

Enter the Cube

by Nicholas and Dan Dobkin
January 2002 ...

Chapter 15: *Jingle's Bells*

The kids bundled into the snack bar, laughing and talking excitedly.

“Was that last one awesome or what?” said Cane. “We blew Wolfie’s nose right off!”

“Yes, well, we weren’t really supposed to do that much damage to their ships,” said Fox. “What do you guys want?”

“Anything that’s not alcoholic!” shouted Nicholas. “I’m dying of thirst!”

“It wasn’t my fault, that’s what happens when everybody hits the target at the same time,” added Cane.

“Yeah, who would’ve thought Erin could make that shot?” said Clara. “I figured I would have to do it by myself.”

“T’was the Captain that sliced through their defenses like cheap sailcloth,” said Erin. “A master of the sea of stars! The devil incarnate! Three cheers for Captain Blood!”

"Captain Blood? who's that?" whispered Cane to Tennyson.

"Nicholas, of course!" Tennyson replied. "Can't you keep Erin's fantasy worlds straight?"

"Uh-- no, not really."

Clara joined in Erin’s *Hip Hip Hooray!*, silly though it was. She preferred Erin the Buccaneer to the self-pitying Dreyfuss. Besides, Nicholas had really done a wonderful job of managing the final dash to the dock, albeit following the outline Slippery had drilled them on the evening before. After making as much use as they could of the blast debris from Clara’s explosives, the Arwings had used the tight turning techniques Fox had taught them to literally fly a circle around the pursuing fleet. Only Wolf O’Donnell himself, lightning quick, had figured out what they were doing and adopted their techniques on the fly: but this left him one against three

two kilometers out from the dock. Nicholas had formed the kids into a pyramid with Wolf at the apex so that if he turned to target any one of the three the other two would have a clear shot at his vulnerable rear thrusters: realizing his predicament, Wolf had accelerated and tried to squeeze himself through the gauntlet before the kids could react. It hadn't worked very well: by targeting the same spot on the Wolfen cruiser, Clara, Cane and Erin had almost melted the nose off even at the low laser setting used in war games.

"Alright, alright, you deserve it," said Fox, handing out refreshments. "You did good, I'm proud of you all. Except for that little whack at the end, Cane, that was gratuitous."

"That was what?" Clara asked.

"A bit much, that's what it was." Wolf and his gunner, Flaherty, had been forced to abandon their damaged cruiser, and use their suit thrusters to regain the docks to get a tow rocket. Cane had taken advantage of the opportunity to pop a few judiciously aimed low-power shots onto Wolf's space-suited behind. "Whip 'em to make 'em afraid is good, not so great to humiliate them."

"You do dumb things like that all the time!" said Cane defensively.

"Yes, and I would've hoped you could learn from my mistakes," said Fox, sighing. "Do what I say, not what I do. You get enough enemies in life without adding to them."

"Hypocritical but true," added Crystal, sipping a glass of Moon Mountain '02. "Anyway, now Wolfie is really ticked off, not least since you all got through and so now he gets nothing."

"What?" said Nicholas. "I thought you were paying him and his squadron a lot of money for practicing with us."

"We were," said Crystal. "But then my honey went and got ol' Wolfie a little drunk last night. Wolfie gets boastful when he's loaded, you know. He bet double-or-nothing that not one of you would get to the dock with any life points left, so he not only got his butt warmed over, his wallet got cooked at the same time."

"Come on, Crystal, I'm not gonna' hold him to that," said Fox. "I'm not following Cane's example here, I'm trying to reform."

"I don't know -- you know how proud he is. He didn't even stay to get paid. I'm glad the kids didn't hear what he was saying to his pilots!"

"Yeah, maybe," agreed Fox. "Well, that's in the future. Raise your glasses, lads and lasses! A toast to Fox's Freeloaders!"

"I thought we were Nick's Ninjas," said Brian.

"No way, Cane's Crushers!" added Cane.

"I would've said Cane's Catastrophes," added Crystal. "How about Dumont's Destroyers? It was Clara that did the camouflage blast *and* knocked out Willoughby and McDiarmid with three shots each."

"Blood's Buccaneers!" said Erin. "Doesn't make sense but it alliterates. Maybe Nicholas could change his name."

"Tennyson's Terrors?" said Brian tentatively.

"Leave me out of this, I just fly," said Tennyson.

"Slippy's Slimeballs?" suggested Slippy, turning away from the Snack Bar window with his bag of Snugasa Bug Nuggets.

"Enough!" said Fox. "Sorry I brought it up. I'll give you guys oh, an hour break as a reward, take a look around, it's kindof fun. Then you can get back in the ship and we'll debrief on the battle while we make the trip to our next training area."

"Next training area?" asked Nicholas. "What's that?"

"We're pretty much done with zero-G stuff, we need a place with some weight!" replied Fox, finishing the last bit of grilled rodent from his rat kebab. "Gotta get tougher, too, you guys are having it too soft. You're gonna think it's easy to win a battle, especially after today, we gotta find some good character-building experiences for you -- that means you get your butt whipped, teaches you humility!" He tossed the little wooden stick in the recycling bin and stood up. "Well, great job, I'm heading back to the Fox. Remember, be back on the ship in an hour or get left with the tourists!"

"Oh, I'd better go too, I've got to do the flight plan," said Crystal.

"Where do you think this new training site is gonna be?" Clara asked Nicholas.

"Gee, I don't know, Fox hadn't said anything about this until just now. He made it sound sort of scary, didn't he? Maybe we're going to go out in the desert somewhere?"

"That's not scary!" said Cane. "I'll bet he's taking us to the spice mines of Kessel! We'll be roasted alive by overheated protocol droids!"

“Aww, Kessel’s kind of nice,” said a uniformed Storm Trooper sitting at the next table. “I was assigned there a coupla years back. It’s sort of spartan, desolate, but beautiful in its own way.”

“If you don’t mind my asking,” said Brian, “what are you doing here at the Interpretive Center? Guard duty?”

The storm trooper laughed -- a somewhat incongruous experience -- and took off his helmet, revealing a lined, graying face with short-cropped hair. “Naw, some of my squad are in the Storm Trooper Folk Dance exhibition. In the auditorium.” He pointed down one of the corridors. “They do two shows today and another one tomorrow, you ought to drop by. It’s a lot of fun. Many of the guys have brought their families along, quite a few kids will be there.”

“I don’t think we have time for that,” said Nicholas. “We’ve got to be back on our ship in -- oh -- fifty-five minutes. But thanks.” He finished his Aquastar and got up. “I’m going to go look at the exhibits before we have to leave, anyone want to come?”

Brian, Erin, and Cane joined Nicholas, leaving Clara and Tennyson at the huge picture window looking out onto the asteroid field. The next room was divided by low partitions into a number of topical areas. Muted narrations could be heard from the nearest displays, and tourists of various species and types were scattered through the exhibits: a father dryite shepherded his two children through the EXIT door as an armored storm trooper chatted with a penguin about the deplorable pay and working conditions for qualified navigators. Placards in several languages hung from the ceiling to guide the visitors. Nicholas read through **ORIGINS OF PLANETARY SYSTEMS, COMETS AND OORT CLOUD OBJECTS, PLANETESIMALS, and RINGS, BELTS AND BRAIDS**, before settling on **ANTILLES ASTEROIDS: A HISTORY OF DEDICATION**. Brian and Erin joined him, while Cane, seeing nothing in the least bit interesting, proceeded on through the door marked **PLANETARY BOMBARDMENT ROOM INTERACTIVE EXHIBIT**.

A holographic movie was already running when they entered the little cubicle. A smiling young man dressed in a red flight suit was climbing into an X-wing fighter as the narration droned on in the background: *... star pilot, warrior, writer, and scientist, Wedge was a rebel only against injustice. Already well-known for his studies of naturally-occurring planetesimal formations in the Hoth and Malastare systems, Wedge became a leader in the field with his classic treatment of the early re-aggregation of the fragments of Alderaan...*

A meowth dressed in striped trousers was talking with a small creature mostly hidden behind a sizable stony meteorite mounted on a stand. “I always had an ethical problem with that work, you know. Making your reputation out of the destruction of an inhabited planet -- shady, don’t you think?”

“Grist for the mill of science, my friend,” replied a familiar voice. “Are doctors wrong for perfecting their art on the victims of a battle?”

“Mr. Saturn!” exclaimed Erin, forgetting his piratical mannerisms. “Wow, this is great! Where have you been?”

“Learning things, of course, as usual,” replied Mr. Saturn. “This display is rather self-serving, but they did a very nice job on impact-induced mass extinctions. Did you know that a cometary collision was the real cause behind the destruction of the Dreamcast worlds?”

“You mean you’ve been at the interpretive center all week?” said Erin.

“Hardly. Let’s make our way back to the Fox and I’ll tell you about it.” Mr. Saturn turned to Nicholas. “I understand your team did very well against the Star Wolf group today. You’ve come a long way from struggling against a couple of Yoshies on a watch tower.”

“So have you,” said Nicholas.

“Good point. Who’s journey has been more enlightening, I wonder?” There was a loud BOOM from the next room. “I see Cane has figured out the high-power meteorite gun controls. You might want to keep an eye on him -- the gun is fairly harmless as long as you shoot at the big imitation planets, but there’s a sizable fine for blowing a hole through the walls.”

“Gee, the bombardment room is on the outside of the station. Wouldn’t a break in the wall let all the air out and kill everyone who wasn’t wearing a space suit?” said Brian.

“Only the rear partition,” said Mr. Saturn. “He’d have to turn the gun all the way around for that. Which unfortunately you can do if you know the cheat code.”

“Oh - oh,” said Nicholas. Cane still had his copy of Skolar’s Ultimate Cheat Code guide; he had been using it for bathroom reading on the Fox. “I’ll go check on him.”

“So, Mister Saturn,” said Erin, “what the heck is up? I mean, I’m still waiting to hear about the train ride, and then you go and disappear for days. And you’ve got a singing career, you never told me about that. And all this training stuff is incredibly boring and there’s no time to read anything and the Fox doesn’t have any library anyway and--”

“You made your point, Erin,” said Mr. Saturn. “What shall I address first? There is an excellent library in the Great Fox; you just have to know how to find it. Concealment was, of course, quite intentional. It was obvious to Crystal that you, at least, would accomplish absolutely nothing if she didn’t hide the reading material.”

“That’s one of Erin’s questions,” said Brian. “What about the others? Where have you been? I’ve been starting to think that nothing you do is quite as accidental as it seems.”

“All right, all right -- let’s wander this way, there’s an asteroid mining display in the next room that piqued my curiosity. Yes, I certainly made use of my time on the Toy Train, and no, Zelda’s Minister of Finance has not yet detected the leakage from her bank account.” The three had entered a smaller hall occupied by placards depicting asteroid cross-sections, metals assays, and schemes for collecting and refining planetesimals *en masse*. They were for the moment the only occupants. Mr. Saturn lowered his voice. “As you should be aware, a key aspect of Crystal’s tactical plan depends on being able to enter Ark through the old recreational access ports, but she probably didn’t tell you that we don’t actually know how to accomplish this. It is well-known that there was a security code system in place to allow inhabitants to come and go without permitting general access -- but as the years passed and the colonization resources of the station went unused, the details of the scheme were lost. Crystal asked me to find out what I could. I was not able to discover the entry codes for the Ark external access ports -- but I did find out who knows and where to meet him.”

Just then a family of Storm Troopers entered through the rear door. Both parents wore full armor but had hung their helmets from a hook on the utility belt. The two children, girls of perhaps 5 and 8 years, were dressed in conservative white uniforms; they were both carrying model tie fighters and immediately entered into a pretend attack upon the cutaway meteorite hanging in the center of the room. Behind them was a group of Starmen (and what looked like Starwomen and Starkids), telling each other what appeared to be jokes in an unrecognizable language and generally much better behaved than their cousins at Fourside.

“So that’s why palladium is relatively rare in second-generation objects even though it is an important constituent of later generation meteorites,” said Mister Saturn loudly.

Erin looked confused and started to ask a question, interrupted when Brian stepped on his foot. “Oh, okay, I never understood that before,” replied Brian. “Well, let’s go see what Cane is up to.”

In the Planetary Bombardment Room, Nicholas was meticulously placing tiny toy dinosaurs, pterosaurs, crocodiles, ferns, and trees onto a large sandbox-like diorama while Cane waited impatiently seated at what were obviously the controls of a sizable rail gun. “Are you done yet?” asked Cane. “I want to blow something up!”

Nicholas ignored him as he recited a story to himself. “Are you crazy? You can’t go out onto the plain by yourself. Why, there are tyrannosaurs out there just waiting for to have a nice meal of protoceratops delivered on a platter. Oh, I’m not afraid of carnivores. You’re not afraid? There’s nothing in the whole world more dangerous than a saurapod with an appetite! I

don't know, what about giant rocks falling from the sky? Giant rocks? You're crazier than crazy! Rocks don't fall from the sky, that's the stupidest thing I ever -- aaaaah!" Nicholas backed away and signaled to Cane. "Okay, now!"

"About time!" There was a big *chuff!* BOOM! and instant dusty chaos replaced Nicholas' elaborate scene, as the model asteroid bounced off the dirt and was harmlessly collected in a rebound chute. On the wall, a huge monitor showed a slow-motion replay of the catastrophic event; the bolide leapt off the track and plunged into the soft ground, the blast wave sending toy creatures flying, as dirt splashed up from the impact point.

