

## SLIDERS

## "GOD IN THE MACHINE"

by David Gerrold

**TEASER:**

EXT. NIGHT. MEDIEVAL VILLAGE. The sliders are being chased by an angry mob. This is a medieval world, ruled by a strict theocracy that uses technology as "the wrath of god" to keep an ignorant population living in fear. The town is dark and shadowy and unlit.

The sliders have committed some kind of heresy and an enraged mob of peasants are determined to purify their souls. In a wave of screams and sirens, spotlights, laser-beams, smoke-grenades, and gunfire, the mob comes boiling after them.

The sliders jump through the Vortex just in time—or so they think. Maggie jumps first. Rembrandt is ready to jump second, but suddenly, he is hit in the back by an energy beam. Red lightning crackles across his body. "*Go on without me!*" he gasps. "No, we're not leaving you." Quinn and Colin grab him by the arms and leap with him. They come tumbling through into the next world; there is lightning still flickering down Rembrandt's back. All three collapse to the ground, but as Quinn and Colin pull themselves up, they see that Rembrandt is unconscious.

**ACT ONE:**

EXT. NIGHT. MEDIEVAL VILLAGE. Dressed with red banners and symbols. A new version of the previous world. The town is brightly lit and open.

EXT. ALLEY. Colin and Quinn carry Rembrandt to the shelter of a nearby alley. They're uncertain how to proceed. They're unfamiliar with this kind of energy weapon. While they deliberate, Rembrandt regains consciousness—but he can't walk. He has no feeling from the waist down.

Maggie and Quinn go looking for medical help. Colin stays with Rembrandt. Colin apologizes to Rembrandt. He says it was his fault. He shouldn't have asked questions. That aroused the suspicions of the villagers. Rembrandt insists that no one is to blame—the world was a theocratic nightmare. No matter what they did there, they would have aroused suspicion, they were outsiders. Anytime anyone claims the authority to speak for God, it's the seed of tyranny. It creates chasm between the congregation and their ability to let God in. God doesn't need a middleman. We can only hope the same conditions don't obtain here. Maggie and Quinn return then; they've found a doctor.

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE / HOME. DOCTOR KRISLOV is a middle-aged man, quite pleasant and considerate. He says Rembrandt's spinal cord has been *scorched*—severed. Krislov is somewhat suspicious of the sliders; this wound was made by a "banned" weapon, a weapon not

used since the overthrow of the theocracy several years before. Quinn says they were attacked by bandits on the road, which Krislov seems to accept.

Doctor Krislov can't cure Rembrandt—and he strongly warns against taking Rembrandt to the nearby colony of Believers. "Don't be fooled by their miracles. You were smart to avoid them when you came up the road into town." Remmy asks, "Can they make me walk again?" Dr. Krislov is reticent to answer. "The cost will be your immortal soul."

Desperate to walk again, Rembrandt pleads with his friends to get him to the believers' camp. Despite Krislov's warning, if there's a chance of a cure, they have to investigate. Before they leave, Quinn talks to Krislov privately about the believers. Krislov gives him a clue. "Your friend is desperate. He'll go to the believers. Afterward, if you can get him away, you must bathe him in Satan's light to save him." This makes no sense to Quinn.

EXT. DAY. MEADOW. TENTS. The believers' camp is a cluster of tents in an open meadow, outside of town. It is like a country fair, run by flower children / gurus. Here, the sliders find friendly people who seemingly want only to help. The curious thing about the believers is that there seems to be no leader. Children, old people, young people, whoever is present—they all speak for the whole group. The conversation is not with one, but with the whole group.

Apprised of Rembrandt's injuries, the believers offer him "the blessings of God" so that he can walk again. "Are you willing to accept God's blessing?" Rembrandt says, "I have always been willing to accept God's blessing."

INT. TENT. The believers give Rembrandt a glowing liquid—which they call "the glow." The liquid contains millions of tiny bio-machines, which will suffuse Rembrandt's body. The bio-machines will radiate a holographic image of Rembrandt's injuries, and a holographic program will be radiated back to them, instructions on how to heal the injuries.

There is no catch. Blessings are freely given. It is a product of the war in which the theocracy was overthrown. The glow is a miracle. It was created to help people recover from the scourge of the lightning rods (the weapons of the theocracy). God is now available to everyone who freely accepts the blessing. "You must drink God's spirit and take him into yourself." Perhaps the sliders should be suspicious, but they really have no choice. Rembrandt takes the "glow" and drinks it. He lays down on a mat and falls into a trance.

Several of the believers circle Rembrandt; soon his body starts to glow. The believers wave their hands over Rembrandt's body and their hands glow as they listen to Rembrandt's injuries. This is "heaven's light." Now, the glow flows back into Rembrandt. The believers are telling his injured body to heal. The glow focuses in on Rembrandt's lower back...and is absorbed.

