have to do is enter in my name backwards," said Devin. He typed in "rats" and hit return. The message came back:

**Password invalid.
Password?**

Devin pushed his chair back in frustration. "Rats to you, computer. I was sure... oh, no, what a dummy I am. My password cracker must have tried that combination of letters last night. I should have known that rats wouldn't work. But now I'm really beat. What could it be?"

"Is there another way you can say star backwards," Gabe suggested.

"What do you mean, another way? There's only one way backwards, and I've already..." A smile came over Devin's face. "Maybe not, Gabe old buddy, maybe not. Let's just try a trick or two here." He typed in his new response:

**Password?
STAR
Password invalid.
Password?
2 L V K
Password invalid.
Password?
2 L V K
Password invalid.
Password?
K V L 2
Welcome to The Faust Group.**

Devin and Gabe let out a whoop of laughter and shook hands.

"What is that?" Gabe laughed out. "That's got to be one of the strangest word processing tricks I've ever seen."

"It's not a program" said Devin still smiling from his success, "It's a strange letterform called Flipfont. Pretty nifty, yes?"

Just then, the telephone rang. Their laughter died out at once. Was this some kind of direct call from the Faust group or the Speed Demon thugs? Devin picked up the phone and answered it.

"Hello?"

"Hi Dev, this is Dave." He sounded worried, and he was speaking in the kind of voice you use when you're afraid someone is going to overhear you.

But Devin was too relieved to notice the tone of Dave's voice. "Yo, Dave, thought you guys were coming right over. What's holding you up?"

"Lena and Marly and I are all here, Dev. We started to come over to your place. But when we got to your street, we saw the black limo parked about three houses down from where you are. You can't see it because there's a moving van blocking the view. But don't go out the front door, Dev. They're waiting for you!"

A chill came over Devin as he listened to his friend. Dave continued, "Look, man, why don't you slip out the back way again and come on over here?"

Devin thought, then replied, "I can't see what good that would do right now, Dave. Then I'm just hiding out over there instead of over here. I need some kind of plan. I think I've gotten into the Faust Group terminal. I'm going to hack around in there and try to get some answers. I'll call you if anything turns up."

Dave tried to convince Devin to come over to his place, but Devin stuck to his plan to stay put and find out more about the Faust Group. "I really appreciate your help and your concern, Dave," Devin said finally. "If things get too tough over here, I'll come right over, O.K.? We'll be in touch."

Devin hung up the phone and looked out of his window. The fog drifted slowly down the street and across the front lawns. From where he was standing, he couldn't make out the house with the moving van.

"What's up?" Gabe inquired. "Why didn't the Lena and the Chans come over?"

"Because," said Devin pointing out the window, "they said the black limo is parked right down the street over there."

Gabe got up to look, but couldn't see the limousine. "Where is it?" he asked.

"It's hidden behind a moving van," said Devin.

"Let me check it out," said Gabe. "They're on your trail, not mine. Maybe I can get a look at them."

Before Devin could stop him, Gabe was out the front door and walking slowly to the front sidewalk. The fog hung thickly in the sky, its misting sheets drooping down into the streets. Visibility was poor, and Gabe could see only a short way down the street.

"See anything?" called Devin in a shout-whisper.

Gabe squinted into the mist. "Yeah, I can make out the moving van. I think there's something parked behind it, but I can't be ... oh wow! Is that

really Dumb Don and Destroyer Diggs down there?"

Devin cautiously edged out of the house and joined Gabe at the curbside. The big moving van was parked in front of the Currans's house; but no one seemed to be moving anything in or out. The Currans usually parked their car in the driveway. But there was no car there now.

What was the van doing there?

Devin could see the vague form of the tail of a car protruding from behind the wide van trailer. He couldn't make out what kind of car it was; but he did see Dackles and Diggs standing in the street talking to someone inside the car.

"Want me to go down there and see if I can hear what they're saying?" Gabe asked in a low voice to Devin.

"No way," Devin replied. "Those guys mean business. And if Dumb Don or the Destroyer tells them you're a friend of mine, they might decide they want to talk to you."

Gabe was about to reply when Dackles and Diggs took a step backwards. The black limousine backed up, angled its tires and came out into the street. Devin and Gabe started to run back into the house. But the limousine stopped, whipped around in a U-turn, then sped off in the opposite direction. Dackles and Diggs saw Gabe and Devin, and walked down slowly to meet them. Dackles had his hands in his pockets and a smirk on his face. He was wearing motorcycle boots, dirty blue jeans and a black leather jacket with a faded picture of a Heavy Metal rock star on the back. Diggs wore what he always wore: running shoes, black Levis, a t-shirt with the name and logo of a Japanese videogame manufacturer on the back, and orange mirror-coated sunglasses.

"Dackles is just a grunge and a bully," Devin thought. "He's not worth worrying about. But Destroyer Diggs — the trouble is, you can never tell what he's really thinking behind those glasses. He even wears them in class." Devin recalled an incident some time ago when the principal, Mr. Barnes, decided that Diggs shouldn't wear glasses. Devin saw them go into the principal's office together, with Mr. Barnes looking steamed and determined, and Diggs looking just like he did when he was playing a videogame: cool, calm, and no facial expression. Half an hour later, The Destroyer came out with the same expression — and the sunglasses still on. No one, students or teachers, ever bothered him about those shades again.

Dackles spoke first: "You guys are sure in it deep. I don't know what you've done, but those dudes in the black hearse sure want to get their

hands on you in the worst way. Right, Matt?" No one called him Destroyer to his face. The last person who did had to miss school for three days.

Diggs considered Dackle's speech. "Maybe," he said.

Devin looked at Destroyer Diggs. "What do you know about those people in the black limo?" Devin asked Diggs, who didn't seem as openly hostile as Dackles. But it was Dackles who answered.

"What I *do* know, nerd, is that they want you watched. They want to know where you go and what you do. I think they're the FBI or the CIA or something, and you guys are in deep garbage. Right, Matt?"

Matt Diggs considered this speech, too. "You talk too much, Don," he said quietly.

Dackles looked surprised for a second, then smirked at Devin again. "Yeah, maybe I do. Maybe I should just shut up and let those government agents grab them and haul them off to jail. Maybe I just shouldn't say anything more."

Devin looked Dackles in the eyes. Gabe casually strolled around behind him, and said in a calm voice, "Maybe you should tell us everything you know, right now, while you're still standing up."

Dackles turned around, only to see Gabe's face just a few inches from his own. Devin took a step forward, but felt a powerful restraining hand on his shoulders.

"Be cool, Dev," said Matt Diggs. "What Don meant to say was that the people in the car sounded like agents of some sort. Their window was only rolled down an inch or two so we couldn't see their faces. But they did want us to keep an eye on you, and they gave us something to make sure we did."

Devin was startled. That was about the longest speech he'd ever heard Destroyer Diggs make. Moreover, Diggs didn't sound hostile or mocking. It was just like he had some information and wanted to pass it along. Dackles backed away from Gabe and they both stood in the background as Devin spoke to Diggs.

"And just what did they give you?" Devin asked.

"This," said Diggs. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, plain brown bag.

"What's in there?" asked Devin.

"Something to help remind us to call this number whenever we see you leaving the house," said Diggs. He held up a card for Devin to see.

The card read:

The Faust Group
(415) 369-6666
E Mail DMON.CA.EDU.

Devin reached out to take the card, but Diggs flipped the card over between his thumb and forefinger, snapped his other fingers around it, and neatly slipped it into his front pocket.

"No, I think I'd better keep this, Dev," he said with a very, very slight smile. "I might need to use it."

For a moment, Devin thought that The Destroyer might be willing to help them. But as soon as Devin saw him put away the card, his hopes sank. No, Diggs and Dackles weren't going to help him. Even worse, they were going to spy on them and inform the Faust Group about his movements.

Devin wanted to ask more questions, but just then he heard a familiar voice.

"Yo, Dev, you're still keeping bad company, I see," shouted Lena as she walked toward them. She saw Dackles and smiled. "Well, if it isn't my favorite punching bag. How about a couple rounds of no holds barred karate?" She crouched down and raised her hands into a karate chop position. Dackles paled and grabbed Diggs' arm.

"Come on," he said, pulling Diggs away in the opposite direction. "She knows I won't hit a female, so she bugs me. Let's go down to the arcade and try some Dungeon Wars. I'm buying."

So Dumb Donald Dackles and Destroyer Diggs went away, Dackles dragging Diggs by the arm, and Diggs smiling slightly as he disengaged himself and said, "Let go, my man. I want to walk. You can run ahead if you want to."

