



A Beginner's Guide To Playing Guitar

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Chapter 1 – Getting Started

The guitar is a fabulous instrument which, in the hands of a maestro, is capable of producing beautiful and complex music. The great thing about the guitar is that you can make a good sound almost right away! Just strumming a chord or two can be very satisfying, and even little knowledge of chords opens the door to a vast storehouse of popular songs. Chapter 1 is designed to help you buy the right acoustic guitar and get accustomed to the feel of the guitar.

1.1 Getting To Know The Guitar

The acoustic guitar can have steel or nylon strings, which vibrate when plucked. This vibration creates a sound in that resonated within the body cavity and is projected outward through the sound hole. Before proceeding forward it is important to be familiar with the various names of guitar parts as shown on the right.

1.2 Buying The Right Guitar

A good guitar can make all the difference to your playing, so it is worth investing in a well-built instrument. Your first guitar does not have to cost a fortune, but it is important that it plays easily and does not hamper your progress in anyway. As you shop for your guitar, make sure you assess quality as follows.

1.2.1 Action

The term ‘action’ describes the distance between the strings and the fingerboard. If a guitar has high action, then you will need to press down with more force to play a note. This is undesirable since it

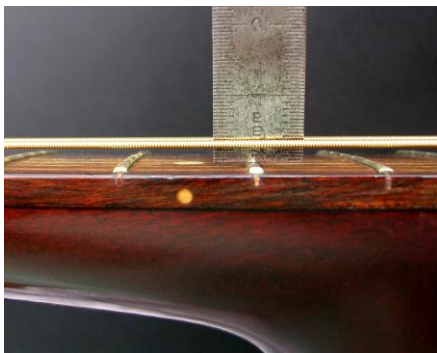


Figure 2: Action

might make your fingertips hurt, at least initially. If the action of the guitar is too low, then the strings can reverberate against the frets causing a buzzing sound called ‘fret buzz’. It is advisable to test every single note on the fingerboard ensure there are no buzzy notes.

1.2.2 General Wear & Tear

Look for any physical damage to the guitar body or any sign of poor assembly. Look carefully at the soundboard of acoustic guitars to check for hairline cracks and splits in the wood. These can be serious problems which get worse with time and are expensive to repair. Also ensure that the strings are not rusting at any part of their length!

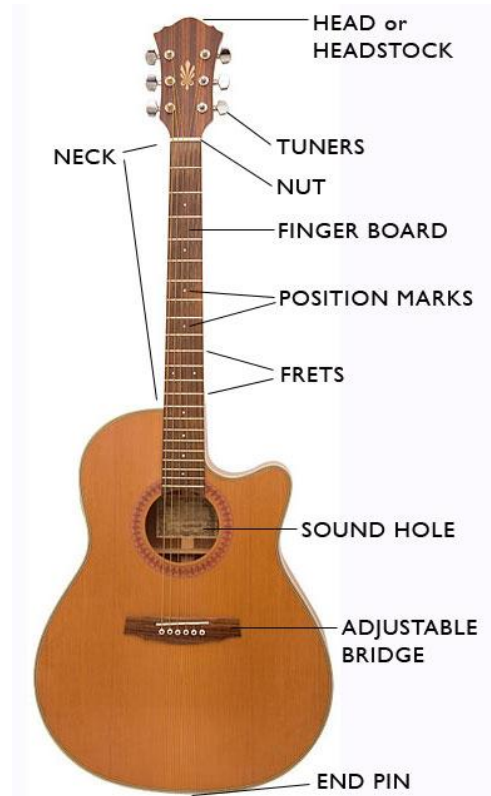


Figure 1: Guitar Body

1.3 Getting Ready

Before you dive into the world of chords and tablatures, it is essential that you prepare for them by adhering to the following.

1.3.1 Staying In Tune

Guitars often go out of tune, especially when the strings have been recently changed. For the scope of this guide it is advisable to only use the ‘standard tuning’ in which the six strings of the guitar are tuned to the notes E, A, D, G, B and E (from lowest to highest). This is the tuning configuration on which all the chord shapes and names in the following chapters are based on.

In practice, tuning is a painstaking process and can be frustrating to a beginner. It is recommended for beginners to use an electronic tuner, since they take the hassle out of the tuning process.



