

Euro Gadget

An "Inspector Gadget" Movie fanfic story by Sandy Schreiber

Chapter One

"Go-go Gadget! Go-go Gadget!" chanted several members of the Riverton Police Department's bowling league, the Blue Bombers, as their resident celebrity stepped up to the lane.

Blue bowling ball held deftly in his left hand, the cyborg detective calmly took his familiar stance. Aiming carefully, he approached the foul line and released the ball, watching as it rolled down the polished surface of the lane. It quickly spun into the mass of pins at the end of the lane, just left of the 'pocket', and scattered all but one of the pins.

"You're supposed to knock them ALL down, Gadget!" shouted Desk Sergeant Jerry Tarkington. "Don't tell me we're gonna have to send you in for repairs!" Several of the cops at the table still chuckled at this well-worn joke. Gadget had been on the team since the beginning of the new season, and most of the 'machine-man' jokes were getting pretty old.

"Don't worry, boys...I'm on the case!" assured Gadget, using an equally old line, as he picked up his bowling ball from the ball return. Once more stepping into position, he rolled the ball down the lane, neatly picking up the spare.

A few of the watching cops clapped, while at least two of the civilian spectators gave a hearty 'wooo-hoo!'. The two most vocal were Gadget's niece, Penny, and Doctor Brenda Bradford, Gadget's inventor and girlfriend.

Police Detective John Brown, a.k.a. Inspector Gadget, walked over and sat down at their table to wait for his turn to come up again. Wearing khaki pants and a blue bowling shirt (with the Blue Bombers logo on the back, and his nickname, Gadget, embroidered on the breast pocket), the good inspector certainly did not look like the most sophisticated combination of tissue, hardware and software in the world. In fact, at 5'8", with features that defined the term 'babyface', wide guileless brown eyes, and short, neatly trimmed brown hair, John looked more like a Boy Scout than the prototype for the most powerful crime-fighting tool ever designed.

"Great shot, Uncle John" said Penny brightly. "Too bad you missed on the strike. Oh, and hey, you're just in time...here's our food!" Greasy food was of paramount importance to any pre-teen, and Penny was no exception to this rule. One of John's teammates had taken food orders, and was now getting over to their table with a tray filled with little fried tacos, cheese fries, and chicken fingers. The twelve-year-old tied back her long light-brown hair to keep it out of her way, and dug in, beating her uncle to the first taco.

Across the table from her, Brenda wrinkled her long nose at the fare. "I can't believe you're eating that stuff, John.... You know what it can do to you." She shook her coppery curls in disgust at the thought of all that grease clogging up the delicate systems she and her team of doctors had labored so hard to install in Gadget's body.

"I know...I know.... You've told me before. But, it's only once a week, Bren.... I don't think I'll mess up anything by indulging myself a bit." John smiled at his ladylove, hoping to charm her into not nagging him in front of the guys on his team.

As always, it worked. Brenda sighed. "Okay...just be careful, huh? I'd hate to have to open you up to make repairs."

The newest member of the police force chuckled. "I bet it would make the Sergeant laugh, though. He's just waiting for me to blow a circuit or something." He held out a gooey fry to Brenda, enticing her with its cheesy goodness.

Deciding not to push the issue any further, the scientist ate the fry right from John's outstretched hand, and then pulled the plate in front of her possessively.

Penny rolled her eyes at this exchange. Old people could be so weird sometimes. "I'm going to get a drink, you guys...the smoke in here is getting really bad." She waved her hand in front of her face dramatically as she left for the snack bar.

A few moments later, a group of officers from Capitol City, one of Riverton's biggest rivals in the bowling league, stopped at the table to get a good look at the big shot cyber cop...and the pretty woman sitting with him.

"This your girlfriend, Gadget?" asked one of the men, a tall husky fellow with a deep, gravelly voice. Before John could answer, another man interrupted.

"Course she is, Bill...don't you know? *All* the ladies love Gadget!" laughed one of the other men, whose pocket strip read 'Albert'. "After all, he's compact, he's man-shaped, and he runs on *batteries!*"

The officers at the surrounding tables, who had also heard the joke, added to the roar of laughter that followed this bon mot. They couldn't help but laugh, even if it was at the expense of one of their own.

Brenda looked daggers at both Bill and his companions. No one got away with putting down John with her around.

When the first wave of hilarity died down, the redhead stood up, the better to look the offending officer in the eye.

"Do you know what I've found to be the *best* thing about battery-powered devices, Albert?" she asked, looking at his name and putting as much innuendo into her voice as possible.

Suddenly quiet, Albert shook his head.

"The best thing about battery-powered devices is that they keep going, and going, and *going...*" she answered, then smiled knowingly, and winked at the stunned cop.

She sat back down in her seat as the whole area around their table burst into cheers and laughter. The Capitol City cops were forced to retreat into safe territory, their joke ruined by Brenda's one-upmanship. A new round of 'Go-go Gadget' chants started up, though their tone was somewhat different from the original version.

"I don't believe you *said* that...!" John could barely get his protest out; so completely stunned was he by the ribald implications of her comment. "I mean, I'll never be able to look those guys in the face again! *Geeze!*"

"Lighten up, Gadget...John. It was just a joke. I had to say something. I just can't stand it when someone makes fun of you!" Brenda reached over and squeezed his hand.

The detective sighed, still mortified. "Cops make fun of each other all the time, Bren...it's part of being 'one of the guys'. They didn't mean anything by it."

The redhead smiled at her guy. John always thought the best of everyone. That innocent mindset was one of the things that endeared him to her, so she couldn't really argue with it when it worked against her.

Just then, Penny returned to the table. "Hey, Uncle John...I think you're up next! Good luck!" Penny gave the 'thumbs-up' sign as her uncle got up to take his turn at the lane.

Smiling, he gave her a returning 'thumbs-up', and then noticed the cheese that clung to his fingers. Being too mannerly to lick his fingers in public, he tried to wipe his hands on the waxed paper that came with the food order. This worked only slightly better than waving them in the air...that is to say, not at all. Oh well, he'd wash his hands off after his last frame. He'd just have to tighten his grip on the ball, so his hand didn't slip off.

Brenda watched the cyber detective walk over to the ball return to pick up his shiny blue ball for his last frame. Looking up at the scoreboard, she noticed that John's score (listed under 'Gadget' on the bright green screen) was currently 153, before the last spare. She frowned as she considered this. With all the gadgets she had designed in him, and the power of his robotic limbs, he should be doing much better than that. In fact, there was no reason why he wasn't bowling a perfect game every time. With his optical targeting system, and the auto-reset options in his limbs, he should be able to roll a strike time after time. Still, his average was in the respectable, but not spectacular 160 range. Was he holding back...trying to avoid the specter of cheating that would arise from being too good?

Thinking about it again, the scientist decided that John either did not know he was capable of performing such a feat of bowling magic, or he felt that using anything other than normal human abilities was indeed cheating.

It had been hard enough for the Riverton police officers to accept John Brown as one of them...even now, the acceptance was a bit grudging. Some of the men and women on the force felt that a 'super-cop' should not be allowed to play on the team at all. When Chief Quimby reluctantly pointed out that technically, the Americans With Disabilities Act covered him, as a 'differently-abled' citizen, there was some grumbling. Even then, John did not hold it against his fellow officers. He probably would not have even pursued it if they had not let him on the team. Fortunately, the charm and good humor that so endeared him to Brenda served him in good stead with his teammates, who still considered him a weirdo, but a non-threatening one.

When it was finally his turn to bowl, John stepped into the lane and hefted his ball to set the weight on his hand. Adjusting his grip to make up for the greasy cheese residue, he aimed carefully. It was his final frame, and if he did well, his team would have a better chance of making it into the finals next month. Fortunately, their fate did not rest in his hands. Still, it was important to their overall team average, and so it was important to him. He couldn't let the team down!

Once more going into his bowling stance, he approached the line with four measured steps and threw the ball in a smooth, powerful roll. Unfortunately, his thumb, sticky with now-warm cheese, had gotten stuck in the ball's thumbhole. The force of his throw pulled the ball, and Gadget's extendable arm, right down the center of the lane! Reaching the limit of its extension at ten feet, the momentum threw the startled detective off his feet, and right into the lane, sliding after his wayward arm. Willing his arm to retract as quickly as possible, the hapless detective managed to stop both his ball and his body from reaching the pins at the far end of the lane...barely. Carefully getting off the oily wood of the lane, John sheepishly walked down the gutter, to the amusement of the bowlers who had watched his spectacularly klutzy performance.

Getting back into place, the embarrassed officer of the law asked for a 'do-over'. Still laughing, even the other teams allowed that since he had not actually released the ball, a do-over would be fair. Besides, he looked so puppy-dog pathetic in his oil-stained bowling shirt.

One more chance. This time, the inspector wiped his hands on a ball buffing cloth, getting off the rest of the cheese before picking up his ball again.

Stepping into place, he aimed and threw, crossing the fingers of his other hand as the bright blue ball spiraled down the lane. Luck, having had its fun with him before, was with him this time, as the ball made a perfect bee-line into the pocket, knocking down all the pins in a satisfying crash. Two more perfect hits rounded out his score to a very lucky 203, winning cheers from his teammates, and some fist-pumping action from his two biggest fans.

Some good-natured teasing, a spectacular goof, and a small taste of victory. John sighed happily. What a great night! He had the perfect job, a loving niece, and a girlfriend who was both brilliant and beautiful. Life just couldn't get better.

Which meant, of course, that it was soon to get much, much worse.



Chapter Two

The squad room was typical of most police stations...noisy, messy, and crowded. The desk sergeant ruled over it all with an iron fist and a bullhorn voice, while the blue-clad beat cops gathered around him to hear the day's reports.

Inspector Gadget had just gotten back from one of his training classes, (Evidence: How To Spot It, and What To Do With It) and was heading for his desk at the back of the large room when Sergeant Tarkington caught his attention.

"Gadget! Get your little tin butt back to the Chief's office! He's hopping mad about something, and he wants to see YOU!" Tarkington was one of the cops that were decidedly *not* happy about Gadget being on the force. Especially when the rookie was given the rank of full detective, without the experience or training to back it up.

John smiled and nodded, acknowledging the message, and went over to his desk to pick up some files he had left there. Looking at his very own desk...in a police station! ...always made John grin. Amid the usual clutter of paper files and candy wrappers was a nice new PC (which Penny was teaching him to use...), a photo of Penny and Brain, her brown and white beagle, and a small potted geranium. On top of the stack of files was a somewhat obscene drawing of him...probably inspired by the infamous 'battery' joke of the night before. Some wag obviously thought the subject was too good to let go. John smiled slightly. It was kind of funny, though pretty crude. Ah, those guys....He folded the picture and put it in his pocket. Brenda would probably enjoy it.

John had no idea what the Chief would be mad about this time. It had been at least a week since his gadgets had destroyed any public property, and he was attending the training classes the Chief had assigned him to. With Penny's help on his homework, he was actually doing fairly well. Maybe it was that car thief he had picked up...literally?

Still, Chief Quimby seldom needed a reason to be mad at John. He seemed to cultivate a bad attitude when it came to their resident cyber cop. John never took it personally...it was just Quimby's way. He was tough on everyone...and to Brown's mind, it only showed how much he cared.

Still, it couldn't hurt to bring along his current case file, small though it was. At least his mistakes were getting less noticeable. Glancing back at his desk to see if he had missed anything, John noticed the nameplate that Brenda had given him...Detective J. Brown, R.P.D. Seeing the light glance off the shiny brass of his name made him stand a bit straighter as he left the squad room to brave the lion in its den.

Quimby's office was just off the back of the squad room.... Close enough to see what was going on, but far enough away that the constant noise was a bit muffled.

John could hear the Chief's voice through the closed door.

"What does the *F.B.I.* want with him? Since when do we need those government nimrods messing around in our business?" The Chief's angry tones made John's ears ring. The F.B.I.? "So tell 'em to go to Hell, Mayor! We've got everything under control here, and we don't need those suits thinking we're at their beck and call!" John figured he had better make his presence known, before someone caught him eavesdropping.

Nervously, he knocked on the frosted glass panel of the heavy door.

"What?" shouted the Chief, stretching his phone cord to reach the door. "Oh...it's you. Get in here." Quimby moved aside to let the much smaller man into his office, slamming the door behind him. "Yeah, yeah...he's here now." He continued his conversation. "Yes...we'll be there." Quimby paused while the person on the other end of this acerbic conversation, presumably the mayor, gave one final instruction. He rolled his eyes in exasperation, agreed to whatever it was, and hung up without so much as a polite 'goodbye'.

John, hat in hand, stood by the Chief's desk, politely waiting for his commanding officer to address him. He wasn't looking forward to it either. It already sounded bad.

Chief Quimby was a tall man, with thinning gray hair, and a salt-and-pepper mustache. His rough, gravelly voice had a distinct Texas twang to it. He had been the most opposed to the Gadget Program from the moment it was first proposed five years ago by the team of Dr. Artemus Bradford and his daughter Brenda. Still, he had been overruled by the Mayor and the city council, who had all been entranced by the idea of a force of 'super cops' who would never go on strike, never get sick, and never need to use guns. The very idea of replacing real humans with some sort of robots, or 'cyborgs' (whatever the hell they were) made him shudder. The reality of the situation was both worse, and somewhat better than he had feared. 'Worse', in that he was stuck

with a 'super cop' with no experience, a T.V.-inspired concept of justice, and enough sheer klutziness to cover all three Stooges. The 'better' part was that there was only one Gadget, and his creation was unlikely to be repeated any time soon.

Adjusting his deep blue uniform, the Chief closed in on the rookie cop. Trying to muster some patience for the man looking up at him so innocently, he sighed. "Gadget...what have you done to attract the attention of the F.B.I? Be honest with me, son..."

John looked up at Quimby, puzzlement in his brown eyes. "I have no idea, Chief. As far as I know, I've never even *met* an F.B.I. agent! What do they want with me?"

The Chief rubbed his hand over his face tiredly. Getting anything useful out of Gadget was always painful. "If I knew that, I wouldn't be asking *you*, would I? All I know is that the Mayor wants you, me, and that doctor friend of yours down at her office to 'discuss the Gadget Program.' Today. Now. Five minutes ago, in fact."

"No problem, Chief. Should we take my car?"

Quimby visibly shuddered at Gadget's mention of that ...car. "No, no, Gadget...that's okay. We'll take *my* car." The chief never wanted to ride in that motorized menace again. Whose idea was it to give that beautiful old Lincoln Continental a smartass AI unit, anyways? Why can't a car just be a car?

Mayor Wilson's office was bright and cheerful, as perky in appearance as the mayor was in personality. The Chief called her 'Evil Gidget' behind her back, and most of the force tended to agree with this character assessment. Hungry for good publicity and the appearance of a 'gung-ho' stance on crime, it was Wilson who had pushed for the Gadget Program so hard. When it finally came to fruition, no one was quicker to take credit for its success than the petite blonde-haired woman who had ruled over the city for two terms...and was shooting for a third.

When John and the Chief entered the office, the first thing they noted was that Brenda Bradford was already there, shuffling through some papers from a large briefcase she had opened on the conference table. She looked up at their entrance, and smiled at John in relief. Next, they saw the mayor, who waved cheerfully at them, a fake smile plastered on her pinched features.

The last thing they noticed was the presence of two strangers standing at the back of the room quietly. They were wearing dark suits, white shirts, and plain black ties. Never had the term 'plain clothes' been so apt. John felt Quimby stiffen at the sight of the two men. He knew immediately that these must be the F.B.I. agents the Chief had been so worried about.

"Chief Quimby! Inspector Gadget! How nice to see you could make it on such short notice! I know how busy you both are, fighting crime, making the city safe for all of its good, hard-working citizens!" gushed the mayor, glancing at the dark-suited men to see if they were buying it. They weren't. Noting this, she quickly added, "Please, gentlemen, take your seats. I'm sure everyone's eager to get down to business!"

Mumbling something under his breath, the Chief took a seat as far from both the mayor and the strangers as possible. John sat next to Brenda, and looked at her questioningly. She shrugged, indicating her own ignorance of the purpose of the meeting. She was wearing a rather severe dark blue business suit, and her unruly curls were restrained in a ponytail at her neck. Since she tended more towards the casual, and even flowery, in her dress standards, John realized she was trying to make a good impression on these men. For both their sakes then, he hoped he didn't say the wrong thing.

The two agents came to stand at the head of the table. Nodding to the mayor, the taller of the two, a dark blond fellow, opened a small satchel and took out some papers before beginning to speak.

"Good afternoon. My name is Agent Tomlin, of the F.B.I., and this..." he said, indicating his dark-haired partner, "is Field Operative Morgan of the C.I.A. I want you all to know that what is being discussed here today is part of an ongoing investigation involving Interpol as well as both my agency, and Operative Morgan's. Please understand that nothing we say here today is to become public knowledge until the investigation is complete."

"Oh, believe me, Agent Tomlin...no one will say a word, will we, people?" interjected the mayor, looking beseechingly at the other members of the captive audience. They all nodded absently, curiosity written large upon every face.

"Very well. Let me start with some facts about the Gadget Program. As she will confirm, Dr. Bradford and her father, Nobel-Prize honoree Dr. Artemus Bradford, began work ten years ago on a project that would revolutionize bio-mechanical technology. They called it the Gadget Program. When they felt they were coming close to making the tech work, they approached the mayor of this city to propose a merger of their concerns with the city's growing need for crime-control technology. Given a cost projection that was within the city's

budget for the next few years, the council agreed to fund the project, sharing the costs with Bradford Robotics equally.“ Agent Tomlin paused, looking at Brenda for confirmation. She nodded, as did the mayor. Quimby grimaced. He remembered that time very well. John made no motion. He had been told most of this, but since he had not been involved, it never really made an impression upon him.

“Nine months ago,” the agent continued, “...the project was finally completed with the creation of the NSA chip by Dr. Bradford here. The Neuron Synapse Amplifier, as Dr. Bradford called it, would supposedly amplify and digitize the human brain wave, making its commands understandable to the computers that would power the robotic gadgets she and her father had built. At almost the same time as the discovery of the chip’s success, Artemus Bradford was murdered by the thief who stole the original prototype robot part, and the brain wave transfer device.”

Brenda looked down at her notes on the table, tears misting her eyes at the memory of her father’s death. They had been more than father and daughter; they had been partners and best friends, and nine months was not enough time to get over her loss.

John remembered that part very well. Though he had not known the elder Dr. Bradford well, he sympathized with Brenda’s feelings. He reached over and took her hand in his, hoping to comfort her somehow. She squeezed his hand in thanks, and looked up with clearing eyes at the emotionless federal agent.

“Please go on, Agent Tomlin...don’t let tact stand in your way” she said with a touch of steely resolve in her voice. She was not going to let the fed shake her up.

“As I was saying...at the same time as the murder and theft, a security guard at the Bradford Robotics lab, a Mister...” he consulted his notes, “...John Brown...drove after the suspects, seemingly stopped them, and was nearly killed when one of the suspects threw a stick of dynamite into Brown’s overturned car.”

John vaguely remembered that part. Most of his memories of the chase were pretty blurry, and he could not remember the dynamite or the explosion at all. Thankfully...

“Yeah, we all know what happened that night, Agent Tomlin...so why the rehash now?” questioned Quimby. “The case was solved, and that scumbag Scolex is in jail. What’s *your* interest in all this?”

“Our interest is in what happened *after* the attempted murder of John Brown, Chief Quimby” answered the Federal agent pointedly. “Two days *after* the explosion, Brown was in the hospital, his chances for survival falling by the hour. At this point Dr. Bradford took it upon herself to attempt the Gadget conversion process on the patient. It was to be the first human test, and it had to be done in record time for the subject to survive it.”

“He survived the conversion, as you can see, Agent Tomlin” Brenda pointed out, nodding towards the cyborg cop sitting next to her. “The process worked.”

“Yes, it worked, Doctor...but at how high a price?”

The redheaded scientist looked nonplussed. She shuffled through her notes, searching for the facts and figures that really had not been her top priority at the time.

“Never mind, Dr. Bradford...I have all the figures right here” said the blond man, holding up his stack of printouts.

The mayor had stiffened at the words ‘high price’, and Chief Quimby looked at her curiously.

“Mayor Wilson...was there something you didn’t *tell* the city council about the cost of the Gadget Program...?” Quimby asked, sarcasm dripping from his gravely voice.

“Uh...well...the cost was a *bit* higher than expected, Chief...But nothing we couldn’t handle, right, Agent Tomlin? After all, we wanted the best, and by gosh, we got it!” bubbled the Mayor, a nervous tick appearing under one brightly-painted eye.

The blond Federal agent looked at the sputtering mayor, and consulted his notes once again. He cleared his throat dramatically.

“The total cost, including parts and labor, came to 1.7 billion dollars.”

John Brown’s jaw fell open with an audible ‘clang’.

The stunned silence lasted all of three seconds.

“*What???* Do you mean to tell me you spent more than the total operating budget of this city...on *THAT???*” exclaimed Chief Quimby in complete outrage. “Every city service in Riverton is begging for more money just to keep garbage off the streets and police cars on them, and you waste a *billion* dollars on an *experiment???* What the hell were you *thinking*, Mayor?? And how the hell did you get the money?”

The mayor looked nervously at Agent Tomlin.

Brenda saw the look, and made the correct assumption.

“I think a better question is, “*Where* the hell did you get the money?”, right, Mayor?” asked the scientist, sure of the response. “My firm picked up a large part of it, but not nearly enough to cover that amount.”

“No,” agreed the Federal agent. “Your company went into bankruptcy because of the cost, didn’t it, Dr. Bradford?”

John, speechless with shock, looked at Brenda, completely dismayed. She had never told him *that*. Her company went bankrupt because of him? So *that* was why she went to work for that creep, Scolex, and why her company had shut down right after.

The redhead was not disturbed in the least as she turned to him and smiled.

"It was worth it, John. Believe me...it was worth everything I had to give you what you needed" she said without a trace of hesitation in her voice.

Agent Tomlin smiled grimly, which was the first hint of emotion to cross his face during the meeting.

"Apparently, Mayor Wilson was not so willing to put her city into bankruptcy as you were your business, Doctor. Faced with an outrageous bill, she did what any good politician would do...she went to the federal government for help."

The mayor sheepishly looked at Chief Quimby, Brenda, and finally at John.

"The council would have strung me up by my heels if they had known how much the project finally ended up costing...so I didn't tell them. I hid the cost in a load of paperwork...and got a grant from the government's experimental science division." She looked down at the table, finally subdued. "They still don't know...." she said quietly.

Agent Tomlin spoke up again. "Well, Mayor, the cost might not have been so high if not for Dr. Bradford's insistence that the test subject be restored to his original appearance...and that even non-vital biological systems be fully functional."

Puzzled, John looked questioningly at Brenda.

"Non-vital...?"

The scientist leaned over and whispered an explanation into his ear.

The LED display band on John's Gadget hat lit up with a bright red blush, matching the one on his cheeks.

Still fuming, Quimby viewed their exchange with disgust.

"Oh, that's just *great*. I'm sure we're all *thrilled* to know that Gadget here will one day make some nice *vending machine* very happy," he said angrily. "But the real question here is...What do you want, Agent Tomlin? What does the federal government want with Gadget?"

"It's quite simple, Chief Quimby. The federal government paid for him, and now the federal government wants to use him. Mayor Wilson signed an agreement to the effect that the prototype for the Gadget Project, should it prove successful, would be available to the government's Science and Technologies department at any time. That time is now. We've been sent to collect the prototype, and get him ready for a mission overseas." Ignoring the shocked looks on the faces of his audience, Tomlin turned to his silent companion, and made a motion of yielding the floor to him. "Operative Morgan...if you please..."

Morgan approached the desk, and opened a palm-sized computer. Punching in a few codes, he found the information he wanted, and began reading from his notes.

"Two months ago a break-in at the British world headquarters of RamTech, a maker of robotics parts, was the first in what seems to be a series of high-tech thefts occurring all over Europe. Ten firms have been hit so far, with all of them reporting the loss of some of their most advanced computer or robotics components. Most of these items were top-secret, cutting edge technologies, and all of them were working prototypes. One-of-a-kind things which have set their companies back years in research time, in some cases. Security cameras at all but one of the firms had been disabled, seemingly with some sort of computer virus. It is not known how the virus was introduced into the camera systems. When guards chanced upon the intruders, they were met with brute force that was far beyond what would be expected, given the described size of the attackers. Since one of the firms was American, and did defense contracts, Interpol contacted my group.

We were beginning our own investigation when the most recent break-in occurred. In this case, the security cameras were able to record part of a confrontation between two security guards and a jump-suit clad intruder, before going out. Coming upon the intruder unexpectedly, one guard drew his taser and fired. This caused the suspect to go into strange convulsions...as its head popped off." Morgan paused, waiting for reactions from his audience.

"Its *head* popped off? What...like a *robot*?" questioned Chief Quimby.

"Exactly like a robot, sir. A robot that then fired out a burst of fire, picked up its head, and fled the scene," answered the C.I.A. man. "The guards were so shocked by this spectacle that they did not take chase soon enough, and the intruder escaped."

Brenda spoke up, confusion evident on her face.

"But...the only firm that I know of that has come up with an actual human-looking robot has been Scolex Industries...and that was only after stealing *my* work! Sanford Scolex is in jail, and the new CEO of the company signed an agreement to destroy all the technology based on my work." Brenda smiled then, adding, "Of

course, that was after I sued their corporate pants off.”

“Yes, and that’s how you got your business back on its feet, right, Doctor?” chimed the Mayor, trying to get on Brenda’s good side again. “I do so love to see a woman get back her own! Of course, the City of Riverton’s case is still pending, but I’m sure we’ll win too! After all the damage RoboGadget did...well! Scolex Industries will certainly be held responsible for that!”

“If I may finish, madam?” asked Morgan, irritated at the interruptions. “As I was saying...with the evidence that these thefts are probably all being done by robots, and that only cutting-edge experimental prototypes are being stolen, it was felt by my superiors that we might set a trap for the cyber-thief...and whoever owns it. That’s where the Gadget prototype comes in. So far, he’s the most advanced cybernetic life form on the planet, and would be a real prize to anyone into robotics, whether for profit, for terrorism, or some other corrupt use. In any case, these thefts pose a danger to the world’s security, and we have to address it.”

“So, you want to take Gadget to Europe with you...as bait?” asked Quimby. “And he’d be away *how* long....?”

“There’s really no way of knowing, sir. ‘As long as it takes’ is all the answer I can give.”

Quimby smiled. “Well, I think it’s a *fine* idea. Mayor...?”

“Sounds good to me, Quimby...can’t let those nasty terrorists get a hold of all our high-tech secrets, now can we? Go U.S.A!”

Outraged, Brenda stood up and faced the two government agents.

“Now wait one damn minute here! You can’t just—” she managed to sputter out, as John placed one restraining hand on her arm.

Brenda looked at him, surprised.

Calmly, John issued a command. “Go-go Gadget database, Constitution, 13th Amendment” and from speakers in his ears came a tinny computerized voice, reciting the requested information.

“13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Section 1: Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

John stood to face the mayor, Quimby, and the government agents. His normally cheerful face was somber, but when he spoke, his pleasant tenor voice was strained.

“I wanted to play that again, in case I wasn’t remembering it right,” he said, clearly unhappy at having to stand up to his chief, the mayor, and the F.B.I. agents all at the same time..

Agent Tomlin took the bait. “What are you talking about, Gadget?”

“I’m talking about my rights, sir...and the rights of all Americans. If I understand what the Constitution means, you can’t just order me to do stuff I don’t want to do, or take me where I don’t want to go. I’m a public servant, not a piece of property.

Tomlin held up his sheaf of papers, and waved them towards John.

“The agreement Mayor Wilson signed —“

“Means *nothing*, sir...because if my heart’s not in it, the Gadget Program *doesn’t work*.”

Furious, Tomlin whirled to face Brenda.

“What does he mean, ‘*doesn’t work*’?”

The scientist smiled sweetly at the frustrated federal agent.

“He means just that, Agent Tomlin. The Gadget Program works now only because *he* wants it to...without John’s heart, without his mind, it’s just a pile of metal and plastic. The key to the Program was my invention of the NSA chip. That’s what powered the neural interface, and enabled the computers installed in his brain and body to work. When Sanford Scolex removed that chip in a second murder attempt, John’s body should have died.... But it *didn’t*. In the short months that John had the chip, when it was working properly, it not only sent digitized information *to* the computers, it sent digitized information *back*, something that was completely unexpected. Somehow, it forced John’s brain to rewire itself to actually understand the information the machine was presenting it with. So, when the chip was removed, instead of killing him, it actually finished the process of converting John’s cybernetic body into a living, feeling part of him. There is now nothing separating John’s mind from Gadget’s body. The Gadget prototype is alive, Agent Tomlin...and John Brown is its heart and soul.”

“So...does this mean we have to pay back the money...?” asked the Mayor tremulously.

“No, Mayor...it just means that if the government boys want Gadget’s help, they have to stop trying to throw their weight around, and start playing *nice*,” answered Quimby, who was starting to feel a grudging respect for the cyber cop. At least the kid was trying to stand up for himself for once.

“That’s right, Chief. If Uncle Sam wants my help, all he has to do is ask,” John said calmly. “He can ask me as a police officer, as an American, or as plain old John Brown, world citizen. The only thing he *can’t* do

is *force* me to help.”

“So, boys...what’s it going to be?” asked Brenda, as she leaned over and put a possessive arm around John’s waist. “Are you going to *ask* for help, or are we going to walk?”

The two agents looked at each other. Morgan sighed and nodded. Tomlin shrugged.

“Inspector Gadget...Mr. Brown...would you be willing to aid your government in an international sting operation that will undoubtedly save billions of dollars, and keep the world safe from cyber-terrorism?”

Inspector Gadget smiled brightly as he snapped off a smart salute.

“Of course I would, Agent Tomlin! I’m on the case!”



Chapter Three

"Sweden? We're going to Sweden? That is so cool!" exclaimed Penny to her uncle as he drove her to school the next day.

"Yes, I'm sure it will be, so pack some warm clothes!" warned John, carefully keeping the Gadgetmobile down to the speed limit as they drove down the main streets.

"Oh sure...you three get to go...even the *beagle* gets to go...but me? 'Sorry Gadgetmobile...we have to keep a low profile.... can't have a big fancy Lincoln convertible attracting attention on the streets, can we?' Oh no.... no fancy all-expenses-paid trips for Gadgetmobile! I'm only your *partner*, for crying out loud!" complained the AI unit on the car's dashboard screen. "You three are gonna regret not taking me with you, I guarantee it!"

"Sorry, GM, but we're supposed to be going to the World Technologies Conference as exhibitors. Well, that is, Brenda will be an exhibitor, and I'll be her exhibit. They limit each company to only one big exhibit...and when it came to choosing between you and me..."

"...Dr. B chose *you*...as always" grouched the creamy-white car. "And don't call me 'GM'! I'm a *Lincoln*, damn it!"

"And *you* had better watch your language, Gadgetmobile...there's a lady present!" warned John, nodding to the giggling Penny.

"Uncle John, I still can't believe those F.B.I guys are going to let you bring me along...aren't they afraid it will be dangerous or something?"

"Well, yes...but you're not coming with me, exactly. You're going with Brenda, as her assistant. So, the government guys couldn't say anything about it. You're going to stay and help her figure out what's going on with the weird robots and that virus they talked about, while I help the C.I.A. and Interpol track down the robots' controller," John said as they rounded the last corner to park in the school's wide main drive. "Besides...I didn't want to leave you alone here, while I was gone for who-knows-how-long. I'd miss you too much."

Penny didn't care how uncool it was to hug her uncle in front of the gang at school... she did it anyway. "You're the best, Uncle John!" she said as she jumped out of the car to join her giggling friends.

"Yeah...the best *foo!*" mumbled the still-angry car.

As usual, John simply ignored the Lincoln's snide comments as he guided the big car off school property, and towards his precinct. There was still a lot of preparation to do before they left, and he wanted to make sure his case files were all up to date.

Tired, stiff, and cranky, Brenda and Penny both got out of their seats feeling like puppets with their strings cut. Nothing seemed to work right. It had been a long flight, and neither of them was in any mood to face another few hours getting through customs and whatever other problems were sure to arise.