"We're all gonna' die!" said Nicholas, obviously continuing his dramatic rendition. "We're not! Who are you? We're mammals! Little is better, nyaa nyaa nyaa nyaa nyaa! Stop chanting, we'll eat their carcasses later, now we need to hide in the burrow! Awww, mom, you never let me have any fun."

"Boy, if museums had guns like this back home Dad wouldn't even have to bribe me with game time to go!" said Cane. "What can we destroy next?"

"Mine!" said Brian to Nicholas, and snapped off a shot with his rifle that caught the target placard right in the center. It flipped back into the wall.

"Nice shot!" said Clara, waiting behind the pair for her turn. "You're getting a lot better, Brian." Debriefing done, Fox had assigned the kids a marksmanship exercise while they made their way to the still-mysterious new training ground. The kids worked in pairs, shooting from prone or kneeling positions, one armed with a standard-issue ray gun and the other a projectile weapon. As each target placard popped out of the walls of the little room, they had to identify what type of opponent it represented and whether it was most vulnerable to a ray or bullet, assign the shot appropriately, and knock it out. This had been a difficult task on the second day of training, but by now was so routine the kids could converse as they practiced.

"I think it's gotta be Tallon four," said Tennyson. "They've got monsters everywhere, traps, nasty liquid junk that mutates you, extreme temperatures -- it's really a tough place!"

"No way," said Nicholas. "Mine! (BLAM) Darn it. (BLAM) That's better. This is Fox, he just spent a bunch of time on Dinosaur Planet, that's where he's going to take us for sure. There's all kinds of nasty dinosaurs to fight with. There's super hot places with lava, and the ice fields, and all kinds of obstacles. Yours! Good shot. Besides they use bugs instead of money, it's totally disgusting!"

"I was thinking Dark Star," said Cane, who was using his rifle to blow holes in the paper

copy of the firing range rules posted on the entry wall. “I mean, there’s all these places where you can fall thousands of feet and get splashed flat dead (BLAM *sping sping sping*).”

“Would you stop that!” said Clara. “It’s dangerous.”

“Oh come on, the bullets usually stick into the wall,” replied Cane. “And you know the sky is really dark so you can’t see when you’re going to come to the end of one of these hexa -- hexa -- honeycomb thingies you walk on (BLAM!). Besides there are monsters everywhere. And Kirby. I mean, he really sucks. Ha!”

“Not funny,” said Erin. “You know, I still have a soft spot in my heart for the spice mines of Kessel. They’ve got everything: rotten prison guards, toxic atmosphere, bounty hunters galore, forcefields. I can’t imagine what that storm trooper guy saw in it.”

“We can’t go there, then you’ll be doing your stupid Dreyfuss stuff again,” said Nicholas. “Sorry to tell you this, Erin, but the rest of us are really sick of that character. Okay, that’s ten, we’re done! Nice shooting, Brian. Clara, Cane, you’re up next.”

The door hissed open and Fox barged in. “What the heck are you doing in here? Time to drop everything and drop, my middlin’ marksmen!”

“We’re just doing what you told us to do!” said Nicholas.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about that,” Fox replied. “Never mind, back to barracks and grab your stuff, standard-issue weaponry, meet me in egress lock 2A in two minutes, go, go, go!”

“Wait a minute,” said Nicholas. “Aren’t you even going to tell us what we’re dropping into? Why can’t we at least take a look?”

“No time for such dilly dallying. You want to do research, get a government grant. Move!” the last as he swung his clipboard at Nicholas’ behind. Fortunately everyone had packed up in anticipation of a new site; the kids had merely to grab their assembled fighting packs (stocked with all sorts of essentials, and much more capacious but quite a bit heavier than their school backpacks) and latch up the standard set of ray gun, rifle, and bomb launcher. In less than the stated two minutes they were all gathered in the little room behind the air lock door, in a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Slippy was at the lock control panel and Fox walked down the line of kids, checking their gear.

“Dark Star!” said Cane.

“Kessel!” said Erin.

“Dinosaur!” said Nicholas.

“What?” said Fox. He looked at a little display that the kids couldn’t see. The room door hissed and Crystal entered, dressed in a rather revealing skirt that didn’t look at all appropriate to a combat training assignment. “Oh, never mind, we’re there,” said Fox, nodding to Slippy.

The lock door flew open, revealing a chubby colorfully-dressed fellow with a big nose and sunglasses, sitting on a very comfortable-looking lounge chair and sipping a drink with a little umbrella sticking out of it. In the background lovely palm trees swayed in a gentle breeze before a tall brick-and-tile building.

The creature stood up smiling: “Welcome to the Hotel Delfino! Parking is twenty-two coins per day; guests at the hotel park free with a validated stub. The lobby is right up the stairs if you’re checking in! Rudolfo and Alexander” (at this point delivering a sharp kick to one of a pair of similarly-dressed folks happily asleep in recliners next to him) “will be happy to help with your luggage; just leave the keys in the ignition or equivalent for valet parking. If there’s anything you need to make your stay more enjoyable, just let us know.”

The kids, even Cane, were shocked into speechlessness for a moment. “Come on, come on, let’s roll!” said Fox, shepherding the amazed kids down the ramp and up the walkway. “Peppy will get the Fox parked, you kids can carry your stuff, you need the work. Go! go! go!”

“What’s the big hurry?” said Nicholas. “I mean, I thought we were sneaking past some guards or something like that, what’s the problem?”

“The problem?” said Fox, not slowing. “A dinner reservation at six fifteen, that’s the problem! Four minutes from now, to be exact.”

“Wow, that’s great, I’m starved,” said Cane.

“Not you! This is a private affair, just Crystal and me and a very large plate of grilled rat. You can get whatever you want from room service once you get checked in. Over there.” They had entered the elegantly-appointed lobby, sporting comfortable chairs and tables interspersed between flower-filled pools filled by bubbling streams. Here and there people and creatures of various descriptions sat or stood talking, sipping drinks, or watching one of the various large-screen television displays scattered throughout the room. Fox pointed at a large desk staffed with a number of the colorful folks (Piantas, Brian noted) across the room. “You got three rooms, reservations under ‘Bulwer-Lytton’, see ya!”

Fox took Crystal’s arm and they proceeded towards a lovely stained-glass-covered door off to the right. As they left Crystal called over her shoulder, “Meet in the lobby at seven

o'clock tomorrow morning! I'll send the schedule to you tonight. Everything's taken care of, have fun!" The two foxes were ushered through the door by another cheerful pianta and disappeared.

A moment of awed silence ensued as the kids reset their expectations for the evening. "Don't you think," said Erin, "we should consider the possibility that this luxurious display is merely a facade behind which lurks an evil conspiracy of demon androids using drugged room service food to capture orphaned kids for the spice mines?"

"Why don't you stay down here and check it out?" said Nicholas. "The rest of us are going up to our rooms to get some rest."

"And something to eat!" added Cane.

"I will, thanks. So how long have you been on the job here?" asked Mr. Saturn, taking a seat on top of a pile of empty fruit boxes. The Security office was located in the basement of the hotel. Two diminutive blue-tinged fellows sat at control panels; the walls were covered with television monitors depicting divers scenes in the building and grounds. Bits of wrapping paper and dust swirled in the blasts of frigid air entering the little room from the ceiling vents; icicles were growing from the faucet of the small sink set into the wall in the back corner. Both of the men wore gray flannel coveralls with "Iceman National" stenciled across the back, and an arm patch that bore a round logo with "I.N. Security" emblazoned across it. The guy on the left, to whom Mr. Saturn's remarks had been addressed, removed his thick glasses to rub his eyes, and then pointlessly straightened his thinning brown hair with his hand, before answering.

"Well, uh, I 'been here three weeks yesterday, yeah, you know I'm just getting to learn my way around, the boss don't say much about it, I hope he's not mad at me. Do you think the boss is mad at me, George?"

George was angular and slim and incessantly active, sitting up in his seat, leaning back, picking up a snack from the tray leaning precariously against the joystick, spitting gum into the wastebasket. He took a long drink from a can marked *Canopus Cola* and coughed. "I don't know what the boss is thinking, how would I know what he thinks? He doesn't talk to me, I can't read his mind. What are you always asking me about things for, do you think I'm hiding something from you, are you trying to say you don't trust me, why don't you just come out with it, I don't think I can work in these conditions, it's very stressful, there's a limit to what a person can adapt to, what with all the heat and humidity in here it's a wonder anybody can survive, did you want a drink?" (the last directed to Mr. Saturn).

"No, thank you," replied Mr. Saturn. "So you're responsible for security for the whole

facility? It seems like a lot to keep track of.”

“Well, we’ve got the most advanced equipment, we’ve got everything you could think of, cameras everywhere, we see everything, it’s all stored away on the disks, nobody can get away with anything around Hotel Delfino, you better believe it,” said George, meticulously unwrapping a little chocolate frog and tossing the foil into a pile of similar packaging materials lying just short of the wastebasket under his desk. “No matter what you’re up to, we’re keeping an eye on you! We’ve got everything under control, we sure have, you can rely on it. Under control, that’s us. Have you seen the key to the vault, Phil?”

“Ah, I see,” said Mr. Saturn, abandoning his perch to indicate one of the smaller monitors near the bottom of the wall with his nose. “So you have a bomberman working for you, or is he freelance?” The image depicted a humanoid with a scuba-mask-like visage, unloading a number of round objects from a cart and placing them in a hole dug into the grass next to one of the decorative columns of the hotel facade.

“Oh my gosh, he’s back,” said Phil. “That citation didn’t work, did it?” He turned to Mr. Saturn. “I told George that a citation wasn’t going to work, those bomber people are crazy, I read about it in my magazine,” indicating a messy pile of colorful trade publications lying on one of the shelves: *Your IN Security*. “We should send the patrol guy to get him, don’t you think, George? I think so. Can we do it now? I think we shouldn’t wait, he might set off the bombs this time.”

“Naw, it’s under control, trust me, I talked to the boss, he told me they never set anything off ‘cause they’re trying to get the perfect explosion, they want to destroy the whole hotel in one blast, takes them weeks to get everything, all you have to do is dig up the bombs they plant every night, we send ‘em back to Bomberman Recycling for credit, where do you think we get the money for all this food?” George waved his hand at the cardboard boxes containing a couple of very cold pizzas and donuts that appeared to have the consistency of construction materials. “I’m not paying for all this food, not on my salary, here I’m teaching you how to do this and suffering in the heat, does the boss give me a raise? Under control, that’s what it is, under control. Did I ask if you know where the vault key is?”

“Well, that’s very reassuring,” said Mr. Saturn. “You know, I get worried sometimes when I visit places. You never know when bad guys might be after you. But you certainly seem to have the resources to protect all of us guests at the hotel.”

“Yeah, now you get the picture,” said George. Then he lowered his voice and leaned close to Mr. Saturn. “Could you, like, put in a good word for us with the management? The boss, I don’t know, he’s been cool to me lately, I’m not sure what he thinks, did he stick me with a rookie to get rid of me? If the hotel knew what a good job we do here, if those pinata fellows spoke up for us, maybe they’d treat us a little better, like maybe we could get some decent air

conditioning, a little time off, maybe some hot icegirls, hubba hubba, yeah?”

“Hmm,” replied Mr. Saturn. “The Facilities manager does owe me a bit of a favor. A little sanitation problem I helped him with a few years back.” He paused in obvious thought. “Tell you what, let me check out what you’ve got here a bit, maybe I can help you out. Do you mind?” indicating the banks of monitors.

“No, no, you go ahead, here’s a headset, you just turn the knob to listen in on whatever monitor you want, there’s the number there, if you can’t hear right you can use the joystick here to move the directional microphone, this other blue one moves the cameras, you call if you need help, I gotta finish this report here or the boss will get mad, hey George how’d ya spell ‘delinquent’?”

While the two icemen argued over how to obtain authority over the hotel maintenance staff without accepting responsibility for the result, Mr. Saturn settled himself onto the top of the video control box, whose vents exuded a pleasant warmth, and selected monitor 124 on his dial. Penguin waiters bustled from table to table, their formal attire and mannerisms incongruous amongst the friendly pianta hostess and colorful guests. A tweak or two served to center the images of Fox and Crystal, sitting at an isolated table in a corner behind a dwarf palm.

“I’m not so sure,” said Crystal. “It’s not the way they’re brought up, you know. Especially the girls. It’s a conflict for her.”

“But she needs the encouragement,” replied Fox, holding a rat glazed in some sort of reddish sauce on a stick for Crystal to nibble on. “She’s got the talent and she’s got the guts. That sort of crazy take-no-prisoners single-mindedness. If she stayed she could be another Samus. Tougher, even. I know that she’s not completely comfortable with it, but she’s going to have to deal with that whether she stays or goes. I’m not making her into something she’s not. I think it’s best for her to plunge right in, especially given the circumstances. She has to learn this with her stomach not with her brain, you know. If she runs away from what she is, it’ll come out in fear or hatred and she’ll become a murderer without ever becoming a warrior.”

Crystal sighed and passed the rat back to Fox. “She does belong here, doesn’t she? I’ve been tempted to suggest it to her, did you know that?”

“Crystal, hon, you need your own kids,” said Fox, ruffling the fur under her chin. “You shouldn’t make Clara into the daughter you don’t have. Wrong species, anyway.”

“It’s not just that. I feel awful about this even though I know it’s the optimal tactical solution. Just throwing them into that place and running away. Fox, I’ve never run away from a fight in my life. You know we haven’t closed on anything, we haven’t made contact yet with the colony, we’re practically throwing them to the wolves.”

“Saturn will take care of it, honey, don’t worry so much. Besides, they have to go in themselves. They’ll never grow if they rely on us for everything. And the last time we threw them to the wolves, the wolves got eaten for lunch.”