Figure 3: Electronic Tuner

1.3.2 Hand Positions

This is a matter of personal style as well as practice. A good playing position would allow your hands to be poised in readiness over their respective parts of the guitar.

1.3.2.1 Right Hand

The right hand should hold the plectrum lightly between the thumb and the index finger. Ensure that enough of the plectrum is showing to strike the strings clearly.

1.3.2.2 Left Hand

The left hand fingers should curve around the neck and press down on the strings. The left hand balances and pivots on the pad of the thumb, which rests on the back of the guitar’s neck. The index finger should be able to reach the sixth string without discomfort. Also, fingers should be curled to the point where they can press down a string without making contact with other strings.



Figure 4: Left Hand Position

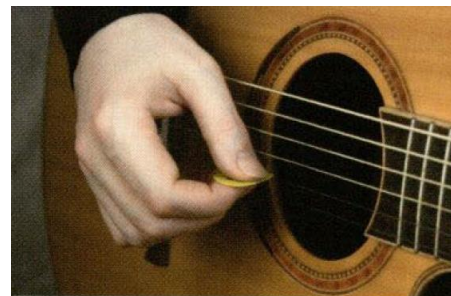


Figure 5: Right Hand Position

1.3.3 Playing Posture

The guitar can be played while you are standing up, sitting down or even moving around! It is advisable for beginners to play sitting down and adopt a position comfortable and relaxed. Choose an armless chair of comfortable height and ensure that your hands do not feel constrained. Furthermore, maintain an upright posture to avoid straining your back and shoulders.

Advice: *A steel-string guitar is hard on the fingers at first. You will find that your thumb aches, and that your fingertips grow sore. But this is temporary, like breaking in a stiff pair of boots.*

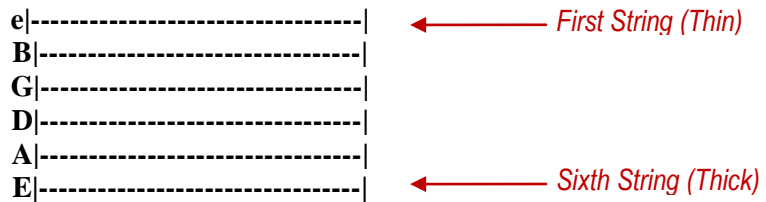


Chapter 2 – Reading Tabs

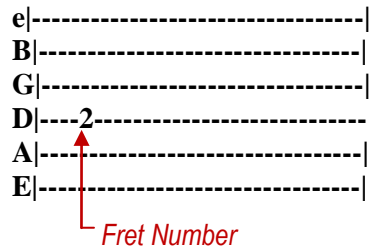
The ability to communicate music by writing or reading it is essential for every guitar player. This skill is often called upon when a guitarist collaborates with other musicians or plays a melody composed by someone else! Chapter 2 is designed to introduce you to ‘tablature’ (‘tab’ in short), a system of musical notation used for fretted string instrument. At the end of this chapter, you should be able to play simple tabs!

2.1 Basic Theory

Tabs convey information regarding the notes played on the guitar and are a heavily simplified version of classical music notation. Unlike classical music notation tabs do not communicate information on timing, note length or which fingers to play with. Although tabs are not as comprehensive as classical music notation, they prove to be excellent learning aids for beginners in conjunction with a recording. The basic tablature structure looks like,



In this arrangement each dashed line represents a string of the guitar and the letters correspond to the standard tuning discussed in Chapter 1. Therefore, the lowercase 'e' corresponds to the thinnest string on the guitar and the uppercase 'E' corresponds to the thickest string. Numbers representing which fret is to be played are then added to these lines, for example,



Tip: Place your finger towards the end of the fret for a cleaner sound!

This corresponds to pressing the 'D' string on the second fret of the guitar. Similarly more notes can be added to the sequence and a melody can be communicated.