To Brenda's annoyance, John looked fresh as the proverbial daisy. His mostly-metal body simply didn't get tired or stiff, and the lithium batteries that powered his robotic form gave him boundless energy. Since this had been his first plane trip, he had been bright and cheerful the whole time. He had chatted amiably with both Penny and Brenda until they could not stand it any more, then he had continued talking with the stewards on the flight. Finally, the other passengers were treated to his opinions on the trip, their airspeed and the quality of the airline food (bad). At this point, Brenda was ready to strangle him...as if it would do any good. She thought about the debacle at the airport earlier that day and rolled her eyes. Even that had not dampened John's high spirits.....

"Hurry up, Uncle John! We'll miss our flight!" cried Penny as she rushed through the airport's main terminal area. "I don't want Brain to spend any more time in that carrier than he has to!"

"Don't worry, Penny. I'm sure we have plenty of time for our flight" John replied, confident that everything was running on schedule. He had everything planned to the last minute, and had left a large span of time for any problems that might come up at the terminal itself. He had never been on an international flight before, or any kind of flight for that matter, and didn't want to make any mistakes. It had been fun planning their trip! Brenda had asked him to make all the arrangements for the flight, as she had been busy getting her presentation ready for the conference. The government had pushed through his and Penny's passports, so that was taken care of. Since he was not going on an 'official' mission, he did not need any special permits or permis-

sion, and he never carried a gun, so he did not need special paperwork for that.

Even getting Brain on board for the flight was easier than expected. Since he had all of his shots, no quarantine was needed. The little beagle would no doubt be uncomfortable on the long trip, but as long as he was near Penny, he would stay quiet.

Gadgetmobile was still unhappy about being left behind, and used every opportunity to remind anyone within earshot of this fact. Driving them to the airport was the last straw as far as he was concerned.

“Don’t expect me to be here waiting when you get back! I may just get another job....!” he had called to them as they waved goodbye at the front lobby of the airport. “Don’t think I can’t do it, either! I hear Michael Knight’s lookin’ for a new partner...!”

Riverton did not have an international airport terminal, so they had been forced to drive over the Ohio state line to Pittsburgh to catch a flight. The terminal was very large, and bustling with traffic.

Penny had been excited about the trip, and had gone online to find out all she could about Sweden, the city of Stockholm, and various facts about the weather and customs. This was not to be her first flight. She had been on a plane before, but that was when she was six years old, and had come from Germany to live with her uncle after her parents’ deaths. Her father, John’s older brother, had been career military, and was stationed on a base in Germany. His wife and he had been killed in a terrorist attack on the base, and Penny had been sent to the States to stay with her only living relative. The two got along famously, and if anyone found it odd that a little girl had been entrusted to a bachelor with no apparent parenting skills, they quickly changed their minds when they saw how well John cared for his niece.

Knowing that her uncle, for all his virtues, was not exactly the sharpest pencil in the box, Penny had tried her best to get John to let her make the travel plans. ‘Nothing doing’, he had said. ‘It’s no problem...don’t worry about it.’ Still, every day before the trip, Penny had asked to see the tickets for the flight, the hotel reservations, Brain’s permits...and John had patted his trenchcoat’s breast pocket, assuring her that everything was there.

There was, unfortunately, one thing John had not thought of.

Security was tight at most American airports, and even worse in other countries, so there was a real no-nonsense attitude to all the proper procedures...especially regarding the terminal’s metal detectors.

Dropping their carry-on bags on the conveyor belt of the entrance to the security station, both Penny and Brenda booted up their portable computers to satisfy the demands of the bored attendant. There was nothing odd in their bags or on their persons, so they quickly got through the checkpoint.

Such was not the case with Inspector Gadget, following behind the two. Dropping his duffle bag onto the belt, he casually walked through the detector, and set off every alarm in the place. Immediately, every guard around turned to look at what was causing the ruckus, and saw a guy in a trenchcoat and fedora standing in the middle of the detector, looking very guilty. Several guns were drawn by suddenly nervous guards, as John backed out of the detector to try to explain.

Looking back in surprise, Brenda did her best Homer Simpson impersonation as she smacked her hand to her head and cried “D’oh!”

“Uncle John!” cried Penny as she rushed back to help her chagrined uncle. “Didn’t you get Chief Quimby to call Airport Security for you about this?”

“Um...no...I-I didn’t think there would be any problems....” he said, still eyeing the guards with guns. The booth attendant was getting out her wand to run over John’s body, while another guard asked him to please remove his hat and coat.

“But...this is really easy to clear up, guys! See, I’m Inspector Gadget, and-“

“I don’t care if you’re the king of Spain, buddy...just take off your hat and coat, and stand over there” the guard said, indicating a space away from the booth.

“Well...okay.... but I don’t think it will do any good. If you’d just let me explain...”

Ignoring him, the guard with the metal detector wand began to run it over John’s body, trying to see where the source of the concentrated readings was coming from. Starting at his head, the rod glowed and beeped, and kept on doing so as it reached his shoes. She looked at John, puzzled. John just shrugged, and started to try to explain, when the manager of Security showed up.

“What’s the problem here, Carole?” he asked, annoyed that the smooth operation of the airport was being interrupted in the middle of the day. “Can’t you handle a simple search without drawing a crowd?” Indeed, a crowd had gathered, curious to see someone get caught by security.

“Well, this guy looks clean...but the wand keeps beeping...everywhere!” explained the indignant guard. “And he set off every alarm in the place just by going through the frame!”

The manager grabbed the wand from her, and ran it over John’s body himself. The wand continued its

incessant beeping.

"Have you got a metal plate in your skull, buddy?" he asked John, giving the guard a dirty look for having overlooked such an obvious solution.

"Uh...yes, actually..." answered the cyborg, willing to let it go at that if it would get him out of this embarrassing situation quicker.

The manager of Security eyed John's two large, strange looking watches, one on each wrist. They did not look like any watches he had ever seen before...in fact, one looked like a mini-computer.

"Would you please remove those ...watches, sir? Just place them on the conveyor belt there..."

"I...I *can't*. They don't come off..." John answered, finally thinking there would be only one way to get out of this quickly. "Maybe you had better let me show you..."

"What do you-? *Gahhhhh!*" screamed the manager, as Gadget extended his legs and arms to their full span, almost hitting the ceiling at his now nearly sixteen-foot height. He reached down to show the manager his watch, firmly implanted below his very human-looking hand...but actually attached to the titanium and plastic arm below the silicone/latex skin.

A number of the people who had gathered around were screaming at the sight of a metal giant in their midst, but their screams just drew more attention. Every kid in the area was quickly attracted to the sound...and to the man in the center of the commotion.

"Inspector Gadget!" one cried, as every child and teen around took up the chant. Shouts of 'Inspector Gadget!' and 'Go-go Gadget!' quickly filled the terminal, as kids began to clamor for autographs from the cyber cop.

Finally regaining his air of authority, the manager of Security looked narrow-eyed at his staff.

"Inspector Gadget? Why the hell didn't you *tell* me he was Inspector Gadget?"

"Well, he said that was his name, but we had no idea...I mean...what the heck is Inspector Gadget?" stuttered one of the confused guards.

"Never mind—just let him through," the manager said gruffly, wanting this incident to be over as soon as possible. "And clear these crowds!" He turned to the Inspector, who had now returned to his normal unimposing size, and tried to make amends. "I'm sorry about this, Inspector...I hope you understand...?"

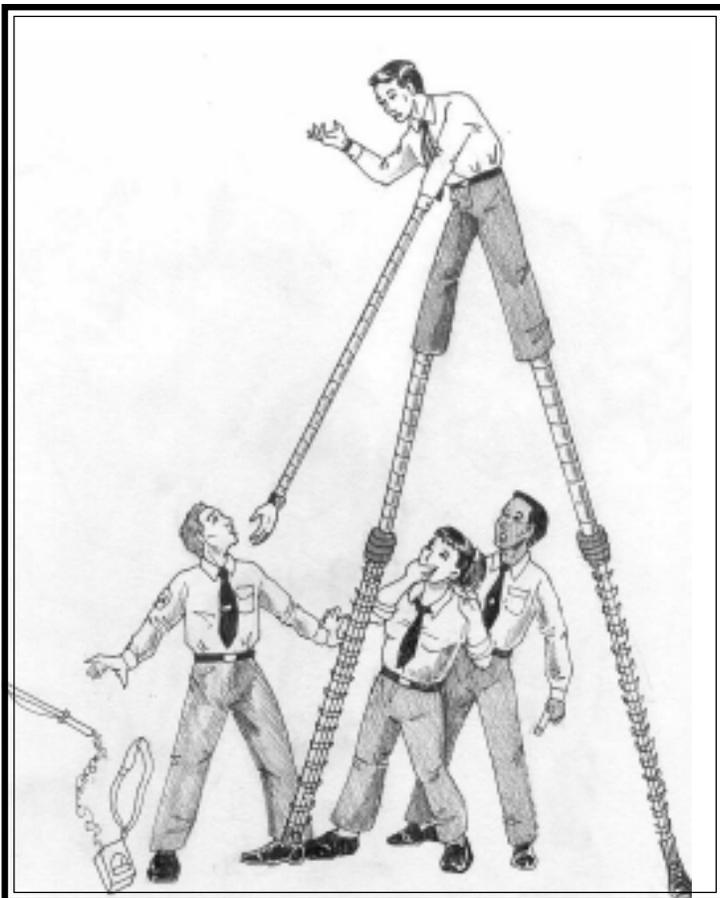
"It's not a problem, sir," John replied, deciding that he would not mention his own complicity in the

situation. "As long as we can make our flight."

"Don't worry. I'll call the gate and make sure they hold it for you." The manager was just relieved that the celebrity was taking it so well.

John gave him the flight number, and quickly gathered up his hat, coat, and bag, then ran through the detector (which set off the alarm again) to join the exasperated Brenda, and his laughing niece.

As they rushed for their gate, now late, John thought it a very good thing the guards had not checked his hat and coat. Those rocket launchers would probably bother someone...



Chapter Four

Getting through customs was not the hassle Brenda had thought it would be, and they actually got to their hotel near the convention center fairly quickly. She felt relieved that John had checked to see that Brain would be allowed to stay with her and Penny in their room, because finding out differently at this late date would have been a pain. Since this was a 'business' trip, her company was paying for their accommodations, so Penny could have had her own room if she had wanted, but she had said she liked the idea of staying with Brenda...and the girl-talk that was sure to result. Brenda had smiled at this, delighted that the girl felt comfortable enough with her to want to share secrets and gossip. Besides, they could discuss the upcoming conference, and how best to prepare John for his part in it.

Stockholm was sunny and warm on the early spring day. The city looked clean and bright, and most of the people were in shirtsleeves or other lightweight clothes. The conference was not going to open for setup until Thursday, so they had one day to rest and get ready.

Naturally, John wanted none of this 'resting' nonsense.

"C'mon, Brenda! You don't want to *miss* anything, do you?" he had asked, looking from her to Penny, who were both lying on their respective beds in their side of the adjoining rooms, suffering from serious jetlag. "It's so beautiful out! And Penny...you could take Brain for a walk! He'd *like* that, wouldn't he?"

Brenda covered her face with her pillow as she listened to Penny slowly give in. She had probably looked in her uncle's eyes. Big mistake. No one could say no to those innocent, pleading eyes. *Damn* his eyes, anyways. She would stay strong...she would *not* remove that pillow...aw, hell. It didn't matter. She could *imagine* his eyes, all big and brown and hopeful...why hadn't she replaced them when she had had the chance?

"All right, John...I'll come with you" she sighed. "But let me take a shower and change clothes, okay? Can you wait another twenty minutes at least?"

"Of course! No problem!" he replied brightly, obviously pleased that both Brenda and Penny had fallen to the lure of the city. "I'll just go and unpack while I wait."

"Uncle John...why don't you put on something more...casual...?" Penny said, waving a hand at her uncle's Gadget suit. "You're not here on 'business', after all. Not officially, anyways..."

"Good idea, Penny. Always thinking!" he answered approvingly as he closed the door between their rooms. Brenda could hear him whistling.

Twenty-five minutes later, Brenda and Penny were ready, if not exactly eager. Brenda had donned a flowery skirt in blue and red, loose enough to be comfortable, but long enough to protect her from the slight chill in the air. Over that she wore a blue light-weight sweater. The warm shower had cheered her up considerably, though she still would rather have stayed put for a while.

Penny had washed up, then torn through her bags looking for the perfect outfit for her first day in Stockholm. She finally settled on khaki jeans and a tan long-sleeved tee with the Kanji symbol for 'peace' displayed in bright red on the front.

Knocking on her uncle's door, Penny asked if he was decent. Of course he was...he always was. They entered to find him casually attired, as suggested, in a dark brown sweater covered in an abstract pattern of rust and tan, and light brown corduroy slacks. Apparently he was taking his surname to heart.

"You ladies look great!" he said, admiringly. "We're really going to light up this town!"

Brenda and Penny looked at each other and giggled at the thought of 'lighting up' the town in broad daylight. Metaphors were not John's strong suit.

"You look nice too, Uncle John. Oh...do you think we can get a look at the King's castle today?" Penny asked, thinking about the travel information she had gleaned from the 'net.

"I don't see why not...though we'll probably have to take a cab to get there. Better get Brain's leash out. I'm sure they have leash laws here, and I don't want to get him, or us, impounded!"

The little beagle barked excitedly as Penny drew the leash out of her backpack. She seldom had him leashed at home, but her uncle was right. In a strange town, it was better to err on the side of caution.

Brain's barks of excitement quickly changed to warning barks as a knock sounded at the door.

The three humans looked at each other, puzzled. They were not expecting anyone, and they had not been making enough noise to bother their neighbors yet.

Shrugging, John said "Go-go Gadget Swedish translator!" and opened his room's door to the hallway.



Standing in the hallway was a tall, blond-haired woman of about forty, wearing what appeared to be a uniform for the World Technologies Conference welcoming committee. She smiled at John, and moved to shake his hand.

"Goddag, Inspektör Gadget!" she said smoothly. "Välkommen till Sverige!"

John smiled blankly until the tinny voice of his internal database obligingly translated the woman's words.

"Greetings, Inspector Gadget. Welcome to Sweden."

Ah, of course. The people running the Conference had been expecting both he and Brenda. How nice that they sent someone to greet them personally! John moved to shake the woman's hand, and offered a cheerful greeting in reply, which the translator quickly changed to Swedish.

The woman smiled again. "Thank you, Inspector. But, you don't need to wear out your batteries on my account. I also speak English fairly well. My name is Jes Gustavsson, and I am here to help you all in your preparations for the Conference. May I come in?"

"Oh, certainly, Ms. Gustavsson...please!" said John, standing aside as he held the door for her.

"I am honored to meet you as well, Dr. Bradford...I have read a lot about you, and your work. I am sure you and your...exhibit...will be quite well-received" Jes said pleasantly as she shook Brenda's hand. "I am also pleased to meet you, Ms. Brown. My daughter Katarina is quite a fan of your web site."

Penny was thrilled. "She's seen my web site about my uncle? Really? That's so cool!"

Jes smiled again, and moved to shut the hall door. "Yes, Kati visits it quite often...but that is not the reason for my visit at this time" she said, lowering her voice, and losing her beaming smile. "I actually came to make contact with you on behalf of Interpol, at Mr. Morgan's request."

John was surprised. "You're an Interpol agent?"

"Yes, Inspector. We don't all wear trenchcoats. I just wanted to inform you of some of our plans for security at the Conference, and see that your plans fit in well with ours. I know you were briefed before you left, but if something has changed, now would be a good time to let us know."

"Um...no, nothing has changed. I know I'm supposed to be 'bait' during the Conference, at least during its open hours. Well, me and all the other high-tech gizmos they're showing off here. At night though, I'm supposed to help patrol the convention center itself, to watch for any signs of the robots. And if I spot one...well,

I'm supposed to do anything I can to capture it. Right?" answered John, hoping he had remembered everything. There were a lot of people involved in this assignment, and he was used to working alone, or at most with Gadgetmobile as backup.

"Basically, Inspector. There will be a whole crew comprised of Interpol agents, the Stockholm police, and the C.I.A. involved, and most of them will not make contact with you. If the one behind these crimes is watching, we cannot afford to make you look as if you are involved with the local law enforcement groups. The idea is to capture, not scare away, the things responsible for this. Though all the items on display here will be highly valuable, and open to attack, you are the only one capable of fighting back. We will need that advantage." She turned to Brenda. "And you, Dr. Bradford, will be invaluable in helping to identify the components of any robot we manage to capture. If you can identify the programming used on it, we may be able to track its source."

"I'll do what I can, Ms. Gustavsson" Brenda assured her. "Believe me, I want these things captured as much as you do. They're going to give robots a bad name!"

"Very good. I shall let you get ready for the Conference, then. I will be your contact with the others working undercover, but when in public, please regard me as just another Conference staff member. Enjoy your day." With that said, she nodded to them all, and left the room.

After she had left, Penny and Brenda were both a lot more sober in demeanor than before. They had just been forcibly reminded of the real reason they were all there: to put John in danger.

John, however, was quite pleased. "Wowsers! Did you hear that? I'm officially a part of an international sting operation! I'll finally get to use all the spy-tech you built into me, Brenda! I can hardly wait for the Conference to start!"

Brenda and Penny looked at each other. Each sighed. It was going to take both of them to keep the excitable, inexperienced, and decidedly klutzy detective safe.



Chapter Five

On Thursday, both Brenda and John were busy helping the hired tech boys who were putting up the Bradford Robotics displays, so Penny was on her own. She decided to use the time to tour the backstage areas of the massive convention center, with the convenient excuse of taking Brain for a walk.

Penny had found over time that most people didn't pay any attention to kids. Especially kids that look innocent and non-threatening. Penny did her best to look wholesome and friendly, and having Brain along only solidified the image. Therefore, she had a wonderful time investigating all the loading docks, service entrances, and stockrooms in the center, with an eye towards ways some unscrupulous person might get in unauthorized. Since she was having absolutely no trouble getting around, she figured someone with less noble reasons for snooping would have no problems either.

Since they were attending a tech conference, the convention staff had made available all sorts of downloadable freebies to their guests and exhibitors. Having already downloaded the floor plans to the public areas of the convention center into her notebook computer, she swiftly added notes on the 'hidden' areas as well. She noted which ones were easy to access, and which ones actually had posted guards. The guards were shockingly easy to get around, unfortunately. All she had to do was let Brain off his leash, and motion him to run to any of the exits she wanted to investigate. Nine times out of ten, the guards took her 'Please sir...my dog got loose' story at face value, and let her through.

Another thing she noted was that there was an awful lot of 'junk' stored back in the less public areas. There were literally tons of old display equipment, boxes, power lifters, and other paraphernalia associated with a place used for as many different venues as this one was, and there was no way to secure all of it against intruders. Penny shook her head in disgust, making her long hair swirl about her shoulders. This place was a security disaster. Was it being kept this way deliberately by Interpol and the Swedish police, as an enticement for the cyber thieves, or was it just laziness? Either way, Penny intended to keep an eye out for any suspicious activity in the back areas...and to notify both Dr. B and her uncle as soon as possible. The international police agents did not seem to care about her uncle's well-being on this case, except so far as he was helping them, but she certainly did. No stupid robots were going to kidnap him while she was around to stop it!

"We'll keep Uncle John safe, won't we, Brain?" the girl asked of her little beagle, who was still snuffling around some of the boxes in the area. Brain looked up and seemed to 'woof' an affirmative.

The first full day of the Conference was Friday, and when the doors to the center opened at 10 A.M, the crowds of scientists, students, and general geeks and nerds swarmed in to see the latest and greatest in advanced technologies. Since setup on Thursday, the Bradford Robotics display booth had been busy with onlookers, but those had been fellow convention attendees. This time, it was the general public who came to gawk...and Brenda's crew gave them plenty to gawk at.

It seemed strange to John that most of the people who came to the booth had no idea who he was. He was a minor celebrity in his own city, and even though he did not expect anyone to recognize him as a person, he at least thought they would know about him as the world's most advanced cyborg. Still, despite all the blueprints, the robotic parts on display, and his own presence...most of Brenda's carefully planned presentations fell on disbelieving ears and eyes.

He finally got up the nerve to ask Brenda about it, after the umpteenth attendee had sniffed disdainfully at their display.

"I don't understand this, Brenda. Why is everyone acting like the Gadget Program is some sort of joke? It's like everyone thinks this is fake or something...." The cyborg detective ended his query on a rather plaintive note, as though he took this as a personal rejection.

The scientist sighed. She felt pretty rejected by it too...but didn't want to bring John down any further than he was now. "I'm not sure John. I think it maybe has to do with me trying to finish my father's work. He was very well respected in the robotics field...but I was always thought of as just his daughter and assistant. I'm afraid women are still not fully accepted in the hard sciences...despite our degrees and successes."

John frowned. "That's just stupid. You and your dad were full partners in the Gadget Program...and it was *you* who came up with the NSA chip to make it all work!"

Brenda was cheered by John's indignant defense of her abilities, but had to disagree with him. "My father won a Nobel Prize...and to the scientific community, that made *him* the project's main man...and the one

solely responsible for its success.” The redhead shrugged. “I don’t even care about the credit, really...it’s the ignorance of the people in not believing the Gadget Program *works!* This is what my father died for...and I won’t let his work be ignored!”

“So...what are we gonna do about it?” asked the cyber cop, brown eyes wide at Brenda’s sudden vehemence.

The scientist crossed her arms defiantly over her ample bosom. “When we have our big presentation tomorrow night, we’re gonna pull out all the stops. Not only is the Gadget Program going to become very real to everyone, but we’re gonna prove just how valuable you, and my father’s work, really are.”

The rest of the day was spent in frustrating tedium, and when John had a chance to escape the booth for a while, he took it. He wandered around the other exhibit areas, noting their fantastic and flashy displays, their seemingly impossible claims for their prototypes, and the attitude of the conference goes towards the other exhibitors. It was not just Brenda’s display that was getting the cold shoulder, reception-wise...most of the more advanced or ‘out-there’ experimental projects were met with skepticism by the throngs of scientists and others. John heard the word ‘crack-pot’ tossed about here and there, and though a lot of the attendees were speaking other languages, the general gist of their tones suggested that their opinions were not far off that mark.

Still, the cyber detective felt it was his duty to scout out the best, most advanced targets for theft, keeping in mind his real reason for being at the conference. Penny had warned him and Brenda about the unsecured areas in the center, and he felt that when he went on duty later that night, he should check some of them out.

Just then, a quiet argument began in one of the service corridors behind the main auditorium. John’s better-than-human hearing caught the sound of voices rising in anger...and since it was his job to watch for anything suspicious, he turned on his Swedish translator to find out what was going on. Adopting his Gadget persona, John went into full tracking mode...

“The back halls are fully open and unsecured, which leaves them ready for the planned attacks...but I say we shouldn’t wait for tonight!” said one angry male voice. “He has to know we’ll be coming for him! Why wait?”

“Because that’s the plan...we wait until the last minute before contact...nothing should get in the way then” spoke up the other male voice, less angry than the first, but still adamant. “Besides, the other cyber-stuff may come first. A lot of it looks very valuable.”

Gadget stiffened. These could be agents of the cyber thief! Maybe they were scouting out the place like he was, looking for the best items to steal! Quickly he looked for a way into the service area that would allow him to approach the two suspects without being seen. A set of swinging doors a bit down the hall became apparent after a moment of looking, and the cyber cop slipped inside the darkened area. He could still hear the two intruders, though just barely.

“What? Where did he go? He was just outside, looking at displays!” Gadget heard the first man say

They were looking for *him!* These had to be part of the gang that was attacking those high tech companies!

“Go-go Gadget camouflage!” Gadget whispered, starting the system-wide program that changed his coat, hat, shoes, and artificial skin to match the surrounding conditions. Almost instantly, those parts of him changed from their normal pigmentation, to a dark, shadowy color...everything but his head, his pants, and his dress shirt and tie. Most of his clothing was normal garden-variety cotton, and not the special fabric of the Gadget suit. His head, however, was mostly his own living flesh (on the outside at least) and not subject to any of the Gadget commands. He flipped up the lapels of his trenchcoat, and pulled his hat further down on his face to hide his fair skin before he started to sneak closer to the suspicious pair of still-arguing men.

Getting a closer look at the two, he noted that both of them were wearing coveralls of the type that was common to the workers at the center. It seemed like a good disguise to Gadget, as it would make it much easier to get around. They even had security badges! Forgeries no doubt. And weren’t the thieves supposed to be robots...? Of course, the thieves may use robots during the nighttime raids, and humans during the day...that would make sense! Getting as close as he dared, since his disguise did not mask the sounds of his footsteps (he had forgotten to activate the stealth-mode silencers for his shoes...) the detective listened again to find out the crooks’ plans.

“We’d better tell Number One about this, Jonas...she’s going to have our heads for losing the guy” said the original speaker, obviously upset.

Gadget allowed himself a smirk. It wasn’t that easy to catch Inspector Gadget! The nerve of these

guys, coming after him in broad daylight!

The man named Jonas spoke up again, with a bit more anger in his voice than before. "Well, we wouldn't have to sneak around like this if it wasn't for that nosey girl and her dog. I can't believe she found us out!"

"Yes, but Number One took care of her...she won't bother us again."

Gadget almost gasped aloud. Could they be talking about...*Penny*? Now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen his niece all day. He had assumed she was off enjoying the conference, science whiz that she was. But...what if...? No! They *couldn't* have...!

"I just hope she can keep that beagle quiet. I swear it could see right through my disguise!" said Jonas again, amazed.

His worst fears confirmed, the cyborg detective stood stunned for a single moment, before leaping into action. They'd taken Penny! *They'd taken Penny!* Rushing forward, he extended his arms to grab the two men by the cloth of their coveralls and lifted them into the air.

"*What have you done with Penny??*" they heard an angry voice shout, first in English, then in a tinny Swedish version, as they looked down at their attacker to see nothing but a seemingly disembodied head, pale amid all the darkness of the service hall.

Both men screamed in surprise, as the arms that lifted them suddenly flung them down into a pile of cardboard boxes and bubble wrap. The impact was enough to stun them both.

"Go-go Gadget duct-tape!" said the cop, as he moved to tie up his foes. A line of thin gray tape unraveled from his sleeve, and he quickly secured the two groggy men.

Grabbing one of the men by the collar of his coverall again, Gadget hauled him upright.

"I'll repeat the question....." Gadget growled, his threatening tone mocked somewhat by the tinny voice of his translator. "What have you done with my niece, Penny?"

The stunned man looked at the glittering anger in the cyborg's eyes, and could only stutter out a surprised reply.

"W-what are you talking about...?!"

"My niece...the 'nosey girl' that your Number One 'took care of'. *Where is she?*" said Gadget, realizing he may have to find Agent Gustavsson and get her crew of agents to question these guys. He really had not been trained for interrogation techniques.

"The girl...? She's with Number One...! But..."

Whatever the man had been about to say was cut short as a sweetly familiar voice fell upon Gadget's ears.

"Uncle John! *What are you doing!?*"

Gadget whirled around to see his niece standing in the entrance to the service hall, Brain in her arms...and Agent Gustavsson at her side.

"P-Penny..? But...how did you get away from Number One? Did Agent Gustavsson rescue you?" Dismissing that matter as unimportant, Gadget dropped the man he was holding and rushed forward to pull Penny into a relieved hug. "It doesn't matter now, anyways...as long as you're safe!"

"But Uncle John..."

Whatever she had been about to say was cut off as the blonde Interpol agent moved towards the tied up men.

"Agent Blomquist...report!" she barked in English to the man Gadget knew only as 'Jonas'.

"I'm sorry, Number One...I don't know exactly *what* happened!" he said also in English. "We were following Inspector Gadget, as you ordered...but while we were...um...discussing the arrangements...he disappeared! The next thing I knew...we were being attacked by this...this crazy *freak!*" He shot a deadly look at Gadget.

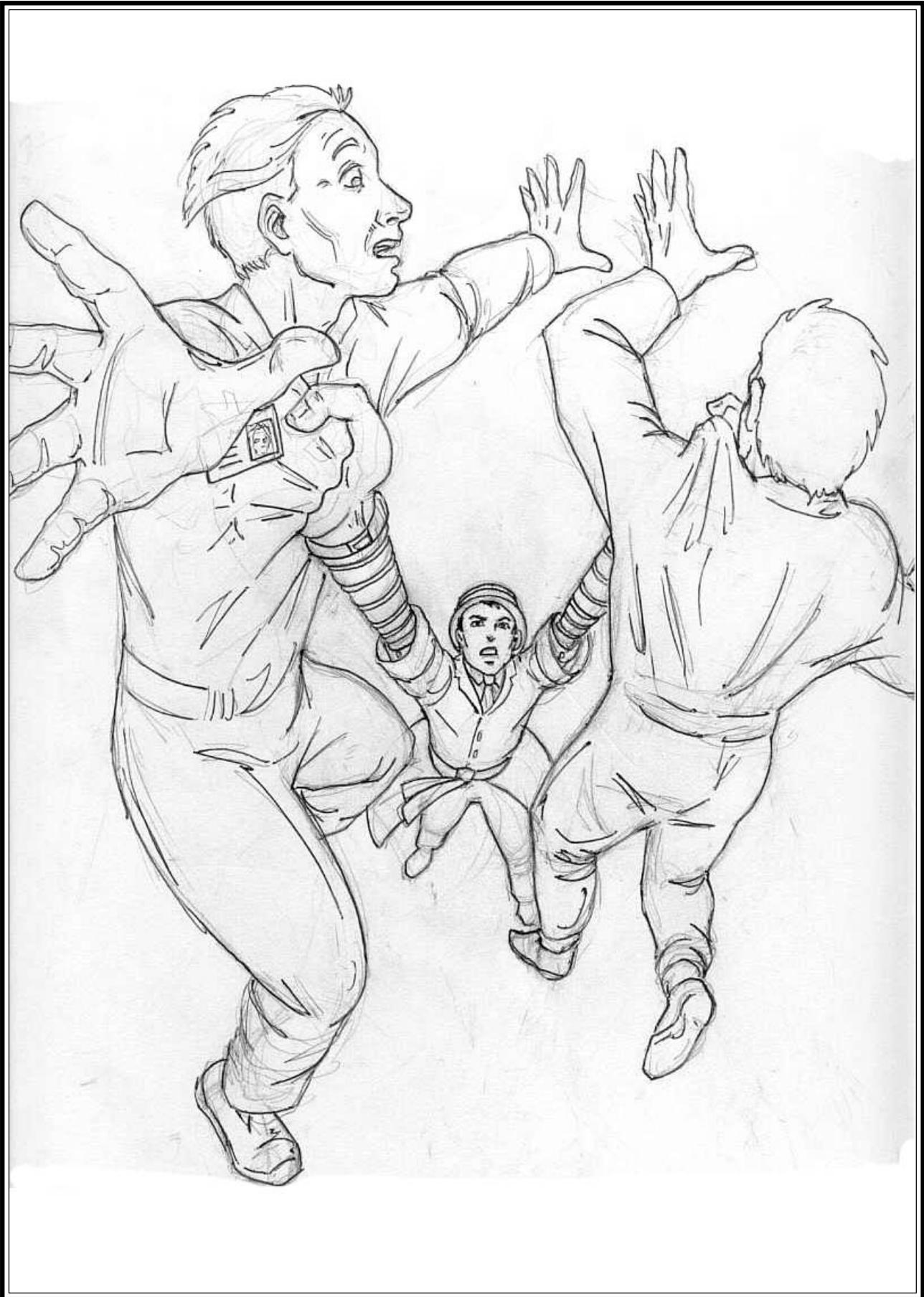
Gadget was stunned. The supposed criminals were agents of Interpol? And Agent Gustavsson was...*Number One??* He realized he had just made a huge mistake...and might now pay dearly for it. His own inexperience and overactive imagination had made a touchy situation even worse. His heart sank as he imagined how he may have ruined whatever plans the agents had set up.

Penny looked into her uncle's face, and saw the hurt and confusion that played over his youthful features. She reached for his still-camouflaged hand, and gave it a small squeeze.

"I think you did great, Uncle John...you caught two very suspicious characters, who were sneaking around spying on you!" she said as she smiled up at him.

John smiled weakly back.