They disappeared around the corner.

Lena came up smiling. "I guess Dumb Don doesn't like me," she said.

Gabe let out a whistle. "Maybe he was afraid of being blinded by your jacket."

Lena laughed and did a little 360-degree turn like a fashion model. "Like it? It's my newest fractal jacket. How about this purple spiral here on the arm? See how it zooms into those golden teardrops?"

In spite of all his worries, even Devin had to be impressed with Lena's jacket. She did all the transfers herself, taking the geometric designs from

her computer, converting them into color separations, and transferring them to fabric. Then she cut the fabric into parts and sewed them together so well you couldn't see the seams unless you looked very closely and very carefully. "Sometime," Devin thought, "when all this is over, I really have to get her to show me how she makes those cosmic coats." Out loud he said, "I must say, Lena, that your jackets would cheer up anyone. But I sort of wish you hadn't scared away Dackles and Diggs."

Lena looked surprised. "Why? I'd have thought you'd be grateful for getting those creeps off the street."

"They'd been talking to the people in the black limo," said Gabe, "and we were trying to find out just what the Speed Demon people said to them."

"And what did they say?" asked Lena.

Devin recounted the whole incident, from the time they went outside until the moment when Lena had come up and driven Dackles away.

"Hey, I'm really sorry, you guys," said Lena. "But look. I'd be happy to go down to the arcade and persuade them to tell us what they know."

"Thanks, Lena," said Devin. "But, first of all, I don't want you tangling with them. Dackles is just a bluff, but that Diggs makes me real nervous. Something tells me he could be dead-on dangerous if he wanted to be."

"Dev's got a point, Lena," Gabe agreed. "Remember what happened to Adam Erickson when he tried to snatch off the Destroyer's glasses?"

Lena remembered.

"And besides," Devin continued, "I think we've got as much information from them as we need."

"Too bad you didn't get a copy of that Faust Group business card," said Gabe.

Devin smiled. "Who needs a card when you've got sharp eyes and a good memory?"

Back inside his house, Devin first turned on his computer and called up the Chans. No one answered the phone, so he sent an electronic mail message to let them know he was all right, and that Lena was with them. Then he called up his electronic address book and entered:

The Faust Group
(415) 369-6666
E Mail DMON.CH.EDU.

Devin took a long, hard look at the information he had memorized from his quick look at Desroyer Diggs' card. "That phone number isn't Cupertino," he said to Lena and Gabe, who were peering over his shoulder.

"Right," said Gabe. "Don't you recognize the first three digits? They're the new telephone prefix numbers for our own town."

Devin did a double take. "Here? Right here? You mean this Faust Group and the Demon are from here?"

"Sure looks that way," Lena agreed. "Why don't you just call them up and see who answers?"

"Good idea," Devin agreed. "But what do I say?"

Gabe had a ready answer. "Tell them you're from the Network, and that you think a hacker is trying to break into their files. Ask to speak to the head honcho."

"And what do I say if they put the head honcho on the phone?" asked Devin.

"Tell them you're on to their tricks," said Lena. "Tell them you know all about their organization and that you're going to get in touch with the police or the CIA or the FBI if they don't stop hassling you."

The three friends discussed the plan, then decided that it was about the best they could do. Devin still wasn't satisfied, though. The whole plan, even if it worked, still left too many unanswered questions. But for now, he agreed with Lena: the first thing was to get these people off his case!

Devin dialed the phone number. It rang six times; then came a click like an answering machine starting its message.

Then the line went dead.

"Hey, I got disconnected!" yelled Devin.

We will have to disconnect more than your
phone line if you do not start cooperating with
us, Devin Orion.

The voice came from the computer. Devin and his friends turned to look — and there was the demon.

"Whoa!" was all Gabe could say.

"Pretty righteous graphics," said Lena in obvious admiration for the quality of the image on the screen.

"But an unholy picture," said Devin, his eyes showing real fear for the first time since the adventure began. "How did you know I was calling the Faust Group? And what do you want? I already told you I wouldn't go for your deal."

The demon smiled the sneering smile it always wore before delivering some particularly nasty bit of news.

Your friends are there with you right now,
Devin Orion, are they not? Do you want me to
tell them about that little prank of yours with
the school records?

Now it was Devin's turn to smile. "Sorry, Horns, but you're too late. I already told them that I broke into the school records office, changed my grade, then changed it back again. Unless you're willing to add a few lies to liven up the story, you're out of luck. Try something else."

The demon paused. "It's almost like he's listening to instructions from someone off-screen," Devin thought. Then the demon spoke again:

I might have known you would resort to
honesty to get out of your fix, Devin Orion.
So you will not do what we asked?

"No way," Devin replied triumphantly. He'd taken away their trump card. Now what could they do?

The demon smiled again — a slight smile, but full of malice.

How much do you care about Marly and
Dave Chan, Devin Orion?

A chill shot up Devin's spine. Lena muttered something under her breath, and Gabe spat out, "You creeping cruds!"

In as cool a tone as he could manage, Devin replied, "I care a lot about them. I care enough about them to phone the police if I even think you've done anything to hurt them. Remember, demon, I have your license plate number, your phone number, and your computer network number. It wouldn't take the police five minutes to track you down."

The demon replied:

Oh yes it would, Devin Orion. It would take them much longer than you think to find out anything about us. We are experts in covering our tracks and hiding our whereabouts. But even if your local police were staffed by a troop of Sherlock Holmeses, they could not do anything without proof of criminal activity. And I can assure you, they would find no trace, no trace at all, of any wrongdoing. Nor would they find any trace of David or Marly Chan.

"They could be right," said Gabe. "Anyone or any group smart enough to pull off the computer tricks they've pulled off would be hard to nail."

Lena leaned over and whispered in Devin's ear. "If they've got the Chans, we've got to get them back. Find out what kind of deal the demon wants to make."

Devin turned back to the screen. "What's your proposition?"

The demon replied at once.

The same as before, Devin Orion. You get the records we want from Cal Institute, and we make sure your friends come to no harm. Double cross us, and I cannot make any guarantees about your friends' safety.

Devin answered, "How long do I have to think it over?"

The demon replied.

Your attempts to evade our agents and break into our system have taken too much valuable time, Devin Orion, I am afraid we will

have to ask you to hurry. I shall be back at 6 o'clock this evening for your answer.

With that, the demon dissolved, and the screen was normal again.

Everyone was quiet for a long time. Finally Gabe said, "What time is it now, Dev?" He looked at the mini-clock in the upper right corner of his screen.

"One-thirty," Devin answered.

"Four and a half hours," said Lena with a discouraged tone in her voice. "Not much time to find out what we need to know and help Marly and Dave."

"We've got to try, though," said Devin in a strong voice. "First things first. If that Faust Group has a local phone number, they've got a local address. I'm going to get that address right now!" He began tapping out commands on the keyboard at a furious rate.

"What are you doing, Dev?" Gabe asked. "You'll never get past the password gate of the Faust Group. I was amazed that you got as far as you did. But there might be a dozen or a hundred levels of passwords around their network gateway. If you don't know all the passwords right now, it could take you weeks to figure them all out."

Devin didn't stop typing. He stared at the screen as he replied to Gabe, "You're right, old buddy. It would take too long to get what I need that way. So I'll just have to get their address somewhere else."

"Where else can you get it?" asked Lena in a skeptical voice. "You don't know who knows their address."

"Oh yes I do," said Devin, still typing.

"Who?" asked Gabe and Lena together.

"The network that the Faust Group uses — the same computer network we use: Compunet," Devin replied.

"Hey," said Gabe with a smile, giving Lena a friendly shove on the arm, "He's right. He's right! The network will have a complete listing of all their customers. The Faust group is a customer of Compunet, and Compunet sends them bills every month, so they must have an address!"

Lena wasn't convinced. "Maybe. But what if they only have a P.O. box number? Or what if they pay all their bills by electronic banking?"

"Then we go to the Business Bureau," said Devin. "It's a state office, and every business has to file an actual address with them. And whoever runs the business has to put down their real names."

Lena was convinced. "Go Dev!" she shouted, giving Devin a pound on the back that almost knocked the wind out of him.

Devin logged onto the Compunet business office. A printed message read:

**Welcome to Compunet Services.
Name/Request?**

Devin typed in "Orion, D./billing address, Faust Group, The."
After a brief wait, the reply came back:

**Addresses of clients available only to
authorized personnel.**

Devin entered: "List authorized personnel."
The reply came back:

**Compunet President, Vice-Presidents,
Director for Marketing/ Billing
Officers/Sysop.**

"What's a Sysop?" Gabe asked.