“Now *you’re* sounding like a frustrated parent. They’re pretty young, are they ready to handle all this on their own?”

“I think they are. Clara doesn’t need help, of course, and I think by the time we get there Nicholas is going to be ready to lead the rest of them. Just enough guts, just enough smarts, a little bit of caution -- the makings of a good commanding officer. Kindof the opposite of me, you know?”

Mr. Saturn switched to monitor 74: the lounge of a suitably luxurious two-room minisuite. The camera was looking at a very large flat-panel television display, showing a road race; off to one side two other smaller TV screens glowed with what appeared to be a documentary about Pikmin agriculture and a fashion show for turtles, respectively. The back of Cane’s head could be seen as he spoke to someone on the picture phone. “Don’t you have anything else? I mean, anything that’s not fruit! I mean, this is crazy! Where’s the beef?”

“The what, sir? Beets? Those can be found after bananas and before berries, bush, pages eleven through fourteen of volume one of the evening room service menu, sir.”

“Page what? what? I hate volume! I never even understood area, don’t talk to me about volume, that’s what Emily Lu tried to do, I had to hit her with the dodge ball! All right, all right, just give me some of everything, let’s see, how about Pianta pineapple pudding, red pepper roast, dorian grated, whipped watermelon, pickled pear, one order of everything.”

Erin’s voice could be heard from somewhere else in the room: “And I want some apple pie too, I’m hungry!”

“Right, okay, two plates of apple pie with apple, um, compost, I guess that’ll be enough for now. I can’t believe I have to live on fruit. Eating all this awful healthy stuff, it’s gonna kill me!”

Monitor 33 showed one of the hotel’s numerous bars and lounges, this one outside on the veranda. At an unilluminated table under a silhouetted umbrella, an indistinct figure could be seen, wrapped in a coat so absurdly heavy for the warm Isle Delfino evening that Mr. Saturn was a bit envious, talking to a fellow wearing epaulets and braid under a military cap. The voice was that of Wolf O’Donnell: “Tomorrow, then? The whole squadron, I won’t pay for less.”

A gravelly brogue replied. “Don’t be grindin’ your molars, doggie. It’s a wee bit too
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peaceful here, the boys have had enough of beach football. Nothing like a little donnybrook to build a bit of team spirit. Did you want your heavy weapons now, or just a bit o' small arms and a grenade or three, what d'you think, son?"

Two tables to the right, partly hidden by a large cycad, the back of an armored suit could be seen, talking with another suited figure hidden in the evening dim, but whose silhouette revealed short bouncing bangs and round glasses. A touch of the smaller joystick brought the second conversation into focus: "This one and this one. A hundred coins each. Dead is fine but not desintegrated; clients need proof, you understand?"

"Oh, what about the other ones on the list?" replied an absurdly cheerful voice. "Can I look for them, too?"

"You keep your nose clean and do your own work. When you've made a few captures you can take the top of the list."

"But I've read almost all the bounty hunting manual and I even started on the commentaries!" said the happy voice. "Pleeease?"

"You listen to your mentor, rookie. These guys have a rep. The word on the street is they're moving with a bodyguard, swordsman, did Andross' wolf bud and Conker and his five bodyguards without even breaking a sweat. New guy, 'Pickles'? No, 'Nickles', which is probably how much your life would be worth if you went up against him. You'd best leave him to me."

By this time Wolf and his companion had finished their drinks and departed; a pianta waiter was noisily complaining about the tip (or lack of it) as he cleaned the table. In monitor 153, Nicholas and Brian could be seen leaning over a small box placed on the writing desk in their hotel bedroom: Mr. Saturn could tell from the repetitive slicing that they were reviewing the plans of Ark again, even though the image was too small to resolve clearly. Brian was making notes in a book of some sort as Nicholas pointed at something near the top of the hologram.

Monitor 29 showed Clara snuggled under Tennyson's chin as they perched on the side of one of the two twin beds. Clara's cheeks glistened wetly. "I missed you, you know," she said.

Tennyson chuckled. "You weren't showing it! There were a couple of times I thought you were going to blow me away for sure. Just checking how my permanent absence would feel?"

"Don't say that, don't say that!" Clara said urgently, pressing against his side. "It's not true, I don't want you to go!"

“I’m sorry, really,” Tennyson said, stroking her hair. “I don’t want you to go either. I’m really glad you’re coming with us. Not to mention that we wouldn’t stand a chance without you.”

“Is that all you want me for? Just to blow things up for you again?”

“I want you to be with me, whether we’re blowing things up or not,” replied Tennyson, taking Clara by the shoulders and turning her to face him. He leaned over and Clara turned her head upwards; their lips neared. Just then there was a *boing!* sound, and a large hinged panel in the floor next to the bed flew upwards. The head of a boy of perhaps six or seven years popped into the room through the opening left by the cover, hung suspended briefly staring at the amorous pair, and disappeared again.

Tennyson and Clara stood in surprise. A quick tweak of the microphone made other voices audible: “Yeah, there were two, like, teenagers almost, and they were kissing!” “Oooh, I wanna see, I wanna see, my turn!” *Boing!* A red-haired girl’s head, perhaps a bit older than the boy’s, popped into the room and disappeared just as quickly. “They are not neither kissing, they’re just standing there!” “They were! Let me see!” and the boy popped through the panel again.

“Stop that!” said Clara, and then as the boy disappeared she leaned over to shout into the floor. “This is our room, you shouldn’t just barge in!”

Boing! the girl’s head appeared. “Aren’t you gonna smooch?” the girl said quickly, before she disappeared again.

“Not while you’re watching!” shouted Clara. Tennyson tapped her on the shoulder and glanced towards the bed. Clara nodded assent; the two kids hopped over to the other side and began to shove the bed towards the movable opening.

B oing! The girl’s head reappeared, seeing them shoulder-to-shoulder: “Oh, that’s so romantic!”

“Hey, that’s two for you, it’s my turn!” said the boy’s voice as Tennyson gave a last shove to the bedframe, placing one of the legs squarely on top of the panel.

Boing! Thump! “Ow!” *Boing! Thump!* “Ow!” *Boing! Thump!* “Ow!” *Boing! Thump!* “Ow!”

Clara turned to Tennyson. “Not too bright, is he?”

“He won’t be if he keeps this up for long,” Tennyson replied. Then putting his arm

somewhat awkwardly around her shoulders: “Now that we have some privacy, where were we?” *Boing! Thump!* “Ow!” *Boing! Thump!* “Ow!” Mr. Saturn redirected the camera to a view of the snack cabinet list and turned the sound down.

George and Phil were still struggling with grammatical issues in their report. “Hey, Uranus, would you say ‘we should take their Privacy Policy and shove it down their throats’ or ‘the Privacy Policy should be eaten by the policymakers, with or without their consent?’”

“The former, of course. Never use the passive voice in an incitement to action, however vile or reprehensible. It’s Saturn, incidentally. I take it you would prefer to employ this unconstrained access to the guests’ private rooms that I noticed here as you see fit?”

“Well, you see, it’s like this,” said Phil. “We don’t really want to look, you know we don’t, but then again we can’t help ourselves, the job gets very dull and we’re so hot all the time in this miserable room, and if one of them was a bad guy we need to know about it, and besides if we don’t watch what people are doing when they think no one is watching we’d have nothing to tell the other guys about in the break room.”

“Holy avalanche, Phil, that’s not the point! Geeze, how we gonna’ make ends meet if’n we can’t sell some of these here funny pictures? I mean, it’s not like we’d just send this info anywhere, we’re only passing the best stuff on to our official secret affiliates, like the Candid Cable Channel, fifty-four on most gameworld networks (eleven in Freedom and eighty-seven in the Metroid worlds). What do you think pays for the thermal underwear here?” George pulled the elastic band out from under his shirt to demonstrate.

“It seems, gentlemen, that you have both social and fiduciary responsibilities that compel you to advocate free and unrestrained exploitation of the guests’ private activities. Perhaps you could make your case more effectively if you simply took it to the people; I’m sure they’d understand that your intrusions are not merely necessary but advantageous. A modest marketing campaign, conducted behind a phony organization named something like Citizens for Rehabilitation of Abnormal People, ought to do the trick. Although some folks might want a cut of the take. Call me if you decide to go that route. My card.” A little card floated out of Mr. Saturn’s pocket into George’s hand. It said:

Roche’s, Ltd.
Cassini Division
Mr. Saturn, Proprietor
Research - Sanitation - Public Relations

“Phone and mail are on the back, gents. I shall certainly speak to Mr. Zamboni on your behalf if I see him, though as he’s often very busy administering the black market in termite food that might be only cold comfort.”

“I wish!” sighed George, wiping his brow. “Well, thanks for stopping by, don’t be a stranger, I wish we’d called you before even though I can’t imagine why, that’s just cause I ain’t got much imagination. Should you capitalize the ‘y’ in ‘Up yours’ or should we just say ‘maybe you oughtta shove it up your--’” *SLAM*. The big insulated door of the security room sealed tight, protecting its occupants once again from any physical intrusions from the outside world. Mr. Saturn took a deep breath of pleasantly warm air and waddled towards the elevator.

Clara had slowed to chat with Cane as the kids jogged along the beach behind Slippy and Fox. “How the heck did you do that? I mean, that was amazing. Twenty of twenty. You did better than I did! Where did you learn to shoot like that?” Fox had dragged the kids to Pinna Park, a huge theme park near the hotel, early in the morning, before it was open to the public, to do marksmanship practice. The drill required the kids to puncture balloons suspended near the tracks with rifle shots, as the cars whirled, dropped, and twisted through the roller coaster course.

Cane replied with more difficulty: he was in much better shape than a week ago but still struggling in the soft sand. “Geeze, Clara, I’ve been shooting (pant) rabbits with my beebie gun since I was, like, four or something! (pant) I mean, those balloons were (pant) huge! Nothing to it.”

“Well, but, upside down and spinning! I mean on the fourth balloon, that one under the twisty part of the track, that was hard! I missed it both laps, you got it first time.”

“Come on (pant) Clara, that coaster is hardly even, like, Top Gun!” said Cane. “I’ve been on (pant) a lot faster coasters than that!”

“Tell that to Nicholas! I’ll bet he has a different opinion.” Nicholas had survived the two laps of the shooting practice by sheer force of will: as soon as he had gotten off the car, he had retreated to a corner of the platform and involuntarily recycled his breakfast. The sincere solicitude offered by the other kids -- even Cane -- while demonstrating their growing respect for their leader, did not make him feel better. He was not a fan of roller coasters.

“Well, I’ll have to (pant) take him on the kids coasters (pant) when we get back. He needs to start somewhere (pant), geeze! Hey, Clara, do you wanna’ carry this pack for me? You’re not tired, how ‘bout it since I like out-shot you and stuff?”

“No way, Cane, I don’t like that much!” laughed Clara.

“Glad to hear it,” puffed Tennyson from ahead of them.

“Hey, look at that!” said Nicholas. “Isn’t that just like the digging machine you found at the treasure island, Brian?” The putative excavator had been left at the high-wafer edge of the beach, where the paved road ran.

“Another excuse to run on the road, eh, Nicholas?” puffed Tennyson.

“That’s okay, we need to get to the road anyway,” said Slippy, pointing ahead to where the beach sand ended in a broken, rocky stretch extending several hundred meters. He led the kids up into the sandy scrub near the road and Clara stretched her stride and made her way back to the front of the line with Fox.

The other kids labored behind Fox’s effortless lope. “Watch it, they’ve been trenching up ahead! Don’t fall in!” said Fox, pointing to the left.

As Clara’s eyes followed his gesture, she noted a tiny glint from the forested slope above their path. She couldn’t have said what it was -- the terrain, the scent, some tiny noise -- but without a further thought she screamed “Into the trench!” and dived.

Fox followed instantly. The others stopped in puzzlement but only for a moment; as soon as Nicholas could draw a breath he shouted “Follow Clara, move it!” and made towards the gap at full speed, pushing Erin ahead of him. It was none too soon. The harrowing whistling of high-velocity bullets all around announced the ambush just as Slippy dragged Cane’s behind down into the trench.

“Everybody okay?” shouted Nicholas, as soon as he regained his feet. The trench was deep enough to provide excellent cover to a crouching child; Fox and Slippy had to kneel.

“My arm hurts!” said Cane.

“Are you shot?” said Nicholas, apprehensively.

“Naw, Slippy pulled too hard!”

“Geeze, never mind, get your guns out and wait for my orders! Clara, what’s the deal? Can you see anything?”

“Just a minute!” She twisted off her pack and pulled the Superscope sight from a side pocket. A high-pitched whine forced them all to duck low as Fox shouted “Incoming!”. After the explosion of the mortar shell, fortunately long by about thirty meters, Clara carefully inched the scope over the edge of the trench as bullets continued to whine and skip around her. A brief examination, interrupted by another mortar round, sufficed. “It’s a bunch of uniformed soldiers!

And -- wait a minute -- that's Wolf! He's over at the back, with some guy that looks like the commander. Boy, what a sore loser!"

Fox borrowed the scope. "Yep, that's him all right. Can't say I'm surprised. Oh, oh-- they're moving up. Well, I wanted some hard work for you kids, here it is. Cane left flank, Clara right, you're our sharpshooters! They're moving out of cover -- you need to make them regret it! And keep your heads down while you're at it! *Incoming!*"

"What about the rest of us?" said Nicholas.

"They're still pretty far out," replied Fox. "You guys would just be wasting bullets. Keep your heads down for the moment."