"I agree, Penny...Inspector Gadget is to be commended for his skill in apprehending two spies...and for completely incapacitating them so quickly!" said Jes, as she also smiled at the cyber cop.



"But Number One, we're on *his* side...and he *attacked* us! This misbegotten *science project* could have killed us!" snarled Jonas. The other agent remained silent, sensing what was coming next, and hoping to avoid more of the fallout.

Brain, silent up until now, growled at the agent, sensing his animosity towards the dog's pack member. He looked up at his pack leader, Penny, and sought confirmation on the rightness of his feelings. Penny was frowning. Brain decided that at the first opportunity, he would bite the angry man. No one was allowed to hurt his pack.

Agent Gustavsson frowned at Blomquist as she moved to stand in front of the still tied agent.

"You have been an Interpol agent for how long? Fifteen years, Blomquist? And in that time, you have traveled all over the world, fought in many campaigns, and captured many criminals of all kinds. You are to be commended for this. However, this man..." and here she turned to indicate Gadget, "who has been a police officer for less than a year, who has had no training in espionage, who is new to this area and its layout, nevertheless managed to elude your surveillance, sneak up on you, capture you both single-handedly, subdue you without harming you, and was even beginning to interrogate you before we stopped him. For a newcomer to the field, I find that extremely impressive. Agent Mattison...do you agree?" She looked at the other, silent agent.

"Completely, ma'am. He took us out with no problem...we never even saw him coming." Mattison obviously knew which way the wind was blowing, and was taking cover as best he could.

"Good. Agent Blomquist...I would like you to guard the parameter of the Center...you will no longer be required to assist Inspector Gadget or myself on this case. Turning away from the disgruntled agent, she looked at Gadget and smiled again. "Inspector...if you would be so kind...?" She motioned to the tape binding the two men, and made a 'scissors' motion.

Gadget stepped forward, beaming at her praise. It was true...he had beaten two trained agents...! Of course, it was still a terrible misunderstanding, and he would have to be much more careful in the future...but even so, he felt proud that Agent Gustavsson thought he had done well. Best of all, though, was the way Penny was smiling at him. If he was right in her eyes, nothing else really mattered.

The cyborg detective knelt down to cut the tape that bound the two agents.

"Go-go Gadget camouflage...Stop!" he said, causing the program to reverse, and return him to his normal coloration. Feeling a bit pucky, and a little offended by the 'freak' remark, he then held his hand right up to Blomquist's face, as he willed one of his finger tips to flip back, and cause a tiny high powered saw blade to buzz into action inches from the startled agent's nose. Smiling at the now worried man, he bent to make short work of the duct tape bonds. After freeing the two, he stood and took Penny's hand again.

"Sorry about the mix-up, boys. I hope this won't affect our plans for capturing the cyber-thief!" he said brightly, still buoyed by Jes's words.

Mattison looked at Gustavsson, then smiled wanly at the Inspector.

"No...no, I'm sure we won't have any further problems, Inspector Gadget. If you have any questions, please contact me through Building Security." He looked at Jes again, waiting for a dismissal. She nodded, and he quickly disappeared down the dark service hall.

Agent Blomquist was of a different mind though. He looked angrily at Jes, and made a dismissive gesture toward the cyber cop standing in front of him.

"I don't see why we need this robotic freak to help solve this case! He should be treated like the bait he was supposed to be, and not involved in the actual stake out. We don't need any fancy toys to solve this," he said, looking pointedly at Gadget, "just good honest police work!"

Before Gustavsson could answer, Gadget replied for her.

"A good officer uses all the tools he's been given, Agent Blomquist" he said confidently, "...and I was given a *lot* of tools!" Smiling an uncharacteristically impish grin, he held up both his hands, and watched Blomquist's face as dozens of gadgets began to pop in and out of his fingers.

Looking sick, Blomquist turned towards Jes again, a pleading look in his eyes.

She nodded her dismissal, and he ran into the dark. Gadget and Penny both hoped they would never see him again.

"Well, Inspector...I see we have gotten this investigation off to an interesting start...!" Jes laughed. "And you have already done me a favor in exposing a bigot on my team. Thank you."

"I think you'll find, Agent Gustavsson, that I'm a handy guy to have around!" he grinned, holding up his gadget-filled digits.

Brain was not the only one to howl at the awful pun.

Chapter Six

John told his tale of misadventure to Brenda over dinner that evening. Though she commiserated with him at his mistake in capturing the Interpol agents, she was pleased by his inventive and skillful use of the technology designed for him. Penny was quite proud of her uncle, and let him know it at every opportunity.

After dinner they took a long walk around the city surrounding the convention site. Penny chatted animatedly about the center's layout, and gave suggestions to her uncle on the best (or worst, security-wise) areas to patrol. Brenda, however, could not help but worry about that night's planned activities. Despite his skill at protecting himself that afternoon, the idea that John tended to jump into dangerous situations without thinking them through bothered her.

When he finally bid them goodnight at the door to their hotel room, John saw the worry in the woman's blue eyes. He gave Penny a peck on the cheek as she wished him good luck, then turned back to Brenda as his niece went inside and closed the door behind her.

"Don't worry, Brenda...I'll be okay" he said quietly, as he pulled her into a tender embrace. "I promise to be careful." He sealed his promise with a long and very warm kiss, then released her to open the door to her room. She stood in the doorway and watched him wave to her jauntily as he walked down the hallway toward his big assignment.

"Remember your promise, John. Be careful...and come back safely..." she whispered as he turned the corner, and left her sight. Then she closed the door.

Tonight was the first night of Gadget's real mission...to help guard the technology that filled the convention center...himself included. Tonight he would get to prowl the darkened center, using all his stealth tech, while the other assorted agents made way for whatever intruders cared to try to gain entry. Since the plan was to lure, then capture, the thieves, no special locks or alarms had been added to the outside entrances.

The convention center was huge, and looked even bigger when it was empty of people. Except for the usual night security, everyone had cleared out, and the silence was profound. The shadows were broken occasionally by the flash of lighted displays that were kept on by whatever company owned them, either for extra pizzazz, or out of sheer laziness in having to start the computer programs again in the morning. Either way, the colors and pulses of light that the displays blinked out gave an almost otherworldly feel to the deserted center.

Gadget had to admit that it felt a bit creepy sneaking around the huge place in the dark, alone. It was true that he usually worked alone anyways, since the other detectives on the force tended to keep to their already established partners, but even so he at least had Gadgetmobile's snarky but insightful comments for company. Looking at the black, watch-like communicator/computer terminal on his wrist, now silent, he sighed. He never thought he'd actually miss the car's computer-generated 'face' constantly peering out at him from the device, or the Lincoln's derisive tone whenever he addressed the rookie cop.

Gadget was never sure why Brenda had given the vintage car such a street-smart attitude. It certainly seemed at odds with the looks of the thing, though perhaps it *did* go well with the funky purple-and-blue plush interior. (Of course, the pop and candy dispensers on the dashboard were quite incongruous to a functioning police car, too, but since Gadget liked those, he never mentioned it.)

One thing seemed certain; Brenda had designed the AI unit to be more than just a mode of transportation. John suspected the car had been given a personality quite unlike that of his new owner in order to help the rookie cop as both a partner and a guardian. His cynical attitude served as a sharp contrast to Gadget's own admittedly more naïve approach to life, and had saved the day on more than one occasion.

Prowling the darkened center, alone, Gadget had to admit he wished he had brought the car with them, no matter how much attention he would have attracted. But, there was no help for it now. He would have to do this on his own, and hope he didn't make any more bonehead mistakes.

After a few hours of patrolling, the cyber detective began to feel a bit bored. Stakeouts had seemed a lot more exciting in the movies! In real life, they turned out to be mind-numbingly dull. Deciding to take a short break from all the 'action', Gadget took a seat on one of the convenient packing crates that crowded the area

behind the United Technologies booth. Reaching into one of his coat's many pockets, he took out a candy bar that he had been saving...for later...and began to unwrap it.

That's when he heard the distinctive, and familiar, sound of cybernetic gears whirring into action. Leaping to his feet, he whirled around to see where the sound was coming from. In this large place sounds echoed, and his better-than-normal hearing caused even far away noises to sound close. Behind him, the lights on the display for the United Technologies booth went out, plunging the immediate area into darkness. On a hunch, he glanced up to the ceiling, to the spot where he had been told the myriad security cameras were located, and noticed their ever-present red 'on' lights were dark.

He was about to use his hand phone to call Security to alert them of a potential problem when he caught a flash of movement within the U.T. booth itself. Moving closer, but staying behind the crates and curtains of the back booth area, he spied out to the main display, and saw what had to be the cyber-thieves Interpol had been searching for.

Their human-shaped bodies made even more strange sounds than his own did, as the cloth jumpsuits seemed to be covering bare metal and circuitry, unmuffled by artificial skin as was his own body. The dark gray jumpsuits, with full face and head masks, only barely gave the two the appearance of humanity. The two humanoid robots had what looked like visors over the area where eyes would have been. There were twin eerie green points of light behind those visors...unblinking and very bright, and whatever sense of fellowship an onlooker might have had at first glance would be quickly dispelled by the sight of that cold sickly light. Sure this time that these creatures were indeed the enemy, Gadget decided that he need not hold back either his strength or his built-in weapons.

"Go-go Gadget night vision" he breathed, knowing that the program would obey no matter how quietly he voiced the command. Instantly, thin glass lenses slid down from behind his eyelids to fully cover his dark brown eyes, and an electrified field ignited them to a glowing green. Had John possessed a mirror at this point, he would have been disturbed to see how like the intruders' eyes his own now looked; frightening, and quite inhuman. With his night vision turned on, everything in the center now glowed in stark relief, and details that he had missed became glaring. One such detail was the now-open service hole in the floor near the booth, with the manhole cover laying off to one side. Gadget did not remember anyone saying anything about there being access to the center from underground, but it would certainly explain how the androids had gotten in the place undetected by the outside team.

Watching the two creatures rummaging around the booth, he noted they were going for the computer systems that had been locked in the main display. As one ripped the metal lock-box door from its hinges, the other seemed to be turning about, spying out the area, or keeping watch. Seeing, and hearing, the metal door being ripped, Gadget decided that the kid gloves would be off...there was no way he was going to let either of them get near enough to him to cause the same sort of damage.

For a moment, Gadget debated whether or not to call for the rest of the security team. On the one hand, if he called, the robots would hear, and might be able to escape before the others could come. On the other hand, if he didn't, he really was breaking the rule about calling for backup in such circumstances. The Chief, and the other detectives on the Riverton force, had told him time and time again to never enter into a potentially dangerous situation without calling for backup. So, sighing silently, the cyber cop lit up the phone built into his left hand, and started to call the number that led directly to Agent Gustavsson's link.

Unfortunately for him, that was when the sentinel robot chanced to look his way. It spied the green glow of Gadget's night vision eyes, and the colorful lights of the cell phone buttons shining through the flesh of the detective's palm. Through some sort of electronic communion, both the spy android and the one loading up on the stolen tech turned towards the back of the booth where Gadget was. Dropping the computer hard drive it was carrying, the thief-'droid joined its brother robot in rushing towards Gadget, who stood for a moment in surprise, his hand phone held to his face as a voice on the other end began to speak.

No time for backup now; the trenchcoat-clad cop jumped back as both 'bots came at him, green eyes sparking against their glass visor lenses.

Not willing to let either of the 'bots near him, Gadget extended his arm to throw a powerful roundhouse punch at the midsection of one of the creatures, hoping the force of the blow would shove it backwards into the other. However, since the androids were obviously as heavy as he was, this did not work as well as it would have on a human, though the thing did lose its balance enough to topple sideways into a display.

The second robot came at him just as the first one fell, and this one managed to barrel into the cyber cop with all the force in its metal body. Gadget went flying into the main display, and glass shards flew as several large signs were destroyed. As the detective painfully tried to regain his footing, the voice of Agent Gustavsson called out from his hand phone, and it sounded like she was saying that backup was on its way. Just as Gadget was thanking his lucky stars, the two androids came at him again, but this time they both did

something odd with their gloved hands. From the tips of their fingers came some sort of cable, with strange metal fittings at the tips of each one; strange pointed fittings that looked eager to impale him.

Feeling a bit outnumbered, and suspicious of this odd threat, Gadget called out to his most deadly weapon...one of the few items built into his body that still needed a voice activation command. All of his high energy gadgets, the ones that used huge amounts of his reserve energy stores, had to be voice activated like the ones in his Gadget Suit, but this one was special. Brenda had not even installed it until a couple of months ago, until she was sure he had enough control over his body to not activate it by mistake, or by some emotional overreaction.

"Go-go Gadget laser!" he shouted, and a bolt of ruby light shot out from his left index finger to neatly slice off the tendrils of cable that snaked towards him. Both robots jerked back. Gadget then used his laser to cut into one of the 'bots, and it went into a frenzy of motion as its arm was severed just below the artificial elbow. The other robot sidestepped him as the detective came at it to try another shot, and delivered a punch that sent Gadget reeling.

As the inspector whirled back to slice his laser into the offending android, the damaged one grabbed him from behind, grasping his throat with its one good hand, and gouging the stump of its arm into Gadget's left hand, just below the black communicator watch on his wrist. The cyber cop cried out in pain as the sharp metal of the laser-cut stump tore through the thin skin of his hand, exposing the delicate machinery beneath. Immediately, his laser cut off, responding to fail-safes that kicked in as the circuitry was damaged.

Gritting his teeth to keep from gasping at the tearing pain in his hand, Gadget quickly wrenched free of the robot's choking grasp and hurled it away from him...or so he thought. For, even as the android was shoved away, it was still connected to him by more of the snaky tendrils that arched out from its damaged arm, and had imbedded themselves in his torn flesh.



Eyes wide in horrified revulsion at the grotesque violation of his body by the inhuman creature, Gadget instinctively tried to pull his arm back from the invading robot's touch...only to stop and stare in amazement as his arm went numb and lifeless.

Just then, doors slammed open, and the glaring beams of hand-held spotlights wildly swung around the main exhibition hall. The rest of the outside security force, along with the Interpol agents, came swarming into the building, causing both robots to react in what looked like surprise. The undamaged one made a dive for the open manhole, as shots began to ring out towards the struggling Gadget. The robot that had Gadget in its grasp made one final move against the cyber-cop, as it sent a jolt of electricity through their connection, stunning the cyborg before pulling back its connector cables. Just as Gadget began to collapse from the surging current burning through his systems, the robot leaned forward, and from its head issued a digitized voice, low and smooth, whispering a strangely familiar phrase that made the cyborg's eyes widen before they dimmed in pain and shock. The robot then made good its escape, following its brother down the manhole. As the surrounding agents hurried towards the wrecked display, the second robot made quick work of returning the cover of the access port, causing the men to strain to remove it to follow them.

Gadget, meanwhile, had fallen heavily to the floor, and as Agent Gustavsson hurried up, shouting orders to her people, he was still twitching spasmodically. The LED display band on his Miranda hat was flashing different colors, primarily red, and scrolling around the band were the words "Secondary Systems Failure—Reset".

The last thing Gadget saw before everything went black was Agent Gustavsson leaning over him, shouting for one of her men to get Dr. Bradford on the phone.

Oh good, Gadget thought as his consciousness began to fade. Brenda will help me...and then I can tell her about.....



Chapter Seven

Jes leaned over to get a closer look at the fallen man after the weird green glow in his eyes shut off, and saw his dazed look as the spasms began to die down. She also noted the damage to his hand, and the dangerous-looking sparking in some of the exposed wires that now hung out of his torn flesh.

"Nils...get Dr. Bradford on the phone...Gadget is going to need her help" said the blonde agent grimly. "And clear out this area. I want all the debris cleaned up and put in evidence bags. Whatever is here may give us clues to what these robots really are, and who is controlling them. We cannot afford to miss anything."

"What shall we do with Gadget, Number One?" asked Nils Andersson, already dialing the number to Bradford's room. "We can't just let him *lie* here, can we?" Several of the surrounding agents looked at each other worriedly, as the obvious question came to their minds. Who was going to touch the still-twitching body of the cyborg...and what would happen to them or him when they did? Several of them who had seen the alien look of Gadget's eyes as he was fighting the androids were not sure which looked stranger; the robots, or their American partner.

Gustavsson sighed. "We can't let him stay here, no...We need to check everything for evidence...including him. But, he may be in danger of further damage here, too. Get a stretcher, Petra," she ordered, turning to one of the female police officers. "We will have to carry him to a safer and more private place than this."

"Those things...those robots...they were a lot more powerful than we thought, if they could overcome Inspector Gadget as they did" commented Nils, as he bent to check Gadget's pulse in the only external place it was possible, the main artery in his neck. The beat seemed a bit erratic, but strong. He was one of the few agents present to actually have a degree in engineering, and he had studied up on Gadget and Bradford's work when he had gotten the assignment to work on the tech theft case. The dark-haired agent knew a bit about the capabilities of the cyborg, and hoped Dr. Bradford would allow him to help her with the injured man.

Jes merely nodded, as Officer Petra Eriksson hurried up with a rolling stretcher, and several men bent down to reluctantly attempt to lift the unmoving cyborg onto it. It took four of them, as his titanium-frame body was far heavier than it looked. They decided to move him to an office near the main hall, which would at least be more private, and probably had better lighting.

It turned out that the office was actually a mini-suite, with a small twin bed and a bathroom. The agents settled Gadget on the bed as best they could as they waited for Dr. Bradford to show up. Andersson examined the cyborg's damaged hand, unafraid of the exposed wiring. He marveled at the human look of it, with the varied skin tones, the fine pattern of hair on the back, the neatly manicured nails, and the texture of the skin itself, which was obviously artificial only because of the lack of blood in the wound. Underneath the tear was the most complex array of miniaturized machinery he had ever seen. Tiny rods and gears, levers and pistons, computer terminals and circuits, plastic, plexiglass, steel, gold wiring and copper plating...and everything fit together in an integrated mesh that moved and flexed as smoothly as any human hand of flesh and bone.

The agent began to feel a bit guilty, and quite ghoulish, examining Gadget's body as if it was nothing more than a fascinating example of engineering wizardry. The man was hurt, and he should really be trying to help him in some way. Unfortunately, except for looking in the cyborg's dazed and unresponsive eyes and taking his pulse, Nils had no idea of what he *could* do.

The dilemma was solved a few minutes later when Brenda showed up, looking harried and extremely unhappy. Following right behind her was Penny, who was just barely holding back tears, and Brain, who bounded into the room and up onto the bed Gadget now occupied. There, he proceeded to lick his friend's face thoroughly. Though messy, this had the welcome side effect of causing Gadget to grimace in disgust, which at least was a response.

Not bothering to introduce herself, or to get the names of anyone else in the room, Brenda immediately set about unpacking her emergency repair equipment. Penny meanwhile sat herself at her uncle's side, and leaned over him, trying to see some sort of recognition in his half-closed eyes.

"Uncle John, can you hear me? Dr. B's here to help you, so you're gonna be okay!" She patted his cheek reassuringly, and felt the slight rasp of his beard stubble against her palm. She smiled at the feel of it, remembering how pleased her uncle had been after his conversion to learn he still had to shave. He had always hated it before, because his beard was so dark against his fair skin, and grew so quickly. After his big change though, it was one of the few normal, human, *masculine* things he was still able to do, and he relished it.

A slight groan from John made her look into his eyes more closely, as he finally focused to look at his niece. He smiled slightly, and haltingly asked what had happened.

Before Penny could try to answer, Brenda whirled around and gasped.

"John! You're *conscious!* Oh thank *God!* Just hold on...I'll get your body back on line in a minute..." She quickly booted up her laptop, pulled out a long connector cable from the back, and reached over to the back of the cyborg's head. Feeling around at the back of his neck, she found the access port hidden just above his hairline. Moving aside the small flap of artificial skin that hid the titanium steel cover, she opened the port and plugged in the cable jack.

"Um, Dr. Bradford...shouldn't you repair the damage to his hand before you bring his power back up?" asked Nils in heavily-accented English, knowing that he had no real right to speak up, considering his knowledge of the patient was limited compared to hers, but still remembering his basic engineering training. "I mean...there may still be open circuits...and the bleeding energy may cause more damage."

Brenda looked at him over the top of her computer screen. He seemed genuinely concerned that John would be hurt. There was definite worry in his dark blue eyes, and Brenda decided that he could be trusted to help.

Smiling, she said "Don't worry, Agent....um..."

"Andersson...Nils Andersson" he supplied when she paused.

"Andersson...yes....well, don't worry. I've already shut down the power drivers to his left arm, so nothing will happen when the rest of him comes back on line."

"But...why bring him on line at all? Why not do it after the repair? That way, at least he'd be finished, and you wouldn't have to restart the ...um...program" Nils asked, still puzzled at the double work load she was proposing.

"Because he's *paralyzed!* He can't even feel his own body right now!" broke in Penny, feeling anxious and overly protective of her now-helpless uncle. "Would you like to lie here, unable to move, waiting for us to repair *you?*"

Nils was taken aback at the frustrated anger in the young girl's voice, but understood it. He looked at Gadget's now wide open eyes, and saw barely-controlled panic at being unable to move anything but his head...and that only slightly. Beads of sweat dotted his pale face.

Brain had begun to bark, dismayed at the vibes of anger and frustration his pack leader was sending out.

"Penny, why don't you send Brain out to help the detectives...I'm sure they could use a trained nose to sniff out evidence" suggested Brenda, sensing that the situation in the room would only get worse if the little dog kept mirroring his master's emotions.

Penny nodded. "Brain, go help find evidence! In the main hall, Brain! Go on!"

The brown and white beagle took off at his leader's orders, skittering down the hall on clicking nails and slipping pads.

Andersson looked at Penny apologetically. "I'm sorry...I really had no idea it would...bother your uncle, Miss Brown, to be like this. I meant no disrespect."

The girl pulled at her hastily-combed hair, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry too, Mr. Andersson...I shouldn't have snapped at you like that."

All this time, Brenda had been tapping in commands on her laptop. She finally cried out a triumphant "Yes!" as she pressed the final key to reset the cyborg's secondary systems.

Instantly, John's whole body began to tremble, as life and feeling flowed along reconnected circuits to and from his brain. He almost threw himself upright, getting out of his helpless prone position as quickly as possible. He took several deep, voluntary breaths as his panic began to give way to profound relief. John then looked worriedly at his left arm, which hung lifelessly at his side.

Brenda, however, was no longer worried. She reached over to disconnect the computer cable from John's head. Then, while she had her arms around his neck, she leaned in and gave him a very welcomed kiss. Her own fear and frustration melted away at the touch of his warm, mobile lips, and the feel of his one good arm around her waist as he held her tightly.

Penny grinned, happy that her uncle was obviously feeling better.

Nils, however, stood at the foot of the bed, his mouth hanging open. Nothing he had read in the F.B.I. reports or newspaper articles had given him any idea that Dr. Bradford and Inspector Gadget were romantically involved. This could actually cause problems for his team, if Bradford decided to be uncooperative after her boyfriend had been injured. And from personal experience, Andersson knew that if the man's girlfriend wanted him to get off the case and stay out of trouble, Gadget would have a hard time saying no to her. He hoped that both Bradford and Gadget were dedicated enough to stick it out, even after this mess.

Jes Gustavsson stepped into the office, carrying Brain.

"Penny, dear, would you please keep Brain with you for the rest of the night? Some of the other officers

are getting annoyed at the fact that your dog is better at finding evidence than they are.” She placed the squirming beagle in Penny’s arms and stepped back to make room for another agent, who carried a tray full of plastic evidence bags. Inside the largest was the laser-cut forearm of the robot that had put Gadget out of commission. “Ah, Inspector...” she said to Gadget, noticing his upright and conscious state “I’m glad to see you up and around. What can you tell us of the robots you fought?”

“Can’t this wait until later, Agent Gustavsson? I’ve got a lot of repair work to do here” interrupted Brenda, opening her tool bag to dig out the necessary supplies.

“No, Brenda...this can’t wait,” countered John. “This is important, and it’s why we came here. Go ahead and start the repairs. I can talk while you work. In fact, I’d rather have the distraction” he added ruefully. The thought of seeing her ‘operate’ on him was making him a bit squeamish, even if he couldn’t actually feel anything.

“Thank you, Inspector” said Jes. “Perhaps Agent Andersson can aid Dr. Bradford in her work...?” she added, looking at Nils. “He is quite good with all manner of machinery.”

“I’d be happy to be of assistance, Dr. Bradford” offered the dark-haired man.

“Sure....I could use the help” agreed Brenda, smiling at the friendly agent. “Between you, me, and Penny, we should have everything fixed in no time.

“Very good. Now, Inspector, about the robots...?”

Gadget proceeded to tell the Interpol agent everything he could remember about the fight with the robots. There were some curious gaps in his memory towards the end, which both Brenda and Nils attributed to the electric jolt he had received. When John told them all about the cables that had snaked out of the androids’ hands, Brenda paused in her work to take a look at the bagged items.

“These are computer connector cables...they’re used to hook up two or more systems, and can pass information back and forth” she pronounced, at a loss to understand what the robots were trying to do with them.

“Perhaps instead of trying to steal Inspector Gadget himself, they were trying to steal his programming...” suggested Nils.

Penny, who was getting out a laser welder from Brenda’s bag to give to Nils, looked up. “That would make a lot of sense...it would be a lot easier to steal the info from a computer hard drive than it would be to steal the computer itself! Maybe Uncle John just put up too much of a fight, so they tried to get what they could.”

Brenda conceded the point. “Well, I’ll have to check the read-only memory, to see if they tried to download anything...but all the files I installed are encrypted. Without the proper hardware, they can’t be deciphered. And the only hardware is installed in John’s head...where it is hopefully still safe and sound” she said, patting his dark brown hair fondly.

Just then, a couple of the other agents entered the room, to talk to Gustavsson. They all spoke in Swedish, so Brenda and Penny paid them no attention. Nils, however, looked disturbed.

“The robots have escaped, Inspector” Jes announced. “After going down into the service ducts to find their trail, the trackers found quite a maze down there. Unfortunately, there was no trace of the creatures, and though the surrounding area of the Center has guards posted, the agents on duty reported no sightings.”

John sighed. “So it was all for nothing...”

“Not at all, Inspector. We have a good deal more information than we had before. We also have physical evidence, which you and Dr. Bradford can investigate. Perhaps with your help we can have an idea of who is behind this.”

“Well, I’m almost finished here, Agent Gustavsson...so I can take a look at the pieces as soon as I check out John’s secondary systems” agreed the scientist, as she started to fuse the artificial flesh of John’s hand back together. Since she had not brought any spare MEMS, the joined areas would have no feeling, but she could easily fix that when they got back to her lab. To John, it would feel like nothing more than a numbness in those few thin lines.

MEMS (Micro Electro Mechanical Systems) formed the basis for all the senses that Gadget’s synthetic body possessed. The microscopic machines performed a wide range of functions, and combined they simulated the gamut of physical sensations possible with human flesh. Touch and temperature sensitive, they differentiated between the wide range of worldly sensations to send signals of hot and cold, wet and dry, hard and soft, pain and pleasure. The engineer who had installed the machines when Gadget’s skin was first applied had made sure that the tiny devices were spread throughout the body area, but concentrated more of them in the areas of the human body that would naturally be more sensitive. This especially applied to Gadget’s hands, which not only had the touch/temperature sensitive ones, but a wide range of other specialized MEMS. Among them were MEMS that were sophisticated enough to read chemicals from a tiny sample, and to give a complete

analysis. In Gadget, these formed the basis for a complete internal 'crime lab', which was an important part of the super-cop's arsenal. Brenda's team had hoped that their crime-fighter would use all the tools they had built into him to become a one-man police squad...beat cop, detective, lab tech, and records clerk all rolled into one. If the reality of the situation had not matched their dreams, at least they had given it all they had.

Brenda finally finished with John's hand. She proudly displayed her handiwork to the watching agents, and to John. He looked at the white scars that formed the lines of the tear, and realized that the skin tones would not be fixed until they returned home. There, Brenda's artist friend Roger would once more apply his painterly skills on John's behalf.

"Okay, John...I have to check out your internal system now...to make sure there was no physical damage caused by the electrical discharge" the redhead said cautiously, knowing what his reaction to her upcoming words would be, "So, I've got to open you up..."

As expected, John was not happy with this pronouncement.

"Do you *have* to, Bren?" he asked, discomfort evident in his tone and on his face.

"Yes, John. I have to. Now don't worry...you know it doesn't hurt..." she answered soothingly as she helped him off with his trenchcoat.

"I know...but does everyone have to *watch*?" he queried plaintively.

Penny spoke up, realizing how uncomfortable the thought of being exposed—literally—to the gazes of the surrounding agents was making her uncle.

"Could you guys leave us alone for a while? This is kinda 'doctor-patient' stuff...you know...personal. Jes nodded.

"I think we have all the information we're going to get for a while, team. Let's go and see what we can do about repairing the damaged display. The company that owns it is going to be angry enough at the destruction...and we will have to have some cover story to give them."

With that the agents left the small room, giving Brenda, Penny, and John the privacy requested.

Nils paused in the doorway.

"Are you sure you don't need any help, Doctor...?"

Brenda looked at John, who sighed and nodded.

"Sure, Mr. Andersson...you can stay. Another pair of trained eyes is always helpful" she answered.

The scientist then turned back to John, and helped him undo his necktie and unbutton his crisp white dress shirt.

Nils watched curiously as she spread back the fabric of the cyborg's shirt, and saw nothing more beneath than a very unremarkable male torso. He saw no access panel on that ordinary looking chest and abdomen, with its smooth skin and firm muscle. He started looking in her tool bag for a scalpel or some other cutting tool...perhaps a laser?

As he was wondering how she was going to avoid hurting Gadget while still cutting through that vulnerable-looking flesh, she solved the mystery for him by poking her finger right through the hollow of his collarbone.

Nils gasped as her slim finger then began to unzip Gadget's flesh straight down the center, making a sound for all the world like one of those re-closable storage bags coming undone. The smooth muscles of his torso lost their shape, as the electrostatic charge maintaining their firmness dissipated.

John, hearing the agent's gasp of surprise, looked up.

"If you think that's strange, wait until you see what's next" he said quietly. "I don't think I'll ever get used to it..."

Nils understood why after Bradford's next move.

Unzipping the skin of Gadget's chest right down to his waist, she began to pull back the two sections of skin in smooth rolls to either side, revealing the most unbelievable array of machinery ever assembled. If the agent had thought the workings of the cyborg's hand were amazing, he found the conglomeration of technology that formed the whole life support system totally incomprehensible.

He had been expecting something smooth and gleaming, robotic in a Star Trek kind of way. Silvery plates and winkly-blinky lights, all forming a sleek, human shape. That, however, was not what he found.

"Herregud!" he gasped. Inside Gadget's chest and abdomen were some of the oddest pieces of ..things...ever tied together with spit and bailing wire. Amid an uncountable number of wires and cables were what looked like an old reel-to-reel tape player, an oil pressure gauge, a light bulb, brightly colored daisy wheels that spun merrily, and many other items too odd to identify immediately.

Nils couldn't imagine how it was all even working. And yet, he could see the steady rise and fall of Gadget's chest as he breathed, so he obviously still had lungs in there...somewhere. The rest of his internal organs must be hidden somewhere behind that maze of machinery, too, though there was no visual evidence of them. There was an assortment of plastic tubes throughout the system, filled with unidentifiable liquids, and



they all seemed to be flowing smoothly enough. In the section of his chest that would normally house a heart was a brass-colored cylinder that was labeled "Narvik 7", and underneath this was a large slot conspicuous by its emptiness. Nils guessed that was where the NSA chip had originally been installed. Without the padding and sound-muffling effect of the skin, Andersson could now hear all the beeps, whistles, clicks and hums the machinery was making. He wondered if Gadget could hear it all the time, and if it bothered him.

Brenda, meanwhile, was inspecting some of the connector cables and readout devices under some of the more movable parts of the mess, trying to work as quickly as possible. She asked Nils to get some tools out of her roll pack, and he bent to retrieve them, happy to have something useful to do. His staring was getting a bit rude, and he didn't want to offend.

Penny was sitting behind her uncle, patting his good arm in reassurance and comfort. She knew this examination bothered him, and she wanted to let him know she was there for him. He turned his head to smile at her, grateful for her complete acceptance of his very altered state.