2.2 Exercise I

As the first exercise in tablature reading we will play the opening riff of '[Seven Nation Army](#)' by the White Stripes. Note that, since the tabs do not relay any information of timing, you can listen to the actual song or watch to the video recording below to learn the timing.

```

e|-----|
B|-----|
G|-----|
D|-----|
A|--7---7---10---7---5---3---2-----|
E|-----|

```



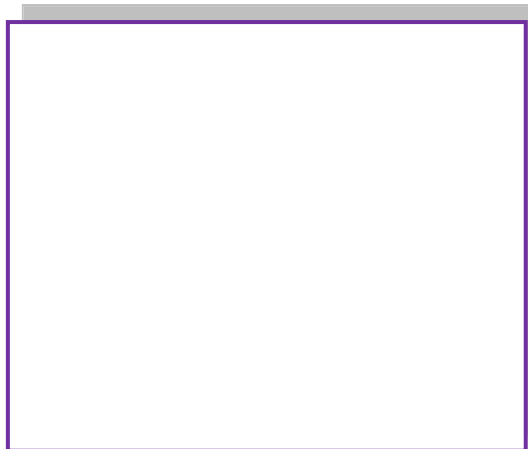
2.3 Exercise II

As our second exercise, a slightly more complex arrangement from the song ‘[Stairway To Heaven](#)’ by Led Zeppelin can be considered. Again it is advised to listen to the original song and understand the timing of the melody.

```

e-----5-7-----7-|-8-----8-2-----2-|-0-----0-----|-----|
B-----5-----5-----|---5-----3-----|---1---1---1---|-----|
G--5-----5-----|---5-----2---|---2-----2---|-----|
D-7-----|-----|-----|-----|
A-----|-----|-----|-----|
E-----|-----|-----|---3-5-5-----|

```



Advice: Since tabs do not convey which finger to use to press the different strings, one must rely on good judgment and comfort. This is a skill and will develop over time!



Chapter 3 – Chords

Learning to strum chords is by far the easiest and most enjoyable way to start playing. By learning the shapes of chords on the fretboard and improving your left hand fluency, a whole world of songs opens up to you. This Chapter focuses on the chord shapes and introduces chord combinations in exercises.

3.1 Chord Shapes

‘Chord diagrams’ are conventionally used to convey chord shapes and the fingering of any given chord. The grid represents the strings (vertical lines) and the frets (horizontal lines) of the guitar viewed as if the instrument were upright.