Devin smiled, "A Sysop, old buddy, is exactly what I want to be: a Systems operator. Those guys are like the store managers of the newwork. They can go anywhere and do anything."

"Including finding out information about anyone who's using the system?" asked Gabe.

"Exactly," replied Devin.

"So are you going to call up any of those people and ask for the Faust Group's address?" Lena asked.

"No. I'm not," Devin replied. "They'd just turn me down."

"You could explain the case to them. Or tell them you're from the FBI," Gabe suggested.

"No more untruths," said Devin. "And I don't want to waste time trying to convince the Compunet people to give me an address. I hate to do it, but I'm going to have to break into the Compunet records to get the Faust Group's address." For a moment, Devin thought about how his one break-in had led him to use the ability again and again. It seemed that once you had a power, it was awfully hard not to use it. He was trying to use it for

good — right now. But would the time ever come when he thought about using it for his own personal gain again? He hoped not.

"What are you going to try, Dev?" Gabe asked. "I'll bet twenty dollars to a dime you won't be able to crack their password scheme — not in four hours, anyway."

"You're right," Devin admitted. "But I'll bet you I'll have that address within half an hour."

"How?" Lena and Gabe asked.

"Just watch," said Devin. If he could get into the computer as a Sysop, he could get anything and everything he needed. He called up the Compunet computer again: "Request Sysop privileges."

The computer answered:

Sysop password?

Devin typed "Guest."

The computer responded.

**Sysop privileges granted.
File access?**

"Ha!" Devin shouted, and started to type.

"Wait a minute," Gabe said, jumping up in amazement. "How did you know the password right off the bat?"

Meena was just as impressed. "Devin, old friend, you are a true wizard. How on earth did you know the password would be *guest*?"

"Because I know people are lazy," said Devin with a smile. "I knew that Compunet had just bought a new Pax 960 computer to handle all their business. The Pax is a great machine, and the people who make it know that whoever buys it will want security. So they ship it with a password already built in. The manual tells the buyer to change the password as soon as the system is set up. But most people are too busy to get the machine up and running, so they just leave the default password alone. I bet that 75 or 80 percent of all Pax machines have the same password they were shipped with, just because the users are too lazy or too forgetful to change them after the machine is set up. And since "Guest" is the password shipped with the machine, I just tried it out — and it worked."

"Aw, too bad, Dev," said Lena smiling. "You shouldn't have told us that. We would have thought you were the computer wizard of all times if you hadn't explained how you did it."

"Still, it shows Dev did his homework," said Gabe. "Good going, man. And now for those mailing addresses, right?"

"Right," Devin agreed, and typed in: "Billing Address/ Faust Group, The."

The reply came back:

**Billing addresses password protected.
Password?**

"Oops!" said Devin. He hadn't counted on a password within the system to keep out unauthorized snoopers at Compunet who might want to take a peek at the accounts, or maybe sell mailing addresses to mailing list buyers.

Lena and Gabe both knew at once what the new message meant. "Back to the drawing board, eh, Dev?" said Lena.

"Not at all," said Devin. He spent the next five minutes typing in lines of code for a program. He then typed in "Logoff" and watched the screen return to its normal desktop pattern as the connection with Compunet was broken.

"What do we do now?" asked Lena.

"Watch," said Devin. He picked up the phone and called Compunet directly. When a secretary answered on the other end of the line, Devin asked, in a voice he hoped sounded ten years older than he really was, "Could I have the Accounts and Billing Department, please?"

"Certainly, sir," came the reply. "One moment, please."

After four rings, the voice of a woman came on. "Mia Sexton speaking. How may I help you?"

Devin took a deep breath. He hoped this ruse would really work. "This is John Smith calling from Mill Valley," he said, trying to make his voice as low and adult as he could. "We seem to have a problem over here at The Faust Group. My secretary said she sent you a check for last month's bill. But I can't find any record of the billing. Could you check our account to see if we owe you a payment or not? I don't need an exact figure. Just whether or not we're paid in full or not will be sufficient."

The voice of Mia Sexton seemed to hesitate slightly. "I'll see what I can do," she said. "Just a moment please."

Just then, a new message appeared on Devin's screen.

**Billing information for Faust Group, The/ Smith, John.
Billing access password protected.
Password?
UNAT.
Password entry invalid. Try again.
Password?**

From the telephone came the voice of Mia Sexton sounding frustrated. "Just a minute, sir. The computer wouldn't accept my password. Let me try again."

After a moment, the secretary spoke again. "Mr. Smith? Your records show that your account is paid up to date. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Devin winked at Lena and Gabe. "No, thank you, Ms. Sexton. You've done everything I wanted. Good-bye."

"What was that about?" asked Lena in a puzzled voice.

"It's called a Trojan Horse," said Devin. "Now let's find out where this Mister Smith lives."

"Wait a minute," said Gabe. "What do you mean, a Trojan Horse? What did you do to that secretary?"

Devin turned to his friends. "I didn't do anything to her. But she sure did something for me. She provided me with the password to their billing records."

"I don't get it," said Lena. "How did you do that?" She didn't just come out and tell you."

"Right," Gabe agreed. "And what's that got to do with the Trojan Horse?"

"O.K.," said Devin. "Remember the story of how the Greeks finally broke into Troy during the Trojan War?"

"Sure," said Lena. "The Greeks built a big wooden horse, towed it up to the gates of Troy, and said they were giving up and going home. They told the Greeks they were giving them this big horse out of appreciation for how well they'd fought, or something like that. Anyway, after the main army of Greeks left, the Trojans opened their gates and brought the wooden horse inside. It turned out that the Greeks hid some troops inside the horse. Late at night, when the Trojans were asleep or drunk from celebrating the end of the war, the soldiers sneaked out of the horse's belly

and opened the gates. In poured the Greek soldiers, and Troy lost the war."

"That's about it," Devin agreed. "So a Trojan Horse in the computer world is a program that lets you inside the computer's main operating system, or else lets you have whatever you're looking for. What I did was enter a program that said, basically, *As soon as someone enters a password, send it to Devin Orion, then tell the user she has given an invalid password. Then get out of there, and let the user continue to go on with his or her work.* Meanwhile, I've got the password because the Trojan Horse sent it to me as soon as the user entered it the first time. After that, my program is invisible. The user thinks she just made a typo error the first time and tries again. The second time the password works, because my Trojan Horse is in the background, and won't come alive again until another person tries to enter another password."

"But won't someone at Compunet get suspicious if the computer always rejects their first attempt at a password?" Gabe asked.

"They might, if I left the Trojan Horse there permanently," Devin replied. "But I'm not going to. I got what I needed, so I deleted the program out of the Compunet system, and things are normal again."

"Pretty nifty," said Gabe, looking at Devin with renewed respect. "That's quite a neat hack."

Lena gave Devin an appraising look. "Dev, I hope you never go in for a life of crime. You'd be the devil to catch."

Devin smiled at her. "It's the devil I'm trying to catch, Lena. I'm never going to use my computer skills dishonestly again. I don't even like doing this — tricking a secretary into giving me a password. But Marly and Dave's lives may be at stake — and mine, too — and I'm going to do whatever it takes to protect us."

"I wonder if the Faust Group's code letters mean anything," asked Gabe.

"I don't know, and we don't have time to puzzle that one out," Devin replied. Devin turned back to the computer terminal and typed:

```
Billing information for Faust Group, The/ Smith, John.  
Billing access password protected.  
Password?  
UNAT.  
Password accepted.  
Faust Group, The.
```

John Smith
123 Sunrise Lane
Mill Valley, CA 94941
Phone: (415)-369-6666
Account Activated: 1/1/87

Devin hit the escape key, and the information stopped scrolling down the screen. He had what he wanted.

Gabe and Lena were both talking at once.

"Hey, man, do you see that?" shouted Gabe, staring in disbelief at the screen. "These guys are practically right here in our own backyard. Can you believe it?!"

"I thought they were in Cupertino," said Lena. "Do you think this Faust Group is a network operation of some kind?"

Devin printed out the information on the screen, closed up his desktop and shut down the computer. He got up out of the chair and said, "I don't know, Lena. What I do know, though, is that as long as we stay around here guessing we'll never find out. And the longer we stay here, the more danger Marly and Dave might be in. Let's drop by 123 Sunrise Lane!"

Sunset at Sunrise

Though it was only 4:00 o'clock, the evening darkness was already beginning to invade the fog-misted streets. No sooner had Devin, Lena, and Gabe started down the street than a large black car thundered down the street in the opposite direction.