John Brown was not a man given to introspection. He saw the world through rose-colored glasses, and most of the more complex situations in life seemed to slide right by him. He seldom, if ever, deliberated on the meaning of his own life. Still, the situation he found himself in after his near-fatal experience affected him deeply. When he had first awakened in the hospital after the series of operations that had changed his life forever, he had no idea what had happened to him. Suddenly seeing strange gadgets and gizmos popping out of his hands and feet had scared him more than anything in his life. Even having Brenda's assurance that everything was going to be all right had only calmed him for a while. He hadn't understood at first how complete his transformation was. A few new attachments? Well, it was weird, but acceptable. After all, other people had prosthetics...his were just more complex.

It was when Brenda and her fellow scientists had first shown him the full depth of his transformation that he had become truly upset.

His whole body was gone! Oh, he still looked the same...Everyone had taken great care to pore over his family albums to find the best photos of him, digitize them, and build computer-scanned molds of his body. Color, shape, size and texture...almost everything was the same...but it wasn't real. The surgeons that saved his life had managed to save all his organs except his heart, and had implanted them in the world's most complete life-support equipment, forming the basis of his primary systems. His head was also still human, but the internal structure was now titanium instead of bone, and a miniature but fantastically-complex computer/neural net was forever melded to every section of his brain.

For a long time after that revelation, he had wondered if he was even still human. He had no bones, his blood was synthetic, his brain was hooked up to a computer...and he didn't have a heart. Oh, Brenda had assured him that the Narvik 7 that took its place was far more efficient...but it still wasn't real. It wasn't *human*.

Finally, it was Penny's total acceptance of him that made him realize that no matter what he was made of, he was still John Brown. His heart may be missing, but his soul was still intact. Penny was so overjoyed at seeing her uncle alive and well that even after seeing how much he had changed, she was unfazed. She never treated him as being in any way strange or freakish, and in fact seemed proud of his new abilities. No one was happier than she when John was accepted into the Riverton police force. Her total faith in him had given him the strength he needed to get over his own fears and doubts.

Getting Brenda to see him as more than just a science experiment was really just a bonus after that.

Brenda finally finished her internal exam, and after checking the readout on her computer screen, pronounced John to be in proper working condition. He breathed a sigh of relief as she pulled his skin back together, painlessly sealing the seam in the middle into an invisible line. Instantly, the electrostatic charge kicked in, and John's torso took on its familiar shape, covering up the jutting wires and tubes, daisy wheels, and other oddments.

She connected her computer cable to the back of John's head again, and started the program that would reboot his left arm's systems. As soon as the final command was typed in, his arm began to move, and the cyber-cop smiled gratefully.

"Good work, Doctor" said Nils appreciatively. "That was neatly done."

"Brenda always does good work...I don't know what I'd do without her" said John as he buttoned up his shirt.

Brenda blushed happily. "If you play your cards right, you'll never have to find out," she laughed.

Penny laughed too, and Brain jumped up to lick John's face again, despite his protests.

Penny suggested they should all call it a night...again. "I think Uncle John needs to get some sleep, Dr. B. He's been up for way too long...and after that big robot fight, I bet he could use a break."

Nils was packing up Brenda's equipment, as the redhead took another look at the bagged evidence the agents had left in the room.

"You're right, Penny. This can wait till morning..." she said, glancing at her watch. "Or rather...*later* in the morning" she added with a grimace. "Let's get out of here."

Nils escorted them to their rooms, then bid them a good night. Penny paused in the doorway of her uncle's room while Brenda made sure John was indeed going to try to get some sleep. He had a tendency to stay up far longer than he should, since he never really felt tired physically. His brain still needed rest though, and he started making far too many mistakes when he wasn't getting it.

Figuring that helping him get undressed was more than John would stand for, Brenda settled for folding back the covers of his bed.

"I want you to go right to bed, John. No reading, no room service...just sleep, okay? We have a big day tomorrow."

John turned from hanging up his coat on the heavy steel hanger he had brought for it (the coat, with all its built-in gadgets, weighed almost sixty pounds) and smiled.

"I will...I promise" he said.

"Yeah...I've heard that one before" she answered, smiling back. "You promised to be careful, remember? And then I had to come and put you back together again."

"Well...that's true. But..." and here he held up his hand, beginning to count on his fingers, "I caught the robots in the act" (he raised one finger) "I stopped the robots from stealing the tech they were after," (two fingers) "I escaped capture," (three fingers) "I got physical evidence by damaging one of the 'bots," (four fingers) "And..." he paused, leaning over to kiss Brenda, "...I managed to get the most beautiful scientist in the world to come and make all my boo-boos better." He held up all five fingers, making his point, then used them to wave goodbye to Brenda and Penny, who both giggled as they went to their room.

Later, when John was finally drifting off to sleep, a stray thought flashed through his memory, too fast to catch consciously, but enough to make his dreams uneasy. It was the sound of a digitized voice, low and smooth, issuing a warning that was as familiar as it was frightening.

*"Arrivederci, Gadget...this is **not** goodbye. I'll get you next time, Gadget! I'll get you..."*



Chapter Eight

The next day was an incredibly busy one. Since Brenda wanted to examine the evidence left behind by the robot fight of the previous night, she left it to her employees to man the Bradford Robotics booth.

Penny split her time between helping out at the booth and helping Brenda in the lab that had been hastily prepared for the scientist's use. Agent Andersson volunteered to help them with the search for cybernetic clues.

John found himself effectively out of the loop, being pretty much useless in ferreting out information in a lab setting, and having little to do at the display booth. He did manage to impress many of the convention attendees by using his extendable legs to reach and reattach an overhead display that was coming loose from its moorings. A quick application of his all-purpose duct tape solved the problem, winning applause and some gasps of amazement from the spectators, as well as some grumbles of anger from the union workers who did not appreciate him stepping on their turf.

The cyber-cop felt that everything was going according to their original plan. He had stopped the theft of valuable computer equipment, and Brenda was sure to find out some clues to the thief's real identity. She and Penny had worked out an impressive audio-visual presentation for his display at the big dinner later that evening, one that was sure to wow the attending scientists and journalists. And best of all, even after that nasty case of shock from his battle with the robots, John felt perfectly fine, ready to tackle any new problem that came up.

Except for the hiccups. They were really starting to annoy him.

In the lab that had been arranged for her use, Brenda worked with several other police detectives and Interpol agents that were skilled in computer technology to decode the programs that controlled the captured robotic arm.

After a few hours, and a lot of printouts, it became apparent that the codes that were incorporated in the chips that powered the circuitry were startlingly familiar.

"These codes came from my research," Brenda announced grimly. "There's no other firm that uses the algorithms the same way, I'm sure of it."

Andersson looked at her skeptically. "How can you be sure? Do you know the codes for every other company's products?"

The redhead shrugged. "Not all of them, no...but I know my own fingerprints, cryptographically speaking, and I know this is my work. Someone stole my research, and I already know of one person who may be partially responsible."

From the deadly look in her eyes, Nils knew who she meant. "Sanford Scolex, the man who killed your father? He's in jail, Dr. Bradford. He is also not in charge of his own company anymore, since he was found guilty of murder and terrorism. After your firm sued, and caused a huge financial loss to the company, his stockholders took over, and turned over or destroyed all his stolen research. I hardly think he is running a secret ring of robot thieves from his jail cell in America." Nils smiled. "But it was a good thought."

Brenda frowned. "Don't underestimate Scolex, Agent Andersson...he's very tricky. I wouldn't put it past him to have figured out some way of doing it. He wouldn't be the first criminal to run an empire from a jail cell! Maybe we should have the prison officials check on him, just in case."

"I'll have my superiors look into it, if you're worried about it. Meanwhile...do you have any idea on how the robots are knocking out the camera systems before they attack?"

The scientist looked again at her notes, and at the graphics printed on her laptop computer. Changing the view a bit, she turned it to show the dark-haired agent.

"I believe it's this series of code that's doing it. It seems to be some sort of computer virus, one that's controlled from remote relays...perhaps a transmitter inside the robots that planted it. In fact, the robots themselves seem to be running this code as their main control system..." She paused, not sure of her next words. "I think they use this virus as their communication system with whoever is controlling them. I don't think that they have independent thought."

Nils perked up, excited by the prospect. "If that's so, if we could jam the transmissions somehow, we could stop the robots. That would be wonderful—if you can figure out what frequency they're transmitting on."

"That might work...though the range is so broad that trying to jam it would probably cause more harm than good to surrounding technology. If I can devise an anti-virus, I could stop the code from infecting other

machinery as well, which would stop the robots from shutting down existing systems, such as the computer-controlled cameras and security devices.”

“That sounds reasonable...you know more about it than I do. Perhaps you should work on the anti-virus, while the others work on figuring out the frequency of the transmissions,” agreed the agent.

Brenda smiled, pleased that her views were not being discounted by the more security-oriented members of the research team. “I’ll get started on writing up a new code right now...If the virus can control these robots from a distance, it could potentially infect and control other sensitive equipment. Imagine the owner of these robots infecting a country’s defense grid, or a bank’s security computers or vaults. With a simple remote, he could control all sorts of dangerous machinery.” Brenda nodded to herself, already starting to work on the problem. Jamming the user’s control was fine, but it was only a stop-gap measure. The real solution to the problem lay with destroying the control virus...without deprogramming the infected programs and systems. There would be no use in curing the disease while killing the victim, after all.

Penny had been checking out the damage to the United Technologies booth, watching as the workers there tried to salvage what they could from the mess. They had not been told all about what had gone down the night before. She heard from agent Andersson that the owners had been told that vandals had broken in, and had escaped before security forces could capture them. Luckily, no permanent damage had been done to the most important equipment, so the company did not plan to sue.

The girl finally made her way back to the Bradford booth, intending to see if Uncle John wanted to go to lunch with her and Brain.

When she spotted him, he was in the midst of a crowd of people, displaying some of his more interesting gadgets. She rushed forward as she saw him bring out the Gadgetcopter from its compressed state in his brown fedora, to the amazement of the onlookers.

“Uncle John! *Don’t start it up!*” she cried, thinking already of the damage the powerful ‘copter could cause in the enclosed area.

John, and the crowd, turned to look at her as she finally reached his side.

“I wasn’t going to start it, Penny,” he said, a bit hurt. “I know better than that.” He concentrated as he said the key words that caused the mini-‘copter to retract, and smiled at the crowd, directing them to the technicians in the booth for any further questions.

“I’m sorry, Uncle John...I didn’t mean to embarrass you” Penny said sheepishly. “I just get worried when I see you use your more, um, dangerous gadgets. I know how excited you are about some of them...especially the ‘copter.”

The cyborg smiled. It was true...The ‘copter was his favorite gadget, and only its incredible energy drain on his systems prevented him from using it as often as he would have liked.

“Oh, it’s okay, Penny. I know you’re just looking out for me. How’s Brenda coming on the **hiccup**” John grimaced as another abdominal spasm interrupted his speech. He was really tired of the problem.

Brain looked at John, cocking his head oddly.

“Sorry...I’ve had these hiccups since I woke up this morning. No matter what I do, they won’t stop,” John said, a bit puzzled. “None of my old tricks for getting rid of them seem to be working.”

Penny smiled. Her uncle always seemed to get the hiccups before some big event, though she could not remember the last time he had gotten them this bad. He must be nervous about the big presentation coming up that evening.

“Don’t worry, Uncle John...I’m sure they’ll go away before the show tonight,” she said reassuringly.

“Probably...but I wish **hiccup**” Another vocal spasm burst forth from the annoyed detective.

Brain looked at John again, and this time growled and barked.

Both John and Penny looked at Brain, puzzled at his behavior.

“What’s the matter, Brain? Are you hungry?” John asked, suddenly realizing the time. “Maybe we’d better go have lunch. With luck, that may get rid of these hiccups.”

Penny nodded her head enthusiastically, causing her light brown braids to swing against her shoulders. “Yep...you’re right. Let’s go before Brain decides to drag us both away!”

They started off towards the food court, Brain trailing behind. He continued to look at the inspector oddly...cocking his head as though listening, and growling deep in his throat.

Something bad was touching his packmate, but he didn’t know what. He couldn’t see it or smell it...but it was there. Danger.

Brenda and the international team of detectives, agents, and computer experts worked right up to the evening on both the anti-viral program and the communications blocker. The team working primarily on the frequency blocker had enjoyed some success, but only in a confined area, limited to less than fifty feet in diameter. Blocking a bigger area required a prohibitive amount of power, and risked damaging any equipment set within the protected area.

Brenda had managed to come up with a code that the scientist believed would begin the job of deleting the communications virus, but it was still not powerful enough. The virus was tricky, and kept mutating its code just enough to avoid deletion whenever the code isolated it. It seemed to work fine when eliminating the virus from simple systems, such as the security cameras, but failed when installed in more complex systems, such as the robot arm. Some element was missing, though she did not know what it was.

Figuring that she could get no more work done before the presentation, she copied all her information onto a CD, and dropped it in her purse. After downloading the programs, she double-checked her encryption on the laptop, and closed it down.

Getting up to leave, she motioned Agent Andersson over. "I've got to get dressed for the awards dinner, Mr. Andersson...will your team keep on working on the frequency blockers?"

"Of course. We've got one prototype ready, and are finishing up another. With two, we could at least set up a containment field of some sort, should we need to."

"Well, I don't think the robots, or their controller, will put on a show for us tonight, so you've got some time to work, at least."

Nils laughed. "The mastermind behind this whole scheme would have to have nerves of steel...and a lot of gall...to try to steal the top-rated prototypes as they're being displayed on stage...with the press and every security guard in the building watching!"

Penny had already gotten ready for the banquet. She was wearing a deep red short-sleeved velvet dress with a gathered knee-length skirt over crinoline, and was just finishing up her French-braided hair when Brenda got back to their room.

"How'd it go with the program, Dr. B? Did you get the new code working?"

The scientist shrugged as she slipped out of her work clothes, intending to take a quick shower before getting into her evening clothes. "I have some of it working, but it's not strong enough...it tracks down the code in simple systems, but the virus mutates too fast in more complex computers." Brenda sighed, frustrated. "If the code isn't destroyed throughout the infected system, the virus will just reassert itself, and take control again. The virus seems to be beatable, but the treated computers aren't strong enough to use the new codes to defeat the full infection. It mutates too fast."

Penny thought for a moment while Brenda slipped into the bathroom to turn on the shower. "You mean...the infected computer is sorta making antibodies with the new code...but they aren't strong enough to knock out the full virus?"

"Right," Brenda called from the bathroom, her voice muffled from the pounding spray of the showerhead and the glass doors of the enclosure.

"So...what you and this new code needs is a faster computer...one that can take the code you have, and build it into a 'magic bullet' kinda thing, like the Salk vaccine!"

"I suppose...though I don't have access to anything here that can...." The shower stopped, and Brenda stepped out of the bathroom, towel-clad and dripping.

"John's CPU is powerful enough....." she said thoughtfully, looking at the door between their rooms.

"*What?!* Uncle John?? Don't even *think* of testing this thing on him!" Penny cried indignantly, her blue eyes flashing.

Brenda turned back to the girl, startled by her tone. "Oh, of course not, Penny! I would never infect John with the virus, not even for something this important! I was just thinking of where I could find a machine with as much computing power as his CPU. Maybe Interpol could commandeer one of the prototypes here at the conference."

"Well, I sure like that idea better," Penny said, mollified by the scientist's heart-felt rejection of such an outrageous plan.

"By the way...where is John?" Brenda asked as she slipped into her blue satin cocktail dress; scoop-necked, long-sleeved, and form-fitting.

"He went down to the banquet hall to talk to some of the security guys. I think he wants to make sure nothing goes wrong with the presentations tonight."

Brenda laughed as she gathered her coppery curls into a mass at the back of her neck, and secured it with a jeweled clip. "That figures. Well, I'm sure we'll all be relieved when this night is over, and we can get back to solving the real problem: defeating the virus and the one who controls it."

Inspector Gadget was very pleased. Firstly, his hiccups had disappeared. That was a great relief, since he had been having dreadful and embarrassing visions of hiccupping all over the stage during Brenda's very serious presentation. Secondly, the security personnel swarming all over the banquet hall and theatre were uniformly nice to him, and had even let him in on their preparations for the event. No trouble was expected after Gadget's rousting of the robots last night, but it seemed prudent to take no chances.

"Inspector Gadget! How pleasant to see you!" said Jes Gustavsson as she walked up to the detective in the backstage area of the hall.

John turned and greeted the agent, using her conference title rather than her Interpol one as he noted her convention uniform. She must be under cover again, he thought.

"Are you ready for the big show, Inspector?" she asked neutrally, mindful of the civilians running around setting up displays and testing equipment.

John smiled conspiratorially. "Yep. Brenda has the whole thing set up, and Penny's going to help. *I'm sure nothing can go wrong tonight,*" he said, adding a wink to get his point across.

"I see. That's very good to know, of course. By the way...why are you recording this? Making a film for your niece's web site?"

John looked puzzled. "Recording?"

"Yes, with the camera in your hatband...the red light is on, so I assumed you were recording." She pointed to the front of John's Gadget hat.

Taking off his hat, John was surprised to note that the Gadget camcorder was indeed on, its recording and transmitting functions operating fully. Since it was still in contact with his body, it was still working. "Go-Go Gadget camcorder stop" he said, ordering the program to shut off. It did of course, and the hatband returned to its normal unbroken blackness, all signs of the camera completely hidden.

"That wasn't supposed to be on," John said, confused. "It must be some sort of glitch in the system..." he added, a bit worried.

"Well, whatever it was, I'm sure your Dr. Bradford can fix it later." Jes looked at her watch. "You'd better get to the dining room now, Inspector. I'm sure she and your niece have arrived by now. Besides, I wouldn't want you to miss the convention center's famous Swedish *gummi kyckling!*" The blonde agent laughed at Gadget's puzzled expression, but as he did not bother to turn on his translator, she let the remark lie.

"Thank you, Ms. Gustavsson...hope you enjoy the show!" John said as he headed towards the dining area of the huge hall.

"Oh don't worry, Inspector...my crew and I will be watching it very carefully."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Bradford Robotics is very pleased to present to you a breakthrough in the field of cybernetic bio-enhancements. A breakthrough that will challenge the boundaries of modern reconstructive surgery, prosthetic engineering, and bio-mechanical transplants. We bring before you tonight a man literally re-built from the ground up, a man designed to be the wave of the future not only in cybernetic medicine, but in the fast-growing field of crime-fighting technology. Everything you will see here tonight is so far beyond what any other company has accomplished that it may seem like pure fantasy, the creation of movie makers or special effects artists...but after our demonstration, you will believe."

Standing onstage at the polished wooden podium crowded with microphones from various news agencies, Dr. Brenda Bradford's amplified voice rang out in proud, but professional tones.

Waiting in the wings, John watched as the scientist began her presentation. Poised even in the spotlight, her sapphire blue gown and coppery curls glowing in the light, she looked to him like a living jewel. The cyber-cop sighed happily. He knew she was pleased with the way he had turned out, and that she was proud of the way he had adapted to his new abilities, his new body...but did she know how proud he was of *her*? Though it was Brenda's father who had begun the Gadget Program, and designed the major components of most of the cybernetics, it was she who moved the program forward, who brought it into reality. She was the one who had

insisted the conversion process be tested on him...and it was her hand-picked team that had created the incredible combination of experimental cybernetics and programming that made his impossible body work. Still, without her invention of the complex NSA chip, all the programming and mechanics in the world would not have made his body connect to his living brain...it would never have really felt like *him*, even if it had been able to function.

When he had been just a security guard working for the Bradford's company, John had had a secret crush on the beautiful lady scientist. After the terrible explosion, and his conversion into Inspector Gadget, immense gratitude and respect had been added to the emotional mix. Constant contact with the object of his affection, and the chance to get to know her on a personal level, had finally deepened those emotions into true love.

He fervently hoped she felt the same way about him. Oh, she had told him she loved him, but there was 'you're a lot of fun' kind of love, and then there was 'I want to be with you forever' kind of love, and he wasn't sure how to tell the difference...

John snapped out of his reverie as he noticed Brenda gesturing to Penny to start the audio-visual presentation...a combination of graphics and sound displayed on the Jumbo-Tron screens located to either side of the stage. Mindful of the fact that everyone in the audience had just eaten dinner, Brenda and Penny had both decided that showing pictures of John's ruined body prior to conversion would not be a good idea, so they started with the schematics of the cybernetic limbs, and the mechanical enhancements that were grafted onto his living organs, forming his primary systems. It was almost impossible to believe so much machinery could fit inside a human torso, but the evidence was right there, in all its twenty-foot-high Jumbo-Tronic glory.

Showing John's comatose, robotic body before the synthetic skin had been applied was as far towards grossness as Brenda had been willing to venture, and the reaction of the crowd indicated their amazement.

It was a tape of the insertion of the NSA chip, the component that would make the cybernetic body work, that really had the audience sitting up and taking notice. It was the most crucial point of the whole experiment...if it did not make the connection between the subject's human brain functions and the computer that ran his new body, the whole experiment would be a failure...and the patient would die.

The audience of scientists and reporters waited in suspense as the chip was inserted, and the outside life support was shut off. For three seconds, there was no movement, and then the heart monitor began to show a familiar rhythm, the mechanical chest rose in its first independent breath, and the test subject went from being a collection of metal and tissue parts being artificially sustained to a living, breathing, independent human again.

The next part of the presentation showed the application of the skin, and the efforts to make the synthetic body match exactly the contour, color, and texture of the original one. Pictures from John's family album, supplied by Penny, compared the new and the old, and Brenda made sure to show the artists who had been involved in this stage of the experiment. The comparison was amazing, so far beyond what had been done with artificial limbs before that it seemed like science fiction.

Finally, the video presentation turned towards the most amazing part of the Gadget Program: the gadgets. Brenda explained the philosophy behind her father's idea of a cybernetic cop, a crime-fighting cyborg that could do anything, go anywhere, and would not rest until the crime was solved, and the criminal brought to justice. Aware that the idea was starting to sound a bit like those RoboCop movies, Brenda listened to Penny's advice that she stress the non-violent aspect of the cyber-cop's arsenal. Sleuthing was more important than brute force in the police officer of the future, and Bradford Robotics had installed every high-tech tool imaginable in their cyber-cop. Chemical analyzers, fingerprint files, an encyclopedia's worth of knowledge, and many more esoteric pieces of electronic equipment were stuffed into the hard drive of the cyborg's CPU giving the new-born policeman the tools he would need to track down any criminal. His extendable limbs, helicopter hat, Kevlar-lined coat, and digital recording/transmitting camera all enabled him to catch the crooks...and his laser, sleep-darts, and ever-useful duct tape enabled him to hold onto the villains once he caught up to them. With this kind of super-cop after them, the criminals of the world simply didn't stand a chance.

Brenda smiled at the polite and appreciative applause that followed the visual presentation. Penny joined her at the podium, as they both made ready to introduce Bradford Robotics' most amazing creation. The scientist urged Penny forward, and nodded. That was the girl's cue to introduce her uncle to the waiting world.

Standing as tall and proud as she could, the pre-teen girl smiled at the waiting roomful of scientists, investors and reporters, and gave her introduction. "Direct from the city of Riverton, Ohio, a city investing in the future, Bradford Robotics and the Riverton Police Department are both proud to introduce you to the world's first cyber-cop, the wave of the future in crime fighting technology, my uncle, police detective John Brown...*Inspector Gadget!*"

With that, the spotlight zipped over to stage left, where John stepped out from the wings, trying to look as impressive as possible. There was polite applause from the audience, and John smiled and bowed slightly. It was a good thing he had spent some time in front of audiences in the past, from his high school choir days to his more recent stints in the local community theatre. Otherwise, he might have been overwhelmed by the sheer size of the room, and the glare of so many cameras and eyes being trained on him, all alone in the spotlight.

“Good evening, everyone, and thank you for the warm welcome. I know that most of you here tonight are in the scientific community, and are used to seeing strange new inventions, really weird ideas, and all sorts of gizmos that seem impossible. I’m not a scientist, though. Frankly, I barely passed most of my high-school science courses. So, of course, I probably wouldn’t have believed *anything* that Dr. Bradford just showed you tonight. A man with a robotic body? Not likely. A cop with a built-in crime lab? Uh huh. Sure. But, even an ordinary Joe has to believe the evidence of his own eyes...when it’s shoved right in his face, live and in person. And that’s what I’m here for now.” With that, John smiled again, and extended his head from the shoulders up on its metal and silicone neck. He kept on smiling while the audience gasped. He knew what most of them were thinking; Human heads shouldn’t pop off like that!

“As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, I’m very real, and so are my abilities,” he continued as the murmuring died down, his youthful features and bright smile looking incongruous on that inhumanly extended neck. The cyber-cop pulled his head back to its proper position, and began to show the enrapt audience his myriad gadgets and gizmos, extending his metal legs to walk around the banquet hall as the cameras of the Jumbo-Tron and the spotlight followed him.

Brenda smiled as John began to win over the crowd with his natural charm and boyish good looks. He was doing very well with the script that Penny had helped him write, and his improvisations were getting a few laughs from the normally stodgy crowd.

Penny leaned over and whispered to Brenda away from the mic. “Boy, am I glad Uncle John’s hiccups went away before his big speech! He would have been so embarrassed.”

“Hiccups?” asked Brenda, confused. “What hiccups?”

“Oh, it was nothing, really. He always used to get them before some big event. Nerves, I guess.”

The scientist looked at Penny, stunned into silence.

“Dr. B...what’s wrong...?” the girl asked, seeing Brenda’s eyes grow wide as the redhead considered the implications of Penny’s innocent statement.

“Penny...has John had a case of hiccups even *once* since his conversion...?” Brenda asked, knowing the answer before the girl supplied it.

“Um...well, not that I can remember...but why is that important...?” Penny asked, a shiver of fear beginning to run up her spine at the expression on the scientist’s face.

“He can’t *get* the hiccups anymore, Penny. It’s not possible. A hiccup is the result of an electronic spasm, a kind of mini-short circuit in the brain that causes the diaphragm muscle in the abdomen to contract out of sync with its normal rhythm. It makes the lungs expel air in a noisy outburst...*and it can’t happen to John*. He’s not *built* that way. All impulses that control his primary systems, including his lungs, pass through his CPU. Any ‘glitches’ would have been smoothed out...and so, no hiccups.”

“But, if that’s so...then why did he have them? ‘Cuz I know that’s what I heard,” asked Penny, really scared now, though she didn’t know what Brenda was leading up to. But one thing was certain; If Dr. B was scared, it was bad.

“Penny, when did his hiccups start?” Brenda asked, dreading the answer.

“He said they started this morning, when he woke up.”

Brenda closed her eyes, trying to hold in her panic. There was only one thing that could affect John’s powerful CPU enough to make it accept faulty data, to stop it from detecting and deleting glitches in its own life support system: the virus.

Those damned robots had infected John with the control virus.

“Penny, we’ve got to get John out of here, now!”

“What’s wrong? Is he sick?” she asked, looking out at her uncle, happily showing off one of his sillier gadgets, a Pez dispenser in the shape of a duck.

Brenda’s pained look spoke volumes. “I-I think he’s been *infected*.”

As Penny stared wide-eyed at her, Brenda grabbed the mic. “Inspector Gadget! Let’s wrap this up. I think the show’s over for now.”

John stopped, puzzled. He was supposed to go on for a few more minutes, and then turn the stage back to her, for the closing speech. Was there a problem?

As he turned, the Gadget camcorder in his hatband opened up, the red recording/transmitting light glowing. It focused its bright red eye on Brenda.

Suddenly, John's internal speakers crackled to life. Quietly, so that only he could hear, came a voice that he would never forget; a smooth cultured voice that sneered at everyone and everything beneath it....and in its owner's opinion, everyone and everything was beneath it. It was the voice of Sanford Scolex, the madman who now called himself 'Claw'.

"The show's over, darling Brenda? Why, I think it's just *beginning!*"

That's when everything started to go very wrong.



Chapter Nine

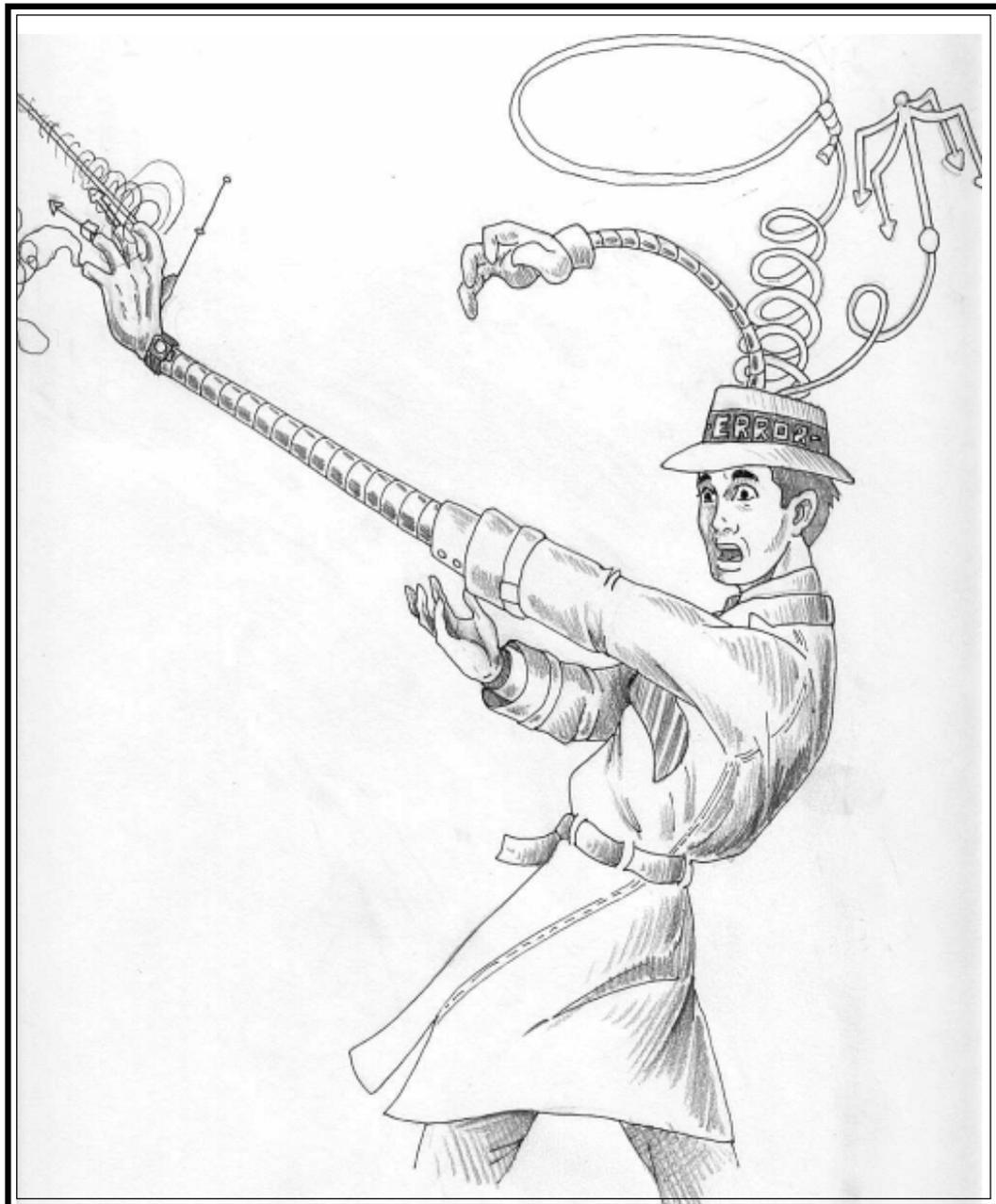
John Brown's eyes widened in horror as his memory of the night before flooded back. He remembered the phrase whispered to him by the robot thief before it shocked him into unconsciousness. He also remembered who had originally said it.

Claw. Sanford Scolex, as he sat behind bars in Gadgetmobile's back seat, had growled that same phrase, his voice still sneering, still haughty with contempt. It was a warning, a threat of retribution, one that no one took seriously.

"I'll get you next time, Gadget...I'll get you!"

It was a threat that he hadn't taken seriously, until now.