"Sounds good to me!" said Brian. He tried to keep his voice calm but he was shaking from something other than the cold. "Who are these guys, anyway?"

"Probably the black hole army," replied Fox. "There was a squadron of 'em hanging around the hotel. Supposedly on vacation but they never miss a chance to cause trouble. Nice shooting!" the latter directed to Clara and Cane. Four soldiers of the attacking party had jumped out from behind their camouflaged sandbag pile dragging some large heavy weapon behind them, but before they could gain the cover of the huge Sequoia-like tree trunk they were headed for, Clara had wounded one man and Cane had put two shots into the mystery box, causing it to emit smoke and sparks. The three others abandoned their load and helped the wounded man back to cover. Meanwhile, Fox pulled a communicator box from his belt, pressed a pair of buttons, and then shook his head. "They're jamming us, I can't reach the Great Fox. We're gonna' have to do this on our own."

"Fox, what if the rest of us move over there?" said Nicholas, pointing down the trench. About 20 meters away there was a place where the trench walls had been dug out sideways to allow for some sort of access point. "We could set up a bomb launcher. We don't have to go over the trees on that side."

Fox nodded. "Good idea. Stay low so they can't see you moving. We'll arrange a little diversion over here." While Nicholas led Tennyson, Brian and Erin crouching low down the trench, Fox shouted to Clara. "Clara, entrainment gun, knife beam, 250 meter focus! Clip the top of that Douglas fir behind them! We'll lay smoke!" She nodded. He moved down the trench to tap Cane on the shoulder. "Smoke grenades out, son! Over there towards that clump of bushes, okay?"

Cane snapped off a shot that winged an advancing black-clad soldier who had unwisely deserted the protection of the sandbags, forcing him to limp back to cover, and then nodded. "Those guys can't hit the broad side of a barn!" he said as he turned to grab the smoke grenades

from his pack. Just as he did so, a bullet spanged off the stock of his rifle an inch from his arm, knocking the weapon to the ground. Fox raised an eyebrow. "Lucky shot!" said Cane, grabbing two smoke grenades. Clara was poised behind the boulder she had been using for cover with a curious pretzel-like contraption that didn't look at all like a weapon. She nodded. Fox and Cane jumped out of the trench just for a moment to toss their grenades. The sudden activity drew a hail of bullets, leaving Clara free to leap on top of the boulder with a clear line of fire. A pencil-thin intensely bright beam leapt from the tip of her weapon to intercept a large pine above the main concentration of the ambushing force; she slid the aiming point ever so slightly down and to the right, making a diagonal cut across the trunk. The huge mass of bushes slid free and plummeted downwards towards the soldiers, who were forced to dive for cover. Clara instantly switched back to her ray gun and stung two of the exposed opponents as Cane and Fox jumped back up and fired through the smoke.

This little escapade had seriously deranged the Black Hole army's tactical position, but had not been without cost: Clara had received three gashes from the sharp edges of the boulder, Fox now had a pierced ear that was not a fashion statement, and Cane looked down as he dropped back into the trench to discover two widening red patches on his shirt. "This really sucks!" said Cane. "I actually washed this shirt! Why did I bother?"

"I'd love to care but not right now," replied Fox. "Can you still shoot?"

"Yeah, it ain't nothin'," Cane replied. The bullet had glanced off his ribs and done little damage.

The enemy forces were not idle, and quickly reassembled themselves to continue the assault. Fortunately, neither were Nicholas' group, who had constructed their bomb launcher in the trench and started to fire on a high trajectory that carried the bombs over the intervening foliage. It looked like the attackers might be forced to retreat. A group of them seemed to be doing just that, fleeing up the hill pursued by fire from both groups of kids, but instead they collected around a lumpy apparatus of some sort consisting of a central pedestal with four orthogonal horns or beams sticking out from the top, which they dragged down the hill towards the front of their position. "Stop those men!" said Fox. Clara and Cane from the left and Erin and Tennyson from the right all fired towards them, but to little effect. A crouching figure twisted something on the pedestal and leapt away: four brilliant red beams burst out at right angles to the four points of the compass. One of the beams passed along the ground right between the two groups of kids, separating Clara, Cane and Fox from the rest.

"It's a death ray!" screamed Fox. "Don't cross it!"

"What do we do now?" said Nicholas.

Fox shrugged. "I'm working on it! Keep up your fire!"

Before Nicholas could reply, there was a loud POP!, audible over the sound of the battle, and the crimson beam was interrupted by a battered DeLorean sportster, whose brilliantly polished stainless steel surface sent the deadly radiation glancing sideways back up the hill. Instantly seizing the opportunity, Fox led Clara and Crystal back to rejoin the others, while Brian shouted over the noise of the conflict: "What did you do now?"

The gull wing facing away from the Black Hole army popped open and DK stuck his head out. "What do you mean? (POW! BLAM! ROAR!) I did what you told me to do!" he shouted.

"Read the numbers on the (RAT A TAT BOOM!) displays!"

"Thirty two point one (KAPOW) nine!" Brian nodded. "Seven four three five one!" DK disappeared for a moment and then popped out again. "And dash dash three one for two five seven!"

"Dash dash, you said?"

"Yeah, I put two of 'em in to make sure!" screamed DK, ducking as a bullet ricocheted off the door of the car.

"No, no, that's not right!" screamed Brian. "Two minus make a plus! You have to use only one! (SCREECH! 'Incoming! Duck!' BOOM!) Try it again!"

"Okay!" said DK, closing the door. The DeLorean rose up off the ground and zipped off towards the beach.

"Brian, why didn't you ask him to rescue us!" screamed Cane.

"Oh, yeah, sorry!" said Brian.

While Fox and Tennyson took rifleman positions and Brian and Erin lobbed bombs, Nicholas dug in his pack for the megavitamins. "You're supposed to take these with water, okay?" he said to Clara, handing her two of the pills. "And don't do anything stupid afterwards!" he added, recalling his escapades on the Winstar Hotel roof.

A shout came from down the trench: it was Erin. "A pox on their hides, they've sold their souls to the devil to summon a monster from Hell, Cap'n!" Nicholas followed his gesture: a strange multilegged armored creature or conveyance, somewhat resembling a giant pig, was making its way down the steep drop to the right, seemingly undisturbed by the bullets, bombs, and ray blasts the kids immediately devoted to it.

"What the heck is that?" shouted Nicholas.

"A neotank!" replied Fox. "It's moving to take us in enfilade!" Nicholas followed his gaze: if the tank continued on its course it would gain a position from which it could fire down the length of the trench, 'rendering their position untenable' to quote from Crystal's lecture on siege tactics.

"Hey, what about me?" said Cane, who was still waiting for his megavitamin dose. "I want more than Clara had! I got shot! she only got cut!"

"Doctor Mario said you can only have two, and besides if we don't figure out what to do about that tank we're all hosed anyway!" shouted Nicholas in reply. Then he stopped short: "Dr. Mario -- that's it! THE PARTY BALL!"

"The what?" said Clara, squeezing off another shot from above and to his right. Nicholas ignored her and rummaged in the bottom of his pack. "Come on, come on, where did I -- all right!" He withdrew a fist-sized shiny object, screamed "CLOSE YOUR EYES!", and tossed it into the air.

There was an incredibly bright flash, even through their closed eyelids (except of course for Cane who had ignored the command and was staring right at the party ball when it went off). The shooting and sounds of battle stopped immediately.

When they could see again, a remarkable sight met their eyes: half the hillside had been instantly flattened, and in the place of the scrub and forest was now an elaborate maze of tables laden with food and drink, racks of dart boards and video games, a huge glistening bandstand before a wooden parquet dance floor, a water slide, a swimming pool and sauna, a row of card tables and roulette wheels, an arcade with Pokemon Puzzles and Pokemon Pinball, pool tables, balloons, bubble baths, and confetti, all populated by a number of penguin servitors and a larger number of very attractive females and handsome males of various species in stylish black-and-silver outfits. Above it all floated a huge sparkling mirror ball, glistening as it rotated in the sun, spewing rainbow streaks across the implausible scene.

A group of the girls, all garbed in short slit skirts and halter tops, backed by a line of their male compatriots in smart striped uniforms, had moved to the hill-facing side of the dance floor and were waving towards the erstwhile combatants. The Black Hole warriors, who were after all on vacation, didn't need too much convincing: they began to file down the hill, apparently led by their officers to judge from their elaborate epaulets and decorated helmets. In the rear, the kids could see Wolf O'Donnell, jumping up and down and screaming ineffectually at the soldiers as they made their way towards the party.

The kids weren't much more reluctant: combat, after all, is thirsty work, and, as Cane loudly proclaimed, he needed a good big drink to go with his megavitamins. Soon the former adversaries were mixing happily with each other and the party staff. Only Wolf was left out, though even he succumbed to the extent of consuming hors d'oeuvres provided by white-hatted Toads carrying trays in between rants at his mercenary allies. Finally four of the soldiers grabbed the angry wolf, knocked him unconscious with a rifle stock, and dumped him into a huge bubbling punch bowl. While the soldiers returned to getting acquainted with a similar number of the scantily-clad ladies, staff members hauled the sodden carnivore out and put up a big sign over the bowl. Cane looked up from filling his glass with punch and asked Brian, "Hey, what does 'non-potable' mean?"

Fox was talking with the Black Hole squadron commander, a fellow named Stock, and his adjutant, Barrel. "It's no hard feelings, now, Fox my lad," said Stock. "The lads need a wee bit o' shootin' to get up proper in the morning, eh?"

"If you'll take the same attitude towards your wounded," replied Fox, gesturing towards a number of soldiers lying on improvised field cots amongst a veritable meadow of wildflower bouquets interspersed with an assortment of food and drink probably not appropriate for consumption by convalescents, served by an adoring crew of female acolytes in return for which the sufferers regaled them with the harrowing story of the battle, already rather embroidered over actual recent events.

"What are you, barmy?" replied Barrel. "A Purple Heart and a bonnie lassie, all for a wee mornin's fun? It's a line they'll be makin' to be wounded like this, the lads. Now, if the lads were not on leave it's a mite less conciliatin' we might be, seein' as there's a fancy price on some of the heads I'm seein' here."

"I didn't think you fellows did bounty work," said Fox, handing Stock another foaming glass.

"Right you are, lad, the squadron takes only proper honorable military activities, squashin' upstarts and suppressin' popular rebellion and such, but it's a poor commander who wouldn't wink at a little freelancin', you get me' drift?"

Brian, Tennyson, and Erin were guzzling slightly-enhanced fruit punch while being regaled by a tall, muscular sergeant, incongruously named 'Pin', who wore a huge emerald ear ring that glistened against his smoke-black skin and battle-gray uniform. "It was touch and go, lads, whether we'd ever see the light o' day! Cannon to the right of us, cannon to the left of us, cannon in front us, volleyin' and thunderin'! Onward into the valley o' death we rode, but no longer six hundred!"

"I'm sure it happened exactly that way. In fact, I'll bet Tennyson and Nostradamus
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played video games together in those student cafes and stuff in Vienna, Australia," said Erin. "I saw it in a PBS show a couple of weeks ago."

"I did what?" asked Tennyson.

"Not you, the other Tennyson," said Brian.

Cane, having finished his punch, was sampling the ice cream and pie sections of the dessert tables. "Ummm, vanilla cinnamon banana peanut butter crunch, my favorite!" he remarked between mouthfuls. Clara ignored him, as she was helping Wolf to recover his dignity. "Fox was going to pay you anyway, if you'd just asked," she said as she towed off the fur on his back. "Crystal wouldn't let him cheat you out of your money."

"Child, perhaps you're right, though you should have gathered that McCloud isn't called Fox just because of his ears," grumbled Wolf. "It's a weakness of mine, I admit, that my judgment is often overmastered by passion. I'll not deny being surprised by the skill and cleverness of your friends and your self, lass. I've no liking for humiliation, I've got my pride, now."

"And I guess we're still just kids, you know -- we're not very -- um"

"Gracious?"

"Yeah, that's what I meant. Thoughtless. We still need to learn to think out the consequences of our actions." A pause. "I certainly do."

"Lass, age comes to many, wisdom to few. Still, there's always hope. You're right, my responsibility to my lads comes first. Where has that Fox gotten to?"

Nicholas was trying to remember something important, but he kept getting distracted. Partly it was his own fault: he had succumbed to the temptation to recite his favorite jokes to the coterie of admiring young ladies and smartly-dressed gentlemen who surrounded each of the party guests. "You see, these three guys went to heaven, and--"

"What's heaven?"

"Umm, oh, never mind, Star Haven." Nods of understanding. "And the, um, the boss there says 'Welcome to star haven, you can do whatever you want but just don't step on a duck!'"

"A what?"

"Oh, geeze, don't worry, it's just something you step on. So everybody starts going out

and having fun, and then the next day one of the guys shows up with a really ugly girlfriend, and the other two guys say ‘What happened?’ ‘I stepped on a duck.’ But they all go off dancing and eating and stuff and then the next day the second guy has a really ugly girlfriend and they ask what happened and he says, ‘I stepped on a duck’, and then the third day the last guy shows up with a really gorgeous girl, and the other two guys ask ‘What happened to you?’ and the *girl* says ‘I stepped on a duck!’ Ha ha! Get it? *She* stepped on the duck.” Blank faces. Distinct lack of laughter. *That didn’t go well*, he thought. *What was it I was trying to remember again?* Just as it was on the tip of his mental tongue, there was a loud bashing chord and a wild drumset cadenza. Up on the bandstand, he could see a group of bearded, long-haired, slightly transparent ghostly figures: two guitarists, a bass, a ghost on keyboards and a spirit drummer.