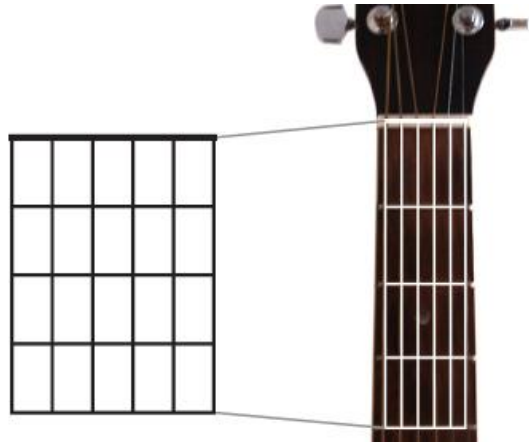
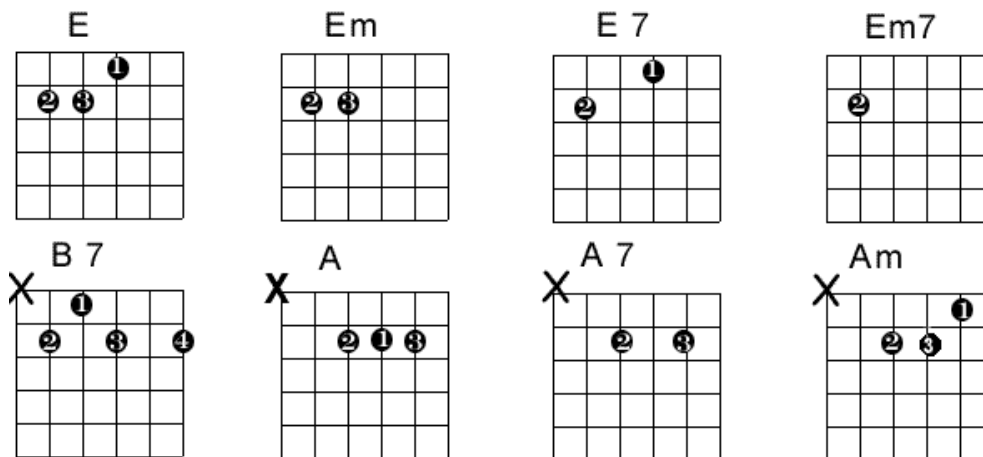
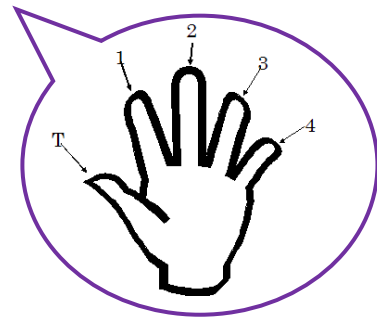
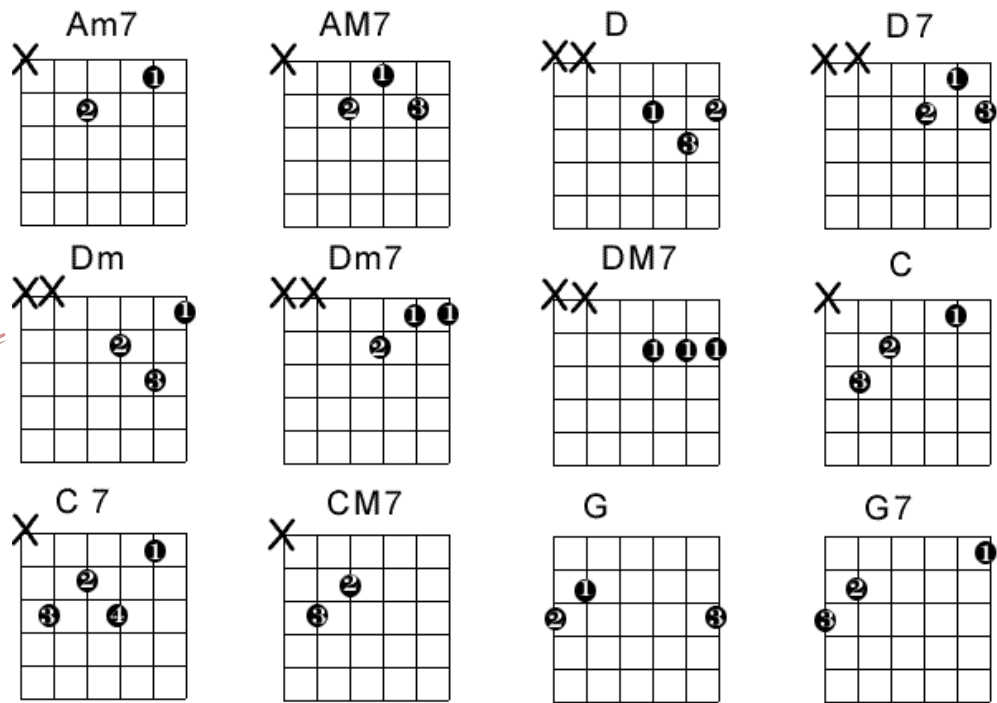


Figure 6: Chord Diagram Grid

A thorough list of easy and commonly used chords is shown below. For now, don’t worry about their names and what they mean, just have a go at making the shapes. In the chord diagrams, the circle shows which string and fret to press and the number within the circle tells you which finger to use. Also, an ‘X’ over a string indicates that that string should not be played when strumming the chord. Arch your fingers so that the underside of your fingers does not unintentionally touch strings.





Tip: For all chords, strum slowly to check if each string rings clearly!

Figure 7: Basic Chords

3.2 Strumming

So far we have focused on the left hand, but now we turn our attention to the right hand and strumming. Strumming essentially comprises of striking some or all the strings in the downward or upward direction and is a vital component of playing chords. Strumming enables the guitar to deliver a fuller sound which is not achievable by instruments with fewer strings. Using upstrokes and downstrokes together creates the possibility of a wide variety of rhythmic patterns.

Playing chords and switching between them requires good coordination between the left and right hands. This is a skill which can only be developed through practice. Listening and observing the playing style of your favorite guitarist might aid you in building your strumming skills. Mastering chords is like learning to write, once you have had enough practice, they just play naturally!