John looked at his left arm in surprise, as it suddenly extended outwards. He could feel it, as he always could...but he could not control it. His body started to move jerkily, as his unseen foe slowly gained control over John's hapless form. His legs extended and retracted, gadgets started to pop out of his hands, and even the normally voice-controlled gadgets in his clothes began to sputter to life, and just as quickly shut off again. The LED display on his hatband flashed out a warning: Error!



Gadget's unseen puppeteer pulled his remote-controlled strings, and John's left arm swung up to point at the ceiling. His index finger opened, and the deadly laser lanced out, without its voice-control, to slice through the tiles, wires, and supports of the high roof. Plaster started to rain down on the confused crowd, as many of the people started to jump out of their seats. When the glaring red laser blasted through one of the Jumbo Tron screens, people started screaming, and the rest of the crowd, suddenly realizing that this was not part of the demonstration, began to panic. Turning suddenly, John saw his hand aim at the door to the back-stage area...where Agent Gustavsson and her crew had been stationed. Slashing through the beams and plaster of the support structure surrounding the entrance, the laser effectively blocked the door, and kept the Interpol crew from quickly deploying.

At the podium still, Brenda grabbed the mic and tried to restore a bit of order. She pleaded with the crowd to leave the auditorium quickly, in an orderly fashion. She might just as well have been whistling into the wind, for all the good it did.

People upended chairs and pushed over other attendees in their rush to escape the rampaging cyborg in the center of the room. Security guards tried to guide the flow, but the panicking crowd was impossible to control.

More gadgets popped out of John's unruly hands, and sleep darts shot out, catching a couple of escaping patrons, who fell to the floor in seconds. A gush of toothpaste, blue and gooey, flooded out of the detective's coat sleeve, sliming a group of guards who had rushed into the room, guns drawn. They fell in a tangled heap, the force of the blast knocking them over, and the slippery toothpaste making the floor suddenly too messy to gain a foothold.

Aghast, John tried to turn towards Brenda...looking for answers, for help. He found to his dismay that he could only turn his head slightly...every part of him that was not organic was now completely under Scolex's control. He began to panic, as the horror of his situation began to finally sink in.

He was a prisoner in his own body, and Scolex was his jailor.

Worse, Scolex was using him to hurt people, using him as he had used RoboGadget, causing panic and destruction where ever he went. John had defeated his robotic twin, but how could he defeat himself...?

At the podium, Brenda grabbed her laptop from Penny, frantically calling up the anti-virus program. If she could somehow introduce it into Gadget's CPU, it should cancel out the control virus, and restore John to normal...if it worked.

In a moment of exquisitely bad timing, Penny called out to her uncle just as Brenda was getting to the right program files.

"Uncle John! Please, try to fight it! You can't let a stupid virus control you! You're stronger than that! You're stronger than the machine!"

John felt his body turn towards the podium, and he heard the camera in his hat switch to its close-up lens. It was focusing on Brenda and Penny...and specifically, on what Brenda was doing with her laptop computer.

"Penny! Look out! Get out of here! I can't control myself...I'm trying, but I can't!" John cried out in fear, dreading what Scolex had in mind. He was right to be afraid. He felt his left arm lift up, his hand aiming straight at the podium. Straight at Brenda.

He screamed as the laser went off, jerking back in his terror, causing the red beam to slice through the wooden podium, and sending Brenda and Penny diving for the floor. Desperately trying to fight Claw's control over him, John struggled to force his cranial CPU to listen to his commands. Normally, he never had to think about it...it naturally responded to his every desire, every emotion. Now, however, it wasn't obeying him. It was like being paralyzed, but he could still feel everything that was happening. He could feel his lungs pumping frantically and his heart racing in panic, so his primary systems were still accepting data from his brain, but all voluntary movement was being overridden. The cyber-cop knew that his primary systems ran through his CPU as well, and if Claw wanted to shut him down...he could. His life was literally in Scolex's hand.

Stepping closer to the wrecked podium, John could see Brenda lying on the stage, dazed and bleeding from cuts caused by the shrapnel of the slivered podium. Penny was beside her, trying to help her up. The girl turned to look at him, tears sparkling in her blue eyes.

"Uncle John...you've got to *fight* it...! Don't let it win!"

"Penny, get Brenda out of here....I can't—"

A smooth voice interrupted Gadget's frantic order, a voice that issued again inside the cyborg's ear speakers. "Oh, Gadget, look! It's your nosey little niece, Penny. How charming. Perhaps I should pay her back for her part in causing my downfall, for turning my henchman against me." Scolex's evil laugh rang in Gadget's ears.

John saw his hand reach out and grab Penny by the arm, dragging her across the stage to him. He felt

his other arm reach out to grab the girl by the throat. She stopped struggling to look up at him, unswerving faith in her eyes.

"You can do it, Uncle John...I know you can...! *Fight it!*"

Tears slid down John's cheeks, as terror for his niece overwhelmed him. He could feel his hand, his wonderful, sensitive, human-looking hand, start to squeeze. The millions of MEMS implanted throughout his skin faithfully recorded the feel of the girl's soft, warm skin, and the rapid beat of blood through her carotid artery. The MEMS sent their information instantaneously to John's CPU, and from there to his brain, enabling the horrified cyborg to feel every moment of his niece's death by his own hand.

Frantic, John did the only thing he could do. He begged. "Claw...*please*...don't make me do this! I'll do anything you want, if you'll just let her go!"

He heard Scolex's mocking laughter ringing in his ears again. "Oh, what a cliché, my dear Gadget! Why, I *already* have you doing anything I want! My bonus here is that I get the delightful pleasure of knowing that you'll be reliving this moment, and suffering for it, for the rest of your life...and I plan to keep you around for a *long* time!"

The cyborg's hand continued to squeeze, and he could only stand there helplessly as he looked into his niece's now-terrified eyes. He prayed for a miracle. Even as he prayed, he focused all his will on his hand, on getting it to loosen, to obey his fervent desire to protect Penny. To John's surprise, his prayers were answered. As he focused his desire on that one action, his hand stopped squeezing, the fingers starting to loosen their death-grip on the girl's throat. He was beating the computer controls...!

Scolex's voice growled in his ear. "Oh no you don't, my little puppet! You will *not* overcome my virus, or my control...*no* machine can resist it, not even *you!*"

"*I'm not a machine!*" screamed John, as his human mind and soul fought a battle with the computer to which they were forever joined.

That was when Penny reached out with one hand to jab her fingers into Gadget's eyes. His reaction to the pain was instinctive, overriding all imposed controls, as he released the girl to protect his sensitive eyes. Penny fell to the ground, gasping, as John reeled away, temporarily free of Scolex's control.

The reprieve was short-lived, however, and John felt his body again moving under Scolex's commands. Fighting it, he stumbled around the hall, his legs growing and shrinking, arms extending and retracting. His laser clicked on long enough to shred a large portion of the ceiling, causing more plaster and metal to rain down upon the ruined banquet. People who were trapped in the hall by the debris screamed for help and scrambled away from the horrible man-machine, who looked more and more like a monster from a bad science fiction movie. Some of them were hurt by chunks of the debris, and their cries of pain and fear added to the panic of the rest. The trapped security guards finally managed to get to their feet, but dove for cover as Gadget was forced to wheel around and shoot at them with more of the toothpaste, the laser, and anything that Scolex could get to work.

Still on stage, frantically tapping away at her laptop computer, Brenda wiped a stream of blood and sweat from her eyes as she sought out the one program that could end this horrible scene.

Penny ran to the scientist's side, desperate to help her uncle, but terrified of getting in his way. She had heard him begging for her life...and that plea had been directed at Claw...Sanford Scolex's self-proclaimed criminal name. It was Scolex who was trying to get her uncle under his control, and he was sure to try to use her to get to Gadget again, if he could.

"Oh my gosh, Dr. B...it's Scolex! He's the one who's hurting Uncle John! Can't you do something...?"

Brenda nodded. "I think so, but we've got to get him to... stop...." She seemed unsurprised by the revelation of their attacker's identity, and never looked up from her typing. "God, I just hope he can forgive me for this...." she whispered.

Before Penny could question that odd statement, she heard a gunshot ring out. She looked out into the hall, at her uncle, and the security guards. Two of them had managed to get out their guns, and had started to fire on the rampaging cyborg. Slugs slammed into his Kevlar-lined coat, jerking him around, but leaving him undamaged. John's various gadgets starting popping out at random, as the detective's concentration began to slip. His hat sprouted the mini-copter as all sorts of items began popping out of his hands, his coat, and his shoes. The noise of the 'copter did not drown out the cries of the wounded, or the frantic shouts of the beleaguered cops as they aimed their guns again.

John felt his laser-bearing hand raise up to aim at the ceiling again, the laser cutting through most of the remaining ductwork, exposing the night sky beyond. His 'copter revved up.

"Oh no..!" he whispered.



On the stage, Penny also realized Claw's new plan...to kidnap Gadget! He was going to get her uncle to fly out of here under his own power! "Dr. B...hurry! He's gonna get away! You've got to do something...anything!"

"He's...not going to go anywhere, Penny," replied Brenda, tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm going to stop him."

That's when Penny looked at the computer's crystal-display screen, and realized what it showed in all its clarity. In bright graphics, pulsing with a frantic rhythm, was a display of Gadget's heart monitor, and above it a legend that showed all of the cyborg's primary and secondary systems' activity levels.

Just below this display was a small box containing a single question.

'Complete Shut Down?'

The pointer was poised on this box, waiting for the final keystroke that would transmit the shutdown signal.

A 'kill switch'.

"No....Dr. B...*you can't...!*" breathed Penny, as Brenda's trembling finger pressed the 'enter' key.

Across the room, Gadget's systems all...stopped. The 'copter, devoid of power, slowly spun to a halt as the unmoving cyborg quietly crumpled to the rubble-strewn ground.

The guards watched in amazement as the cyber-cop fell before them. Neither of them had hurt the wildly lurching man, and they couldn't see what had caused his downfall.

The room was suddenly quieter, filled now with only the moans of the hurt conventioners and the sounds of rapidly approaching sirens.

"Uncle John! *Noooooo!*" Penny screamed as she jumped off the stage to rush over to her fallen guardian. The guards were approaching more warily, guns drawn. They tried to stop her as she ran to the cyborg's side, but she neatly sidestepped them and fell to her knees beside her uncle's unmoving body.

He was laying against a tipped-over dining table, glasses and dishes broken around him. A floral centerpiece was scattered about, some of the flowers resting on his outspread trenchcoat. His limbs were in various states of extension, gadgets and gizmos stuck out of several of his lax fingers and his 'copter was still spread out, though now quite still. He wasn't breathing, but his eyes were open. John smiled faintly as Penny lifted his head to look in his deep brown eyes, just in time to see their sparkle of life dim, and finally go out.

In a darkened garage on the Bradford Robotics compound, a state-of-the-art car motor revved to life as all the warning lights on its dashboard glared bright red. A simple message flashed on its cardio-tracking screen: Signal Deactivated.

"Oh shit" said Gadgetmobile, as he sent a signal to the garage door opener. "I *knew* they'd need me..."

Penny turned towards the stage, in time to see Brenda scrambling down to the banquet floor. "He's dead! You...you *killed* him! Oh, Brenda...how could you *do* that?" Her voice was choked and hoarse with her tears. "Turn him back on...please! *Bring him back!*"

The scientist was already pulling out the connector cable of her laptop as she fell to her knees beside the crying girl. "I swear to God, Penny, I'm going to bring him back. I didn't want to do it...but I had no choice! It was the only way to stop him long enough to install the anti-virus!" Her voice was as ragged as Penny's, but she couldn't afford to let her grief cripple her. John's life depended on her staying calm.

"But...he was fighting the virus! He could have overcome it! *You didn't have to kill him!*" Penny cried, unconvinced.

The redhead never looked up, continuing to tap on her keyboard while she talked, calling up the reboot program that she never thought she would need. "Penny, he was fighting it, but he wasn't winning...he *couldn't!* You don't understand because you don't know his systems as well as I do."

"And you don't know John Brown as well as I do...but you *should.*" The girl sobbed quietly, before adding "I thought you loved him..."

Brenda looked up then, tears glittering in her eyes. "I do. That's why I had to stop him."

"Both of you...get away from that...that *thing*" said a heavily-accented male voice. One of the put-upon guards had finally gotten up the nerve to approach the fallen cyber-cop, and stood behind Brenda, gun raised.

The scientist kept on tapping on her keyboard, setting up the final prep sequence. "I have less than five minutes to restart him before permanent brain damage sets in, Mr. Guard...and I'm not stopping for you or anybody." she said calmly. "So you might as well either shoot me or let me finish."

Penny jumped up and ran to the guard, tugging on his sleeve. "Oh please, Mister...don't shoot!" she cried in her sweetest voice, which cracked only a little. "Please don't hurt us!" Her tears added to the intended effect, and the guard relaxed his stance, lowering his gun.

"Don't cry, Miss. As long as she doesn't try to start up that creature, no one is going to be hurt here."

"Don't count on that, buddy!" Penny tried to bark out, her quavering voice giving the lie to her surety as she grabbed the man's arm and slammed it across her upraised knee, causing the guard to lose his grip on the gun as he cried out in pain and surprise. The girl scrambled for the gun, holding it in the proper two-hand position, and pointed it at the startled guard before he could recover. "Now, back off...we've got work to do." Tears continued to stream down her pale cheeks, and her hands trembled.

The guard looked as though he was debating whether or not to try to get the gun from the girl, but one look at her set and determined features convinced him he would have an easier time getting it away from Godzilla. He backed off as instructed. He was fairly sure the girl would not deliberately shoot anyone, but in her panicked state, the slightest movement could set off a horrible chain reaction.

Penny was surprised at her own actions. Hitting someone? Grabbing a gun out of a guy's hand? If her uncle's life had not been at stake, she knew she could never have done either of those things.

Brenda silently cheered her brave young friend as she connected the computer cable into John's access port and started the reboot program. The laptop beeped as it worked, slowly inputting the data that would start up John's primary systems. She would have to wait to install the anti-virus program, since it couldn't run until the CPU was functioning.

"Is it working, Doc?" Penny asked anxiously, never taking her eyes off the wary guard. His partner came up next to the man, but did not draw his own gun. She knew they would both jump her at the first sign of weakness, so she couldn't show any. Not now.

"We'll know in less than a minute" Brenda replied, looking at the countdown on the clear screen. "It's not a long program...but getting everything started up again...that's the real time eater." The woman sighed and closed her eyes. "Better start praying, Penny."

"I never stopped, Dr. B." the girl replied sadly. "I'm always praying for him."

As she spoke, emergency crews and security people broke through the rubble-blocked doors, swarming into the room. With them came Agents Andersson and Gustavsson. The blonde Interpol agent immediately took charge of the crews, ordering the paramedics to get the injured out of the room as quickly as possible. Andersson came right up to the tense standoff, ignoring the warnings of the two guards.

"Miss Brown...Penny... please put down the gun. You're only making things worse" he said quietly, as he stepped in front of her, blocking the guards from her quivering, gun-heavy hands.

"No. They want to stop Dr. B from helping my uncle." She sniffed, holding back tears that she feared would never stop, once they started again.

Nils nodded. "I know...and they're right. He's too dangerous. I'm sorry, Penny, but we can't let any more people be hurt by him."

"It wasn't his *fault!* It's the virus! He was being controlled by Claw...Sanford Scolex! You can't let him die because of *that!*"

The dark-haired agent sighed. He moved closer, and reached out his hand to take hold of the gun's shaking barrel. "I know you won't hurt me, Penny. I know you want to help your uncle...but this isn't the way." He took the gun from Penny's wavering hands.

He was right...she couldn't hurt him.

A computerized beep made both of them turn towards Brenda and Gadget on the floor.

"It's a moot point, Agent Andersson...it's started. Gadget's systems are rebooting...and there's nothing you can do to stop the process" said Brenda, wiping tears from her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Bradford...but there *is* something I can do" he replied, as he lifted up the gun he had taken from Penny, and aimed it at John's unprotected chest. At this range, a police-issue bullet would cause massive damage to the delicate machinery within the cyborg's breast, more damage than Brenda could fix quickly enough to save him again.

The scientist knew it too. She threw herself upon the prone form of her creation and friend, blocking his vulnerable body with her own. "I know you won't hurt me, Nils" she said, mimicking his statement to Penny. "And I won't let you hurt him."

"Dr. Bradford, I—" Whatever Nils had started to say was interrupted by Agent Gustavsson, as she finally came to view the cause of so much destruction.

“So...this is a very sad situation, isn't it? Please explain...now.” Her stern voice and grim face bore none of the friendship she had shown to them before, and would obviously brook no interference.

“It was the virus, Ms. Gustavsson...it infected my uncle...and Claw's behind it all!” said Penny, trying to win back the agent to their side.

“Claw? Sanford Scolex? He's in jail, Miss Brown.”

“No! He must have gotten out somehow! My uncle was speaking to him...I heard him say the name 'Claw'!” Penny was very earnest in her conviction, adding, “And no one but Claw would be evil enough to make my uncle try to kill me with his own hands!”

Agent Andersson looked shocked. “He...he tried to kill you?”

“Well, it wasn't him, really, it was Claw...but yeah.” Penny shuddered, remembering the look in her uncle's eyes as his hand began to squeeze...

Nils looked at Gustavsson. “She must be telling the truth, Number One...there's no way that Gadget would hurt his niece. I've seen them together. Nothing short of this virus, and the villain behind it, could cause such an action on his part.”

Brenda broke into the conversation. “Penny, look! It's working!” Penny knelt beside the scientist, looking intently at the display screen of her laptop. The systems displays that had been flatlined before were now wavering into action, life rhythms reasserting themselves as the cyborg's CPU powered up.

They all looked at Gadget, Andersson forgetting his gun as the drama of life and death caught their attention completely.

John began to breathe. Shallow breaths lifted his chest as the four watched. On the computer screen, slow but regular heartbeats made waves of digital light.

Gustavsson made her decision quickly. “Nils...get those transmission blockers you've been working on, and set them up in the office we had Gadget in before. We will take him there.” She looked at Penny and Brenda, who were hovering worriedly over their fallen companion. “If he has a chance to live, we will need to protect him from any further compromises. That area is at least close by, and fairly secure.”

Nils nodded, and left quickly, pulling out his cell phone as he ran.

Brenda sighed in relief. At least one problem was not as bad as she had feared. Now, if only she hadn't been too late in getting John's blood flowing again. She was horribly afraid that the reboot had taken too long, and that he would suffer brain damage from the lack of oxygen. Unfortunately, there was no way to tell with the tools she had now; she couldn't really be sure until the man woke up. If he woke up. There was nothing more she could do until the anti-virus could be installed. From the way Agent Gustavsson was ordering her team to gather up Gadget and haul him away, the scientist doubted they would stop long enough for her to download the new, untried program.

As Interpol agents hurried up with a rolling stretcher, Penny leaned down and kissed her uncle's slack, pale cheek. “You're gonna be okay, Uncle John. I love you, and I'm gonna take good care of you...I promise.”

Brenda hoped the girl's faith was justified.



Chapter Ten

"I'm afraid I can't let you in there, Dr. Bradford," said the police guard sternly, never giving an inch in his stance before the door. "Orders from Agent Gustavsson." His openly displayed machine pistol gave a weight to words that Brenda might have discounted otherwise.

They were taking no chances, the scientist thought as she backed off. After placing John on the bed in the small suite/office, arraigning his extended limbs as neatly as possible, Agent Gustavsson had ordered everyone out of the room, to the loud protests of both Penny and Brenda. The blonde agent assigned a guard to stay in the room, with one barring entry at the door. Both were more heavily armed than was normal for policemen. Before she left, Brenda heard Gustavsson give the inner guard an order in Swedish. She needed no translation to know what it meant. The agent's motions made it quite clear that the officer was to shoot to kill at the first sign of movement on the cyborg's part.

Penny and Brenda had been escorted to their room, and instructed to stay inside. There was a guard posted outside their hotel room door as well, though this one was not obviously armed. Once inside, Penny quickly gathered up Brain, and angrily stalked into John's adjoining bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her. With a sigh, the redhead resigned herself to the girl's understandable anger and feelings of betrayal. Heaven only knew what John would think of her, when he found out what she had done to him. If he found out.

With a sob, the woman threw herself on her bed, crying out her fear, anger and guilt as all the evening's event played themselves out in her mind. She had killed him. She had killed the man she loved...to save him. But, the system was never meant to be used that way, and she didn't know if he would ever wake up from his shock-induced coma. If only the agents would let her see him...!

After a time, there came a gentle, hesitant knocking at the door between the adjoining rooms.

"Dr. B? Could I come in?" said Penny, her voice sounding hoarse.

Wiping her eyes, grimacing at the streaks of makeup that came off on her hand, Brenda got off the bed to open the door.

A very quiet girl stood there, her words coming out in a rush, as if she feared to break into sobs again if she hesitated. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. We need to work together to save my uncle, Dr. B...and us not speaking to each other isn't gonna help him any," she said, her voice hoarse from her tears. "We need to come up with a plan...something..."

Brenda sniffed away her own tears, as she accepted Penny's sort-of apology. Since she had not forgiven herself, how could she expect it from her young friend? "You're right, Penny. We need to convince Agent Gustavsson, or someone, that John is in danger as long as he has that damned virus inside him. We need to install the anti virus program. Only then can we bring up his full systems, and hopefully bring him back to us." Brenda winced, wishing she had not used the word 'hopefully'. Any doubt she expressed now would only estrange the girl further.

Penny shuddered at Brenda's words, but did not back off. "Yeah...but how do we get it installed? Can you send it remotely?"

"No...the dampeners would block the transmission...as they were designed to do, to keep the infected machines from being corrupted in the first place."

"Why didn't you send the program when Uncle John first started going crazy? Why didn't you try that first?" Penny asked, thinking back to earlier that evening. She frowned.

"I tried...but something was blocking all other incoming signals...probably Claw's transmissions to and from the virus. I knew if I didn't completely shut down all power, there would be no way to free the lines..." she said with a sigh. "I swear, Penny...there was no other way to stop him...and keep Claw from getting his mechanical grip on your uncle, forever."

The girl angrily wiped away a tear, and then continued on her original line of questioning. "Okay...then we need to install the program manually, right? We need to get to his room."

The scientist nodded. "We at least need to be *in* the room with him. The dampeners only keep transmissions from coming into the 50-foot radius...they don't stop transmissions *inside* that circle."

Penny perked up as an idea occurred to her. "Maybe we just have to be in the 50-foot area, not right in the room! If there's an area above or below Uncle John's room..."

"No good, Penny...someone has to switch on his upload circuits manually, with him in low-power mode." The scientist hated to see the girl's face fall, but it was not to be helped.

"Okay...so how do we get inside with your laptop? The guards aren't gonna let you try any science-stuff near him...and I don't think Agent Gustavsson will give permission either."

Brenda frowned thoughtfully. "They took my laptop, remember? But...maybe / don't have to be there at all!" she exclaimed. "I can download the program into your computer notebook, Penny...and you can activate it with your communicator watch!"

Penny smiled for the first time since the horrible events of the past several hours. "Yeah...they can't keep out Uncle John's sweet innocent little niece, can they? I mean, what harm can / do?" She rushed to change clothes, hoping that the 'innocent' look would be helped by her girlish tee shirt and jeans. Finally, she could do something to help her uncle, and if it meant fooling a bunch of adults, all the better.

Brenda quickly changed clothes, washing her face to rid it of the smeared makeup. Better that she try to look 'innocent' as well, and be ready for action too. She changed into slacks and a sweater, going for comfort and ease of movement rather than style. She might need to move fast at some point.

Opening up Penny's colorful computer notebook, she breathed a sigh of gratitude that the girl's whim that the thing be completely hidden inside a real notebook had challenged her all those months ago. No one could tell that the paper and hardcover spiral-bound book was actually a miniature computer almost as powerful as Brenda's own laptop. Getting her purse, Brenda drew out the disk she had thrown in there earlier for backup. This was all she had left of the anti-virus, and she said a fast prayer as she started the download procedure.

Penny sat on the bed beside the scientist, her long light-brown hair still up in its French braids. "Ready, Doc?"

The program beeped as the download was finished. "Almost. I just have to program in the transmission sequence, and key it into your watch. It should key into John's comm. watch, and transmit from there directly to his CPU." She lowered her eyes, knowing the next step would be the hardest. "After that...we just wait."

Penny stiffened. "Won't he wake up when the virus is gone?"

"I don't know...I may have to start his secondary systems myself...if the anti-virus works."

"If??"

Brenda looked at Penny, feeling the anger radiating out from the pre-teen's thin frame again. "It's untested, Penny...you know that. If the anti-virus doesn't work...we can't wake him up. Claw would just take control of him again, and he'd never get free."

Penny sniffed proudly. "I told you, Dr. B...you don't know my uncle as well as I do. The anti-virus *will* work...he *will* beat this thing...because Uncle John has the heart to fight it."

Brenda smiled at the girl's faith. It was so much like John's...faith in the face of adversity. With faith, and a good heart, anything was possible. It was John's credo, and he seemed to have passed it on to the girl he had raised for half her life. Now all they needed was a little luck to go along with that faith...

As luck would have it, all of Brenda's calls to Agent Gustavsson were routed to a junior officer, who told her in no uncertain terms that the Interpol agent would be unavailable to her until morning. They would have to start their waiting sooner than they had thought.

Penny tried to take Brain out for a short walk before they reluctantly settled in for the night, but the guard refused to let her and the little beagle out. Brain was reduced to the indignity of using papers on the floor like an untrained puppy.

Brenda actually managed to get a little rest, though she could hear Penny tossing restlessly in the next bed before finally falling into a fitful sleep.

Morning could not come soon enough. After a breakfast brought by a hotel waiter (carefully scrutinized by the guard, as though there had been a bomb planted in the eggs!) Brenda got a call from a weary Agent Gustavsson. She was to meet with the agent and some higher-ups in thirty minutes, to discuss what was to be done with the still motionless cyborg lying in the convention center's spare office.

Penny quickly started writing something in her notebook. She looked like she had some sort of inspiration, and just smiled when Brenda asked her about it.

"Just make sure I can get into Uncle John's room...I'll do the rest, I promise!" she said, smiling. "I'll take the lead...you just play along, okay?"

The scientist smiled too. Penny was at her best when she had a plan. "You've got it. I'll try to keep everyone busy while you do whatever you have to do."

Soon, the two of them were heading down to the improvised meeting area in the back of the convention center, near John's makeshift cell. They were met by several agents, who dismissed the 'personal' guard who had watched them for the night shift.

Agent Gustavsson was there, along with C.I.A. operative Morgan and someone the scientist had never seen before.

Gustavsson, tired and rumped, nonetheless tried to look official when she introduced Brenda and Penny to the head of the Swedish branch of Interpol, Commander Fredrik Lundberg. He was a tall, blond haired man in his mid fifties, and looked like someone who was used to handling problems. He shook their hands warmly and motioned them to sit down.

"We have a very serious problem on our hands right now, Dr. Bradford, as I'm sure you can imagine. Not only do we have our original problem of super-robot thieves being controlled by some hidden mastermind, but also the disastrous events of last night." He sighed, obviously not happy to have yet another problem heaped on his already full plate. "The first, at least, we could try to keep secret, while we worked on it...but now that seems impossible." He looked pointedly at Brenda before making his next statement, steeling himself for her reaction. "The only way we may be able to keep our operation a secret while we continue our investigation is to allow the press and the public to believe that it was your creation, Inspector Gadget, that caused all the problems. He malfunctioned, and has been taken off-line for the foreseeable future. If nothing else, it will set most people's minds at ease."

He was expecting a bad reaction, and was not disappointed.

"Get bent!" Brenda shouted, leaping to her feet in outrage. "Do you think I'm going to just sit back and let you make a scapegoat out of Gadget...and my company?"

Penny, sitting beside the angry woman, merely frowned, waiting for her cue. She no longer had any doubts that her plan would be needed.

The commander shook his dark-blond head, sighing. "We don't have a choice in this, Doctor, and neither do you. We don't want to let the controllers of these robots know that we are onto them, and that Gadget was here as bait for a trap."

"He already knows, Commander!" said Brenda, indignantly. "We all thought we were setting a trap, but we were the ones who were caught. I think it was Claw's plan all along, to get his hook into Gadget...using this virus to control him."

Morgan spoke up for the first time since the meeting began. "My superiors at home have already checked on Scolex, Dr. Bradford. As expected, he is safe and sound, in his cell. He is *not* behind this."

"He is. Penny heard John say his name, as that madman forced him to try and kill her."

Morgan shook his head, unconvinced. "The confused memories of a frightened girl are hardly proof, Doctor. From what the warden of the prison has said, Sanford Scolex is a model prisoner. He stays in his cell, keeps to himself, and never makes trouble."

Brenda frowned. "I know it was him...his fingerprints are all over this operation, and the programming used to create this control virus."

Penny finally spoke up, her young voice quivering with distress. "Does it really matter who made my uncle sick? What really matters is getting him well, right? When are you going to let Dr. B. install the anti virus, so Uncle John can finally wake up?"

All eyes turned towards the commander. "I'm afraid I can't allow that at this time, Miss Brown. It's just too dangerous. We have no idea if the program will work. If he is allowed free movement, he may malfunction again, and this time we may not be able to stop him."

"You have the transmission blockers, Commander. They should stop any outside signals from locking onto Gadget's systems and controlling him," said Brenda, hoping to avoid the need for sneaking around to accomplish their goal.

"We don't know if the system actually works, doctor. If you reactivate Gadget, and the blockers fail, we have the same problem we had before...a very dangerous living weapon running amok. That is totally unacceptable."

Brenda sighed, shaking her red haired head. "You don't understand...we're all in more danger with John unconscious than we are with him awake. Awake, he can fight the control virus...but as he is now, if the blockers fail, and the robots' controller tries to take over Gadget's systems again, there is no way for John to fight back, to resist. His body would be under complete control of the madman behind this, and there's no way I could stop him again. I'm sure he'd find a way of blocking my 'kill switch' a second time."

Lundberg looked around the room before answering. "I'm sorry, Dr. Bradford...I can't allow Gadget to regain consciousness. If he does awaken, and tries to escape custody, he will be shot."

That's when Penny started to cry.

Even Morgan looked moved by the girl's heart-rending sobs, and Brenda put one arm around Penny's shoulders to try to comfort her. "Oh, good going, Commander. That's a very nice thing to say in front of John's niece," she said angrily. "Can't you at least let Penny see her uncle, to know that he's safe? I seriously doubt

she's a threat to your precious security."

Penny turned tear reddened eyes to the commander, trying to hold back further sobs. "I wrote him a poem... 'cuz I heard coma victims can hear stuff people say to them... Please, just let me stay with him for a little while! I won't mess up anything, I promise!"

Lundberg sighed. Motioning to the door guard, he gave instructions to the man in Swedish. Turning back to Penny, he said "All right, Miss Brown. You can see your uncle. I'm sorry it has to be under such unhappy circumstances. We don't want to harm him, or you... we just want to keep everything under control."

Penny sniffed, letting a glimmer of a relieved smile flash across her features. "Thanks, Commander. I'll be good..." She then turned to Brenda, and smiled a bit wider. "Don't worry. I'll make sure Uncle John is okay, Dr. B."

The redhead nodded. "And I'll stay here and try to pound some sense into these guys."

The guard left with the girl, and Brenda turned back to her task; keeping the agents busy while Penny did the real work of installing the anti-virus.

The guard that let her into the room was obviously bored. Standing watch over a door to a room holding a coma victim had to be close to the top of every guard's 'jobs I could do in my sleep' list, and most of them seemed to do just that.

There was another man in the room, a plain clothes detective from his look, and he nodded at the first guard's explanation for Penny's presence. Giving the teary-eyed girl a bored look, he turned back to his paper, after warning her in halting English not to disturb "Inspektör Manick".

Pulling a chair up to her uncle's side, she sat down next to him, on the far side from the distracted guard. Penny took a good look at the comatose man, hoping to see some sign of returning consciousness. He appeared to be in better color than the last time she had seen him, and he was in need of a shave. Still, he was unmoving and did not respond to her greeting. His extended limbs were still splayed out, and the mini copter still stuck out from his hat.

Glancing at the guard from the corner of her eye, Penny opened her notebook. "I thought you might like to hear a poem I wrote about you, Uncle John," she began brightly, letting her voice carry a bit. "I know you can hear me, so try to wake up, okay? I really miss you." She sniffed loudly, only partly for dramatic effect.