Standing in the street by the place just vacated by the car was Don Dackles. He was holding a large paper bag, and followed the retreating car with his eyes.

Lena spoke first, "Hey, you, grunge head, we want to talk to you," she said, speeding up her approach.

Dackles saw her. His eyebrows shot up, and he started backing away. "Hey, you, I don't want to hit a girl," he said, and turned to run.

"Don't worry," said Lena, running in pursuit, "I won't give you the chance."

Dackles was faster than Lena — but not faster than Gabe, who caught up to him quickly, grabbed his arm, and yanked. Dackles flew backwards, the paper bag falling from his hand. It landed with a plop.

Ten and twenty dollar bills fell out, and started rolling lazily down the street in the light wind.

"My money!" Dackles shrieked, and pulled himself free of Gabe's grip.

"I ought to sit on him and let the money blow away," thought Devin; but he raced after some of the flying money, and soon the four of them had collected the loose bills.

It took some time, but the four of them finally rounded up all the money that had escaped from the paper sack. Dackles put out his hand for the money. Devin, Gabe, and Lena just looked at him.

"We'll be glad to turn over to you what's rightfully yours," said Lena. "You are thankful to us for helping you save all your hard-earned cash, aren't you, Donald?"

"That's rubbing it in a bit, Lena," thought Devin. Everybody knew that Don Dackles hated being called Donald. "Donald Dack" is what his enemies called him behind his back.

"Uh, right, thanks," said Dackles. He clearly would have liked to get away from Devin and his friends as fast as possible — but not until he had

all the money safely back in his hands.

"Maybe we'd better count it out, just to make sure it's all here," said Gabe. "Dev, see how much there is." He and Lena turned over the money they had rescued to Devin. Dackles looked at him in despair.

"I think you'd better give him what you've got, Donald," said Lena, "just so he can make sure it's all there."

An even more worried look came over Dackles' face. "Uh, I'm sure we got it all, Lena. If you'll just...."

"Turn it over, and don't quack, Donald Dack!" said Lena in a very firm voice. Dackles reluctantly gave the money to Devin.

They all looked on as Devin counted out the bills into the sack that Lena held.

"Say," said Lena, "isn't this the sack that Destroyer Diggs was holding just a while ago?"

"Nine hundred eighty, nine hundred ninety — one thousand dollars!" said Devin. He was trying to sound fake-amazed at the money. But in fact he really was amazed. "What did you do to earn this kind of money, Dackles?"

"And who paid you?" Gabe added.

For a moment, it looked like Dackles might actually bolt for freedom and leave the three friends with the thousand dollars. But maybe he knew that Gabe could catch him anyway, and Lena could make it very tough on him once he got caught.

"The guys in the big limo paid me," said Dackles in a low voice.

"Paid you a thousand dollars?" shouted Lena. "For what? You wouldn't be worth a thousand dollars if somebody plated you with gold."

Dackles was silent.

"Don," said Devin in a very soft but very firm voice. He looked straight into Dackles eyes and held him there. "We have to know who gave you that money and why. Marly and Dave Chan are in danger. They may even have been kidnapped. If you know anything at all about this business, you'd better speak up now."

Dackles now looked truly frightened. "Hey, Devin, like, I didn't know. These guys just pulled up to me — the same guys we were talking with yesterday — and offered me a thousand bucks if I could find you or Lena or Gabe or the Chans. I didn't know where the rest of you were, but I saw the Chans go into Village Pizza. I didn't know those guys wanted to hurt anybody. I just thought they wanted to talk to you or something. And a thousand bucks, just to tell them where they could find the Chans and talk

to them! I bet you'd have done the same thing."

"We might have, if we were as dumb as you are.," said Lena, clenching her teeth. "Dev, just let me..."

"Forget it , Lena," said Devin, putting a restraining arm on Lena's shoulder. "We've got to find the Chans, and we've wasted enough time already. Besides, I don't think Don realized he might be hurting anyone by what he did."

"Right, I didn't, honest!" Dackles pleaded.

"O.K. now, here's what we're going to do. Lena, you and I will head off down towards Village Pizza this way, and we'll keep our eyes open for the Chans and that black limo. Gabe, you run back over to Dave and Marly's and see if they're there hiding out or something. Then I'll go back to my house. We'll keep the money for you, Don" — here Dackles let out a groan of disappointment — "until we can be sure you're telling the truth. If you are, the money's yours."

"And if you're not," said Lena menacingly, "you'll need it for your hospital bills."

"Are you sure we should split up?" asked Gabe. "We might do better if we all stick together."

"We can cover more ground this way," said Devin firmly. "If you find out anything, get to a phone and leave a message on my computer. We'll plan on meeting back at my place at" — Devin looked at his watch — "quarter til six. That way if we don't find anything, we can decide how to handle the demon when he shows up."

Dackles eyebrows shot up. "The demon? What demon are you talking about?" Now he really looked frightened.

"Donald," said Lena, coming up to Dackles and putting an arm around his neck, "Donald, old buddy, the best thing you can do right now is to go home, say your prayers, get in bed and pull the sheets up over your head." With that, she gave him a shove and a push with her foot on the seat of his pants. "And don't forget to hug your teddy bear!"

Dackles raced down the street without looking back.

"Gabe, you take this money and stash it at the Chans' house," said Devin. "See you soon."

"I'm off," Gabe shouted back over his shoulder as he ran down the street the other way.

"Do you think Dumb Don is telling us the truth?" asked Lena as she and Devin started off at a fast walk for Village Pizza.

"I think so," said Devin, "though in some ways it doesn't matter whether he is or not. We still need to check out the Chans' house and go by the place they'd be most likely to go."

They walked for a while in silence. "Maybe you're right," said Lena. "But what if they went to the pizza place, then headed over to your house?"

"Could be," said Devin, "or they might have gone to my house, found us gone, then headed over to Village Pizza. We're just guessing. But we'll know one answer in just a minute."

Soon they were walking through the door of Village Pizza. The place was jammed. Crowds of people stood in line at the order counter, the booths were full, and there was a big audience at the videogame machines. Devin and Lena looked around, but saw no sign of the Chans.

"Hey," said Lena, "isn't that Destroyer Diggs on the *Warbeast* game over there?"

Devin looked over at the crowd of people gathered around Matt Diggs as he worked the controls of the game with lightning speed and deadly accuracy. *Warbeast* was a multiple-player game; but the others had been forced out, and now they stood around watching Diggs elude the dangers and destroy the bad guys all by himself. Though he was in a hurry and worried about his friends, Devin couldn't help admiring Diggs' skill.

"If there was ever a world championship for videogames, Destroyer Diggs would be number one — no question about it," Devin thought. Just as he walked up to Diggs, the screen flashed:

VICTORY!

**You have defeated the
forces of chaos and
liberated the world. Enter
your name here on the all-
time champions list!**

The screen changed to the Champions List display. There was only one set of initials on the list: **M.D.**

There was a round of applause for Diggs, then the crowd broke up. Devin reached out and tapped Diggs on the shoulder. He turned around, and regarded Devin from behind the tinted sunglasses.

"What do you want, Orion?" demanded Diggs. The voice wasn't hostile; but it wasn't friendly, either.

"I'm looking for Dave and Marly Chan," said Devin in a tone that he hoped matched Diggs'. "Have you seen them here?"

Diggs turned back to Destroyers. He put in two quarters, pushed the start button, and proceeded to work two characters at once, slashing, burning, shooting and dodging his way across enemies territories on the screen. The sound of gun blasts and cries covered up Diggs reply.

Devin put a hand on Diggs shoulder. "I didn't hear you, man. What I want to know is..." And suddenly, Devin felt his arm locked inside an iron-strong grip.

"You made me miss a shot, man," said Diggs in the same flat tone of voice. The voice was expressionless — but the grip told Devin that Diggs was pretty angry.

Devin was angry, too. He put his other hand on Diggs arm and tried to wrench it away. Diggs' arm didn't move. Devin kept up the pressure.

"We can stand here all day like this," said Devin. "But the thing is, your characters will start dying unless you get back to the game. Just tell me where I can find Dave and Marly Chan and you can get back to business."

Diggs gave the screen a quick glance. One of his characters was dead, and had just started to come back to life. The other character was frozen in a corner of the screen behind some palm trees.

"If you mean those Chinese people..." Diggs began.

"They're not Chinese," said Devin, looking into Diggs' sunglasses.

"They're Americans."