3.3 Exercise I

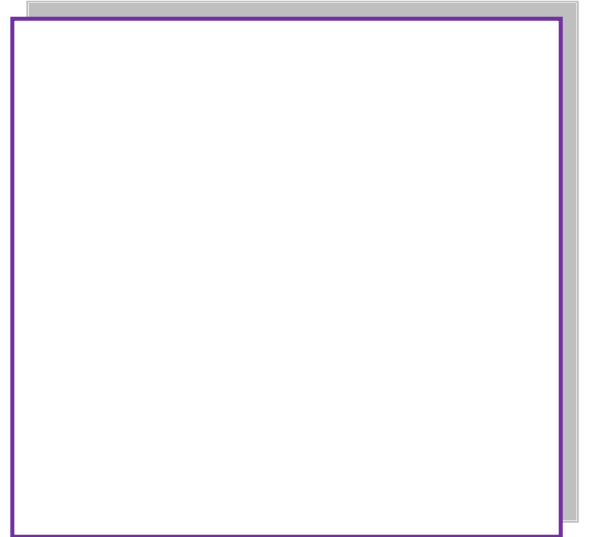
To put your knowledge of chords to the test, try playing the Guns n' Roses version of '[Knocking On Heaven's Door](#)'.

Verse 1

G D Am
Mama take this badge off'a me
G D C
I can't use it any more
G D Am
getting dark to dark to see
G D C
Feels like I'm knocking on heaven's door

Chorus:

G D Am
knock knock knocking on heaven's door
G D C
knock knock knocking on heaven's door
G D Am
knock knock knocking on heaven's door
G D C
knock knock knocking on heaven's door



Advice: Practice, practice, practice! **Look for patterns in chord arrangements.** Play your favorite songs and have fun!



Chapter 4 – Polishing Your Skills

Use it so you don't lose it! - The skills you learned in previous chapters provide you with an insight into what the guitar has to offer. To make this effort worthwhile, it is important to keep playing and combining these skills. This chapter will provide two exercises which combine tablature reading and chords for a more complete experience.

4.1 Redemption Song – Bob Marley

The redemption song as played in Bob Marley’s album, *Uprising* has been an anthem for thousands of reggae fans. It was originally recorded with only an acoustic guitar as accompaniment. This song is not very difficult to learn and is a good exercise to practice chords and tabs. Familiarize yourself with the layout of the song’s transcript and watch the video for timing.

Chords used:

G	320003	Em	022000
C	x32010	G/B	x20003
Am	x02210	D	xx0232

Only fret numbers are given
(no fingering information)

Intro:

```

e-----|-----|-----|-----|
B-----|-----|-----|-----|
G-----|-----|-----|-----|
D-----|-----2---0-----|-----0-----|
A-----0---2-----|--3-----2-|-----0---2-----2-|--3---0-----|
E--3-----3-|-----|--3-----|-----3-|
  
```

```

e-----|-----|-----|-----|
B-----|-----|-----|-----|
G-----|-----|-----|-----|
D-----|-----2---0-----|-----0-----|
A-----0---2-----|--3-----2-|-----0---2-----2-|--3---0-----|
E--3-----3-|-----|--3-----|-----3-|
  
```

Verse 1

G Em
 Old Pirates, yes, they rob I.
 C G/B Am
 Sold I to the merchant ships
 G Em C G/B Am
 minutes after they took I from the bottomless pit.
 G Em
 But my hand was made strong
 C G/B Am
 by the hand of the Almighty.
 G Em C D
 We forward in this generation triumphantly.

Chorus

G C D G
 Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom?
 C D Em C D G
 'Cause all I ever had, redemption songs,
 C D G C
 redemption songs.



Observe the variation in strumming pattern throughout the song to emphasize or to provide moods to the lyrics. Thus always pay attention to the lyrics of a song to grasp its mood and strum accordingly!

4.2 Wish You Were Here – Pink Floyd

This song was the title track of Pink Floyd's 1975 album by the same name. This song is classified as being a progressive rock song and is heavily based on the acoustic guitar. It combines cords and tabs in a very intricate way. Familiarize yourself with the layout of the song's transcript and watch the video for timing.

Chords used:

G	320033	Am	x02210
C	x32010	D	xx0232

Intro:

Strum a few Times Strum a few Times

```

e-----3-----3---|
B-----3-----3---|
G-----0-----0---|
D-----0--2---2---2---2--0---0---|   X 2
A-----0h2-----0-----2---|
E--3-----x-----3---|
  
```

Several notes occurring together represent a chord!