"Oh, wow, it's a -- a live dead band," said Nicholas.

"No, it's a dead live band!" said Cane from behind him.

"And the way they look, I'm grateful they are dead," said Brian.

The guitarist stepped up to a microphone. "Isle Delfino, are you ready to rock?"

"Yes!" replied much of the crowd. Nicholas and Brian both looked dubious.

"Stand by to shake your bodies while we bend your heads!" screamed the guitarist. "We are glad to be bad, sad, and mad! You gotta be riven while you're living, cause once you're dead there's a paucity of sin and debauchery!" He slapped out a series of painfully loud and distorted chords as the band launched into something that was presumably their first song.

"Debauchery?" mumbled Nicholas to himself. "Ohmigosh! Debauchery! We gotta go!" He grabbed Tennyson, who was about to join a brunette named Mindy on the dance floor, and yelled over the music: "We gotta get out of here! Now! Get Clara! Get Erin! I'll find Cane and Fox!"

"What?" shouted Tennyson.

"It's the debauchery thing!" said Nicholas.

"Butchery?" replied Tennyson.

“No, no, it’s different. Never mind, run!!” Nicholas jogged off to find the others. Something about his urgency penetrated Tennyson's chord-sotted brain: after a brief confused pause, he begged off the dance and went to look for Clara by the citrus and bubblegum punch fountain.

The band was still meandering through the first, very long number as Nicholas and Brian dragged Cane, an ice cream pot pie in each hand, bodily down the hill. Slippy was offering a continuous stream of suggestions as they marched, but no physical assistance. The others, having left with varying degrees of reluctance, were loudly demanding an explanation from Nicholas. "Wait, wait, where's Fox? We've got to go back and find him!" said Nicholas desperately, and then "Not you!" as Cane immediately volunteered to look for Fox under the dessert tables.

A familiar muzzle stuck out from behind a tree: "What now?" said Fox, leading a very fetching female fox, apparently wearing even less than her compatriots on the dance floor, out of the concealment of a patch of mesquite.

"Great, there you are," Nicholas sighed. "We have to get as far from the party as we can, quick!"

"I'm, a little busy here," said Fox dubiously.

"Geeze, Fox, it can wait!" said Nicholas. "I mean -- oh, never mind, let's go!" He dragged the kids down the hill and Fox and his new companion followed reluctantly. They had scrambled almost back to the road as the band's cacophony rose to a crescendo. There was a rumbling noise that didn't sound quite like the drums. Nicholas shouted "Get DOWN!" and threw himself behind a lovely old fir tree, dragging Tennyson with him. The others took his suggestion, and just in time: there was an intolerably bright flash and a strange wailing noise, followed by an unearthly silence. Nicholas poked his nose out from behind the tree. Where the huge party field had been, there was a perfectly flat rocky plateau, with no sign of the festivities that had filled the space a moment ago.

"Are they all dead?" wondered Brian.

"Dead or gone," said Clara. "Wow."

"Thank you, Doctor Mario!" said Nicholas.

"Nicholas, you certainly have style," said Fox, brushing pine needles from his fur. His companion had vanished along with the rest of the party folk, though rather less violently. "And I suppose you saved me from myself, again. Seems to me we were on the way back to the hotel, crew. Clara, would you like to lead the way?"

As they regained the road, the sound of a truck induced another bout of caution. Rounding a curve they saw a big slow platform rig carrying a load of concrete pipe. It screeched loudly to a stop just in front of Clara, and the door swung open. Mr. Saturn jumped down to the ground from the cab, turned back, and shouted "Thanks, fellas! Call me if you need help with the grading!"

A voice from the truck replied: "No problem, bud, we will." A grinding and clashing of gears and the big rig trundled slowly down the road again.

Mr. Saturn waddled over to Slippy and Fox. "You know, I was going to warn you about the Black Hole Army last night, but I found a really useful monograph on chlorination and I just lost track of the time. Sorry about that. Still, seems you dealt with them pretty summarily on your own."

"No thanks to you!" said Fox. "You're supposed to be watching out for these things! We could've all been fried in that firefight if Nicholas hadn't come through. Crystal is gonna be furious."

"Yeah, well, then I guess I won't bother to tell you about the bounty hunters," replied Mr. Saturn.

"Boss, calm down," said Slippy, interposing himself between the two while snagging a couple of flies that were foolishly circling in a patch of sunlight between boughs. "If Crystal found out about that little foxlet you were about to go off with you'd be alot worse off than a little neotank attack. Remember what happened at Mute City."

Fox cringed. "That wasn't my fault! Oh, never mind. You're right as usual. Let's get back to the hotel before something else goes wrong."

“Don’t stop attacking, dang it! I dun’ tol’dja and told’dja, I want you to attack like a dern fool madman! If y’aint gonna’ listen what’s the point fer me to waste my valuable time tryin’ to fill yer brain up with wisdom ‘stead a’ slapdash halfbaked silliness.” By now Nicholas was accustomed to Peppy’s ranting. They had been working on fencing every afternoon since shortly after the start of training. Fox was completely opposed to wasting time with short-range weaponry like the beamsword, but it appeared that anything a bit old-fashioned was fine by Peppy; he had agreed at once to provide Nicholas with assistance, though in general he spent more time and effort complaining, telling the same story repeatedly, and indulging in short unpredictable naps in the middle of the lesson, than teaching. Actually fencing would have considerably exceeded the physical energy Peppy was willing to devote to the endeavor; Nicholas’ opponent was a worn and beaten-up practice robot, with a limited repertoire of stereotyped maneuvers which Peppy called up through a wireless controller in his computer tablet. Clara, after a refreshing dip in the pool, was watching the proceedings from a lounge chair to the side.

This particular rant had been initiated by Nicholas’ ill-advised attempt to employ a parry
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to block the simplistic head-thrust from the robot. It was Peppy's contention that a novice fencer like Nicholas could not hope to learn enough to sustain any sort of defence against an experienced combatant. The only approach that offered any promise was for Nicholas to practice a single attack tactic and employ this as his sole recourse against all the exigencies of actual combat: in this particular case, the attack consisted of unlimited repetition of a head thrust (beating the opponent's blade if the thrust was parried was okay) followed by a cut to the torso area. Needless to say, Nicholas found this single-minded approach dull and of dubious utility. He had practiced the parries that Marth taught him at Fourside in his free time, and even worked privately with Clara to improve his defensive abilities. He was sure that he could do more than Peppy gave him credit for.

"I just don't see why I shouldn't try to block an attack if I see an opening," complained Nicholas, backing away from the robot and opening his protective face mask. "I've been working a lot on all the basic parries. I can do this if you'll just give me a chance."

"'Cause yer' gonna get your tail cut raht off, that's why! Anybody with a bit o' seasoning, they's gonna feel ya out with a coupla' whacks, and then they's gonna sucker ya' into a useless parry and knock yer' head offa' yer shoulders. Why, I once saw Princess Peach -- back in the days when she was a'fahtin and a'duelin, y'understand -- go up agin' some dang fool buddy o' Link's, an within one minute there wasn't a piece o' him left big enough to choke a hawg."

"You're just saying that to scare me. I mean, we met Princess Peach, and she was really nice to us. She's the one who gave me the beam sword, for cryin' out loud!"

"You know, Nicholas is really doing a lot better," added Clara, putting down her smoothie. "I'm better than the boys in just about everything else, but he beat me yesterday four to one and my one touch was just luck."

"You keep out o' this, young lady, it's 'tween me 'n mah student!" Before she could reply, the mobile phone on Peppy's belt started to play an old StarFox theme song. Peppy sniffed and looked distant for a moment. "Allus' brings a tear to mah eye, it does," he mumbled, as he flipped the phone open. "Peppy here, what can I do ya for? Oh, yeah, we're out in the field raht behind the tennis courts, y'all come on out." He turned back to Nicholas. "I've had just about enuf of yer dern sass 'n nonsense on this topic, young fella. Me 'n my ol' buddy Falco dun' arranged a little deminstrashun fer to teach ya' a little manners. Yep, yer gonna' listen to yer ol' instructor after this, ya will, I tell ya!"

A crunching sound of boots on gravel caused them both to turn back towards the hotel. The familiar figure of the birdlike Falco appeared from behind the wind-screened fence surrounding the tennis courts. Behind him Nicholas could see a pair of legs engulfed in swirling robes beneath the windscreen; who the heck was that? He retracted the beam sword and

replaced the hilts in his belt as the mystery figure moved into the open: he or she was hooded and wrapped in a brown and gray angle-length robe from which only the hands protruded. Nicholas waited, puzzled, as the two approached across the long grass.

Falco trilled a greeting to Peppy and then said “Just as promised! Let me tell you, this was not easy! I had to break more than a few rules, but the barrier that can keep Falco from getting what he wants once he puts his mind to it, that hasn’t been built and never will be! Why, this is nothing compared to when I stood single-handed against Wario’s whole squadron of --”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard about that namby pamby pillow faht twenny, thirty times already. Ya got him, let’s put ‘im to work, ah ain’t had my afternoon nap yet.” Peppy turned to Nicholas. “You’d better put yer mask back on, son. Ah got ya a real opponent fer to teach ya just how dumb yer dern fool ideas are. Now you just go ahead ‘n let me know when you’ve had enuf, I told’em not to cut off too much o’ ya but he maht ferget in the heat o’ battle.”

The robed figure laughed and turned to Nicholas, doffing the hood to reveal a tall handsome man with flecks of gray in his short-cropped hair. “I shan’t forget, though a little pain in the interest of instruction is sometimes the course of wisdom,” he said. He bowed his head slightly. “Obi-wan is my name, though you may call me Ben.”

Nicholas gasped, and then managed “Uh-- wow -- uh, pleased to meet you, sir, I’m Nicholas.”

“Shall we fight, then, young Padawan?” replied Obi-wan. He shrugged the robe off and dropped it behind him on the grass, revealing a huge white stylized X on his shirt.

It was Clara’s turn to gasp: “He’s gone over to the Dark Side!”

Ben smiled as he pressed the button that extended his light saber. “Reprehensible, I agree, but lucrative. If you only knew the power of the X-box, girl. Still, for now I have another task to attend to.” He turned to Nicholas and nodded.

Nicholas extended his beam sword. Peppy nodded: “Go ‘head, in a faht ya’ ain’t a gonna wait fer anybody to say fer ya to start, get on with it!” Nicholas drew a deep breath and then charged towards Obi-wan: feint to the head, cut at the torso, do it again. The Jedi effortlessly parried the blows, not retreating a step, waiting for Nicholas to tire. After ten or so repetitions, Obi-wan launched a series of lightning-fast attacks: a thrust to Nicholas’ belly, a head cut, a roundhouse stroke at the legs, each easily evading Nicholas’ belated attempts at deflection and delivering a painful burn through the protective fencing suit. The damage could of course have been far more drastic had Kenobee desired, as the suit represented no obstacle to the blade of the energy weapon; but this was little consolation to Nicholas as his claims of defensive ability were rapidly and authoritatively demolished. He tried to retreat, but as they had only practiced

footwork for the attack, he stumbled and fell onto one knee. Obi-wan's hissing blade flashed straight towards his face, promising Nicholas the gift of a very unpleasant traditional dueling scar, when suddenly he stopped completely in mid-strike.

For a moment only Nicholas' panting attempt to catch his breath could be heard. "Uh -- Mr. Kenobee? Sir?" said Nicholas. "Are you okay?"

Falco grabbed a little box from his belt and pressed a button. Nothing happened. "You know, everything worked perfectly before. Hung up again! This always happens when we come out for a demo. Reset, you stupid Microsoft junk, reset!" He jabbed the button futilely a few more times, sighed, and walked over to the frozen figure of the Jedi Knight. After retracting the light saber, Falco pushed Kenobee on the chest; he fell backwards, stiff as a statue, onto the ground with his feet sticking into the air. Falco signaled to Peppy: "Well, are you going to give me a hand here? Come on." He reached down and tugged hard on Ben's left boot, slowly working it off. While Peppy explained in great detail about the misery in his back, Clara shook her head and walked over to help with the other shoe.

"I have to say I'm not much more impressed with you than the last time we met," she remarked to Falco as she pulled. "What are we doing, anyway?"

"What do you think? We're rebooting!"

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"What's the end of time and the beginning of eternity, the --" Nicholas began.

"E!" interrupted Brian. "Geeze, that's too easy."

"Okay, okay, um -- okay, I got another one: what do you call a blind dinosaur?"

"Doyouthinkhesaurus!" shouted Erin. "*Jurassic Park*. Duh."

"All right, fine, how about this one," said Nicholas, undeterred. "There are these three guys trapped on a desert island and they find an old pirate stash, and there's like an oil lamp. So they rub the lamp and out pops a Genie! 'In return for freeing me from the prison of the lamp, I will grant each of you one wish,' says the Genie, and the first guy says, 'I wish to be returned to my wife and family right now' -- POOF! he's gone. The second guy says 'I wish to be home again, too!' -- POOF! he's gone. The third guy says, 'Gee, I'm lonely. I wish my friends were back.'"

A burst of laughter from the table behind Nicholas overwhelmed the modest response of the other kids. Nicholas turned to check out his new fan: an unidentifiable figure, completely

encased in white plastic armor, sat at the table sipping a tall smoothie through a helmet-mating straw. A female voice said: “That’s a good one! ‘I wish my friends were here!’ That’s funny!” she said, collapsing into another burst of mirth. Apparently she had unwisely tried to drink and laugh simultaneously, judging by the burbling sounds that followed. She pulled the straw out and twisted her helmet off, revealing a teenage girl with round glasses, bobbed brown hair and bright smiling eyes. She grabbed a napkin and wiped the excess smoothie from her mouth and chin.