The girl took her uncle's hand in hers, patting it comfortingly. It still had some of it's fingers open, a few gadgets jutting out forlornly. The guard looked up and frowned, then turned back to his reading. With one finger, she punched the communicator button on his wrist computer unit, opening a circuit to incoming transmissions and downloads. Still holding his hand in hers, she started flipping through her notebook with the other hand, as though searching for the right passage. "Now, where was that page...?" she mumbled loudly. "Oh, here it is!" she exclaimed, punching the page hard, while really pushing the upload button on the open program already up and running on the hidden laptop computer. The little machine started to upload the program to Gadget's open communicator watch, flashing a bit as it worked. Penny began to read her poem, a horrible piece of doggerel that she was almost ashamed to read even to the English-impaired Swede across the room. It didn't matter what he, or anyone, thought of her right now, though...as long as her plan worked.

Brenda, meanwhile, had spent her time fruitlessly arguing with the cyborg's captors, formerly his allies.

At her insistence, Nils had been brought in to the meeting, and with his help, she explained how the anti virus would work, and how the blockers would protect the policeman as he was recovering.

The commander was unmoved. "My superiors are quite clear on this, Doctor. Inspector Gadget is just too dangerous. We had no idea of the type of damage he could do, or we may not have brought him into this at all. We may not have even let him into the country!" He shook his head. "I truly am sorry, Dr. Bradford. I know you and he came into this with open hearts, trying to help, but you have only made things much worse."

Nils spoke up, unwilling to let the matter rest, even if it meant facing up to his superiors. "Come now, Commander, you must see Inspector Gadget! I'm sure once you have seen him, you will know he could never be the monster you believe him to be!"

"He's right, Commander" added Agent Gustavsson, standing up. "We at least should see the object of our dispute, if only to check on his well-being. Gadget is a good man...it's not his fault he had been used so horribly. We owe it to him, as a fellow officer of the law, to see that he is well cared for. At the least, he should be moved to a secure hospital, where his medical needs can be met."

Commander Lundberg sighed. "Yes, you are right, Jes...he is a policeman, whatever else he may be. We should at least see that he is safe." With that, he and the other agents made to leave the room, a hesitant Brenda following behind. She hoped she had kept them long enough for Penny to finish her work, or they might never get a second chance.

"...and we can go to the ice cream store, just like always!" Penny finished her 'poem' just as her computer signaled that the upload was complete. Sighing, she shut her book, letting the machine go into low power mode. Now, she could do nothing but wait. If Brenda was right, the program would start to attack the virus in all of Gadget's systems, and as each system was freed, it would start to power up, allowing the cyborg to awaken from his own low-power mode.

That's when the door opened, and the Swedish agents, and Brenda, entered the room.

Brenda quickly shot a questioning look at Penny, who gave her a cheerful smile. "Don't worry, Dr. B...Uncle John's gonna be fine...I just know it."

The red haired scientist breathed a sigh of relief as she let the tension of the last hour unclench her muscles.

The other agents stepped closer to Gadget, looking at his helpless, pathetically rumped and totally still form. Under the watching eyes of the agents, Brenda leaned in to check John's eyes, his pulse, to try to gently push in his extended gadgets. All the while, she was stalling for time, hoping the anti virus was taking effect, letting his systems power up.

The commander looked at the cyber-cop, and as unmoved as he was by the arguments of his colleagues, he was not unaffected by the sight. The unmoving officer looked as harmless as a puppy, almost comically like a boy dressed up in his father's coat and hat. Seeing him, it was impossible to again think of him as the monstrous machine he had seemed in all the reports.

Nils was checking the transmissions blockers he had set up the night before. They hummed along, hopefully doing their job. He nodded at Gustavsson. She in turn looked at the commander. He rolled his eyes, and lifted his hands towards Heaven, asking for guidance.

"My bosses may have my head for this...but I will agree to your plan, Dr. Bradford...under careful supervision, of course. We will have to move him to a more secure location, but you may install the anti virus once we have him safely locked away."

Brenda looked up from her examination of Gadget, and grinned sheepishly. "We may not have time to move him anywhere, Commander..." she began, when she was gently interrupted.

"Where're we going...? And can I have breakfast first...?" asked a soft voice from the bed. Every head in the room turned towards the voice, some faces surprised, some delighted.

Inspector Gadget was awake.



Chapter Eleven

"Hold your fire!" shouted the commander, holding up his hands to halt his startled officers and agents. "We have civilians in the room. And I suspect that Inspector Gadget will be wise enough to keep very, very still. Isn't that right, Inspector?" he intoned, looking pointedly at Gadget.

Gadget, for his part, was profoundly surprised by the scene that greeted his awakening. Brenda and Penny, looking as though they had spent a great deal of time crying. A roomful of agents, some familiar, some strange...and all of them reaching for or holding their firearms. Firearms pointed at him. Suddenly frightened, he nodded at the older man whose words held an overt threat.

"Very good, Inspector. I'm sure we can get to the bottom of this mystery with a minimum of trouble, now that all the players are present, and awake. Of course, I must ask exactly how you managed to do this, Dr. Bradford." The commander turned to Brenda with a sharp look.

Penny broke in, trying to diffuse the tense situation. "She didn't do it, Commander, I did. I installed the anti virus program."

"Oh? And how did you manage this, Miss Brown? You were guarded." He looked at the room guard, who suddenly found the room's tiled ceiling very interesting.

Brenda stepped up to the plate. "Does it matter, Commander? What really matters is that the program worked...John is virus-free! His systems wouldn't have started working if the foreign program was still operating." She smiled down at Gadget, who looked at her with confusion in his dark eyes.

"What's going on here, Brenda? What's everyone so mad about? Why am I...?" He stopped suddenly, as memories began flooding back. Memories of fear, confusion, pain, and a voice. A voice that tried to make him..."Oh my gosh...!" he gasped. "Penny, are you...?" He sat up and turned towards his niece, moving quickly, forgetting his promise to keep still, as he looked for tell-tale signs of his forced attack on her. Seeing the dark bruises on the girl's slender neck almost made him sick.

"Uncle John, I'm all right! You beat him...you stopped Claw from hurting me!" Ignoring the guards' distress, Penny sat down next to her uncle and hugged him.

John turned to Brenda, though still eyeing the guards with their guns. "It was Claw, Brenda. He was using my internal speaker system, so only I could hear him. He used my Gadget Cam to watch all the security preps, and to keep tabs on me...and you."

Commander Lundberg motioned again for the guards to stand down. The cyborg seemed in control of himself, he thought. Either the anti virus was working, or the transmission blockers were, or both. Either way, they seemed to be in no danger at the moment. He spoke up, trying to regain control of the situation. "We have been informed by Operative Morgan of your CIA that Scolex is in jail, Inspector. I don't know who you heard, but it wasn't him."

Gadget looked up at the tall Swede. He didn't know who the man was, but at least he seemed to be in control of the trigger-happy guards, so it was best to treat him with a great deal of respect. "It was him, sir. I've been in his evil clutches before...and I *know*."

Lundberg was a bit taken aback at Gadget's use of the term 'evil clutches'. No one outside of an old movie had ever used the term, in his experience. Still, he seemed very sincere, and very certain. It was also true that no one here had more experience with Scolex than him, except perhaps for Dr. Bradford, who had worked for the criminal genius, briefly.

Making a decision, the commander turned to the CIA agent standing at the back of the room. "Morgan, I want you to have someone look in on Scolex, closely, and see if he is up to anything." At the agent's obvious intent to argue, the commander threw him a withering look. "That's an order, Mr. Morgan." The dark haired agent turned and left without another word.

"As for you, Inspector...I'm glad you are feeling better, but I am afraid you must still be closely watched. We don't know if it is the anti virus, the blockers, or the controller's lack of interest that is enabling you to keep your control, but we can take no chances that you may lose control again. For the foreseeable future, you must stay in protective custody. We will make arrangements to move you to a safer location shortly."

"But, sir...how can I help you find the robots, and their master, if I'm locked up? You'll need my help!" protested Gadget, pulling his wayward limbs and gadgets into their proper places. "I know I can track them!"

Lundberg shook his head. "You're vulnerable, Gadget. If they could infect you once, they can infect you again. No, we must keep you out of this fight. I'm sorry, Inspector, but you are far more dangerous than the robots ever were."

Brenda spoke up, hoping to salvage something out of the commander's good will. "Can I at least bring in some of my equipment, to make sure he's all right, Commander? I need to find out if the virus has been totally destroyed, or only disabled."

The commander nodded, giving orders to Agents Gustavsson and Andersson in Swedish. "Andersson will assist you, and report to me on your findings. Please do not try to do any investigating on your own, doctor. I'm trusting you to stay with me on this important matter."

The scientist nodded. It was a start, and with all of them working on the same page, hopefully they could solve this case.

"You don't have to worry, Commander," said Gadget, finally having a title to attach to the man. "We'll solve this case. If we all work together, the forces of darkness don't stand a chance!"

Lundberg shook his head as he left the room, amazed. 'Forces of darkness'. The man had actually used the phrase 'forces of darkness'. What was even stranger was the fact that it did not sound at all out of place coming from the cyber cop's mouth. It seemed...right. The 'forces of darkness' didn't stand a chance...as long as Gadget could fight them.

The commander hoped that Inspector Gadget would somehow get his chance.

And hour later, Brenda began setting up all the equipment she could beg, borrow, or steal from both the police and the confused conventioners. John had been allowed to clean himself up, with a guard constantly in attendance, and change into some fresh clothes that Penny brought him. A nice breakfast had been hastily arraigned, after which John was prepared to deal with the problems at hand.

"We've got to find a way of tracking down Claw," John said, after setting down his coffee cup and pushing away the emptied tray. "There must be some way of tracking his transmissions to me." He looked over at Brenda, who was busying herself in setting up her restored laptop's virus detect programs.

"Not as long as you're under the dampening field, John," she replied without looking up.

"So...if the virus has been wiped out, why can't we shut off the field?"

Nils replied quickly. "We don't know that the virus has been wiped out, Inspector. It might have been destroyed, or it might just be blocked by the field. If it is still active, letting you out of the field would mean that Claw...or whoever, could control you...and we might not be able to stop you again." He shook his dark head sadly. "I'm sorry, but we are under the Commander's orders on this. The field stays on, and you stay here."

Penny fumed. "It's not fair. We came all this way to help, and now we're being held prisoner by a bunch of our own teammates!"

"You're not being held prisoner, Miss Brown, your uncle is, and with good reason, as you know. It is very fair, and very right." The agent understood her anger, but wasn't about to allow her to spread it around unjustly. "Besides, we still have to determine if there has been any...damage...to him after his...his..." the man hesitated a bit too long.

"After his death', you were going to say, Agent Andersson," Brenda said softly, still fiddling with her computer.

John looked at her as she quietly tapped away at the keyboard. She did not look up. "Um...how dead was I? I mean, I remember feeling my heart stop...and I couldn't feel my body anymore...and my lungs weren't working either. I remember seeing Penny rush over to me...and I remember being happy, because she was safe. After that...nothing." He glanced over at Penny, who looked like she was trying to avoid saying anything. Nils kept his mouth shut as well, not sure what to say.

The scientist came over to John and sat in the chair next to his. Still avoiding his eyes, she reached over to connect the cables of her computer to the port in the back of his neck. "You were very dead, John," she said quietly, still managing to avoid meeting his eyes with her own. "Your CPU had been shut down completely...secondary and primary systems...everything was turned off." She shuddered, and a slow tear began its trek down her cheek. "I didn't know if I could bring you back or not..."

"But you did, Brenda! Claw tried to kill me, and you saved me!" He reached out to caress her cheek, to wipe away the wayward tear.

Startlingly, she pulled away from his touch, and shuddered again as she cried out with a sob, "Oh God, John, Claw didn't kill you.../did!"

The cyborg looked at her, confusion in his dark eyes. He turned to Nils and Penny, whose silence only puzzled him further. Turning back to the weeping redhead, he asked in a soft voice, "Brenda...what happened?"

She told him. She told him of her realization that he had been infected, of having her attempted transmissions blocked. She told him of her last resort, the one transmission that could not be blocked by any

system he had. The only way to stop Claw from kidnapping Gadget with his own mini-copter was to shut him down, completely. She had used a circuit installed in his own CPU to kill him.

When Brenda's voice grew too hoarse with tears to continue, Penny stepped in, and told her uncle of his collapse, of her defense of him against the guards and Nils, and of Brenda's frantic attempt to revive him in time.

John was quiet for a moment as he attempted to digest this confusing tale. He stood up and walked to the other side of the room, looking at the pastoral print that graced the wall over the bed. The long cable of Brenda's laptop trailed after him, still attached. John felt it. It was sort of symbolic, he thought. No matter how far he went, he would always be tied to a computer.

Without turning, he asked of the room in general, "What is this 'kill switch'? Why is it in me...and who put it there?"

Nils spoke up. "Usually, Inspector, a so-called 'kill switch' is a circuit or program that can be used to instantly shut down a whole system...wiping programming and everything that is connected to it. We often install them in units that...." His voice trailed off, as he realized that he was not the one from whom Gadget wanted answers

Brenda knew he needed her to talk to him, to tell him why this had happened. He needed to hear that it wasn't her idea, that she hadn't known about it. He needed to hear that she hadn't been the one to install a program that could stop him cold him with the press of a button...like a defective machine.

Unfortunately, she couldn't tell him these things, because they weren't true.

"John, back when the Gadget Program was in full swing, and my father and me were developing the neural interface unit, we talked with a neurosurgeon about the effects of melding a high powered computer with a human brain. We needed to know how the energy levels needed for the machine would effect the person's mind. She told us that the high levels of electromagnetic energy might interfere with the normal transmissions of brain waves without the proper shielding." She looked at the cyber cop, but he was still facing the painting, and she could not see his reaction to her words.

The scientist continued, determined that he hear the truth, finally. "We designed shielding, but were worried that it might cause problems even then. It was possible that the high energy levels might...well...drive the test subject mad." Looking over at Penny, she saw the comprehension beginning to dawn in the girl's angry eyes. Hoping that John would begin to understand as well, Brenda went on with her explanation. "We were designing the most sophisticated combination of man and machine in the world...there had never been anything like it! We were going to install all sorts of weapons...tasers, lasers, sleep darts, and make him incredibly strong and fast...we had to design something that could take out the subject if...something went wrong."

"Like in 'West World'," Penny said softly. "Only they were *robots*."

"Yes, Penny...like in the movie 'West World', where nothing could go wrong...but did." She looked over at John, but he was still facing the wall, his hands clasped behind his back. He hadn't moved since she had begun speaking.

"We weren't finished testing...*nothing* was finished, when we suddenly had our trial by fire. My father was dead, and we had a dying man on our hands, with only days in which to save him. My team and I worked 'round the clock to install everything we needed to save him, to make him into what we dreamed of...a super-cop. The whole series of operations took weeks...but we had never had a chance to test the neural interface. Not even on animals." Brenda hesitated at Penny's grim expression. She knew the girl was against animal testing. "The CPU had to be the first thing we installed, to get everything in life support working. There just wasn't time..." The redhead sighed, remembering the quick decision that had to be made so long ago. She was paying for it now.

"Dr. Blanchett was the neurosurgeon that helped me install the neural net and the CPU. She suggested that there should be some way of shutting down the CPU if there was any sign of malfunction. That's when I designed the kill switch. It's just a tiny circuit that...well...you know what it does. The doctor and I were the only ones who knew about it. I never even put it into my notes...which is why Claw never knew about it, thank God. I had the only password into the system, too. I was always the only one who could access it."

Walking closer to John, she gently touched the connector cable that trailed from the back of his head. It looked so wrong now. "I believed in my work, in the safety of everything we had designed for the Gadget Program. I was so confident I'd never need to use it, John...but I understood why it had to be installed." She stepped closer, looking over his shoulder, hoping to see his face. She saw nothing more than the curve of his cheek, and the flutter of one dark-lashed eyelid as it lowered. He had closed his eyes. "Do you understand, John?"

"I understand," he said quietly. He still did not turn to face her.



Brenda waited a minute, then turned and walked back to the other side of the room, where Penny and Nils waited. Neither of them said a word. They both seemed to know that this was between John and Brenda. The two of them had to work it out themselves, or they might never be able to work together again.

After another few moments, John turned slightly, and asked a question in a quiet, controlled voice. "When RoboGadget was running wild in Riverton, blowing up stuff, and setting fires...hurting people...why didn't you throw the switch then? He looked just like me...you had no way of knowing it *wasn't* me..."

"But I *did*, John! I knew something was wrong, that you couldn't have done all the things the reporters were talking about! By then I really felt I knew you, and no matter how badly you had short circuited, you could never...hurt people...." Her voice trailed off, as she began to understand the point that John was slowly getting at.

"No...I couldn't, could I?" John finally turned, and she could see tears sparkling in his dark eyes. "But even after that, even after I had proven myself...after all the time we've been together, and...and all the times you've held me close and told me you loved me...*you still left that damned thing in my head!*"

His voice, hoarse with anger and unshed tears, was as foreign to Penny's ears as John's use of profanity. She had never known her uncle to swear, under any circumstances. Wide eyed, she turned to Brenda. The woman looked stunned, as her blue eyes welled up with tears that spilled down her pale cheeks. Penny felt like crying now, too, but someone had to stop those two before they got so far apart they could never find their way back again.

'Uncle John? Please, just listen for a minute, okay?' Penny waited until her uncle turned, his expression softening as he looked at her. "I know you feel bad...like Brenda's been lying to you or something, but it's not like that...I know it's not!" The girl cast a sidelong look at the scientist, who still seemed at a loss for words. "I think it's more like...you know how there's so many gadgets in you...thousands and thousands of different things? Well, I think there's just so many things...stuff you haven't even used, that everyone just kinda forgets about them...like no one even thinks about an appendix, unless it goes bad. It's there, but it doesn't do anything, and no one ever talks about it."

"I don't have an appendix any more," said John quietly. "It got infected when I was a teenager, and they had to remove it."

"Yeah, but I bet you never even thought about it before it started to make you sick, right? And it could have killed you! So, I think that's how Brenda was about this chip...it was there, but it didn't do anything, really...so she just forgot about it." The pre-teen looked over at the redheaded woman again. Brenda smiled a little, and nodded.

John looked at Penny for a moment, then turned towards Brenda. He looked like a drowning man being offered a lifesaver, and he desperately wanted to grab it with both hands.

Brenda knew that was her cue. "I swear to God, John...I never gave that damn chip a single thought after I installed it," she said earnestly. "Until last night, I never really thought I would have to use it." She stepped over to the man she loved and took one of his hands in hers. Gazing steadily into his warm brown eyes, she prayed he would somehow be able to feel the truth of her words. "I wasn't...lying to you, John, not even by omission. I don't spend our time together thinking about all the different gadgets that make up your body; the weapons, the analyzers, the computers. I don't think about the gadgets, because I'm too busy thinking about the man."

John's only answer to her heartfelt words was to draw her into an embrace that more eloquently expressed his forgiveness than words ever could.

"When we get home," he murmured into her hair as he held her tightly, "you'll remove that chip."

"Yes..." the woman said with a sigh of relief. "...when we get home."



Chapter Twelve

"This...this isn't possible!" exclaimed the surprised scientist. "Here, Nils...you check this out...tell me if I'm seeing things." Brenda took off her reading glasses and rubbed her tired eyes. She then pushed her chair out of the way as the Interpol agent moved over to look at her laptop computer's bright screen.

"If I'm understanding what I'm seeing, you're right ...Brenda," he said, hesitating to use such a familiar form of address. She had insisted, though, and he did not want to be rude in refusing. "The virus has not been destroyed...but altered."

Brenda shook her head. "That's not the impossible part, Nils. The impossible part is that the virus now seems to have part of the Gadget operating code written into it. It's like...the virus wasn't destroyed, it was...*converted*."

"Converted? You think it is now...a part of the Gadget program? But...what could do such a thing?"

The woman shook her head again, making her coppery curls bounce around her shoulders. "It must be the anti-virus...but I don't see how..."

Penny, talking quietly to her uncle while the engineers worked, spoke up. "Maybe it's like I was saying the other night...maybe it's like the Salk vaccine, remember? Or something like that. Uncle John's body just...took the weakened virus code, and made it into antibodies that could fight off other infections."

"That shouldn't be possible," said Brenda, "but I can't ignore the evidence of my own eyes. Something changed this code...and it now seems to follow the patterns of John's CPU transmissions."

John looked up. "You mean...it's a part of me now? It's a part of my Gadget programming?" His tone suggested that he found this condition appalling.

"It seems to be, John. What's more, if this code works the way I think it does...it should respond to your mental and physical commands, just like the rest of your systems."

Thinking about it for a moment, the cyborg smiled slightly. "It'll obey me?"

"We'll have to test it...but I think so."

John's smile grew wider. "If it does...I may just have an idea on how to stop Claw."

Nils, Brenda and Penny all looked perplexed.

"How?" they asked as one.

John laughed. "Y' know, Claw hates clichés. They make him nuts. Well, I've got the perfect cliché to throw in his face this time..."

"And that is...?" asked Brenda.

The cyber cop grinned again as he delivered his punch line with dramatic flair. "'Turnabout is fair play!'"

"But, I'm your best chance of finding Claw, and stopping his plans, Commander! You can't keep me out of this," argued Gadget, as he faced off against the leader of the Swedish Interpol division.

The tall Swede shook his head. "I believe you and Dr. Bradford think you have this virus under control, Inspector, and perhaps you do. But it still remains that you have caused some major damage, and my superiors don't want you involved in our investigation any longer. We will take whatever information you two have gathered so far to continue our search, but you will be sent home as soon as government transportation can be arranged." He reached out to lay one hand on the cyborg's shoulder in consolation. "If it is any solace to you, I think that if not for this unfortunate incident, you would have been a fine addition to our team."

"Thank you, Commander," said Gadget sadly. "And if you change your mind..."

"Yes, I will be sure to call you if I change my mind. Now, it would be a great help to us if you and Dr. Bradford stay in protective custody here." He smiled slightly, as he tried to ease the sting of his orders to the rookie cop. "At least you may now return to your hotel room, since we can safely move you and the transmission blockers at the same time. Please don't try to leave your room. You will be guarded, for your protection."

Gadget knew it was not really his protection that the commander and his crew were worried about, but didn't want to press the issue. He nodded to the commander as he walked out of the room, his unobtrusively-armed guard following behind. Nils, Brenda, and Penny, who had all kept silent during the last part of the discussion, carried the still working blockers as they unhappily trudged up to the main hotel, and their rooms.

"This stinks!" exclaimed Penny as she flopped on her bed after the guard had been dismissed by Nils to stand watch down the hall. "We're the only ones who really know what's going on around here, and no one will believe us!"

Brenda, looking over the pile of evidence bags still in the room as she had requested earlier, nodded in agreement. ‘You’re right, Penny. This *does* stink.’ She wrinkled her long nose in disgust. “In fact...this *really* stinks! What the hell...?” The source of the offending smell seemed to be one of the evidence bags, left open from their investigations of the previous day. It contained scraps of metal and cloth from the robots’ jump suits. The cloth was muddy looking, and had an odd smell that was amplified by the warmth of the room.

“John, come here for a minute, okay?” Brenda looked over at the cyber cop, who was leaning out the open window, looking at the city that was just starting to darken as the afternoon’s pale light began to fade towards early evening. He seemed strangely subdued, but not as disheartened as she had thought he would be after being dismissed by Interpol. He seemed almost resigned, as though he had come to a decision, but not a pleasant one.

“What is it, Brenda?” he asked softly.

The redhead raised one eyebrow at the man, but decided it was not the time to ask about his unusual mood. “Could you use your chemical analysis units on this stuff? It may be a clue to Claw’s whereabouts.” She indicated the bag and its smelly contents.

Nodding, Gadget removed the scraps from the plastic, and placed his right hand upon the heap. “Go-go Gadget Chemical Analysis system.” Instantly, the program caused the tiny MEMS in the skin of his palm to take minute samples of every chemical substance with which they had contact. To prevent it from overloading by analyzing everything Gadget came into contact with on a daily basis, the system had to be voice activated, even though it was a part of his body, not his Gadgetsuit.

After a few minutes, during which Nils began to examine the other evidence bags more closely, a long tickertape of paper started spewing forth from John’s coat pocket.

After the paper stopped printing, Gadget tore it off and looked at it. He frowned. “It’s all Greek to me.” Handing the tape to Brenda, he started talking to his CPU directly. “Go-go Gadget Data Base: Please use the data just gathered and put all the chemical words and stuff into ordinary English...okay?”

“Working” said the tinny voice of the computer in John’s head.

Nils looked up from his perusal of Brenda’s list. He hadn’t realized the computer that controlled the Gadget body could talk. It was a little unnerving.

Penny went closer to the evidence bag and wrinkled her nose as Brenda had.

“Ew! It smells like rank seaweed! And there’s some oily sludge too.” Penny backed away, noticing something that had not been apparent when the room had been lighter. “And it glows...!”

The three adults in the room turned around to look at the accused item. The room had gotten a bit darker, as the afternoon light continued to fade, and the faint glow became more obvious. It was spotty, but it was there.

Brenda backed away slightly too. “That explains these readings, then. I didn’t believe it, but this seems to be some sort of nuclear waste,” she said, pointing to a particular section on the printout. “And this is definitely seawater,” she added, pointing to another section.

“Analysis complete.” Gadget’s CPU spoke up, ready to give its report.

“Report” Gadget ordered, annoyed that everyone seemed to be figuring out the clues before he could.

“Sea water and salt, industrial oil, residue of nuclear waste materials, gasoline, exhaust residue, industrial concrete dust, acrylic fibers, and inorganic and organic trace elements commonly found in North Atlantic seabed sludge near heavily industrial coastal regions of Europe.”

“Wowsers...that’s some list!” gasped the startled detective. “how the heck did all that get onto these robots?”

“Well, they did come up through the sewers, right?” asked Penny.

Nils answered her with a negative shake of his head. “The tunnels they used have been closed off from the sewer lines for years. They are all dry. They could not have gotten sea salt on them from that. And certainly not nuclear waste!” He was still surprised about that finding.

“It might be something we could track,” suggested Gadget, “if it’s some special kind of radiation or something...!”

“It’s not dangerous nuclear stuff, is it?” asked Penny nervously.

Brenda smiled, happy to relieve the girl’s fears on this at least. “No, not in these small amounts. Not that I’d recommend swimming in a pool of it, as these robots seemed to have done.”

Nils smiled too. “This is a very good start, but I think I’d better get this information to the commander, and have our team start analyzing it. You may have given us a valuable lead, Inspector. Thank you.” He nodded to Brenda as well. “And thanks to you...Brenda. You have been very cooperative.”

“Yes, I love being ‘cooperative’,” she said sarcastically. “Too bad I have to do it under ‘house arrest’.”

The agent sighed. “I told you...neither you nor Miss Brown are under arrest, or anything else, while you

are here. You are free to go as you like. We only ask that Inspector Gadget stay here under guard.”

“Yeah, like we’d leave without my uncle!” said Penny indignantly.

“I know, but those are the commander’s orders. I’m sorry.” Nils smiled then and tried to change the subject as he headed for the door. “So, perhaps I could order in dinner for you? Some traditional Swedish treat perhaps?”

John nodded as he showed the agent out the door. “That would be fine, Mr. Andersson. We’d like that.” He turned back to Penny and Brenda, who both looked puzzled by his apparent calm. “It’d be nice to have a quiet dinner that *didn’t* end in disaster for once,” he said with a smile for them both, and a conspiratorial wink. “Right, ladies?”

Taking the obvious hint, the ladies in question both nodded and smiled.

What did the cyber cop have in mind this time? Whatever it was, they knew it was not going to be quiet.

“We have no idea if this will work, John!” said Brenda stubbornly. “You can’t risk yourself that way!”

“So, what way *should* I risk myself?” John replied, watching the scientist’s deft fingers sealing up the openings she had made in the ‘flesh’ of his right arm. Since his attention was caught by her work, he didn’t see the dirty look she gave him for his innocently-delivered remark. He caught her snort of anger though.

“John, I’m serious! This idea is far too dangerous. We need the help of the international police teams to track down Claw. You can’t do it all by yourself.”

The cyber cop straightened his sleeve, covering up the white lines in his artificial skin just below the wrist computer. “That’s what you designed me for, isn’t it? Doing what a whole team of cops was supposed to do?” He sighed, throwing a sad puppy-dog look her way. “Besides, they’ve made it clear they don’t believe me...and they aren’t even going to *try* to find Claw.”

“Uncle John’s right, Dr. B., and you know it,” said Penny, who had been listening to the conversation while stuffing her backpack with her and Brenda’s essentials. “By the time they decide to do anything, Claw’ll go on the lam again. Our clues will be useless!”

Brenda was not happy with what they were saying, but had to admit that they were both right. She knew it was Scolex causing the troubles, and how dangerous he was. They had to go after him now, or risk never finding him again.

“Okay, I’ll go along with this...but I’m gonna be really worried, you know!”

John smiled sympathetically at the redhead as he put on his trenchcoat and hat. “I know, and I’m sorry about that. But, if it makes you feel any better, I promise I’ll be careful.”

Brenda rolled her eyes. “Yeah...promises, promises. Just keep in touch through your private phone line, okay? Or your wrist communicator.”

The cyborg nodded absently as he opened the window in his bedroom and looked out at the sparkling lights of the nighttime Stockholm skyline. “It’s so big... I just hope I can trace the signals Claw has been sending to me somehow.” He looked back at Penny and Brenda, who were about to open the hall door of their room. “You’ll send me updates on the evidence won’t you? If you find anything I can use?”

“We will, Uncle John. We’ll help you in any way we can.” Penny said as she slung her backpack on her shoulder. “But we’d better go now...you know...to provide a distraction.” She gave her uncle a ‘thumbs up’ signal as she picked up Brain. Then she and Brenda left the room.

“I guess that’s my cue,” the cyborg said as he took a deep breath to steady his nerves and began to climb out the open window. Using his extendable limbs, he was able to grab window ledges and frames from side to side, floor to floor. He had started out on the twentieth floor, and as he paused to catch a nervous breath, he looked down.

Big mistake.

“T-this looked a lot easier in cartoons!” he said to himself as he continued his climb, trying to control his shaking.

“What are you doing, Dr. Bradford?” asked the English-fluent guard unobtrusively posted at the end of the hotel’s hallway. “Aren’t you and the young lady staying in for the night?”

“We just wanted to take Penny’s dog out for a walk, officer,” the scientist answered, indicating the happily barking beagle.

“Yeah,” added Penny, “we won’t be gone long...just a few turns around the block.” She turned her

sweetest smile on the man as she threw in her clincher. "That's all right with you, isn't it?"

The hapless guard smiled back, and nodded. "I'm sure no one would mind, miss. As long as Inspector Gadget doesn't leave, no one will mind if you see a bit of the city before you return home."

Brenda smiled too, and nodded. "Yes, we would certainly like to see more of the city before we leave." She turned to Penny and the anxiously dancing Brain. "We'd better get going now, Penny... I don't know how much longer Brain can hold out!"

Laughing, the two left the smiling officer to his duties, which by now included guarding an empty room.

Once down the elevator and out of the building, the pair took a stroll around the hotel's courtyard. It was well-lit, and Penny made sure that they were seen by hotel security several times.

When they had been on one major tour of the area, she pulled Brenda off to one side, in a darkened bower formed by a wall and some shrubbery.

"We're not seriously going to let my uncle go off on his own, are we, Dr. B?" she asked in a conspiratorial whisper. "I mean...we're gonna help him, right? Follow along or something...?"

Brenda grimaced. "I don't see how we can, Penny. John made it quite clear that he is going to do this on his own. And besides, I don't think we could escape as easily as he could, without transportation."

"Hey, they said we were free to go...it was just Uncle John they wanted to stay put, right?"

"Yes...but we said we'd never leave him, right? So, if we just packed our bags and left suddenly...it would look pretty weird." The redhead sighed. "Of course, we're out *now*...too bad we don't have any of our stuff with us."

Penny grinned. "Like...our passports?" she asked, pulling them out of her over-stuffed backpack. "And our laptops? And some clean underwear...(cuz you never know...)"