'h' stands for 'hammer-on'

Strum a few Times Strum a few Times

```

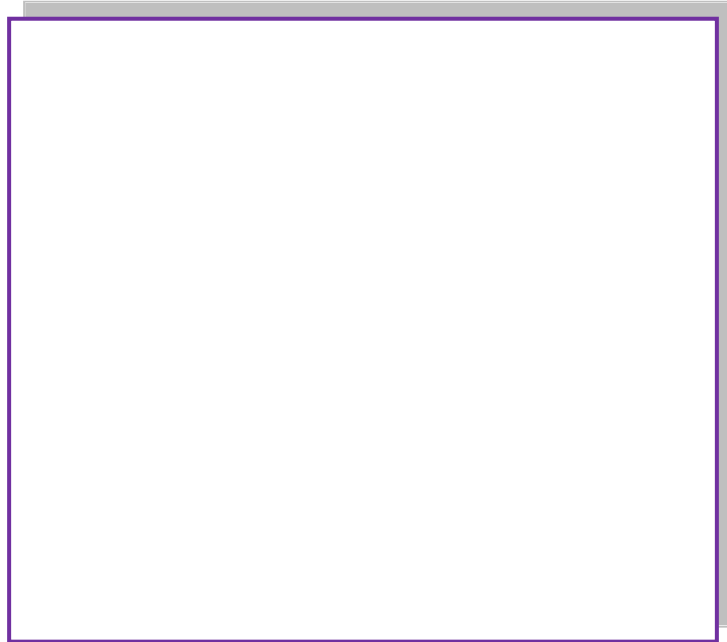
e-----3-----3---|
B-----3-----3---|
G-----0-----2---|
D-----0--2---2---2--0---2---|   X 2
A-----0h2-----0-----2--0---0---|
E--3-----x-----0---|
  
```

Verse 1:

C		D
So, so you think you can tell		
	Am	
Heaven from Hell		
	G	
Blue Skies from pain		
	D	
Can you tell a green field		
	C	
From a cold steel rail		
	Am	
A smile from a veil		
	G	
So you think you can tell		
	C	
Did they get you to trade		
	D	
Your heroes for ghosts		
	Am	
Hot Ashes for trees		
	G	

Hot air for a cool breeze
D
Cold comfort for change
C
Did you exchange?
Am
A walk on part in the war
G
For a lead role in a cage

Repeat intro



This song requires almost seamless transition from playing single notes to chords! This is a very good to learn this song as it helps build your fluency with the guitar techniques.



Chapter 5 – Reaching Out

“For anything worth having one must pay the price; and the price is always work, patience, love, self-sacrifice – no paper currency, no promises to pay, but the gold of real service”

– John Burroughs

5.1 Suggested Readings

By now, you must have a good idea of what it is like to play the guitar and also heard several maestros performing. This guide was created to provide a glimpse of what it is like to play the guitar. However, it cannot be stressed enough that it is very limited and simplified in describing a greatly versatile instrument which has existed since the sixteenth century. It is for this reason that reading of other more advanced books on guitar methods or personal lessons are strongly recommended. Some useful books divided by genre are listed below.

Music Theory:

Music Theory for Guitarists: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know But Were Afraid to Ask	Details
Fretboard Theory	Details

Electric Guitar:

Learn to Play Like the Guitar Greats: The Essential Guide to Chords, Equipment and Techniques	Details
Blues You Can Use	Details

Rhythm and 12-String Guitar

Twelve-string guitar styles: 12-String Guitar	Details
Rhythm Guitar: The Complete Guide	Details

References

Black, David. *“Playing Better Guitar”*. Quercus Music

Tablature and Chords – www.ultimate-guitar.com

Figure 1: <http://www.onlineguitarlessonsfree.com>

Figure 2: <http://upload.wikimedia.org>

Figure 3: <http://www.musicalinstrumenthaven.com>

Figure 4 & 5: Black, David. *“Playing Better Guitar”*. Quercus Music

Chapter 1 & 2 cover: <http://fc09.deviantart.com>

Chapter 3 cover: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/35881467@N00/3902815061/>

Figure 6, 7: <http://www.guitaristguitarist.com/> & <http://www.guitaralliance.com>

Chapter 4 cover: <http://www.music-for-music-teachers.com>

Chapter 5 cover: www.photobucket.com