“Would you like to join us?” said Nicholas, who thought a fan of his jokes, even one wearing a number of deadly weapons on her belt, would be a welcome addition to the group. Nicholas, Erin, Clara, and Brian were taking a break before dinner at one of the outdoor bars to be found in various spots on the hotel grounds. Wooden tables with brightly-colored umbrellas, wicker chairs, and padded recliners surrounded a cheerful little bamboo-and-wood kiosk peopled by two equally cheerful piantas. A gentle sea breeze and the distant greedy honks of gulls complemented a sunset whose glowing oranges and yellows would have fascinated van Gore. It was not an environment that encouraged cautious dealings with strangers.

“Thank you, I’d love to,” the girl said. She pulled her chair over to the big round table. “I just started being a bounty hunter, you see, and I didn’t realize that it’s kindof a lonely profession. When you tell people you get paid to kill them they don’t want to talk to you anymore!” Her expression fell. “Oh, I shouldn’t have told you that, now you’re going to run away, aren’t you?”

“No, no, it’s okay,” said Clara. “That’s really interesting. How did you come to be a bounty hunter? Have you been doing it very long? Is it as dangerous as -- oh, I’m sorry, I’m Clara and this is Erin, Brian, and Nicholas is the one who thinks he’s funny.”

“Hi, I’m Wendy! And I think Nicholas is really funny!” She released another flood of giggles. “‘I wish my friends were here.’ Ohmigosh that’s good.”

Clara (who did not share her appreciation of this particular bit of humor) was not deterred. “So, what’s it like being a bounty hunter? Who are you hunting? How did you get started?”

“Oh, I just started, like I said, I guess I don’t really know what it’s like very much,” Wendy replied. “You know, I was a snowboard kid, it was so much fun -- but our game didn’t do very well, and people just didn’t come to the resort, I guess it’s the economic precession or something like that. So after a while they just let us go! We had to get jobs. All of us! Mister Doggie took up painting snowboards. Slash is running a snowmaking machine last I heard. Let’s see... Jan tried to be a lyric writer. Nancy almost got on the graphics team for Super Mario Sunshine! I think she got some work on Metroid Prime. But anyway I thought it would be fun to be a bounty hunter, and I read some books and bought this suit, and Slash knew this guy who knew a woman at the MBHL, and like, there I was!” Wendy removed two photographs from a

pouch on her belt and showed them to Nicholas. "I'm on my first assignment, it's really exciting. I get to go after, um, Stick, he's worth two hundred coins!" It was a photograph of Cane, obviously taken at Luigi's place. "And this other guy, Teasy Eliot I think, he's not very scary at all, I'll bet I can take him! Two hundred fifty coins!" It was Tennyson. "Have you seen either of these guys anywhere? I could really use some help, I want to find them! I've been all over the island here, a whole day's work and not a sign of them."

Nicholas took the photographs from Wendy. "Ugly looking guys. Probably pretty mean. I haven't got a clue where you could find 'em though." He turned to Clara. "Oh, Clara, why don't you go upstairs and make sure Bill and Ralph stay in their rooms. They need to finish their studying, you know."

"Who?" said Clara, mystified.

"*Bill and Ralph*," said Nicholas, shoving the photographs in her face.

"Oh -- Bill and Ralph -- oh, yeah, they sure do need to study a lot or they'll never pass their exams, all right." She stood to leave, spilling her tall glass of papaya punch. "Oh, gosh, I'm sorry, I got punch all over your pictures," she said to Wendy. "Let me just go clean these up, I'll be right back!"

"Okay," said Wendy. "Who are Bill and Ralph?"

"Uh, nobody you know, just some friends of ours," said Nicholas. "So, two hundred coins, that doesn't really sound like much money for such a dangerous job. Are you sure you can make a living doing this?"

"Oh, I've still got lots of money left over from my inventions," Wendy responded.

"Inventions? What were those?" interrupted Erin, abandoning his previous mumbled reverie concerning the intricate diplomacy surrounding the meeting of Babar the elephant and George of the Jungle.

"Oh, there was my personal robot, and the low-pollution rocket engine, those were good, but my best one was the UFO tractor beam." She turned to Erin with an earnestness that revealed that inventing held even more fascination than bounty hunting. Clara noticed that Erin's eyes were already glazing over in a Princess-Zelda fashion and decided it was an excellent time to make a quiet exit. "The old tractor beam was, like, the color of barf and, it made you barf, it was terrible, it felt like your stomach was being turned inside out! So, like, it was all just because of the mismatch between the in-phase and quadrature reality generators, you just had to add a closed-loop control to adjust them. It works a *lot* better than the old one -- why, people even like being captured now! I even had an offer from Pinna Park to make a UFO tractor beam ride!"

“We were just over there this morning,” said Erin, looking puzzled. “I didn’t see a tractor beam ride. Where is it?”

“No, no, I didn’t take the job. At least not yet. They want me to be the product manager. I have to be responsible for all this testing and focus groups and safety standards and marketing collateral materials and, then, like, they wanted to pay me in stock options! I mean, where’s the money, honey? That’s what I said to her, too. I mean, the manager there. I think it was a she. It’s hard to tell with gryphons, you know.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” said Erin, rather too loudly. “Designing them park rides is so neat! I mean, I can play Roller Coaster Tycoon for hours and hours!”

Sudden silence enveloped the bar. The barkeep was staring at him. Brian kicked Erin under the table and whispered, “You don’t talk about *those* games here!”

“What, just because it runs under Windows ME?” said Erin. A penguin at the next table spat her margarita into the face of her companion. Two ghosts at the bar turned pale. The bouncer (a dinosaur that looked like an overweight version of General Scales) withdrew a large wooden club from his belt.

Wendy grabbed her helmet and slammed it on. “All right, you’re coming with me, you scumbag Friend of Bill!” she declared loudly. She grabbed Erin by the arm and dragged him roughly away from the bar in the general direction of the parking lot. “I’d blow your head off right here but I’d make less money on a partial corpse!”

“What? Leggo!” said Erin, struggling futilely.

“Quiet!” hissed Wendy. “Let’s get out of here quick before you get yourself into even more trouble!”

Erin’s eyes widened. “Oh.” He began to flail his legs in a fashion that looked frantic but did not impede Wendy’s progress. “Ow, let me go!” he cried, with rather less conviction than before. “Save me, save me! I am innocent!”

“No Dreyfuss!” yelled Brian.

“Write if you find work!” shouted Nicholas. “I mean Wendy!”

Once they were out of sight in the parking lot elevator Wendy released Erin, who fell on his back on the floor. “Gee, you were great!” said Erin. “That was really quick thinking.”

“Well, it would be better if you could just keep your mouth shut ,” replied Wendy, still in her bounty hunter role. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that,” she said, taking her helmet off. “Are you okay? I didn’t hurt your arm, did I?”

“No, thanks, I’m fine,” said Erin, getting up. “What do we do now?”

“I guess we’d better get out of here until things cool down. We can take my shuttle up to my UFO! I could show you the tractor beam. Would you like to see that?”

“Yeah, wow, that would be so cool! I always wanted to ride in a space shuttle. Does it have huge solid-rocket boosters with big clouds of poisonous smoke and stuff? Oh, I forgot, that’s your invention, isn’t it, non-polluting rockets? No smoke?”

“Wait a minute, um, it’s not exactly like that,” said Wendy, leading Erin out of the elevator. “This is my shuttle. I had to borrow it from Jingtown after my rocket shuttle was banned by the Air Pollution Enhancement Board.” She pointed to what was unmistakable a sleigh, about the size of a large automobile, albeit the skids were equipped with supplementary wheels. Six pairs of rocket-powered snowman robots waited patiently in the traces. At the front of the passenger compartment a diminutive humanoid, dressed in a sort of green velour with huge red buttons and a floppy velvety purple pointed hat with a white cloth flower dangling from the top, slept contentedly on the padded bench behind the instrument panel.

“Dave! Wake up, Dave, we gotta go!” shouted Wendy.

The little guy bounced up, looking as if he regretted the fact. “Wake up!” he said in a tremulous tenor. “I was working on my song lyrics. We can’t go yet, anyway. This uniform still isn’t right. I don’t like red and green, it makes me look short.”

“You don’t just look short, Dave, you *are* short,” said Wendy. “To my UFO please. You didn’t lose the orbital parameters again, did you?”

Dave tried to ignore her. “Bang the drum slowly, little drummer boy, the streets of Laredo are covered with joy!” he sang. “What do you think? Too maudlin? Do you think it’s corny? I don’t know, maybe I should use a theme of redemption from evil, or overbooking airline reservations, or something like that. I’m not sure.”

“Dave, do you want me to call Jingle?” said Wendy.

“No, no, you don’t have to do that, I’m on it, we’re getting going right now! Just a little RA and declination conversion, it’s nothing, an impulse estimate, we’ll be off, step right on in! Do you like the upholstery? I redid it in cream and mauve, you know, with felted yak hide trim.” He turned back to the control panel, while singing off key: “*Jingle leases, rents and sells, as long*

as you pay, oh what fun it is to ride in a rocket powered sleigh!"

Erin couldn't decide if the dizzy floating feeling was the exhilaration of driving in a rocket-powered sled through the narrow lanes and helical access tunnels of the parking lot, or the effect of Wendy sharing that exhilaration right next to him. She had shed her top body armor and wrapped him up in an embrace, whooping and hollering as they paid their parking fee in less than 10 milliseconds and burst into the air over Isle Delfino. The wild whipping wind of their initial passage was replaced by the scent of Wendy's hair as Dave extended the protective bubble over the passenger compartment in preparation for altitude; the fake snowflakes that filled the compartment from a little dispenser on top of the bubble completed his disorientation. Erin was definitely weightless long before they reached orbit.

It took about an hour to match velocities with the orbiting UFO, ample time for Erin to reaccustom himself to zero-G maneuvering. Outside of arguments about fuel reserves, maximum safe velocities, shell temperature limits, whether to use mean or actual anomaly to find the osculating parameters of their orbit, and interminable disputes over unanswerable questions about unfashionable articles of clothing, Dave and Wendy got along just fine. While the two squabbled about approach velocities, Erin, who after the asteroid adventure considered himself a certified master of seat-of-the-pants space navigation, took the controls and guided them towards the only feature on the silvery-smooth surface of the saucer that could be a mating hatch.

"Okay, what do we do now?" asked Erin as he damped the approach velocity down in preparation for contact.

"I can't possibly arrange a successful rendezvous with this -- this -- kid distracting me!" replied Dave. "I'm under a lot of stress, you know. It's not easy being responsible for a rental sleigh." *BUMP!* Erin gently slid the bottom of the sleigh onto the pyramidal collar of the match and heard a hissing sound as a seal was established. "There's that big deposit, I have to refund it if I don't -- what was that?"

"We're here," said Erin. "What do we do now?"

"Oh, we're here!" exclaimed Wendy. "You're so smart!" She wrapped Erin in an enthusiastic embrace, causing them to bounce weightlessly back and forth between the ceiling bubble and the seats a couple of times. "That was great!" She released Erin and grabbed a handle next to the control panel to drag herself towards the displays. "Well, let's see, now we need to verify mating lock here -- yep -- and seal integrity -- okay -- and re-pressurize the lock side there -- coming up, there we are, forty thousand, fifty thousand Pascals, equalize--" there was another loud rushing hiss as the port on the bottom of the sleigh cracked open, making Erin's ears pop -- "okay! Out we go."

"I'll -- uh -- I'll stay with the -- sleigh, okay?" said Dave. "You never know what might

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happen to it. Somebody might steal the radio or something.”

“Dave, the sleigh is going to be in our cargo compartment,” Wendy sighed.

“Well, you know how it is. I think I’d better keep watch just in case. I’ll be fine. Could you bring me something to eat in the cargo compartment? Just a sandwich. My appetite is elfin, you know. And a drink. And maybe a cookie. Do you have strawberry chocolate chip? Just a little one. Or two. I’d better work on my damage report. And some hot soup?”

“Fine, fine, I’ll pull you in with the tractor beam,” Wendy said, tugging at Erin’s pant leg as she floated towards the exit port. “Hey, you wanna’ see some of my inventions? The tractor beam is here, obviously, and I’m still working on the robot, I’ve got it stashed in my bedroom.”

They floated into the lock. Wendy twisted a handle to close the hatch behind them and then pressed another button to restore gravity to the lock without warning Erin: the direction of the restored weight was such as to land him face-down on top of Wendy, literally face-to-face. “Oops, sorry,” he mumbled.

“Oh, that’s okay,” Wendy said, mussing Erin’s hair affectionately. “Come on, let’s go in!” A bit of untangling later, the two bounced through the low-level artificial gravity into the UFO.

From the lock they entered a short corridor opening into the control room. The view was truly breathtaking: before them in the huge wraparound viewpanels the cloud-covered ocean glistened blue and white in the afternoon sun. Erin could see the dots of cumulus-topped islands, an archipelago guarding the edge of a continent just rolling into view as they skimmed towards the rim of the world. While Erin admired the view, Wendy swung herself into a swiveling chair before one of the numerous panels and donned a headset.