"Whatever," said Diggs. "I saw them in here maybe an hour ago. Why don't you find Don Dackles and talk to him? He was looking for them, too." Diggs released Devin's arm and went back to his game. Even though the encounter with Devin had cost him two character lives, Diggs whipped through the opposing forces like they were standing still.

"Look, Matt..." Devin began.

"Bug off, Orion," said Diggs as he worked the left and right joysticks. Just then Lena came up. "No luck, Dev," she said. "I've looked everywhere and I can't find them. I asked some people, but no one has seen them all day." She jerked a thumb at Diggs. "What did you learn from the Destroyer?" she asked in a low voice.

"Nothing," said Devin. "He says to talk to Dackles. Look, Lena, we're not getting anywhere hanging around here, and it's already five o'clock. You stay here and keep an eye out for Dave and Marly. They may still come by here. I'm going home to check the computer for messages, and then I'm going to check out that Sunrise address. If the Faust Group has captured the Chans, maybe I can nose around a little."

"And maybe you'll get your nose caught in a mousetrap. Let me go with you, Dev," pleaded Lena. "It's too dangerous to do on your own."

"Look, Lena," said Devin, "I can handle it. And if anyone gets hurt, I don't want it to be you. I'm the one who caused all this to happen, and I don't want you in trouble on my account."

Lena stared at Devin suspiciously. "You're not trying to tell me that because I'm a girl I can't handle myself, are you? Because if you are..."

Devin cut in. "No, no, Lena, that's not it at all, and you know it. You're probably better able to take care of yourself that way than any of the rest of us. But we have to stake out this place in case the Chans turn up; and I can do the most good by checking out that address."

"All right," said Lena reluctantly. Then lowering her voice, she added, "Think I should keep a special watch on Destroyer Diggs?"

Without turning from his game, Diggs replied, "You call me that once more, girlie, and here's you:" With that he launched a grenade at an alien storm trooper, blowing it sky high.

"Don't watch anyone in particular," said Devin, making sure Diggs could hear him. "Watch everybody. And keep an eye on the door. Oh, yeah: And try calling Gabe at the Chans or at home when you get a chance."

* * * * *

Devin ran out of the Village Pizza and headed for home. Five minutes after five o'clock! Soon he was rushing through his front door, then into his room. He flipped on the computer switch.

No response.

Startled, Devin flipped the switch off and on three more times. Still nothing. He checked the extension cord. It was still plugged in. He turned on the monitor. No image, no *o n* light.

A chill came over Devin. What was wrong? How could the demon or the Faust Group have sabotaged his computer this thoroughly? Had they sent a deadly virus into his system — one so brutal that it actually destroyed the insides of the computer itself?

Though he was worried about the Chans and mystified about the state of his computer, Devin calmed himself and thought over the situation. The virus idea seemed good; but that wouldn't account for the monitor not working. There was a mystery here, all right, but it wasn't a piece of sabotage over the network.

Devin still had no idea how it was done. And he was pretty sure that at six o'clock the computer would be working again. The demon would make sure of that!

Devin headed out to the garage to get his unicycle, then decided against it. If he had to run, he would do better on foot. And he would be less noticeable that way. With a glance at the address scribbled on a sheet of note paper, Devin headed off for 123 — Sunrise Lane.

Sunrise Lane was up on the hillside. It was a narrow, tree-lined street carved from the side of the hill. If two cars met each other, one would have to scrunch up on the road shoulder to let the other vehicle by. Most of the lots were big, and the houses that occupied them were large. Though the trees lined the south side, where the sun came through the leaves from early morning to late afternoon, today the street was cloaked in mist. The lateness of the hour made the street even darker. As he walked down Sunrise Lane, Devin could hear nothing — no cars, no people, no birds. Once in a while he could hear water dropping from the mist-laden tree branches. Other than the drips, and the soft sounds of his own footsteps, there was only silence.

Devin thought of the Faust Group's password riddle:

Nothing can surpass the stillness of
silence.

The stillness itself seemed like no thing, nothing, as Devin walked carefully along Sunrise Lane. "The house should be right around the next corner," he thought. The closer he got, the more Devin realized that he

didn't have a plan for what he was going to do when he reached the house. So far, it was just the urge to save the Chans that had driven him to where he was now.

Or was it just the safety of his friends? Didn't he want to see the house of the demon? Who was living there, and what were they doing? Devin was pretty sure that "John Smith" would turn out to have another name. Maybe he was wanted by the FBI, or maybe he was just a strange billionaire who liked to torment people, or....

Just then, Devin turned the last corner. There, right in front of him, the street came to an end in front of a tall gate that connected with a high brick wall. The large brass numbers 123 were hammered and bolted into the brick wall flanking the gateway. The gate itself didn't seem locked. But when he tried to push it open, Devin saw the thin bolts spanning the small crack between the two halves of the gate.

Between the misty fog and the darkness and the silence, Devin grew more and more uneasy. He looked at the brick wall. He could see pieces of metal and broken glass set into the top of the wall. If he tried to climb over into the yard of the house that way, his hands would be a mess. He walked down to the edge of the front wall, and looked back into the woods. The wall disappeared into the darkness, but it seemed to circle the house. He walked back to the gate.

And then the gate started to swing open.

Four bright searchlights beamed down from the branches of the trees that overhung the driveway. Five seconds before, Devin was in semi-darkness. Now he was standing in the middle of a pool of light as bright as daylight.

From inside the gate, Devin heard the roar of a car engine. Two headlights stabbed through the darkness, and headed directly at him.

Devin turned and ran.

He ran full speed down the road, looking back over his shoulder only once. He rounded the corner and sped down the road just as he heard the squeal of tires as the car accelerated at full throttle coming through the gateway.

Devin was panting now. There was no way he could reach the main road at the bottom of the hill before the car overtook him. He heard another tire squeal as the car rounded the corner.

Maybe it wasn't after him. Maybe the car was just heading downtown. Maybe — but the gunning of the engine told him that the car was in a

hurry. If the driver wasn't after him, it was going after someone.

Devin had to think fast. His heart was pounding as he raced down the road. Off to the left was a fire road. There was a steel barrier in front of the dirt path that led up through the trees to the summit of the mountain. Cars were not allowed on the path. Devin leaped over the steel barrier just as the car's headlights caught him in its twin beams.

He headed up the dirt path in full flight. If the car was going downtown, he was safe.

Then he heard the loud crash and tearing of metal. The car had rammed through the barrier and was careening up the fire road, spraying dirt and rocks in all directions. Devin turned his head as he ran to get a glimpse at his pursuers. He couldn't see anything but the headlights — and the license plate.

The license read "SPD DMN."

A surge of fear ran through him. "So it is the Faust Group. They know I'm here, and they're going to kill me," he thought. Then, "Correction: they're going to try to kill me. But they'll have to catch me first."

Realizing that it would be hopeless to try to outrun the car, even on a dirt road, Devin ducked into the forest that surrounded the path on both sides. He ran between trees, over boulders, and leaped over a small creek. As he headed farther up the hill, he realized that he could no longer hear the car's engine or see its headlights.

"They must have stopped," he realized and kept on running.

It was deep twilight, almost night now. Devin had a hard time seeing more than a few feet in front of him. He came to an enormous redwood tree with an opening at its base. For a few seconds, he crawled down into the exposed roots and looked around. It might make a good hiding place — but it was still too visible. If they found him there, he was trapped.

"Trapped and doomed," he thought. So he kept on running.

Devin's breath came in gasps now. He had been running hard, uphill, and without a clear idea of where he was going. He was completely lost. "If I've lost them," he thought, "I'll have to spend the night here. I don't have the slightest idea where I am."

Devin stopped for a moment and forced his heaving lungs to be silent. He listened keenly for any sounds. Nothing. Complete silence.

Had his pursuers given up and gone away?

He had just allowed himself to begin to hope, when his sharp eyes picked up a faint beam of a flashlight in the distance back in the direction

he had fled from. The beam swung back and forth through the trees.

His pursuers hadn't given up. And they were getting closer. Devin thought he heard them shout something, but they were too far away.

Zigzagging back and forth among the trees, he decided to follow the stream up the hill. "At least I can follow the path of the water when I go back down," he thought.

Devin cut to the left, climbed a huge boulder, then jumped. Instead of landing on a soft forest floor covered with a carpet of pine needles and leaves, Devin's feet struck loudly against a metallic box. The sound of his landing rang out loudly, and Devin felt a sharp pain shoot up from his right ankle through his leg. He twisted sideways, then fell to the ground.