Brenda looked wide-eyed at the stash of stuff the girl had packed into her colorful backpack. "And our wallets?"

"Natch. Stuffed with Euros and some Kronars I got from a bank machine in the hotel so we don't have to use credit cards unless we really have an emergency. Credit transactions can be traced, you know." Seeing Brenda's raised eyebrow, Penny added "Hey, I've seen every cop show and movie on T.V. I know what they look for when they follow someone!"

The redhead smiled. "Good thinking, Penny. You and your uncle make a good team."

"Hey...he helped me...now I help him. Fair is fair, right?"

"Right," agreed Brenda. "But...now that we're free, and out of security's watchful eyes...how do we find John?"

The girl rolled her eyes. "C'mon, Doc...*you* invented this comm. watch you gave me...don't you remember what it does?"

The scientist slapped her forehead in exasperation. "The short-range tracker...! Of course! It's like the one I installed in Gadgetmobile, only not as powerful, or as precise."

Penny nodded as she activated the wristwatch-shaped device, watching the small display screen change from a timepiece to a radar-type screen. Quickly, a flashing green dot began to glow, indicating where the man in question was at this time.

The two seekers exchanged a questioning look. Should they do it?

"Let's go," they said in unison, united in their concern for the man they both loved.

Gadget had finally reached the ground, and he stood for a few moments, happy to be upright and on solid footing at last. If his 'copter didn't make so much noise, he would have used that. Still, he reflected, it was probably a good idea to save his energy for the search ahead of him. He had no idea how long it would be, or where it would take him, and he knew he couldn't count on support from his friends and fellow officers along the way.

In fact, the local police and Interpol would probably be after him, once they realized he was gone. Though the cyborg knew he could dodge them if he had to, he didn't relish the thought of being a fugitive. Even using his credit cards would be a problem, he thought. He had watched a lot of police shows with Penny, and they had often discussed how to trace felons on the run.

Gadget started to run to the shadows of a nearby building, away from the lights of the hotel and its convention center. He hadn't thought to get a lot of money from the local ATM's, and now the pathetically small stash in his wallet worried him.

Well, it couldn't be helped now, and if the police managed to track him, he'd just have to run that much faster.

But, first things first. He had to find a way of tracking the signals Claw had been sending to the virus that had infected Gadget's systems. Brenda had said that his CPU should have made a copy of all incoming signals, and that he could access that file.

"Go-go gadget database: check all files of incoming signals in the last three days," he commanded quietly as he continued walking away from the convention center, hoping to get lost in the crowd of strollers out in the early spring air. Unfortunately, downtown Stockholm was a business district, and it was fairly empty at that time of night.

The tinny voice of his cranial computer came up with its answer to his request. "Completed correlation of incoming signals recorded in the last three days."

"Good," said Gadget. "Send all data to the Gadget Global Tracking System."

Almost instantly, the dial on his left hand wrist computer lit up.

"Go-go gadget GTS. Display source of the recorded signals," the cyborg ordered, hopeful that the information would actually mean something to him. Quickly, a small satellite dish popped out of his Gadget hat, as the dial on his wrist computer began to show a holographic display of the earth and its attendant communications satellites. The small dish started to circle around, trying to track the paths of the recorded signals.



Shortly, the display hologram began to illustrate the signals' paths by a series of red lines, bouncing between satellites and earth-based receiver and boosting stations, according to the small labels on the display.

Gadget sighed as he walked, intent on the display. How was he going to track Claw in this mess of transmissions? That was the problem with so many of his high-tech gadgets: he didn't really understand them, and therefore didn't know how to really use them to his advantage. Still, he could only keep trying. Surely something would work, if he just kept on beating away at it.

"GTS...show only the last recorded transmission," the cyber cop asked. Maybe that would narrow the search down a bit. It did, but the red line seemed to bounce all over the globe, from ground to satellite. "GTS, what is the location of the source of this last transmission?"

The little display lit up with a series of numbers that Gadget recognized as latitude and longitude degrees. Global directions. "Um...GTS, show me the *name* of the place at that location, okay?"

Obligingly, the data screen lit up again, replacing the degrees with more elementary directions.

"The English Channel? But...that's just water, isn't it?" Gadget asked in a puzzled tone as he looked at the displayed words. The GTS, not having any way of answering that question, continued blinking its previously requested information.

"The Chunnel's there too...under the water," answered a cheerful voice from behind the preoccupied cop.

"Aaahhhh!" Gadget cried out as he flung himself away in surprise. Several gadgets sprang out of his hands as he flailed about, trying to keep his balance as he tripped over a small guard rail and fell to the steps below. His gadget airbag inflated just before impact, sending him bouncing up again, only to slam him into the sides of the building and stairwell like a Superball on speed. Extending his arms and legs, he managed to grab the rail and stop his bouncing, which deflated the airbag his coat had become so that he could awkwardly lower himself to the walkway next to the offending rail.

"Uncle John! Are you all right?" asked Penny as she ran to her fallen uncle. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to scare you!"

John's astonishment could not have been greater. "Penny! What in the world are you doing here? You were supposed to stay at the hotel with Brenda, to cover for me," he exclaimed crossly, once he had caught his breath. "That was the plan!"

"Um...well...we *did* cover for you...but you never said how *long* we had to stay there, did you?" Penny asked, knowing she was really stretching the truth, probably more than her uncle would let her get away with this time.

She was right.

"Penny, it's too dangerous for you to go along with me on this...you know what Claw is like," admonished the cyber cop. "You have to stay with Brenda."

"Okay," agreed Penny cheerfully as Brenda rounded the corner holding the taut leash of an excited beagle.

John looked heavenward for guidance. "Oh, for gosh sakes..." he sighed.

The out-of-breath redhead smiled apologetically. "We thought you might need some help," she said. "With science stuff, I mean...in case something goes wrong," she added, at a warning look from Penny.

John frowned at the two conspirators. "Look, I know you just want to help me, but you'll really just slow me down! It's gonna be hard enough to get out of here by myself, but trying to sneak around with two girls and a dog...geeze!"

"Well, we can call for a cab..." suggested Brenda, choosing to ignore John's use of the word 'girls', and not sure what the problem was with getting around in a group.

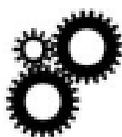
"Oh, and what if Interpol or the local police put out an alert to the cab drivers...who all have radios in their cars? They're gonna remember a gang like us, that's for sure," John said, exasperation coloring his voice. "The only way we could pull this off is if we had Gadgetmobile here, but we--"

Gadget was interrupted by the sound of screeching tires, as a creamy white Lincoln convertible sped around the corner, its glaring headlights pinning them like startled deer.

"Did someone call for Gadgetmobile?" laughed a loud voice from Gadget's wrist comm.

"Aaahhhh!" screamed Gadget again, as he fell over the guard rail once more, causing a repeat of his bouncing ball impression.

"Would somebody grab that human pinball, and get his butt in the here?" Gadgetmobile ordered disgustedly as Brenda ran to grab the wildly bouncing cop. "I knew you shouldn't have been traveling to foreign countries without me, Gadget. Look at you; a few days on your own, and you're a nervous wreck!"



Chapter Thirteen

Normally, it would take a bit less than a full day to travel from Stockholm to Calais, where the English Channel met France's coastline.

Normally, people don't travel in the Gadgetmobile.

Using his turbo jets, Gadgetmobile was able to speed 'under the radar' of even the most diligent traffic cops. Using his metamorphic camouflage abilities, he was even able to alter his distinctive contours and color. The high-tech car was a convertible in every sense of the word, and enjoyed using his abilities to keep local law enforcement officials guessing.

Even getting his human passengers through the various customs points was no problem for a car with his talents. John made unhappy noises about the false pages the car printed up for his, Brenda's, and Penny's passports, but since they were 'in hot pursuit', he let it go. He was already in trouble for leaving Sweden, and police custody. Falsifying official documents probably would not add too much more to his already heaping plate of problems.

"It's easier to get forgiveness than permission, Gadget," the car had asserted when John weakly protested the forged passport pages. "Everything will be forgiven when you catch Claw and solve Interpol's case for them. Don't worry about it!"

It didn't help any that Penny seemed impressed with Gadgetmobile's ability to circumvent the laws of several countries.

"Well, I don't see where it's a problem, Uncle John," she explained. "I mean, you being in trouble and all...it's all a misunderstanding anyways! There's no reason why we shouldn't be tracking down Claw, no matter what it takes." She made a sour face before issuing her final point. "Besides, Interpol *invited* you here...to stop the tech thieves. You're only doing your job." She folded her arms over her chest, problem settled.

John looked to Brenda for help in explaining the moral dilemma of the case to the impressionable girl.

Brenda shrugged. "I don't see a problem here, John. I don't know why you do. Scolex is a murderer and a thief. You have to stop him, using any means necessary. End of story." She also folded her arms over her chest, lending support to Penny's and Gadgetmobile's less-than-law-abiding position.

The by-the-book detective was outnumbered, and he knew it.

Even at "warp" speed, it took the better part of a day to navigate the roads that led into France. Traffic, and bathroom breaks, kept them from reaching the coast before early afternoon of the following day. Gadgetmobile kept track of the signal Gadget's GTS had recorded, and followed it in as straight a line as he could, given the traffic patterns.

They finally reached the city of Calais, and tired as they all were, they paused to admire the beauty of the coastline, and the small inland sea that separated France from England.

The English Channel. The tracks of the virus-signal led there.

Gadgetmobile analyzed the signal files, and was able to trace the results to the middle of the water. There was nothing there; no boat, no floating buoy. Since the signal was recorded, it was possible there had been a boat when the signals were first sent. It was possible too that Claw had left when his control of Gadget had shut off unexpectedly. Gadgetmobile suggested as much to his human companions.

John wasn't buying it. "Scolex wouldn't just leave. He's not afraid of anything. If he has a hideout, and he went to this much trouble to hide it, then it's still here, somewhere.

"John's right," Brenda added stubbornly. "Scolex is an arrogant creep, and he would never believe anyone could track him down. He's here...somewhere."

Gadgetmobile rolled his computer-generated eyes. "Yeah, well, if he *is* here, he's swimmin' with the fishes, 'cuz that signal's starting point is about 300 feet below the water."

"*Below* the water?" Penny asked. "Like, in a submarine or something?"

"Or, in the Chunnel..." mused Gadget, remembering Penny's suggestion from the previous day.

Penny brightened up. "The Chunnel! Yeah, that's it! It's below the sea bed, right?"

Gadgetmobile downloaded internet files on the Chunnel's construction. "Yeah, you're right, girl. It's dug right into the limestone seafloor. Look," he said, loading the schematics of the tunnel onto the car's dashboard screen. "See those side tunnels? That's where the giant borers were set free, digging their way into the ocean floor until they ran out of juice."

"They just let the boring machines go? Why?" asked John.

Brenda chimed in, having studied the plans while the others were talking. "It looks like the two sides were dug at the same time, both starting at their sides of the channel, and working inwards. When they met, there was no place for the machines to go. They blocked each other's paths, and couldn't back up. So, the construction crews set them off in opposite directions, into the sides of the tunnel, and then sealed up the holes they had made."

"Kinda wasteful," observed John.

"Yeah, but I bet some arch criminal looking for a hideout would love it!" said Penny, sure now that one of those dank tunnels hid their enemy. "So, how do we get to it?"

"We don't; I do. But, we have to find out for sure that there *is* such a place. Gadgetmobile, can you crank up your sensors to see if that virus control signal is still being sent out?"

"Sure thing, partner, but it may take a while. There's a lot of crap being shot out over the airwaves these days."

"Well, do your best." John turned to his companions. "Maybe now would be a good time to take a break," he suggested.

The high tech Lincoln quickly found an out-of-the-way parking place, and morphed into the seeming of an old, beat-up delivery car. Brenda, Penny, and John all got out, glad for the break after the long trip. Even a car as roomy as the classic convertible got pretty cramped after fourteen hours.

Trying to keep a low profile, knowing that an APB would have been put out on him, and possibly on Penny and Brenda as well, John kept his hat and coat in a dark camouflage mode. It wasn't much of a disguise, but it was the best he could do with his limited resources. He didn't want to ditch his Gadget suit, even though it made him more recognizable, since he had no idea if Claw was near or not.

Brenda, who knew just enough French to get them sneered at, ordered lunch for the group at a nearby café.

They were half-way done with their meal when they all heard the sharp sound of gunshots cutting through the afternoon street noises.

Instantly, Gadget was on his feet, looking for the source of the disturbance. He didn't have a hard time locating it, as three sweat-suit wearing men, hoods pulled up over their heads, came sprinting down the street. The lead man held a gun, and the other two held briefcases. One briefcase was dripping purple ink, splattering bystanders as they jumped out of the way of the armed man.

The shrill sounds of police whistles and car sirens heralded the arrival of the local constabulary, but that wasn't enough for Inspector Gadget.

Not stopping to consider the consequences of his actions, the cyber cop jumped in the way of the fleeing men.

The lead man slammed into the stalwart detective, bouncing back to fall painfully on his butt on the sidewalk. The other two men, seeing trouble, tried to dodge around the trenchcoat-suited man, but even going in two different directions didn't help them, as Gadget extended his arms to use the classic 'clothesline' ploy. For anyone else, the trick would not have worked, since the crooks were both several feet on either side of the policeman. For Inspector Gadget, it was a simple matter of extending his mechanical arms outwards, beyond normal human length. It worked. The running felons met twin beams of unwavering titanium, and went flipping end-over-end to land with their comrade on the cold concrete walkway. The gunman was getting back up, though, and nervously waved his gun at Gadget.

Gadget slowly pulled in his extended arms, never taking his eyes off the gunman's shaking hand.

Gadget heard Penny's frantic shout of "Brain! No!" just before seeing the angry beagle leap into the fight, grabbing hold of the thief's pants leg and growling.

The startled man looked downwards, and that moment of distraction was all the cyborg detective needed to reach out and grab the man's gun hand and lift him off the ground. The now useless weapon pointed skywards as the helpless man shouted French obscenities at his captor.

The other two men, picking themselves up off the ground, saw their leader's plight, and decided to abandon him to his fate. They ran, right into the arms of the French gendarmes who were finally making the scene.

Quickly, Gadget lowered the last thief to the ground, after forcing him to drop the gun he was still holding. Several more policemen showed up, and the odd sound of French police sirens heralded the arrival of several police cruisers with more men.

The police who were not holding the thieves were all aiming their weapons at Gadget.

"Go-go Gadget French translator," ordered the cyborg cop, hoping to get out of the situation with some calm words. He was sorely disappointed when his translator announced the officer's words in its tinny mono-

tone voice.

“Stay where you are, monster!” ordered one of the gendarmes, pointing his gun at Gadget. “We’ve seen you on the news...! You are wanted by Interpol!”

“I’m a police officer, just like you, and I was trying to help, really!” Gadget said quickly, still hoping to get out of the situation peacefully.

“We don’t have mad robots in our police force, we have only men. Put your hands up, now!”

“My hands? Well, okay....” Gadget sighed, realizing he’d never get out of this with words alone. He had to find Claw, and stop him, and no official source was going to help him. So, he did as he was told, putting his hands up, and quickly spoke a new order. “Go-go Gadget ‘copter!” Instantly, the mini-helicopter sprang from his hat, and assembled itself with lightning speed. Several of the officers surrounding him jumped back, and Gadget took that moment of surprised consternation to grab the control handles of the ‘copter, which were now in easy reach, and turn the motor on to full throttle. Revving up immediately, the noisy engine was startling, and everyone nearby ran from him, keeping out of the way of the whirring ‘copter blades.

The mini-copter created quite a breeze, whipping up the street debris enough to keep the armed officers of the law from getting a good aim on him as he quickly lifted off the ground, and headed out over the Channel.

“What the hell are you doing, Gadget?” asked Gadgetmobile over the cyborg’s wrist comm. “You were supposed to be keeping a low profile, and you go and create another international incident! Man, Chief Quimby’s gonna have your butt for this, I can tell you!”

“I was just doing what any cop would have done... I was stopping a crime!” Gadget said, rather defensively. “I couldn’t just sit by and watch those crooks get away, could I?”

“YES! You’re on a mission, you idiot! If you get yourself caught now, Claw is gonna get away with heaven-knows-what, with no one there to stop him! A bunch of petty crooks don’t need your attention, *he* does!”

“There are no ‘petty crooks’, Gadgetmobile,” said Gadget, steeling his voice a bit, which was hard to do with the sound of the ‘copter’s motor nearly drowning him out. “Who knows what those crooks might have gone on to do, if they hadn’t been stopped now?”

“Fine, fine...whatever you say, Mr. Law and Order. Just don’t come crying to me if Claw gets away because you had to stop and play cops-and-robbers. By the way...where’re you going?”

“To where you said the last satellite signal started...over the Channel, of course.”

“Yeah....and...?”

“And...I need you to try and find exactly where that signal came from...right now.”

“Right now? Well, okay....working on it....”

Gadget hovered, hoping the French police would not bring out helicopter crews to try and capture him while he dangled helplessly over the cold waters of the Channel.

“Okay, partner...here it is, just about a mile to your left...and then straight down. There’s some really weird electromagnetic readings down there, too.”

The cyber cop directed his flight to the spot his trusty car had indicated, and hovered over the dark waters, wondering if he had the courage to do what he had to do next.

“Are Brenda and Penny with you now, Gadgetmobile?” he asked belatedly, realizing he might have left them in danger back at the café.

“Yeah, they’re here now, and worried sick about you, I might add.”

“Tell them I’m fine, and I’m going after Claw, just like we planned.”

“What? How?? That signal’s comin’ from the middle of the Channel!”

“I know...and if that’s where the signal is, I’m betting that’s where Claw is.”

“So how are you gonna get there with no one spotting you?”

“The same way Claw’s robots got everywhere they were going with no one seeing them...I’m gonna swim.”

And with that, Gadget shouted “Go-go Gadget ‘copter, stop!”, causing the rotors to shut down and instantly disassemble. Dropping like a rock, the cyborg had time for only one command before plunging into the icy waters below.

“Go-go Gadget SCUBA gear!”

Several gadgets began to assemble themselves as he fell into the dark waters of the Channel. Swim fins popped out of his Gadget shoes, goggles slid down from his hat brim to cover his eyes and nose, sealing to his face and forming a waterproof protection against the cold and pollution. A rebreather unit popped out of his chest, sliding out from under his shirt collar to cover his mouth. The artificial skin on Gadget’s remarkable hands joined together, finger to finger, to give him webbed hands, and a light popped out of the top of his hat, lighting up the murky waters around him.



He really wished there was more to see. He glanced at his comm. watch, and noted that Gadgetmobile was sending him a signal, a glowing green arrow that was pointing to his left. Grateful for the hint, the submerged detective swam in that direction, quickly coming upon a metal construction sticking up out of the muddy limestone seabed. There was a large round door in the top, and a rather obvious airlock type handle just begging to be turned. Having no better idea, Gadget turned it. It was heavy, and seemed to be a bit too hard for a normal human to turn. For Inspector Gadget, or Claw's androids, it posed no problem.

The door swung open invitingly, and with only a moment's hesitation, Gadget entered the snake pit.



Chapter Fourteen

The small chamber was filled with water, but there was a dim lighted panel on one wall. The surfaces looked fairly new. In the greenish light of the panel and the whiter light of his hat's searchlight, Gadget found another door, with an instrument panel beside it. Since one button was already depressed, he figured that pressing the other one would be the thing to do.

There was a rush of water and sound, as the sea surged out of the chamber, to be replaced with air. After the water had fully drained, another small light clicked on, and the inner door unlatched and swung open.

He removed the rebreather unit from his mouth. "Go-go Gadget SCUBA gear stop," the cyborg ordered quietly, as he stepped into the dimly lit corridor beyond, his skin gleaming wetly in the eerie light.

"Oh my gosh...I can't believe he did that!" exclaimed Penny, as she and Brenda ran to the disguised Gadgetmobile. "The cops are gonna be all over the place! He'll get caught, and get in even more trouble than he's in now!"

"Gadget's not all that easy to catch, Penny. And the English Channel's not all that easy to search," Brenda answered, as she puffed along beside the girl. "I just hope he has time to set his plan in motion before the local authorities ruin everything."

The crowd of people who had gathered for the excitement of the cops and robbers action in front of the café had started running to the water's edge, to watch the departing figure of the cyborg balancing improbably on his tiny 'copter blades above the dark waters of the Channel. Not even the local police, freaked out by the sudden monster in their midst, had paid any attention to the man's lunchtime companions. The sudden flurry of activity served both Penny and Brenda well, as they scooped up the frantically barking Brain and started running, trying to keep an eye on Gadget's progress across the Channel.

They finally made it to Gadgetmobile, who was nearly frantic with worry for them. His wiper blades were slicing across his windshield, and his headlights were blinking on and off.

"What the hell's going on here, people? What fool thing has Gadget gone and done now? The local police radio waves are going nuts! Interpol's gonna be in this faster than you can spit!"

"John's going after Claw, before Scolex knows we're onto him, Gadgetmobile," the scientist said rather breathlessly as she jumped into the driver's side of the agitated Lincoln.

"Yeah, and we've gotta help him, in any way we can!" added Penny, opening the suicide doors on the passenger side of the swiftly converting car.

Changing from his previous disguise to one less grungy, the talented Lincoln changed his color to the less obvious black, and altered his distinctive contours to a more modern shape. They carefully avoided the crowds as they made their way to the nearest road to the water's edge.

Penny stood up in her seat, trying to keep track of her uncle's progress over the channel. She was just in time to see him close up his 'copter, and plunge into the icy water. She gasped in fright, but her fear was short-lived, as she saw his SCUBA gear start to form as he fell.

"Can you contact him under water, Gadgetmobile?" she asked as she saw the splash that marked his fall.

"Not as well," the car replied, concern written large on his computer-generated dashboard face. "He can't hear very well, or speak, under the water, especially with his rebreather unit in place. I can send him signals through his comm. watch, though. Assuming he has the sense to look at it, of course," Gadgetmobile added acerbically, assuring one and all of his lack of faith in that regard.

Brenda scrutinized the signals the Lincoln had recorded, looking for some more clues to Claw's lair, or his power source.

"If we could somehow shut down his power," she murmured, "we could cripple him, and his robots. He must be using a lot of power to keep control of them the way he does. It takes a lot of computing power to keep contact with so much information at the same time."

"But, wouldn't he have a self-contained power source, like a back-up generator or something?" asked Penny, looking at the display over the redhead's shoulder. "It's not like he'd be hooked up to the English version of ConEd!"

Brenda frowned. "He's a thief, Penny, and he likes to steal and cheat and lie. Why buy power when you can steal it? I'm betting he's stealing power from the Chunnel somehow, and if we can cut him off from it, it may give your uncle the chance he needs to catch Claw before he can escape."

"Then we'd better get to work," said Penny confidently. "We're Inspector Gadget's secret support team, after all. He needs us."

Brenda smiled, heartened by the girl's unflagging spirit.

"And we need him too," she added.

The floor, walls and ceiling of the corridor were all of bare concrete, dimly lit by green panels set in the walls near the floor at regular intervals. Gadget was pretty sure at this point that the whole area was not a part of the Chunnel system, and was in fact part of Claw's lair of evil, but he needed proof. He also needed to find a computer access port, for the most important part of his plan to work.

He came to an open doorway in the corridor and looked inside. Hardware of all kinds was piled on the floor, on tables, and in every corner. Computer parts were strewn about, wires and motherboards, sheet metal and tools of all kinds littered the place. Brenda would love this room, Gadget reflected, grimacing at the thought of any similarity between his beloved and the nefarious Claw.

He looked around for an open computer terminal, but found only parts and pieces, nothing finished. This was just a workroom, not the heart of the place. He would have to go further, risking discovery at every step. He lifted his chin, as well as his courage, and left the room for the mysteries beyond.

He didn't have far to go.

Coming down the corridor were two robots that looked very familiar. They were not the humanoid robots that had attacked him at the Science expo. These two rolling monstrosities were the electricity-generating robots that had shocked him into unconsciousness when he had first infiltrated Claw's headquarters so many months ago. Gadget had no intention of letting them get the drop on him a second time. He ducked back into the junk room, and waited for the 'bots to pass the open door. He hadn't seen them react to his presence, so he figured they must not have noticed him.

Unfortunately, they *did* notice his wet footprints.

Just as the cyborg stepped out into the corridor again, he heard the sound of grinding gears, as the 'bots turned around on their rubber tracks. Caught like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming car, Gadget stood stunned as the larger of the two 'bots aimed its taser at him. A sudden burst of self-preservation-induced adrenaline flooded his brain, causing him to dodge back into the workroom he had barely left.

He could hear the motorized menaces ambling back down the corridor, pausing at the still open door to Gadget's haven. Silhouetted in the light of the doorframe, the lethal robot began searching the room with its top-mounted camera. Gadget saw his chance, and before it could focus on him in the less lighted room, he attacked.

"Go-go Gadget laser!" he shouted, neatly slicing the taser cannon and camera off the front of the 'bot's frame. Damaged, the robot barreled into the room, knocking aside crates and tables as it beeped and whirred in confusion. The second robot entered the room, as though drawn by the cries of its brother. Gadget laser-targeted the camera mounted on the front of the smaller 'bot's frame, shattering the lens.

Defenseless, the robots could do nothing as the cyborg closed in on them.

"I've got a present for you," Gadget said, as he grabbed the larger robot. Quickly extending the newly-installed connector cables from his wrist, he hooked up the cables to the damaged area of the 'bot. "Go-go Gadget virus," he whispered, feeling the program begin to download into the machine's circuits. The download was very fast, and he was able to infect the second robot just as quickly. He released them both, watching them for any strange actions.

They both stopped whirring and beeping pathetically. After a few tense moments, they both turned their now-blinded cameras to him. They seemed to be waiting.

"Back off," Gadget suggested to the rather creepily (and blindly) staring pair. They did, as far as their treads would take them in the confines of the room.

"Wowsers," breathed the stunned detective. "This could really work!"

"But Dr. Claw...you don't *understand!* I've lost contact with both Grabby *and* Sparky! That's never *happened* before!" In high-pitched, nervous tones, Kramer tried to make his commander-in-chief see the seriousness of the situation. He wrung his sweaty hands as he spoke, knowing that despite the leeway Claw gave his head scientist, he could snap at any time. And when Sanford Scolex snapped, people got hurt.

"Calm yourself, Kramer, you stuttering milksop. I'm sure it's just a minor malfunction," said Claw,

waving his large, gleaming mechanical limb airily. "They're probably off having a little robotic tryst," he laughed lightly.

"W-what? But...they can't...I mean, I never installed..." Kramer's voice rose another octave as he tried to visualize the scenario. His wild blond hair and sliding glasses contributed to his air of total confusion.

"You idiot...I was *joking*" Claw growled, rolling his eyes in exasperation. "Can't you get into the spirit of things?" He patted the cowering man on his slumping shoulder. "Do try to lighten up, won't you? You'll live longer."

"Y-yes sir, Dr. Claw, sir..." gulped Kramer, smiling wanly. *He's a true humanitarian!*, the blond scientist thought. *Always concerned about my health. I'm so glad I helped sneak him out of that awful prison. They just didn't understand him, or his genius.*

"Now, if it seems that important, why don't you just run along and try to find...Oh! What have we *here*?" Scolex stepped back as both 'Grabby' and 'Sparky' rolled into the large control center, dragging a stunned Inspector Gadget with their mechanical server claws. They passed the two humanoid robots that stood silent and unmoving by the doorway.

The debonair scientist took in the ruined cameras, and the sliced-off taser cannon on 'Sparky'. He frowned, and started to issue an order...then stopped, smiling wickedly. This could be *fun*.

Kramer ran to his pet robots, and their charge. "Oh no! What has that mean man done to you, poor things?" He began to unhook the robots' mechanical limbs from Gadget's unmoving arms. "Dr. Claw, it's Inspector Gadget! He hurt my little 'bots!'"

"Yes, I see, Kramer", Claw said, affecting his best 'shocked' voice. "How terrible! But, you can be proud of them...they obviously put up a valiant fight, and managed to capture our foe, despite their injuries."

Kramer smiled at his boss, admiration written large on his thin face. *He cares for even the least among his servants* thought the worried man. *He deserves to rule the world!* Kramer hurried off with the two injured 'bots in tow.

"So, we meet again, Inspector, and you are once more my helpless prisoner. Perhaps I'll come closer, so I can gloat in your face, eh?" Scolex moved closer to the still prone man. "After all, what's a villain worth, without a good gloat?"

"That's close enough, Claw" shouted Gadget, as he dropped his 'helpless' ruse and jumped to his feet. "You're under arrest!" He smiled as Scolex stepped back, the scientist looking totally dismayed as he raised his hand (and claw) in surrender. "I knew you'd believe your robots had captured me, just like they did the last time." Gadget raised his chin proudly. "I've changed, Scolex. Your robots snuck up on me once, but they'll never do it again. Especially since I'm going to keep you away from that control panel over there," The cyber cop indicated the large computer-strewn table behind Claw, filled with laptops, motherboards, and hundreds of wires that ran out of the various hard drives and into the surrounding walls. "I'm not taking my eyes off you for an instant, Claw."

"Well, that's just peachy-keen for me then, isn't it, Inspector?" Claw dropped his 'surrendering' attitude as his face formed into the more familiar sneer. "Because I don't *need* a control panel to operate all my robots, I just need my mind...."

That's when Gadget felt the first of the two humanoid robots grab him, the second one reaching out to re-infect him with the control virus from its connector cables. The cable whipped out towards his hand, trying to cut through his skin as it had the first time.

"No, not there...go for a direct download" Scolex commanded, as the two androids struggled with the surprised cyborg. Their fight carried them up against the computer-filled control table at the back of the room. Though Gadget was as strong as either one of the two robots, he was not as strong as both of them, and they soon had him in a tight grip.

"Brenda can delete your control virus, Claw! You can't keep me a slave for long" Gadget shouted.

"I don't know how she managed to get rid of my delightful virus the first time, Inspector, but she can't do it again, if she can't get to you. And, as long as you're mine, she won't." He smiled as he came closer, gloating for real this time. He leaned into Gadget's face, his teeth gleaming in the wickedest smile the positronic policeman had ever seen.

"Do it," he said to his android servant.

Gadget felt the small access panel on the back of his head being opened, and the cold touch of the connector cable locking in. He shuddered as he heard the download circuits operating, the small beeps and whirrs of the CPU accepting new data.

Scolex smiled again as the androids stepped away from their prey, the poisonous download completed. "How do you feel, dear Gadget? Think you can escape from me now?" He laughed as he watched the cyborg struggle against the swift-acting control virus, Gadget's secondary systems quickly being corrupted, usurped by

the outside influence of a criminal mastermind.

Finally, Gadget merely stood there, still, except for his face, which grimaced in disgust at his captor. "You'll never get away with this, Scolex. Justice *will* prevail!"

"Oh, Gadget...if you *must* use clichés, can't you at least find some from *this* decade?" The suave scientist rubbed his temples tiredly. "If I'm going to keep you alive, I really must insist you get some better dialogue." He closed his eyes tightly, looking pained.

Gadget noticed the other man's distress. "Is your guilt finally getting to you, Scolex? Are you ready to give up your life of crime?" His voice took on a note of concern for his captor as he continued. "Running a secret criminal empire from a hidden underground lair must be a real strain. Turn yourself in, Scolex, and you'll live longer."

The scientist looked at his captive with amazement. "You really believe that, don't you, John? You really believe in Truth, Justice, and the American Way? You believe that every criminal is merely misunderstood, or misguided? You really *believe* that Good will win out over Evil." Scolex shook his head and sighed. He wrapped his metal-clawed arm around Gadget's shoulders in a companionable way, the gleaming silver device near the cyborg's throat.



"Dear, dear Johnny....what a naive fool you are. It's amazing that the Riverton Police still keep you on as anything but their bumbling little mascot." He leaned in closer, whispering his words in Gadget's ear. "You do know that it was your sweet little niece that solved your first case for you, don't you, Gadget?"

Gadget looked confused at the sudden change in subject. "What? I know she helped out, but I was the one who found the foot you stole, Scolex...and I was the one who saved Brenda from your evil desires!"