Colin, Quinn, and Maggie exchange skeptical glances. What just happened here?

**ACT TWO:**

EXT. DAY. MEADOW. Colin, Quinn, and Maggie are sharing a light meal under a tree. They are curious about the believers—particularly the odd way that they all seem to speak for each other. One of the believers comes to get them. They return to the tent where Rembrandt was healed.

INT. TENT. As the sliders enter, Rembrandt sits up, gets off the mat and walks to them—a little unsteadily at first, but with growing sureness. He is healing. He says he feels fine, but also that he feels filled with goodness.

The believers explain a little bit of the history of this world—how the theocracy collapsed when people realized that God did not need a middleman, that every person has within him a spiritual antenna—his own small access to God. When people knew that, then the theocracy lost its power to control them. This sounds good to the sliders. Colin and Quinn realize that what they saw was applied nanotechnology. The glow is made up of billions of tiny biological engines. The luminance they saw was the communication between the units in Remmy's body and the linkage in all the other believers—a kind of electronic telepathy. The believers were programming Remmy's body to heal itself.

EXT. DAY. Rembrandt is fully healed now. He goes to each of his friends and acknowledges his love for them. There is nothing sappy or weird about it—and yet, there's something *more* than Rembrandt going on here. It is as if he has been filled with God's blessing, exactly as the believers promised.

Quinn expresses curiosity mixed with caution. "What are you feeling?" Rembrandt explains that the feeling of goodness he acknowledged before has become stronger and stronger. He feels linked to every other believer now; sometimes he can hear what they hear, or see what they see, or feel what they feel—soon he will be able to share his thoughts, and then the mind-power available to him will be incredible. "I wish you could feel it too."

The other sliders exchange concerned glances. As the linkage with the other believers grows stronger, Remmy is turning into a telepath—and more than that, a member of a mass-mind. They are intrigued as Remmy says, "And this is the wonderful part. Do you know the feeling that you get sometimes that God has his hand on your shoulder—only it passes too quickly? This is like that, only more so. When you're linked with all the other believers, you're part of a much larger receiving system, like a giant antenna, and you can feel the presence of God within you all the time."

He takes them by the hands, one by one, and as he does—his hands glow and the glow of warmth is felt by the person he touches. Maggie giggles in delight, Colin's eyes go wide in wonder. Quinn is startled and amazed. Rembrandt invites and encourages each of them to share the blessing. It is freely given. The other believers come to them now and encourage them to accept God's blessings. The sliders ask for a moment apart to discuss this with Rembrandt.

EXT. DAY. TENTS. Quinn says to Rembrandt, "We have to slide, Remmy. We have a job to do." The vortex is already forming. Remmy says, "My job is here now. If I slide, it will break

the linkage. I'll lose my connection with God. I'm going to stay here. *You go on without me.*" Colin and Quinn exchange a glance. They look back. The other believers have seen the vortex and now they are approaching with serious intent. They will not let the sliders go—

The sliders make a decision. They've been here before. Maggie jumps. Colin and Quinn grab Rembrandt just as they did before. "We're not leaving without you." They leap with him through the vortex.

### ACT THREE:

EXT. SEMI-MEDIEVAL WORLD. DAY. A new world. The same town, but this time with no banners, no evidence of the theocracy or the believers. Lots of greenery and friendly people. Seemingly a safe-haven. Rembrandt collapses from the jump — the shock of being separated from the rest of the colony has knocked him unconscious.

INT. HOTEL. Maggie and Quinn have found a room at a nearby inn. Perhaps it is run by a duplicate of Dr. Krislov. Rembrandt awakes, confused. He seems normal. He says he is normal. The others are cautiously optimistic. Maybe the jump-shock cured him. Remmy goes off to shower. They hear him singing through the door and he sounds normal.

EXT. DAY. PATIO. Outside the hotel room, the sliders begin to discuss their next moves — Rembrandt brings them iced-tea or lemonade. It's such a normal act — until Quinn notices the way that the liquid sparkles in the glass — and knocks the glass out of Maggie's hand before she can drink. Rembrandt is puzzled and hurt. Quinn tells him to stop pretending. He accuses Remmy of trying to infect them all. Rembrandt denies that he was trying to do anything wrong. Quinn won't believe him, and Maggie and Colin are confused by this confrontation.

INT. HOTEL ROOM. Quinn goes into the bathroom and comes out with a glass that has droplets still clinging to the sides. Quinn holds it under a light and the droplets glow. "You're still infected. You're under the influence of the glow."

"No, I'm telling you that the glow is a real access to something larger than mere humanity. You don't know what it is because you can't feel what I'm feeling. Can you afford the arrogance of *not* knowing? The glow can make us more powerful, Quinn. We can be a linkage of our own." Quinn says to Rembrandt. "There's a way to deprogram you, Remmy. Let us try." Rembrandt refuses. The glow is a blessing. He leaves.