His ankle felt on fire with pain. He reached down to touch it — no broken bones, but maybe a strain or a sprain. A wave of despair flooded over him. He couldn't run away by hobbling on one leg!

Devin glanced down at the box that he had landed on. It was one of four identical metal boxes connected, by a series of pipes, to a large central steel box that stood in the middle of a clearing. It was dark, but Devin could easily make out what stood on top of the box.

It was a satellite dish — not the kind that people got who wanted a hundred television stations, but a large, very large receiver that looked more like a radar installation. Its huge silver dish soared high into the air, and a network of silver cables stretched down to the boxes like the filaments of an enormous spider web. In spite of his pain and fear, Devin was impressed. "This set-up must have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars — maybe even millions," thought Devin. He was positive that the dish belonged to the Faust Group. He was probably on their property, several hundred feet above their house. Some of the cable lines must have connected the satellite dish to 123 — Sunrise Lane.

Who were these people, anyway?

Just then, he heard voices nearby. Devin held his breath as he saw the flashlight beams lance over the boulder and strike the satellite dish.

"The tracker says he came this way," he heard one voice say.

"I hope he's not over there by the unit," said another voice. "He could get fried to a crisp, and it would be our fault."

"You're right," said the first voice. "We've got to find him before he hurts himself."

Devin thought he recognized the voice of the second speaker. He couldn't be sure. But one thing did seem sure: whoever was chasing him didn't seem to want to hurt him. They obviously wanted to catch him; but

Devin was relieved that they weren't going to try to gun him down.

"But they might try to torture me, or force me to hack into that computer and destroy Mr. Yea," Devin thought. They might not be killers, but they were still dangerous.

Devin stood up. His right ankle sent a sharp pain of protest, but he could walk if he had to.

Walk, not run. Devin realized that if he were going to escape, he would have to find a hiding place — and soon!

Where to hide? He considered returning to the redwood tree with the ccluster of exposed roots underneath, then rejected the idea. Too risky, and too close to the fire road.

"Since they're expecting me to go up, I'll go down," he thought, and carefully started descending the hillside.

The hill was steeper here, and Devin sometimes had to slide down, sometimes stagger down, letting his left foot bear most of the weight of his body. For fifteen minutes he snaked his way down through the trees, praying he would find the road or a hiding place along the way.

Finally he came to a barrier. It was a brick wall, with sharp metal and glass embedded in the top.

After almost an hour of running, he had wound up right back at the very place he was trying to escape.

Out of breath and exhausted, Devin sank down at the foot of the wall, leaned back and closed his eyes. His ribs hurt from heavy breathing, his right ankle was swollen, and his shoes, pants, and shirt were covered with dirt and leaves.

Devin didn't see the video camera mounted in the tree branches above him. The camera lens was pointing directly at Devin Orion as he sat with his back against the wall.

Chapter Six

Some Answers

The woods were completely dark now. The tops of the trees were illuminated by a faint glow coming from the house. Devin had his head between his knees. He was resting, and frantically trying to decide what to do next.

"I think you'd better come with me," said a voice.

Devin raised his head, then leaped to his feet. Before him was a large, dark-skinned man wearing glasses and a three-piece business suit. He was holding out a hand to Devin, as if he were trying to help him up. Devin backed away, still looking at the man. The man was smiling, and still holding out his hand to Devin.

"Come on with me, Devin," said the voice. "The chase is over."

Devin turned to run — then tripped over a twisted redwood branch. He went sprawling, and another pain, much more intense now, shot through his right ankle. Devin cried out.

The man ran up to Devin and lifted him up off the ground. The huge hand felt like it had immense power. But it lifted Devin as gently as a kitten.

"Looks like you might've sprained an ankle," said the man in a tone of what seemed like genuine concern. "We'll have a look at it inside."

Inside! The man was going to take him inside the house! Devin had an urge to try to break away and run; but he knew the effort would be futile. He couldn't run, and he had no idea where he was going. Resigned, Devin let himself be half-carried, half-guided through a side door in the wall, across the yard, and into the back door of 123 — Sunrise Lane.

They entered the house through the kitchen, which was located in the back of the house. The kitchen told him nothing about who lived there. The room was large; but aside from a stove, a refrigerator, and a dishwasher, he could see nothing extraordinary about the place. The room was flanked by floor-to-ceiling cabinets.

They passed into a narrow hallway. As they came to a bathroom door on their right, the big man said, "You're a mess to look at. Why don't you go in and wash up? Just come on down the hall when you're through. We'll be waiting for you in the meeting room." Then, without looking back, the big man walked down the hallway, opened a door at the end, walked

through, and closed the door behind him.

Devin stood bewildered for a moment. Were they really going to leave him here unguarded? He looked around for spy cameras, and found none. For a moment he considered running back through the kitchen and out to freedom, but he sensed that that would be hopeless. They would find him in a few minutes, and they might not be so nice about bringing him in again.

Devin stepped inside the bathroom, closed the door and locked it. For a moment, he had the foolish idea that he could barricade himself in the bathroom. He smiled to himself. "I must be going crazy," he told himself with a laugh.

Devin looked at himself in the full length mirror on the back of the door. He was indeed a mess: dirty, bruised, his shirt torn and his hair covered with twigs and leaves.

"If they're going to do me in, I might as well look neat when they do it," he thought. There were washcloths and towels on a rack. But when he opened the drawers, he found nothing but a single bar of soap. Devin took his time washing himself off and drying. He had no comb, so he ran his fingers through his hair and surveyed the results.

"Not good enough to impress the girls, but maybe good enough to face the Faust Group," he thought. He reached for the doorknob, then hesitated. What should he say? What should he do? He was a captive, no doubt about that, even though the big man had been nice enough to him. And the plain fact was, this was the house of whoever or whatever had sent that demon into his computer to force him to do the dirty work on Mr. Yea. These were the guys who tried to run him down close by Rhino Rentals. These were the people who had kidnapped the Chans — maybe. Whoever or whatever they were, they weren't nice people, that was for sure.

What would he do if they tried to force him to do what the demon had been demanding?

If they just threatened him, Devin decided, he wouldn't give in. If they held Dave and Marly captive, he wasn't sure what he would do. He had read about kidnappers who had demanded ransom, then killed their captive even after the ransom was paid. "You can't do deals with dishonest men," Mr. Yea had told him once. So even if they threatened to do something with the Chans, Devin decided that he had to draw the line. No deals.

He opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

Slowly, he walked toward the door. He thought he must know what condemned prisoners felt like when they took the final walk to their execution. Could he still escape?

He put his hand on the large brass doorknob, twisted it, and slowly pushed open the door.

Devin found himself in a large room. The ceilings were high — maybe thirty feet. In the back was a large plate glass window that looked out onto the thick growth of redwood trees. All the walls were covered floor to ceiling with bookshelves. There were ten chairs in front of the bookshelves. These chairs were simple red office chairs. In front of each chair was a computer and terminal on a small desk. The chairs, computers and desks were arranged in such a way as to form a semicircle, creating a kind of stage where Devin stood. As if to dramatize this arrangement, a spotlight shined down on him from the ceiling.

At first glance, Devin thought the room was empty. Then, all of a sudden, someone sprang up from the floor. He had been squatting down inspecting the books on the lower shelves of the bookcases. Now he stood, his back still to Devin. The person leafed through some of the pages of the book, then slowly turned around.

Devin found himself looking into the face of Matt Diggs.

And the Destroyer didn't have on his glasses!

An instant after Devin caught sight of him, Diggs put on the dark glasses — but not before Devin saw a flash of light coming from the Destroyer's right eye. The whole thing happened too quick for Devin to get a good look at whatever was behind the glasses.

What did Devin see coming from Matt Diggs' right eye?? Would he ever find out?

"Hello, Orion," said Diggs in his usual flat tone. "I understand you had some trouble getting here."

Devin was so dumbfounded at finding the Destroyer in front of him that he couldn't speak.

Diggs walked over to one of the computers, patted its terminal, and smiled. "This is a lousy game machine; but it's a sweet way to network with the big military strategy simulators. You should try it some time." Diggs smiled at Devin, crossed his arms, and looked at him — or, at least, that's what Devin assumed he was doing. You could never be sure what Diggs was doing behind those dark glasses.

"I guess you're got a few questions to ask," said Diggs, sitting down in the chair at his terminal. "You'll get some answers in a moment." With

that, Diggs, started punching the keyboard of the computer, and apparently forgot all about Devin.

Then the dark-skinned man came in, nodded to Devin, sat down at the terminal next to Diggs, and began typing. Neither Diggs nor the big man spoke to each other.