“Okay, Dave,” she said, “release the mating collar and I’ll bring you in with the tractor beam.” The other half of the conversation was only just audible as a Dave-esque buzzing over the hisses and beeps of the controls. “No, I don’t want you to just fly it into the hold,” said Wendy, presumably responding to a complaint. “Remember what happened last time you tried that.” A pause. “Good, yes, now just give it a little burst of thrust, just like a hundred newtons is all you need, just to get some clearance so I can steer the beam -- okay, great, that’s it.” After a few seconds, Erin could see the back of the sleigh drift into view at the bottom edge of the center panel as it slowly moved away from the UFO. Dave was just visible inside the swirling fake snowflakes: apparently his protests had been accompanied by emphatic and quite pointless gestures.

Wendy mumbled to herself as she made adjustments at the control panel, and then said, “Okay, here we go!” A brilliant orange-yellow beam leapt from the saucer and enveloped the

sleigh, causing the latter to abruptly halt its slow drift towards the top of Erin's field of view. The saucer shimmered and wavered for a moment; Erin could see Dave suddenly hunch over face down with his mouth wide open, after which he disappeared from view behind the snowshower induced by his sudden movement. The sleigh shook and then zipped almost instantly toward the bottom of the panel; moments after it disappeared from Erin's view, there was a loud thumping and a mechanical whine, followed by what sounded like door clamps closing.

"Well, that went just fine, didn't it," said Wendy cheerfully. There was a loud extended buzz in reply; Wendy's expression turned quizzical as she listened. "Gee, it hardly ever causes that kind of nausea any more. I guess I must have gotten the phase match a little bit wrong. Yes, I agree you sound awful. Yes, I know you have to clean it up. It's a rental sleigh, yeah, yeah. Did you want your sandwich?" The reply to that question was clearly audible even to Erin. Wendy pulled the headphones off and rubbed her ears as she turned back to Erin. "Oh well, it almost always works. Anyway, you wanna' see some of my other inventions?"

"Sure, that would be great."

Pneumatic doors hissed open as Wendy led him into the workshop. The remainder of the ship was quite modest by comparison with the Great Fox, but exuded a comfortable lived-in ambiance that the impersonal environment of the Fox could not match. Erin meandered his way through an obstacle course of cushions, chairs, boxes and shelves, the latter often ornamented with a few flowers in a vase or an embroidered bit of cloth in a frame. Erin stopped for a closer inspection of one. Gold letters at the bottom proclaimed it to be Turtle Island, and a pair of little splotches of thread seemed to represent a snowboarder careening down the fish-laden edge of a reef.

"Oh, do you like that one?" asked Wendy, poking her head out of the door ahead. "I've done much better since, you can have that one if you want!" Her head disappeared again, but her voice continued from inside the room: "Where is that robot?" There was a loud crashing noise. "Oh, yeah, I'd forgotten these! Look, Erin, this is neat: I made special narrow snowboards so you can wear one on each foot! I call them Wizowskis after that one-eyed monster, or maybe just owskis for short."

She held up a long rounded board, turned up at both ends, with a simple belt-and-clasp binding attached at the center, for Erin to admire. "Yep," he said, remembering a long embarrassing roll down hill at Northstar a couple of winters back, "ow! skis, that's an apt name all right. Cool! What else you got?"

As Wendy turned back to rummage through a disorderly pile of assorted mechanical contrivances, Erin's ears were suddenly assaulted with a very loud trumpet note, followed by the fifth and an octave, also fortissimo. By the time the kettle drums pounded his ears through his skull, he recognized Also Sprach Zarathustra. The music cut suddenly short as Wendy pressed a

button next to a panel on the wall, which lit up to show a little strike-thru logo and a placard saying IMAGE ACCESS DENIED. "Oh -- ring tones," muttered Erin to himself.

"Board Couriers, how can I help you?" Wendy recited cheerfully at the panel.

"Pikachu tingles the tip of your tongue," said a tinny voice from the other end.

"Oh -- oh - I know this one -- oh, yeah, 'but Raichu rips out your nose, mouth and lungs!"

"Good, fine. This is Lyghar again. We've decided to hire you after all, if you can be here for a pickup in one hour or less. We talked with Redd; he agreed to a ten percent transport commission as you proposed. The coordinates were provided yesterday. Yes or no?"

"Oh, that's great!" said Wendy. "One hour, no problem, we'll be there! Thanks for your business!"

"What was that about?" asked Erin. "Or maybe I shouldn't know?"

"It's a courier job I was working on last week. Wow! I thought they'd changed their minds, that's why I took the bounty hunting job. This is great! Ten percent, too! All we have to do is go to Star Haven to pick up the shipment and then deliver it to Crazy Redd's black market without being detected by anyone."

"Hmm. How long is this going to take?" asked Erin. "I suppose I ought to at least let the guys know I'm gone."

"Gee, it shouldn't be but a couple of hours," Wendy replied. She looked at a clock display on the wall above. "Oooh, it will be evening there by the time we're finished, we could stop for some dinner afterwards, there's a really nice spot where you can eat out under the stars."

"Wait a minute. Black market. No detection. Is this job illegal or something?"

"Oh, probably, I think it's smuggling. Legal shippers hardly ever hire high-speed low-cross-section saucers with tiny cargo capacities like this one; I read that in last month's Journal of Piracy and Illegal Occupations."

"So you want to go smuggle illegal contraband stuff and then have dinner afterwards?"

"Yeah, sure," Wendy took Erin's hands in hers and broadcast her smile at him: "Oh, come on, it'll be fun! Wait 'till you see Star Haven, it's gorgeous! Besides, I can't bring you back until everybody's forgotten about all that stuff you said; you've just got to come, it'll be so

much better than me doing alone. And you can take my other ray gun and watch my back and stuff. Okay?"

"Well, I guess so."

"Great!" Wendy hugged him and delivered a quick kiss on his cheek, and then ran off to the control room while Erin wondered if his face looked as hot as it felt.

"So this display here just finds the possible transformations of the Kalabi-Yau manifold," said Wendy brightly, pointing to an incomprehensible holographic image floating above the main control panel in front of her. "If you get the right eleven-brane you almost always come out of the warp just where you meant to. I think the chances of disappearing in a burst of subatomic particles are, like, only one or two percent."

"Never tell me the odds!" said Erin, punching the EXIT JUMP button. The tunnel de-streaked into a starlit sky broken in the distance by the silhouettes of pine trees. To the left, the sky was red with the memory of the recently-departed sun. The saucer was floating a few hundred meters above a town of some sort. They descended to land on a round pad just big enough for the craft, in what was obviously a parking area occupied by several other craft of various descriptions. The scene visible through the panoramic windows of the cockpit was inviting: they were at the edge of a plaza dotted with lighted, elegantly sculpted fountains. The long grass rustled in a gentle breeze. Here and there groups of brilliantly glowing Star Spirits drifted, accompanied by representatives of numerous other species, dressed in a ravishing array of colors and styles. Through the plaza were what looked like shops and cafes, each one a unique work of architectural inspiration, tastefully lit and arranged so as to complement its neighbors. As Wendy led the way down the ramp, lovely music that seemed to come from nowhere in particular and a hypnotic blend of aromas were added to the sensual mix. Erin, still dressed in his usual tee-shirt and jeans, felt like a country hick at an expensive party, but Wendy charged blithely across the grass, and Erin, still nominally in his Han Solo adventure mode, was not going to let himself be outdone by a girl.

The aromas of coffee and chocolate greeted them at the StarCoins cafe; Wendy sat down at a contrivance that resembled an elaborated computer desk, and motioned for Erin to join her. At first, he found it disconcerting when the seat molded itself in response to his presence, but that was less bizarre than the perfectly white sphere, emblazoned with a glowing blue numeral '1', that appeared above their table.

"Welcome back to StarCoins, Wendy," it said. "We're sorry to see that you stepped on a duck. Your double latte will be out momentarily."

“There is no duck!” Wendy replied heatedly. “Besides, I think he’s cute.”

“In Star Haven, courtesy is not a barrier to the truth,” replied the sphere. “Here is your latte. A hot chocolate has been provided for your companion. He is not sufficiently mature to be a viable soul mate. You stepped on a duck; it is possible that you did not notice at the time. Your adaptation to this regrettable circumstance is admirable if it is not founded in self-deception. We will debit your account as we find appropriate. I’ll be back when you’re ready for something else,” said the sphere, and *popped* into nothing.

“Star Haven is gorgeous but the service here is terrible,” said Wendy.

“Every one is entitled to their opinion,” replied Erin, taking a sip from the astonishingly-perfect steaming drink. “So just exactly who are we supposed to be meeting here?”

“I don’t really know. Do you think Lyghar himself will come? I don’t know who does the dropoff. We just have a recognition code.”

“Oh, you mean like the Pikachu thing?”

“Yeah. Let’s see, this one is, um...oh-oh, I don’t remember which one I’m supposed to use.”

The sphere reappeared, and said enigmatically: “I’ve been asked to tell you than no one would be so crazy as to fly into an asteroid field.”

Erin replied immediately, “They’d be crazy to follow us, wouldn’t they?”

“I agree completely. Would you be so kind as to follow me, please?” The sphere floated slowly towards a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

Erin stood (reluctantly; he’d already gotten spoiled by the absurdly comfortable chair) and followed; Wendy whispered in his ear, “How did you know? That was great!” and squeezed his hand. The door faded away as the sphere neared it, and reassembled itself behind them as the three entered what was presumably the kitchen. Enticing aromas competed with addictive scents; streams of what was presumably coffee leapt across the room from invisible nozzles to be collected by half-seen drains, the caffeinated liquids interwoven with turbulent cascades of milk and bubbling geysers of steaming tea. Avoiding a scalding if tasty drenching was a bit like river rafting; quiet hints from the sphere told them where and when to move as they navigated towards the back of the room.

The sphere *popped* away as the two humans came around a partition. A Star Spirit, its glow dimmed to tolerability, was tucked into an alcove surrounded by abstract patterns of

rainbow lights, their distribution suggesting a completion by many hues invisible to the human eye. A clock face arose suspended in the air before the Spirit, turning from 11:59 to 12:00 as they watched, then faded away like the door.

“Wonderful, precisely an hour minus one minute,” said the Star Spirit in a voice matching that of the phone conversation. “You are as good as your word. It is always a pleasure to find good help in these troubled times. We all appreciate your forbearance in agreeing to meet in such a run-down, decrepit, disreputable neighborhood. You may be assured that when we have the position that is our due, you will be entertained in the finest establishments in Star Haven.”

Wendy’s eyes went wide, but fortunately Erin was still in his Han Solo smuggler mode. “You’re right, this place is a dump, but we’ve seen a lot worse. Where’s the stuff?”

While you couldn’t really tell where a Star Spirit was looking, Erin had the distinct impression that Lyghar was checking around the room before he responded. “Under the counter,” the Star Spirit said after a delay. Erin and Wendy pulled out a large box marked *POWDERED MILK* in large block letters. “You should get this to your craft forthwith,” said the Star Spirit. “It would be -- inconvenient -- if we were detected.”

“Right away, sir,” said Wendy cheerfully.

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Erin. “Let’s make sure it’s a full shipment.” He lifted the top of the box away. The box was full of metal-capped jars; Erin pulled one out to inspect the contents. Even in the flickering multicolored lights he immediately recognized the repulsive shape: “Ah, sinoglyphygyus obnoxious.”

The Star Spirit flickered blue and then pink. “How did you know that? I wasn’t aware our agreement included disclosure of the contents of the shipment.”

“In this business you have know a lot of strange stuff if you want to survive,” Erin replied. He counted the jars, trying to look as if he knew what number to expect. “Eight by seven by four, hmm, that’s, uh--”

“Two hundred twenty four!” said Wendy.

“Perfect,” replied Erin, replacing the top on the box. “All right, looks fine, we’ll take it from here.” Erin was trying to figure out how to lift the heavy box without looking stupid when Wendy pulled a little wiry contraption from her belt: it extended filamentary feet towards the corners of the box and pulled itself onto the box cover like a button; Wendy grabbed on with two fingers and effortlessly hefted the bulky cargo into the air.

“Ah, glad you remembered to bring that along,” bluffed Erin.

“Oh, you should see my *big* lifting spider!” she replied. Erin, being unneeded for cargo removal, pulled his ray gun from its holster and pretentiously threatened the streams of flying refreshments as they made their way out of the kitchen, while Wendy waved back to Lyghar and brightly chanted, “Thanks for your business! Call us again any time! We’re here to help.”

Erin forced himself to maintain his armed watch as they traversed the plaza, though it was difficult to maintain a high level of paranoia in the soothing environment of Star Haven.

“Wow, how did you learn to do that?” said Wendy as soon as they were away from the cafe. “You were perfect! You made it sound like you were doing Lyghar a favor to let him hire us, and like you knew all about everything without revealing anything. That was amazing!”

“I’ve been around the block with these Star fellows before,” Erin replied. “The sinolyphigus --that was just luck that I’d seen one. Though I didn’t think so at the time.”

“Well you sure fooled him! And me, for that matter. Do you know what they’re used for?”

“Afraid I haven’t the slightest idea.” Erin was distracted by the temptation to turn into Sherlock to tackle the mystery of the alien specimen jars, and disconcerted by the unabashed admiration of such an attractive older girl. “We’d better get inside the saucer before anyone changes their mind,” he said gruffly.

"Hambo, you can't be serious. That's absolutely disgusting!" The two pigs were staring at a display of stuffed wolf heads mounted on the temporary wall above them.

"I know, Lucy," the other pig replied. "Isn't it cool? Boris is going to die! No one is going to care about his coelacanth now! He can go eat his arowana for dinner."

"Excuse me," said Wendy, "could you tell us where to find Crazy Redd?"