EXT. DAY. STREETS. The others follow Remmy, but he has disappeared somewhere into the town. "He'll have to come back to us. We're all he has." Quinn isn't so sure. Remmy has the glow. But he agrees to return to:

THE HOTEL ROOM. Colin and Maggie are furious with Quinn for being so skeptical. What if Rembrandt is right that the blessing can be useful to them? Quinn argues, "Whatever it is, it breeds in human beings. It uses us. Well I don't want to be used. Do you?" He holds the glass up to the light and the droplets glow stronger. There's the proof. Remmy's blood mixed with

water and some nutrient—sugar will do—is enough. Rembrandt is going to spread the glow through this world whether people want it or not! Is that the act of a person pure in spirit? Or is that the act of an infectious disease? They've got to find him. But then what—? How will they stop the glow? Quinn remembers what Krislov told him—Rembrandt must be bathed in "Satan's light." But what is that?

There is a blinking red neon light outside the window. Each time the red flashes, the droplets on the glass fade. They only glow when the light blinks off. Red light? Of course. If the glow is programmed by one frequency of light, it is deprogrammed by another!

"Let's go!" says Quinn. "We've got to find him before he infects others." And they are out the door.

#### **ACT FOUR:**

EXT. STREET. The sliders are following Rembrandt's trail. Periodically, they pass a person who smiles at them and offers them "the blessing of the glow." Quinn is carrying a portable spotlight of intense power and he has fitted a red filter over it. Whenever they meet someone who is "glowing," they turn the light on him or her. The person's beatific demeanor fades. Some start weeping. Others get angry at having their access to god taken away from them. One or two are grateful. And direct the sliders toward a meeting hall where Remmy has set himself up as a preacher.

INT. MEETING HALL. There is a small gathering of people here, all "transformed." There are too many of them for the spotlight, and the believers take the light away from Quinn—not in anger, but in pity. "You don't know what it is to feel the hand of God on your shoulder. Of course, you're afraid."

Now Rembrandt arrives. Even more "converts" accompany him. He has returned to make more glow. More glow will be needed to convert the sliders anyway. We see how the glow is manufactured. Rembrandt cuts a vein and his blood glows as it pours into a beaker. Water is added, and sugar. Now, there is a whole pitcher of "glow."

Other believers wheel in carts with huge coffee urns and Rembrand pours the "glow" into the urns. The believers shine lights into the huge containers. Soon, they will have enough glow for the entire city.

INT. ROOM. The sliders are put into a private room, to wait until the glow is ready. Rembrandt comes to them and Quinn argues uselessly with Rembrandt about their responsibilities as sliders, that they don't want to be transformed. Rembrandt looks at them sadly and explains, "Afterward, you'll wonder why you argued so hard against it. You must trust me. This is for your own good."

INT. MEETING HALL. The glow is ready now. The sliders are brought in. A small crowd has gathered for the service. Rembrandt fills a chalice from one of the urns and holds it up—it radiates so brightly, it's almost impossible to look at it. He drinks.

And now, Rembrandt is transfixed in a glow of his own; he is (apparently) in direct communication with God. But we only see his side of the conversation — and it is the “last temptation” conversation. “Why me?” Through Rembrandt’s side of the conversation we see him come to the realization that *this* is not God’s plan. Is he really talking to God? Or is he hallucinating? It doesn’t matter. Whatever he is listening to is telling him that worship is a matter of choice not compulsion.

Rembrandt turns to Quinn and says, “Forgive me. I did not know what I was doing.” He hands the spotlight with the red filter on it to Quinn, and bares his chest. Quinn shines the light on Remmy. We see Remmy lose his beatific manner and he begins weeping at his loss.

Beyond... some of the other believers begin weeping too. But some of them become angry and irrational. Quinn realizes that this is an effect of the “network” becoming irrational. The crowd exhibits all kinds of emotional behaviors. And they are angry at the sliders. (“Here we go again,” says Colin.)

The crowd wants the linkage back. They insist that the sliders drink—and that Rembrandt drink again. But Rembrandt turns to them like a true preacher and gives the greatest sermon of his life. “People must not be dragged to God, they must come of their own free will. The experience of God (or whatever the gift of the glow represents) is not a goal, but an avenue.” The real job is still individual responsibility.

The speech works. Rembrandt’s presence *as an individual* shines through. The believers take the flashlight and begin to play its cleansing beam all over themselves. The sliders are free. And this time, when they jump, they do so without a mob in pursuit...

Just one question, as Rembrandt looks back at the world they are leaving. Was it real? Was it really God that he experienced? He doesn’t know. And he never will.

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