"Idiot! You entered my headquarters without a *search warrant!* Anything you found, no matter how damning, would have been inadmissible in a trial," Scolex spat, his voice changing in an instant from friendly concern to insane anger. "If it hadn't been for your niece convincing my fool of a minion to turn the foot in himself, you would have lost, Gadget! You would have royally *screwed up!*" The scientist straightened up, stepping back from his captive and attempting to regain his cool demeanor. "And as for my darling Brenda, I'm sure she would have learned to love me, in time." Scolex thought about this for a moment. "Or, at the very least," he admitted, "she would have learned to worship me, as Kramer does." He shrugged. "Either way, she would have been mine."

Gadget managed to turn his head to look at Scolex, who had stepped behind him. He gaped at his captor. Sanford Scolex was an incredibly handsome man, tall and sophisticated, with dark gleaming hair and deep blue eyes. His cultured voice and refined manners bespoke a moneyed background and education gained at the finest institutes both in the States and abroad. Yet, even with all this going for him, Gadget could never believe that Brenda Bradford would follow the man, as lover or as worshiper, for one simple reason.

"You killed her father, Claw" he said quietly. "You killed him to steal his research, and she will *never* forgive you for that." Gadget smiled proudly, in spite of the situation. "Besides, she already *has* someone to love. She has *me*."

He was taken aback when Scolex laughed in his face.

"She has *you*, does she? Has she given up on *real* men, then? How sad!" He continued chuckling as he shook his head. "Brenda, Brenda, Brenda...satisfied with a lover made of plastic, when you could have had *me*." He waved off the thought with his metal claw, enjoying Gadget's insulted look. "Not that it matters now, of course. I've changed too, Gadget. I have much more important matters to attend to now that I'm so close to my most magnificent plan's finale."

"Plan? You mean there's more to it than stealing the newest technologies with your robots?"

"Oh, of course." He looked at Gadget, and winked. "Now, this is the part when The Villain" he said, pointing to himself, "tells The Hero" pointing to Gadget, "his nefarious plan for World Domination."

"You know that once you tell me, I get to escape from your Death Trap and foil your plans, right?" asked Gadget, pretty sure that Scolex knew the way these things worked, but wanting to make sure they were both playing on the same page.

"Oh, of course, Inspector. I wouldn't have it any other way."

He stood next Gadget, pointing to his control panel area behind them. "Kramer and I...well, mostly me (I do so hate false modesty!) have designed this new hardware out of the stolen...or liberated, technologies. It uses the most interesting series of programs and energy sources to create a type of signal, a wave if you will, that will cut through all forms of firewalls and other security systems, allowing my virus to enter computer systems without being directly downloaded."

"And that means...you're going to control all the machines that are connected to the internet or something?" asked Gadget, sure that the plan meant trouble, but not sure for whom.

"Oh, such small thinking, Gadget" Claw laughed. "No, dear boy, it won't just affect machines connected to the internet...it will affect *all* machines controlled by computers. This plan will allow me to beam my magnetic minions of mayhem to systems around the globe! No system will be safe. And I will be able to control it all, with the power of my mind, and the implanted NSA chip I have in my brain!" Scolex raised his arms in a sweeping gesture toward the heavens at this proclamation.

"Brenda still has the anti virus that can stop your plan, Claw" Gadget said, confidently. "You can't win."

"Why, then, I'll have to get rid of dear Dr. Bradford, just as I did her father, won't I, Gadget?" He smiled in a predatory manner, giving Gadget a sidelong look. "And I have just the puppet to do my dirty work, too. She'll never see it coming, and wouldn't be able to stop it if she did."

Gadget narrowed his eyes as he grew angry. "She stopped me once, you know. She can do it again."

The scientist stopped grinning. Looking closely at the frozen cyber cop, he raised one smooth eyebrow. "Yes...how did she manage to stop you when you fell under my sway, Gadget? I made sure no other upload would be able to enter your system while you were under my control. What could have interrupted my signal?" He stood stock still for a moment as the answer hit him. "Of course...! Nothing short of a complete systems shutdown would have stopped you, and me, at that point...a complete loss of power."

Scolex smiled again, and leaned into the policeman's angry face.

“She killed you, didn’t she? She had a kill switch installed, and didn’t put it in her original plans...!” Gadget was treated to the full view of Scolex’s gleaming dental work as full-throated laughter poured from the handsome man’s mouth. “Oh, this is rich! The woman who supposedly *loves* you, *killed* you to stop your...or rather, *my*, rampage!”

Still chortling, he tried to pull himself together.

“My, my, I’d hate to see what she’d do to you if she *hated* you, Gadget!”

“She did it to save me, Scolex. She knew I’d rather die than let myself be used by the likes of you” Gadget said defensively.

Scolex smiled, enjoying his game immensely. “Keep telling yourself that Gadget. I’m sure you’ll start believing it soon enough. At any rate, if you get to her quickly enough, she shouldn’t be able to activate her kill program this time.” As an afterthought, he said “And if it makes you feel any better, Gadget, just tell yourself that you’re only killing her to ‘save’ her from me.”

The arch criminal turned back to his control panel. “But, enough fun for now. I have a virus to upload, and you have a lovely redhead to kill.” He glanced at Gadget again, and added “Oh, and I’ll have you get rid of your nosey little niece while you’re at it.”

Gadget clenched his fists and turned to face his foe, smiling grimly. “No, Claw, I don’t think so. *Go-go Gadget virus!*”

Scolex stared open-mouthed at Gadget. He was moving! Without permission or direction! Impossible! The virus was there, but somehow Scolex wasn’t receiving any signals. He checked his implanted cybernetic link. It was still working, he could feel it.

The scientist turned to his androids, waiting silently nearby. “Don’t just stand there...get him! *Get Gadget!*”

Only one of the robots obeyed him...the other one, the one who had infected Gadget, turned to attack its Scolex-controlled brother.

Scolex reached over to grab Inspector Gadget with his fearsome metal claw. “What did you do, you little fool? How did you escape my viral control?” He was spitting with anger, unable to comprehend how this former security guard had pulled off such a stunt.

“You have your virus, Claw, and I have mine, thanks to Brenda. As your ‘bot was infecting me, I was infecting *him!* I can control my version of the virus too, just like you!”

Scolex growled, finally ruffled. “Ah, but I fight dirty, Gadget, and I don’t play fair. Get in here, minions!”

Gadget jumped out of Claw’s grip as several more androids rushed into the room. Most of them were in various states of completion, but they still out-numbered his one infected robot. Two of them came at Gadget, forcing him away from their master. He realized that the best way to stop the robots was to stop Claw, but the rampaging robots were knocking him around so much he couldn’t reach the man.

Claw, meanwhile, turned back to his control panel, and pressed a series of commands into the nearest keyboard. The lights in the room flickered.

“Hah! It’s done, Gadget! My signal is going out *now*, and nothing you can do will stop it! Soon, the upload will infect every computer on the planet, and no matter how many times your dear Brenda manages to clear one, it will just be re-infected! You’ve *lost*, Gadget! The world will be *mine!*”

The sudden loss of lights and power surprised both of them.



Chapter Fifteen

"It was just a *small* electromagnetic pulse," Gadgetmobile offered weakly, as power all through the Chunnel shut down.

"For crying out loud, Gadgetmobile, I thought you said it would only affect Claw's hidden complex...*beyond* the Chunnel's limits," Penny exclaimed, exasperated. She frowned at the sheepish expression on the car's CGI face, showing on the small screen of her comm. watch.

"How was I to know they'd have the Chunnel's systems set so high? Anyone could have made the same mistake!" the car answered defensively. "Besides...at least *now* we know we've cut off Claw's power supply."

"Yes, but *our* power supply's been cut off, too" put in Brenda, trying to get some sort of reading on the missing detective from the car's auto-homing devices. It was a bit more difficult, since she wasn't in the car, and everything had to be done remotely. "It's a good thing our gadget devices are shielded well enough to withstand small EMPs."

"Well, you don't think I would've suggested it if they weren't, do you? I wasn't pulled off the assembly line yesterday, y'know!"

"Yeah, well...we're still stuck here in the passenger car, you're stuck in the car bay, and Uncle John's stuck in Claw's hidden lair...without power," grouched Penny. "How the heck are we supposed to get in there and help him *now*?"

Brenda sat back in her seat and sighed. "I don't think there's anything more we can do for your uncle now, Penny. I think we just have to let him do his job, his way."

"But..." Penny began to protest, but stopped herself. She had said before that she had faith in her uncle, that she knew how strong he really was. Now was her test, to see if she really had faith in John Brown, or if she was going to be forever second-guessing him. She leaned back in her seat too, trying to stay calm.

"You're right, Dr. B....Uncle John has to do this by himself."

Back in the car bay, Gadgetmobile grimaced. "This is gonna be one holy mess, no doubt about it."

"What did you do, you little idiot?" sputtered Claw, confusion and anger erasing the cultured tones from his voice. He grabbed Gadget's shoulders, trying to look into his enemy's face by the light of the many stalled robots' glowing green eyes.

Surprised, Gadget let Scolex grab him, but had no ready answer. "I didn't do anything, Claw. Maybe you didn't pay your power bill? That happened to me once, and it was right in the middle of my favorite show! Boy, was I—"

"Shut up, you blithering fool! We don't have time for your inane drive!" Scolex shoved Gadget away from him in disgust. "Without power, my virus can't be sent out to control the world's computers...without power, I can't control my androids...and without power, the pumps that keep the waters of the English Channel from flooding this place *won't work*." The handsome criminal genius started to back away, realizing that both his plans, and his hidden lair, were ruined. "My plans for global domination may be dead for now, Gadget, but at least I'll have the satisfaction of knowing *you* died along with them!"

With that, he used his bionic claw like a taser pistol and fired it at Gadget. Having an independent power source, Scolex himself, it had no problem firing its shocking load, and the wires shot out to deliver the stunning electricity to the startled detective. Gadget screamed as the burning current sang through his systems, and fell into an twitching heap on the floor.

Water was already starting to slide into the room from the open door.

Scolex carefully stepped around his fallen foe, smiling smugly. "Remember when I told you I'd get you next time, Gadget...next time? Well, this *is* the 'next time'...and the last!" Laughing the laugh of the truly evil, Scolex left the room, leaving the prone cyborg in an ever-deepening pool of sea water.

Gadget woke suddenly, sputtering as chilly water entered his nose and mouth. Still a bit twitchy from the electric shock, he stumbled to his feet in the dark room.

"Go-go Gadget Spotlight!" The light that went along with his SCUBA gear sprang out of his Gadget hat

at the voice command, lighting up the room. It was a mess. The androids, devoid of direction and will without their connection to their master, had simply fallen to the floor in untidy heaps. Sea water was rapidly streaming into the room starting to short out the electrical systems that still had some stored energy in them. The more volatile systems had begun to spark and flare. Fires were breaking out, undaunted by the water. The dark smoke was making it difficult to see, even with his powerful white spotlight.

Scolex was gone, and judging from the rise of the water, it had been at least five or ten minutes since he had gotten away.

Figuring that Claw might still be in the complex, Gadget rushed out of the room, hoping that his advantage of light and his cyborg abilities would help him catch the fleeing felon.

A sudden splash behind him made the detective whirl about, expecting a stealthy attacker. What he found was one of the androids, rising to its feet. He stopped, ready to fight, but the android also stopped, merely looking at him with its odd glowing eyes.

It was the robot that Gadget had infected with the converted virus. The one he had controlled.

"Wowsers...you're still under my control, aren't you? You don't need Claw's computer system to hook you to the virus...you just need my CPU." The cyborg cop smiled. "Good. You can help me catch Claw, then. He's tricky...I may need the extra backup! Follow me!"

The android made no sound, but it moved when Gadget did. Good enough, thought the detective.

They sloshed through the hallways, searching for clues to Claw's escape route. They didn't find Scolex, but they did find Kramer, stumbling down one hall, using a woefully inadequate flashlight to light his way.

The blond scientist, sodden and scared, nearly jumped out of his pasty skin when he saw Gadget backed by one of the androids he had created.

"Gahhhhhh!" he screamed, falling backwards into the frigid water. Gadget leapt forward to pull the man to his feet.

"Where's Scolex?" Gadget demanded, doing his best to look threatening. It worked only too well, as the frightened man almost fainted in Gadget's arms.

"P-please...don't yell at me! I-I can't stand it when people yell at me," he cried, quaking in the cyborg's grasp. "Dr. Claw's gone! H-he's gone..."

"Where did he go? How could he get out of here? Did he have a sub, or SCUBA gear?"

"A sub? How in the world would we hide a sub in here?" Kramer asked, fascinated by Gadget's train of thought. His fear seemed to melt away as quickly as it had emerged. "What...do you think we just *hide* subs and battleships and ...stuff like that? Don't be silly!" He cuffed Gadget on the shoulder playfully. "Dr. Claw is way smarter than that!"

Gadget stepped back, perplexed by the skinny man's sudden personality change. The man seemed to survive by ignoring anything that bothered him, and by worshiping Claw. He decided to try a different approach.

"I see" Gadget said thoughtfully. "So of course, there must have been some other escape route...one only Scolex could think of, right?"

"Exactly! The androids went out through the airlocks of course, but Dr. Claw and I ...well, mostly Dr. Claw, since I never really went out since we came here, but if I did, it would be the route I'd take—"

"*Where??*" Gadget interrupted, hurried by the water now lapping at their thighs.

"Through the Chunnel exit!" Kramer squeaked. "But I've already tried it! It's blocked by too much water!"

"Then how could Claw have gotten through?" the cyborg cop asked.

Kramer gave an exasperated sigh. "Well, he blew the water pumps after he left, didn't he? He wouldn't want you to follow him, right?"

"But...that would mean he trapped you here too, wouldn't it?"

The blond man almost fainted again, sagging against Gadget. "No...no, I'm sure he thought I had already left...Yes! That's right! He probably thought I had left after the lights went out!" He frowned slightly, his world spinning in confusion. "But, I came back here, looking for him, trying to help..."

"And I'm sure he appreciates that, wherever he is," Gadget said sympathetically. "But now we'd better get out of here." The cyborg looked at Kramer's doubtful expression. "Because Dr. Claw would want you to be safe..."

With Kramer giving directions, the two of them, followed by the android, made their way to the flooded section of the complex. It was further down than the rest of the area, and completely under water.

"The automatic door's about two hundred feet down that way" Kramer pointed. "But, it's way too far for me to swim. Mainly because I can't swim, but even if I could, I can't hold my breath that long, even if I didn't have asthma and—"

"I can swim, and I have an oxygen supply" Gadget interrupted again, trying to hurry the man along. "I can share it with you as we go."

"That's not very sanitary..."

"It's better than this dirty sea water, isn't it?" Gadget asked, doing his best to remain calm. His naturally gentle voice soothed the frightened scientist's nerves, and the man nodded.

"Well, then, hold your breath, 'cuz we're going for a swim! Go-go Gadget SCUBA gear!" The fins and rebreather aligned themselves according to their plans, and Gadget grabbed the shaking scientist as he dived into the chilly water lying between them and freedom.

Brenda and Penny joined the other passengers in cheering when the voice on the train's intercom notified them all that the power would be restored in a few minutes, beyond the emergency lighting that they had now.

"Penny! Dr. B! I've got Gadget on my screens!" Gadgetmobile shouted excitedly on their comm. watches.

"What? Where is he?" gasped the redheaded scientist, hardly believing their luck.

"You won't believe it, but he's—"

The car's voice was drowned out by the sound of the other passengers' startled cries, as the side doors to the dimly lit train opened, and two sodden men climbed into the compartment.

"Uncle John!" Penny exclaimed as she jumped up. "Oh my gosh, I can't believe it! And you've got...uh...not Scolex?" She looked confused at the sight of the cop's blond-haired prisoner. "Is that...Dr. Kramer? The one that got away last time?"

Kramer smiled weakly at the girl. "You called me 'doctor'. No one ever calls me 'doctor'." He then fainted dead away.

"Mayhem and assault at the World Technologies Conference, escaping police custody, leaving the country of Sweden unlawfully, using forged passports, driving an unregistered foreign car, entering France and then England unlawfully, causing a public panic on the shores of the Channel, escaping police custody *again*, disrupting the power supply of the Chunnel Train, nearly flooding out the Chunnel itself...have I left out anything, Inspector?"

"Well, I didn't pay my bill at the café in Calais" the cyber cop added helpfully.

Gadget's questioner was a short, rotund man in his fifties, with a bushy mustache, and a deep, rich voice. He was also Chief Inspector Harold Summers of Scotland Yard, and Gadget, along with Penny and Brenda, was in his custody.

The Chief looked at the younger policeman for a long moment, then looked over at two of the Interpol agents that had been standing at the back of the room.

Agent Jes Gustavsson smiled and nodded, while Nils Andersson coughed, trying to cover the laugh that had forced its way past his teeth.

"Right, then. I'll add that to my list, won't I?" Summers intoned somberly.

"These are serious charges, sir," added F.B.I. agent Tomlin, attending the meeting with Morgan of the C.I.A. "They really can't be taken lightly."

"I'm quite well aware of that, Agent Tomlin" answered the Chief. "But, you must admit, there is one very good reason to...shall we say...'overlook' these charges?"

Gadget, Brenda, and Penny all looked at each other, puzzled.

"What reason?" asked the cyber cop, speaking the question on all three minds

Tomlin and Morgan both looked a bit embarrassed. "Well...I suppose, under the circumstances," Tomlin said to Chief Summers, ignoring Gadget's question, "we would be willing to drop the charges against our citizen, if the other countries involved are willing to do the same..."

Jes and Nils also nodded, though unlike the other agent, they looked pleased by the decision.

"Inspector Gadget saved the world from Scolex's take-over plan," declared Agent Gustavsson rather forcefully, "and the Swedish government has dropped all charges against him, in gratitude for his bravery." She looked at Agents Tomlin and Morgan pointedly. "If I may say so, your government has a far greater reason to forgive him for his trespasses than ours does."

Tomlin nodded, turning red. "Our superiors agree with you, Ms. Gustavsson. Gadget's...'trespasses', as you call them, would not have been necessary if not for our...mistake. As Chief Summers said, we have one good reason to drop all charges against Gadget."

"What reason?" asked Brenda, angry that the man whose future was being discussed was also being ignored.

"England also has no plans to bring the Inspector up on charges" said Chief Summers. "Under the circumstances, it would be bloody uncivilized of us, don't you think?" The other agents nodded. "Then it's decided, gentlemen...and lady," concluded the Chief, smiling broadly. "Inspector Gadget is free to go, with the thanks of the international community for his help."

Penny stood up, exasperated.

"Excuse me, folks...I know you've just let my uncle off the hook and all, but...what the heck's going on? What 'reason' does the United States government have to drop the charges against Inspector Gadget?" She crossed her arms over her chest defiantly. "Except for the obvious one that he was right about Claw, that is."

Chief Summers smiled at the girl's brave stance against a roomful of adults. "Actually, young lady, that's exactly why they're doing it, eh, Agent Tomlin?"

All eyes turned to the embarrassed federal agent. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"I believe the Chief is referring to our prison system's ...error...in the Scolex matter."

"Error?" Penny asked suspiciously, starting to see where the conversation was heading.

"Scolex had always been a model prisoner, never a problem in the short time he was confined" explained Tomlin, now red to the roots of his dark blond hair. "But, after Gadget had insisted that the one who had tried to control him was Scolex himself, our people naturally investigated."

"What did they find?" Gadget asked, knowing that he wouldn't be ignored this time.

"They found Scolex, as you were told, Gadget. Scolex, quiet as always. He did what he was told, and bothered no one. Even the guards liked him." The agent shrugged, resigned to his fate as the bearer of bad news. "Sanford Scolex had money, and was able to buy himself out of a maximum security prison pretty early on in his confinement. That was probably when it happened."

"When *what* happened?" Brenda asked, frowning.

"The switch, Dr. Bradford. Somehow, a realistic android was switched for the real Scolex...and no one knew it until now."

"Wowsers! They fell for the old 'robot switch-a-roo' ploy!" exclaimed Gadget, surprised.

"We seem to have fallen for it twice, Inspector," said the agent ruefully. "We just found out that the 'Dr. Kramer' you brought in is an android duplicate."

Gadget frowned. "He wasn't an android when I brought him in, Agent Tomlin. He was human. No robot could act that well."

"If that's true, Inspector, it proves that Scolex is indeed still alive and well, and free to plot against us again" said Chief Summers seriously. "He must have managed to get out of the Chunnel unnoticed during all the commotion, and then sent the android to take Kramer's place. Scotland Yard and Interpol will be on the lookout for him, you can be sure."

"I could stay and help you out," offered the cyber cop, willing to let bygones be bygones, in the face of this new threat.

"No, no...that's quite all right, dear fellow," said Summers hastily. "Frankly, it seems to be *you* that Scolex wants most of all...and using you as bait was what started this whole mess. I think it best if you go home straight away, and do your best to track him down on *your* side of the pond." He smiled tight-lipped at Agent Tomlin.

"Good idea, Chief! I'll be on the lookout for Claw, day and night! He won't escape the long arm of the law again!" Gadget extended one of his arms to its full length, to illustrate his point.

"This is a federal matter now, Gadget" said Tomlin, rather huffily. "Leave Claw to the experts."

"The experts who ran around in circles while my uncle stopped Claw's plans for world domination, Agent Tomlin?" asked Penny in her sweetest voice. Her well aimed barb hit its mark.

"Ah...well...perhaps we will ask for Inspector Gadget's help from time to time, if his...unique...talents are needed" Tomlin conceded. "But only in matters involving Claw. Otherwise, you will do your job, and stay out of our way. Am I clear on this, Inspector?"

"You betcha!" said Gadget. "Daring detective by day, secret agent by night" he said, deepening his voice for dramatic effect. "Foiling the plans of the evil Dr. Claw and his minions wherever they may hide." The 'daring detective' sighed happily. "Wowsers! This is gonna be great!"

Penny and Brenda looked at each other, both sharing the same thought: They had their work cut out for them.

Chapter Sixteen

John looked around the surgical theatre, wondering at its vast array of high-tech monitoring devices. This is where it had all began, more than nine months ago. Long enough for a baby to be born, he mused. In some ways it really was like being born again, John thought; becoming the living embodiment of the Gadget Project, and of the hopes and dreams of its two creators, Brenda and Artemus Bradford.

It was a big responsibility, and John had tried from the first day to be worthy of the job, and of the new life he had been given. It wasn't easy, and at times it was frightening, but it was also exciting, and an enormous challenge.

He hadn't had a choice in becoming Inspector Gadget. The whole series of surgeries had taken place while he was in a coma. Becoming a cyborg had been beyond his control, but now he had a choice in how much of that control he would take back.

"We're almost ready, John," said Dr. Brenda Bradford as she entered the room, dressed in her surgical garb. She was not yet wearing her protective mask. "Are you nervous?"

John considered the question seriously. "No, I'm not, Brenda, now that I've finally made my decision about the operation."

The redheaded scientist looked at her friend quizzically. "What decision, John? We've already set up the staff and the equipment to remove the 'kill switch' circuitry. You won't ever have to worry about it again."

The cyber cop shook his head. "That's just it, Brenda...I'm not worried about it *now*."

At the woman's continued look of puzzlement, John explained. "I've been thinking about what happened in Europe, with Claw and his virus." The detective shuddered. "He took control of me so easily, Bren. I tried to fight him, and I managed to hold out for a while, but he really had me at the end there. If you hadn't shut me down, I would have flown away, his slave forever."

"We beat the virus, John. Your system has loads of anti-virus software built in now, far more than before. No virus will ever be able to affect you again. You're safe."

John nodded. "I'm safe from *this* threat...but Claw won't stop. We both know that. He's not gonna rest until he has me in his control, one way or another."

Brenda lifted her head proudly. "Then we'll fight him again. What's the problem?"

The cyborg sighed. "The problem is *me*, Brenda. You made me so powerful! If Claw...or even someone else... managed to get me in their control...I could be even worse than RoboGadget!"

"Yeah, you would be," the scientist said seriously. "RoboGadget was slapped together...he wasn't built to last a lifetime. You were." She narrowed her eyes as she looked at the man she loved. "What do you want me to do, John?"

John moved closer to put his hands on her shoulders. His warm brown eyes gazing steadily into the cool blue of hers, he said very quietly, "I want you to leave the chip where it is, Brenda. Don't take it out."

Tears sprang into her eyes as she looked at his earnest expression. "But...John..! When I first told you about the chip...you...you *hated* what I had

done!" A tear rolled down her cheek. Brenda remembered the look on his face when she told him how she had shut him down...killed him, when he was running wild under Claw's control. She couldn't bear to see that look again.

John nodded. He hated seeing Brenda cry, but he had to tell her how he felt. "I did hate it, Brenda, and I was really hurt. But, what really hurt was not that you had used the chip, but that you hadn't told me about it. You didn't trust me." John smiled a bit, and wiped away another of the redhead's tears as it rolled down her cheek. "I think you did the right thing, stopping me, Brenda, and I want you to be able to do the same thing again, if you need to."

The scientist sniffed, trying to hold back more tears. "I don't think I could do that again."

The cyber cop reached out to cup her chin in his hand, lifting her face level with his own. "You can, Brenda, and you will, if you have to. I'll be counting on you to stop me if things ever get that bad again."

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath to steady her voice, Brenda nodded. "If that's your choice, John, I'll do it. But, what made you change your mind about the chip you hated so much?"

John smiled a bit more broadly, now that Brenda's tears had stopped falling. "Like I said, Bren. It wasn't the chip as much as not having a choice about it. Becoming a cyborg, and then Inspector Gadget, wasn't really my decision. At first, I had to learn to make my own choices, to *want* to become what everyone was hoping I would be. I had to choose to be a man more than a machine, no matter how my body was made."

John sighed. "When you told me about the chip, I discovered that you had power over me that I didn't even know about, and that bothered me a lot. It made me feel like a machine again...one that had to be controlled." He smiled a bit again. "After everything I've been through, I know what I am now, Brenda. I'm a man who uses the tools he's been given."

He looked at her steadily, trying to convey his feelings without stumbling over his words. "You still have power over me, Brenda, but only because I give it to you, because I trust you to do the right thing. It's my choice."

The scientist smiled, fresh tears sparkling in her eyes. "It's your choice."

"I can hardly wait for Monday. The kids at school are *not* going to believe all the things we did!" Penny laughed at the thought of telling her friends about her wild adventures in Europe. "Man, wait till they hear about us running from Interpol all over the place!"

"Don't forget to tell 'em about me sneaking my way over there and savin' the day," cautioned Gadgetmobile as he deftly rounded a corner on their way to the police station with Gadget. "I was like your knight in shining armor...chrome armor!"

The cyber cop frowned. "Yeah...how did you get over there so fast, anyways, Gadgetmobile? Where'd you get the money to have yourself shipped?"

The Lincoln 's motor stuttered a bit as they drove along, trying to cover his fast thinking. He couldn't come up with a good lie, so he hedged around the truth instead. "Gadget, what you don't know, you can't be prosecuted for, so don't ask."

Inspector Gadget shook a warning finger at the car's AI unit face on the dashboard screen. "Now, Gadgetmobile, if you've done something wrong..."

"Look, partner, what the mayor don't know won't hurt us, so just keep your trap shut, and we'll all be just *fine*. Okay?"

"But..."

"We saved the world, Gadget! Who cares if someone's secret Swiss bank account had to be raided for us to do it? We're heroes!"

Penny giggled. "He's right, Uncle John! Don't worry about it!"

The detective frowned again. "Penny, whatever you do, don't let *Gadgetmobile* teach you about right and wrong, okay? We'll talk about this later."

He jumped out of the car as it screeched into a parking space at the front of the Riverton central police station.

Penny stood on the car's seat to give her uncle a hug before he left. "Have a great day at work, Uncle John! I'll see you for dinner!"

"Yeah, and I'll be back after I drop off the kid at her friend's house, partner. Then we can talk about your outdated ideas of 'right' and 'wrong', 'K?'"

Gadget rolled his eyes as they sped off. He'd have to have a talk with Brenda about the car's morals programming.

The station looked the same. Gadget smiled to himself. Why had he thought it would be any different from when he left? Then he realized it was because *he* had changed.

The desk sergeant looked up as the cyber cop entered the bustling central area, filled with cops and perps, witnesses and lawyers.

"Gadget! It's about time you showed up for work! There's a pile of cases on your desk...better get to 'em before the Chief reformats your hard drive."

Several passing beat cops stopped to look at the sergeant, surprised that he had made a computer joke. The sarge hated computers, and had always refused to use the ones in the station.

He looked angrily at the puzzled men. "What? A guy can't take a computer class? You think I don't want to get a promotion some day?" He waved them off. "Get back to work, all a' you!" He turned back to his work, muttering something about 'Philistines' under his breath.

Gadget smiled as he made his way to the messy desk that had been so neat before he left. Several case files cluttered the top, along with a can of WD-40 and a Snickers bar. How thoughtful! He perused the cases that had been left; typical stuff. He was just sitting down to start making calls when the grating Texas

twang of the Chief's voice rang out over the din of the squad room.

"Gadget! Get in here, now!"

The digital detective rushed to the Chief's office at the back of the room, conscious of all eyes on him as he hurried to answer the man's call.

Slipping into the office and closing the door quickly behind him, Gadget turned and stood at attention before the tall Texan's desk.

"Inspector Gadget reporting for duty, Sir."

The Chief was leaning back in his overstuffed swivel chair, his feet firmly propped up on his desk, and his arms behind his head. "So. You're back."

"Yes, Sir."

"Did you have a good time in Europe, hobnobbing with all of your Interpol and Scotland Yard friends?"

Gadget wasn't sure how to answer the question. The Chief had asked it nicely enough, but....

"Um...I'm glad to be back, Chief."

"Oh, I'm sure you are, Gadget. And maybe you're expecting to be treated differently now, since you've helped stop a plot to rule the world and all, right, Gadget?"

"Oh, no Sir! Not at all," the cyber cop hurriedly assured his boss. "I don't expect that at all!"

"Damn right you don't, Gadget. Because no matter what your international buddies will tell you, when it comes right down to it, *you didn't catch the perp!* Scolex is still out there somewhere, because you didn't catch him!"

Abashed, Gadget's shoulders slumped slightly. "I know that, Sir." He brightened up a bit as he added "But, I'm going to make finding Claw my top priority from now on, Chief!"

The head of Riverton's police force slammed his feet down on the floor as his lazy posture changed in an instant. "*Your 'top priority' is whatever I say it is, Gadget! Do you understand me?*"

"Yessir! You betcha, Sir," Gadget barked out, snapping to strict attention again at the Chief's strident order.

As quickly as the storm came, it seemed to blow itself out as fast.

"Good, good. I'm glad to hear that were on the same page, here, Gadget," Quimby said, his voice once more displaying its Texan drawl. He leaned back in his chair again, and picked up a file folder. He tossed it across the desk, motioning for Gadget to pick it up.

"That's all we have on Scolex so far...and it includes whatever info the Feds had on him before he escaped." He rolled his eyes. "They fell for the old 'robotic duplicate' routine, and let the real Claw escape. What a bunch of nimrods..."

The Chief looked at Gadget, who was still at attention. "It's okay to call them nimrods, Gadget. That's what they are."

"Yes, Sir," said Gadget, pretty sure that he would not be allowed to get away with that kind of rudeness, no matter what the Chief said.

"I want you to be on the lookout for Scolex from now on, Gadget. Any info we get on that scumwad, or his robots, will be passed to you. Got it?"

"Got it, Chief. The minute any of his robots show up anywhere, I'll be right on 'em, and it'll be 'Go-go Gadget laser!' right in their—"

Both men jumped as the laser in Gadget's left index finger shot out at his unintended command, destroying the phone next to Quimby's propped up feet.

Inspector Gadget looked at the Chief. He smiled sheepishly.

The Chief looked at Inspector Gadget. He raised one bushy eyebrow.

Gadget cleared his throat. "I'll just be going then, okay, Chief? And I'll start reading over this file right now...in Gadgetmobile..." said the cyber cop, as he quickly edged towards the office door. "As we patrol the city...away from my desk for...oh, all day maybe...? Okay, Chief...?"

As Inspector Gadget sprinted out of the door and jumped into his impatiently waiting car, everyone in the station house heard the Chief's bellowed answer

"Gaaaaadget! Next time Interpol calls you for help, I'm gonna tell 'em they can keep you!"