Though the big man had been friendly, and even Diggs didn't seem threatening, an eerie feeling came over Devin. What was this — some kind of cult? The big man seemed normal, but Diggs was pretty strange. Devin could believe he was some kind of Satan-worshipper. And these computers arranged around him like he was on a stage — was he standing in the center of some kind of altar for devil worship?

Devin turned and looked at the wall behind him. There was a fireplace in the middle, with some framed words over the center of the mantelpiece.

Devin didn't have time to puzzle out what the words in the picture frame said. Hearing the sound of a door opening, he turned, and saw two women enter the room and take their seats at the computer terminals. One was tall, with deep bronze skin and long jet-black hair braided and entwined with some kind of silver ornaments. Devin was sure she was an American Indian. The other woman was short, with pale skin and tight blond curls. "Looks like Lena — or what Lena might look like in another ten years," thought Devin. Both women did not glance at him. They seemed intent on their work at the terminals.

Devin shifted his weight from one foot to another. His ankle wasn't hurting him so much now. But with the people in front of him seated at the terminals in a semi-circle, Devin felt like he was about to go on trial.

For a minute, there was no sound in the room but the click of keyboard keys. Then the rest of the room grew dark, leaving Devin in a bright light surrounded by shadowy figures whose faces were bathed in the glow of their computer terminals.

Then suddenly, as if by some signal Devin could not see or hear, they all stopped at once and looked up. Devin could feel the four pairs of eyes looking at him, appraising him.

What was happening? And what was going to happen next?

From the door at the side of the room came a new figure. He walked slowly and deliberately to one of the central terminals; but he did not sit down. He looked directly at Devin. Even in the low light, Devin could tell perfectly well who it was:

"Mister Yea!" he cried out.

Benjamin Yea stepped forward. In the strange kind of stage lighting they were standing in, Mr. Yea looked like some character out of an old play, Devin decided. The grey beard and steel-colored hair gave him a look of power — not evil power: just strength of character. He was dressed casually in dark slacks and a solid red shirt. He looked at Devin — then put out his hand to shake. Though still dazed by the whole scene, Devin took his hand and returned the pressure.

"Before we get down to business, Devin, let me apologize for the trouble and fright we put you through." As Benjamin Yea spoke to Devin they both still stood facing each other in the center to the room. "Some of it was planned, I admit. But some of the trouble we had with you was because you've been very clever in avoiding our traps and getting closer to us faster than we thought you would."

Devin started to speak, but Benjamin Yea held up a hand. He smiled that famous smile of his, and said, "Just a minute, Devin. I know you must have a lot of questions; and I — all of us here in this room — are prepared to answer most of them. I'll explain why we put you through so much trouble. After I'm finished, you may decide that we're all really heartless demons —"

Here Devin did a double-take, and took a step backwards.

Benjamin Yea smiled again, and continued. "Yes, you've got a right to back off when you hear that word, Devin. But hear me out."

"We — all of us in this room, and some others not present — are members of a secret society called the Faustians. You may know the story of Faust —" Devin nodded, and Benjamin Yea continued. "In many versions of the story, Faust sells his soul for the devil in return for unlimited power or knowledge. But in other versions, Faust uses his power over nature to help others. He takes the gift of knowledge and resists the temptation to use it to gain money or power or fame. He dedicates himself to the service of the whole human race."

"This is our creed, Devin. It's written in big words and engraved over the fireplace directly behind you."

Devin turned, and wondered why he didn't notice the framed words at first. The words in the plain steel and chrome frame read:

**The Problem, And The Solution,
Is Bringing Things To Bear**

Devin studied the words. For a long time he stood gazing upward, the warm heat from the fireplace unnoticed as he was lost in thought. Finally he realized that he had been staring at and thinking about the words for a long time, and nobody had spoken. He turned back to Benjamin Yea.

"I'm not sure I get it, Mr. Yea," he confessed. "I think I do; but I'm not sure."

Benjamin Yea was not smiling now. All eyes in the room were turned on Devin, and he felt like he was at the crucial point of a very, very important test. Finally Benjamin Yea spoke.

"Devin, I most sincerely do hope that you understand these words. Everything up to now — the demon, the threats, the mysteries — everything you've been through has led up to this moment. If you are mature enough or wise enough to understand these words, you are ready to join us if you choose to. If not, we must close our doors. You may be asked back at another time, or you may not."

Devin wasn't sure he wanted to belong to any secret society, now or later. He wanted some answers — answers about the demon, about the Chans, and about this whole bizarre mystery. Benjamin Yea seemed to read his thoughts.

"As I promised, Devin, we will explain why we have acted as we did. We can also assure you that David and Marly Chan are quite safe and unharmed. At this minute they are — " here he turned to look at the Native American woman, who nodded back to him — "on a bus back from State University, where we invited them to come and find you at a networking conference. There is a conference, and they did enjoy going there. But I'm afraid we had to tell them you would be there in order to draw them away from your house. Otherwise, matters would have gotten even more complicated."

Devin felt a surge of relief about that point, at least. Dave and Marly were safe!

"Or, at least, that's what Mr. Yea is telling me," Devin thought. "But I still don't know if he's telling the truth. And I still don't understand any of this." Out loud he said, "I'm sure glad to hear about Dave and Marly. But what do you want me to say about those words in the frame? And will you tell me what's been going on even if it turns out I don't understand them?"

"A fair question," replied Benjamin Yea. "If you fail to interpret those words correctly, we will tell you who we are and why we tested you as we did. But we will not reveal anything about the inner nature of our group."

And you will not be asked to join. If you answer correctly, we will reveal whatever you wish, and will ask you to join us. But in either case, you will not be harmed. We only ask your word that you keep our existence secret."

Devin replied at once. "I'm afraid I can't promise you that, Mr. Yea, until I know more about who you are. I've been pretty badly frightened the last couple of days, and I'm not at all sure this group is legal or honest. I just don't know. But if there's something going on here that's unlawful or illegal, I won't promise that I'll never go to the police with my story."

Benjamin Yea smiled. The dark-skinned man at one of the terminals said, in a quiet voice, "You were right. Score one for you, Ben." Devin looked over, and saw that the man was smiling, too.

"Excellent response, Devin Orion," said Benjamin Yea — and suddenly Devin flashed on the demon in the computer. Its voice was disguised by some kind of synthetic sound camouflage, but the rhythm of the words couldn't be disguised. Devin recognized that rhythm now, just as Benjamin Yea had spoken his full name. Mr. Yea was the demon!

He must have seen the flash of recognition in Devin's eyes, for the next thing Benjamin Yea said was, "Yes, you're right. Devin. I am the demon — or, rather, the demon was my disguise when I came to test you. We all argued about whether I should have chosen a different disguise, but I was the one who insisted on the demon. I insisted because that made the test even harder. If I'd appeared as an ordinary man, your refusal to cooperate might have been easier. But adding the face of evil added a level of difficulty, or even fear, to your test."

"But why —" Devin started to ask, but stopped. He was about to say "Why did you put me through all of this?" But he recalled Benjamin Yea's words. Everything would be explained after he tried to figure out the meaning of the framed words. Devin stopped, looked up at the words, then turned to face Benjamin Yea and the others in the room.

"The real key to the riddle — I'm calling it a riddle because you have to figure it out by thinking it over carefully — the real key is the word 'bear.' To bring something to bear could mean making it produce fruit, like when an apple tree bears apples. Or 'bear' could mean applying pressure, like bearing down on a shovel to dig deeper into the ground."

"So," Devin continued, his eyes brightening. He was sure he had it now! "So what those words say is that in life, there are problems we've got to solve. Everything in life has some kind of problems that go with it. So how do you deal with all the troubles? You bring to bear everything that you know and can do to solve it. It's like getting a tree to bear fruit.

You feed it, prune it, spray it, take care of it, and the fruit comes out when the season's right. If I'm trying to get something done, my problem is, 'How do I put what I know to work to get the job done?' And the answer, the solution, is 'Bring everything you know to bear on the problem, and it will bear fruit.' That's it isn't it? That's it!"

Devin stopped and looked around. All the people in the room were looking at him. No smiles, no frowns. Benjamin Yea spoke.

"All in favor of admission?"

"Yea!" said the four voices at the terminals.

"All opposed?"

No voice spoke against him.

"Devin Orion," said Benjamin Yea, placing both of his large hands on Devin's shoulders, "You may, if you choose, become one of the Faustians."

Devin felt a thrill of joy — followed by a counter-surge of doubt. He was glad, very glad, he had answered correctly. Somehow he knew that he had just passed one of the most important tests of his life. But he still needed some answers.

"Come sit here in this chair," said Benjamin Yea, leading Devin to one of the terminals that semi-circled the room. As he took his chair, all the others moved so as to form a circle with him. Benjamin Yea brought up a chair, sat down, and said, "First let us tell you who we are, what we do, and why we do it. As we tell you our tale, we'll also explain to you why we tested you as we did. Chantal, why don't you start?"

Chantal was the woman with the tight blond curls. She was young, quite pretty, and spoke with a foreign accent that Devin guessed was French.

"First let me say, Devin, that I am most pleased that you have been invited to join us. It has been more than a year since we have added somebody new, and I've felt that we need some new ideas in our little group." She looked around at the others, smiled, and said, "Not that we are all falling asleep, of course. But it is always good to have new minds working on the old problems. You see, Devin, though we call ourselves the Faustians, we like to think of ourselves as angels — guardian angels of the computer world. Several years ago, the United Nations approached your teacher, Mr. Yea, and asked him to set up a world-wide computer security network. It is sad to say, but there are many nations in the world that do not trust each other, and many nations that are trying to steal each others' military secrets. Furthermore, all over our planet, more and more people are using computers. They use them for science, for business, for

war, for games, for school — there is no end to the use of the computer. But when more and more people start to use any new tool, there will always be some who want to use it to hurt or control other people.”

Devin couldn’t resist. “Like the demon?”

Chantal regarded him carefully, smiled, then continued. “Yes, Devin, like the demon. The demon was our test for you. We made him up. But there are many people who are like the demon, only worse.”

“Far worse,” said the dark-skinned man sitting next to Chantal.

“Rodger, why don’t you tell him about some of the real demons we have had to deal with?” said Chantal.

Rodger English was somewhat older than Chantal, but still much younger than Benjamin Yea — about 30 years old, Devin guessed. He was a large powerful man, with lustrous dark skin and tightly curled black hair. His manner was gentle, but he wore an expression of worry most of the time, like he was thinking about something that was troubling him.

“Do you know what a virus is, Devin?” he asked.

“Sure,” Devin replied. “In the computer world, it’s like a sickness. Someone plants a virus in the program as a joke, and later bad things happen to your computer. The system crashes, and your files are destroyed.”

“What you’ve described are bad, but not the most serious viruses,” said Rodger, shifting in his seat and bending closer to Devin. “Sometimes the virus lands in a network and wipes out the programs of thousands of people. One virus got into a military program and almost caused a nuclear missile to be launched at an Asian country. Another one got into a medical computer and changed or damaged the records of over 2,000 cancer patients. Some people suffered and some may even have died because of that virus, Devin. These things are no joke, and the people who make them up and infest other people’s computers with them are causing real harm. That’s one of the many reasons the United Nations wanted us to establish the Faust Group.”

Devin was startled by the seriousness of Rodger’s tone. Was he right? Devin remembered reading about some German hacker who broke into networks all over America, and sold what he got to foreign spies.

“I guess you’re right,” Devin admitted. “Those don’t sound like jokes.”

“My name is Ellen Blackhawk,” said the other woman. Her black eyes glistened as she spoke, and her voice had an almost hypnotic quality, like she was on the verge of singing. “And Rodger is right. But it’s not only viruses that concern us. It’s the suspicion and lack of trust that computer

criminals create. We want the information and communication on computers to be open to everybody. Computers let people from all over the world talk to each other, exchange ideas and information. It's like being in a village where all the homes open out onto the main square. It's a community. But if a handful of people start sneaking into other people's homes and stealing things or setting fires, the trust goes away, and the community of friendship is replaced by a group of isolated and suspicious people. We want a community where there don't have to be any guards or locked doors. We have the full support of the United Nations. But they want us to remain secret. You can understand that if certain spies found out about us, our lives could be in danger."

"And that," said Benjamin Yea, "is why we try to keep the dishonest people out of the computer network. People who break into other people's computers are our enemies, and we've devoted our energies to stopping them."

Devin suddenly felt very uncomfortable. "Like kids who break into school records databanks and change their grades, I suppose."

Benjamin Yea looked at him very seriously. "Yes, people like that. We have set a number of burglar alarms to detect such break-ins. In fact, that's part of my job with the National Computer Security Agency. I set an alarm on our school databank just to make sure no one was tampering with the records of my own school. I'll confess that I was surprised and disappointed when the alarm went off and I traced the break-in to your computer, Devin. But I'll also confess that I was impressed by how ingenious your technique was. While we were all sitting in this very room debating what to do about you, the alarm went off a second time, and we discovered that you were changing back your grades in the school data bank. Your honesty was obvious to everyone. Clearly, no one made you change that grade. Your conscience made you do it. Someone with a sound sense of right and wrong plus brilliance with the computer is exactly the kind of person we need, Devin. That's why we put you to the test."

"But what would you have done if I'd given in to the demon and tried to hack into the Cal Institute records office?" asked Devin.

"We would have given you some false data, thanked you for your trouble, and let you go. But we would have made sure you never got away with that kind of theft again."

Devin didn't want to ask how they could have done that. There were still some questions about that demon, and questions about how they had invaded his home computer. But they were technical questions, and

technical questions could wait. Right now, he had some more pressing concerns.

"What about the limousine that tried to run us down — and chased me through the woods back there?"

"The Speed Demon limousine is our cover car, Devin. We rent it so that it can't be easily traced. But when we followed you from Rhino Rentals, and when we took out after you this evening, we were trying to give you a message. We failed both times — you were just too quick for us."

"I'll say," said Rodger smiling. "I almost wrapped the Speed Demon around a fire hydrant in the city, and I did bump into a tree off the fire road, just trying to keep up with this fellow."

"There were other problems, too, Devin," said Benjamin Yea, "Your run-ins with Donald Dackles might have turned out much worse if it hadn't been for Matt's protection. Matt, you might have figured out, is an expert on military strategy. He tests fighter and bomber simulators for the air force. He's the only one known to have guided an unmanned airplane so well that it avoided three Patriot missiles. And he's the one who made sure that you stayed out of harm's way while we were testing you."

Devin was puzzled. "You mean he kept a leash on Dumb Don?"

"Yes, and on others as well. You see, Devin, we're not the only people who are on the lookout for clever programmers. The Faustians may be a United Nations-sponsored secret society. But no secret is perfectly kept. People have found out about us, and we do have enemies. These enemies would very much like to stop our good work — work that depends on the honesty of people like you, Devin. That's why we want you to join us. We want you to help us fight crime and protect people who are trying to create a free computer society throughout the world."

Devin smiled. "I accept. I'm honored that you would even consider me. But what about my friends? Can they join, too?"

"They might — some day," said Benjamin Yea. "But, like you, they must prove themselves. I know all about your Pentagram Club, and all of the people in it have the potential to become Faustians. But they must be tested. And I — we all — would very much like you to promise to keep our existence and your membership in the Faustians secret."

"I understand," said Devin. "And I give you my word that I'll say nothing until the time is right."

"In fact," said Chantal, "there may be an excellent chance for Gabriel to prove himself very soon."

Devin looked puzzled. "Gabriel? Oh, you mean Gabe! I don't think I've ever heard anyone call him Gabriel. And I don't think he'd like it. But maybe people call you Chan," he said, and they all laughed.

Benjamin Yea rose. "Now let's celebrate your membership, Devin. We should have a splendid meal waiting for us in the dining room. Then we'll take you home. But first, would you like to see the computer we've reserved for you?"

"I sure would," said Devin.

"Pull your chair over here," said Benjamin Yea, pointing to a terminal near the center of the ten computers. Devin pulled his chair over, sat down and stared. A thrill of excitement coursed through him. Devin knew what it was — one of the most advanced, most expensive computers made! It was blue and white in color, with a large color monitor and a huge disk drive with a compact disk rom unit sitting beside the main terminal.

"Our computers are tied into over three hundred university computers, four military and medical supercomputers, and networked to virtually every station in the world," said Ellen Blackhawk.

"And it's unbelievably fast," added Rodger English.

"Pretty to look at, too," said Chantal.

"Great for war strategy," said Matt Diggs.

"And it has your code name already entered in," said Benjamin Yea.

"Just hit any key and you'll see it."

Devin cautiously put his hand out to touch the keyboard. Was all this really his to use? It was, and he would use it to help people all over the world. It pushed the *Return* key. The screen flashed, and in red, white, and blue letters was the message:

Welcome to the World
Network, STAR.

THE END