"Probably in the police station!" replied Hambo. "You know this stuff is all completely illegal! If you get caught in here you're in big trouble!"

"Hambo, you are so mean!" said the second pig. She turned to Wendy: "He's just being a jerk, he's like that sometimes even though he's so cute! You'd never get in trouble here. Why, Officer Copper comes here all the time to buy his aerobics supplies at half price. Or double price? I forgot which."

"Quadruple, Lucy!" said Hambo. "Okay, okay, I think he's over in the stolen furniture room. I saw him setting out the fake Luigi trophy box over the stereo. It's over there through that hall."

Wendy led the way, lugging the heavy box effortlessly with her spider, while Erin trailed behind her waving his ray gun, trying to be cool and threatening at the same time.

It wasn't hard to find Crazy Redd; he was audible from two rooms away. The fox was shaking hands or paws, chatting loudly with every customer, fawning over cubs and sniffing female canines. "How y'all doin' today, Mr. Pecan, long time no see, how's little Sally? I've got some wonderful nut logs in the snack room, don't forget they're free with any purchase over five hundred bells!"

"Excuse me, Mr. Redd," said Wendy, jumping in before he could start on another squirrel. "I'm Wendy from Board Couriers. We have a shipment for you."

"Ain't that just dandy! Glad you could make it. 'Scuse me, folks, I just have a little administration stuff to do with these fine couriers here, you go ahead and browse, and remember anything you can't afford, we can finance!"

Redd led Wendy and Erin into his private office in the back of his temporary shop and quietly shut the door. Crazy Redd, Erin decided, was a lot cagier than he looked. As soon as the door closed behind him, the glad-handing know-nothing salesman was replaced by a hard-nosed business animal. "Shipping manifest," he demanded coldly of Wendy, without so much as a greeting or thanks.

"Oh, is that this record disk here?" Wendy replied, flashing a winning smile and handing over a tiny slip of plastic. Redd was not impressed. He slid the disk into a reader and mumbled to himself as he reviewed the supposed contents of the shipment. Without a word he popped the box open, carefully removing each jar and placing them organized in groups of five on a brightly-lit white table equipped with a scale, a microscope, ruler and calipers, and several instruments Erin didn't recognize. Redd weighed and inspected each jar. He opened two jars, apparently at random, and removed a sample of the hideous creature inside with a syringe-like tool, inserting the bit of fluid in some sort of analysis tool. A few indecipherable symbols appeared after a good bit of whirring and hissing. Only then did he seem satisfied.

"Excellent. Everything is in perfect order as promised. Here's your fee as agreed, ten percent, thirty-five hundred fifty." He handed Wendy something that looked rather like Zelda's credit card and shook her hand.. "You are one of the few couriers who have made no attempt to cheat on shipment quantities or adulterate the materials. Needless to say, none of their attempts escaped detection. We'll move you to the provisional approved supplier list for all my vendors at the next supply chain review."

"Thanks! We appreciate your business!" said Wendy, smiling.

"Do you have any interest in moving up the food chain?" asked Redd. "I can always use reliable interfaces to the manufacturing side."

Wendy started to deflect the inquiry but Erin, who had heretofore kept his peace playing the gungel, stepped in front of her to introduce himself. "I'm Erin Hollin, the new director of business development for Board. We're always looking for new areas to expand the business, but you understand we need to qualify our opportunities carefully to manage our limited development resources."

"Of course." Redd nodded. "We at Redd's feel that the unique characteristics of the zombie entertainment market can provide superior returns; that's why we've invested so much time and effort developing our channels. Since zombies are already dead they don't die off, so you can expect to keep a satisfied customer indefinitely. They have very regular habits, as their imagination has generally rotted away with much of the midbrain. This also makes them relatively undemanding consumers. For example, our customer surveys for the liqueur we prepare from this eel venom are uniformly positive, even though our assays show that the venom concentration varies by over thirty percent from one eel to another. We have achieved over seventy percent brand recognition for our Death Wish line even though we've only run the one 'you'll feel like you just died!' marketing campaign. We have distribution arrangements in more than eighty percent of zombie bars and nightclubs in dead and moribund urban areas."

"I see your point," Erin replied. "In an early stage business like this vertical integration makes a lot of sense. If we provide an integrated transport function with your marketing and sales prowess, you can own the whole value chain. Except for the little matter of raw materials; I didn't get the impression those Star Spirits understood the value proposition here." Ten minutes later he and Redd shook hands on a preliminary deal to provide couriers on call at reduced rates, excepting weekends and holidays. "Course we'll have to review all this with top management when we get back to headquarters. Good doing business with you."

"Okay, let me know if you want to go ahead and I'll send a contract over for your legal staff to look at," replied Redd. "Meanwhile here's a couple of vouchers for the snack shop. I'd better get back on the floor before those raccoons steal me blind."

Redd led them back out to the retail area, and instantly transformed back into the amiable salesfox. Erin (who was getting very hungry by now) located a sign indicating the way to the snack room, and started along the corridor. As they walked Wendy leaned (intoxicatingly) close and whispered: "How the heck did you know all that stuff about market segmentation and value chains? I never heard of things like that and I'm really smart!"

“Well, I’m not sure smart people would know any of that stuff,” Erin replied. “I certainly didn’t have the slightest idea what I was talking about! My cousin is some kind of marketing mismanager or something at a startup company. He sat next to me at Thanksgiving dinner last year and spent the whole time blabbing stuff like that -- it was really boring! Anyway I just kept using silly stuff I remembered from him, and Redd kept nodding. It was easy.”

“Well, whatever it was, I could sure make a lot of money doing all that extra work for Redd. Do you realize that he paid us thirty-five hundred bells? That’s -- like -- ten times more than I thought we were going to make on this job. With more work for Redd I could even hire Slash to work for me doing courier runs. Hmm -- maybe that’s not such a good idea.”

As Wendy reflected on the potential reliability of her friend as an employee, she rounded the corner in front of Erin and suddenly disappeared from view with a surprised cry and a *thump!* Erin reflexively whipped out his ray gun and charged ahead, to find a rather less drastic disaster than he’d feared: Wendy had merely tripped over an unusually small person, precipitating them both to the floor.

“Mister Saturn!” Erin exclaimed.

Mr. Saturn looked up as Wendy climbed off of him. “I thought we were still on friendly terms, Erin,” he said, indicating the ray gun with a glance.

“Oh, sorry, I thought you were one of the bad guys.” Erin stowed the blaster in his holster. “Hey, what are you doing here anyway? This is great! Wendy, this is Mister Saturn, he’s a roll!”

“Yes, I noticed,” replied Wendy, who had regained her feet. “I’m really sorry about that, I guess I should look where I’m going.”

“It’s unusual for anyone to apologize,” said Mr. Saturn. “I should know not to stand in places where no one can see me.”

A door swung open at the other end of the corridor. Appetizing smells wafted down the hall as a weasel dressed in a brown leather jacket stuck his nose out: “Saturn, you ain’t nothin’ but a speed bump on the road of life. We goin’ or what?”

“Momentarily, Snide my friend.” He turned back to Erin. “I’d love to stay and chat but as you can see, I am late for a business meeting. We’ll talk a bit more when you get back, Erin. A pleasure to have met you, Wendy -- at least now that you’re standing on your own and not on me.” He waddled off into the open door, which swung closed. Erin looked a bit disappointed but Wendy was obviously relieved.

“Come on, that smells great!” she said, tugging Erin by the arm towards the snack room. “I didn’t realize how hungry I am.”

The sun was setting in a blaze of yellow and orange as Wendy and Erin, each carrying a tray piled high with steaming Animal Crossing delicacies courtesy of Redd’s vouchers, sat down on a little patch of grass next to the town bridge. The rushing creek chuckled to itself while bird-folks trilled to each other as they passed on their way. A gentle breeze rustled the distant trees. Two squirrel folk were weeding their gardens just across the stream, chattering amiably to each other as they worked. It was impossible to be on guard for danger in such a bucolic setting and Erin gave up trying.

“Try this, it’s great,” said Wendy, handing Erin a forkful of fried fish filet. “You know, you haven’t told me anything about yourself. How did you learn to be so many different people?”

“Gee, Wendy, I don’t know. I didn’t really learn any of that, I just like to pretend, I always have, even when I was little. I just read a lot.”

“Hardly anybody reads a lot. That’s amazing. What game do you come from?”

“Well, let’s see, we started in the Mushroom Kingdom, from Smash Brothers. You know, it seems like such a long time ago but it’s only been a couple of weeks. Wow.”

“You’re pulling my leg; the Mushroom Kingdom is, like, ancient! A few weeks?”

“I mean, it’s just been a few weeks since we got there.”

“We? Oh, yeah. I forgot about your friends. Nicholas and, um, Clarice--”

“Clara. And Tennyson and Cane and Brian. I guess we have become pretty good friends by now. It used to be that I just kind of hung out with Nicholas and Brian, probably ‘cause they put with me and my mom is always making me go outside. She gets mad if I read all day. I usually ignored Cane and Tennyson; they were always fighting with each other, anyway. And I didn’t like Clara at all. Envious, I guess; she’s such a good athlete, and almost as smart as you are, but of course not as pretty.”

Wendy, gleaming, leaned over to deliver a quick peck on Erin’s cheek in return for the obviously unplanned compliment. A blushing Erin suddenly found it indispensable to clean up the fragments of eggshell he’d dropped in the grass. Wendy tried to redirect the conversation to give him a chance to recover: “Wait a minute, that’s six. There were only four of you when we met.”

“Well, that’s true. Ever since we checked in Cane spends all his free time in the room ordering fruit stuff from room service and watching three tee vees at the same time. It’s kind of funny since he never ever ate anything with fruits or vegetables at home; just burgers and fries and pizza, typical kid. And then I think Tennyson and Clara had another fight, or anyway they were being pretty cold, so Tennyson went up to the room early to watch tee vee with Cane. Except Cane’s still mad that Tennyson got a bigger reward than he did, so I’ll bet he’ll make Tennyson watch the stupid Pro Trucker channel.”

“Bigger reward? What?”

“Oh, I mean on the wanted poster. I found it! You know, the one on the ghost train. They got everybody’s names wrong! Like, I was Aaron, like in the Bible, and Cane was Stick and Tennyson was T.S. Elliott -- the wrong poet, that was funny!”

“Stick?” said Wendy. “That sounds familiar --”

Erin dropped his sno cone with barbecue sauce on the grass. “Oh. Ooops. Ooops. I wasn’t supposed to say that. Wendy, you’re not going to go kill my friends, are you? You wouldn’t do that?” He tried to stand up, struggling to drag his ray gun out of the holster at the same time. “That’s no fair. You were being nice to me just to get information. That’s terrible! I really liked you.”

“Put that away!” Wendy said, reaching over to muss Erin’s hair. “I like you, too. I’m not going to run off to shoot your friends. Besides, we haven’t finished dinner. Oh, look! a shooting star!” She pointed towards the zenith. Another streak flashed by a moment later. “Tonight must be the meteor shower! Isn’t it beautiful?”

Erin was still a bit leery. “You promise, right? You’re not lying to me?”

“Geeze, Erin, I promise. Hey, does that mean that Nicholas -- the one telling the jokes, I mean -- oh my, ‘I wish my friends were here’--” Wendy was momentarily consumed by another fit of laughter. “Is he Nickles? I mean, did he really kill Conker and his bodyguards and Andross’s wolf buddy all at once? He didn’t look that mean.”

“What bodyguards? Andross? I don’t know anything about any of that. I think Nicholas did actually kill Conker, all right, though I didn’t actually see it. I was over listening to General Scales. He writes some really interesting stuff, you know. But Tennyson told me that it was pretty amazing: Conker was hassling Clara, and Nicholas just, like, cut his head right off. With his beam sword. And then he just turns to everyone in the bar and says ‘anybody else?’ or something like that, and gets a drink at the bar like nothing happened. Great story, don’t you think?”

“Bar? At the hotel?”

“No, no, this was at Cymbaline’s.”

“Oh, wow. You got into Cymbaline’s? You guys are so lucky!”

“Cool, look, there’s two more!” Erin pointed towards an open patch between the trees where two brilliant streaks still trailed across the darkening sky. “I’ve tried to watch meteor showers at home, but the sky was always too bright. This is really neat.”

“Yow! Wow, and -- three of them!” Erin and Wendy leaned back on the grass, food forgotten, the better to absorb the celestial spectacle above them. Erin found it was much more convenient to wrap his arm around Wendy’s shoulders than to try to squeeze it in between them.

“Oh, look at that!”

“Gorgeous. Look, that one must have exploded in the air!”

“Yeah, I think those are called fireballs.”

“Oooh, oooh -- there’s a whole set of lights! It’s really -- wait a minute.” Wendy sat up, somewhat reluctantly. “That’s not a meteor. Hmm. They’re coming this way, and fast.” She reached for the holster at her belt; Erin followed suit as he squinted into the night.

“Yellow orange yellow,” he mumbled. “Gee, Wendy, isn’t that the same color scheme as the sleigh? I mean, shuttle? Or whatever?”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. I thought I told Dave we didn’t need him until, um, nine or something like that.”

“Yeah, you did. Do you think something’s happened? Maybe you’d better call him.”

“No need, he’s just about here.” She stood up, hand still poised above her sidearm. Erin’s training filtered back into his consciousness; he drew his ray gun and took a position behind a rock where he could cover Wendy if there was trouble.

Within a moment the outline of the sleigh became visible as it settled to a bumpy landing in the open field behind Crazy Redd’s *Caveat Emptorium*. Dave burst out of the bizarrely cheerful craft as soon it had come to a stop, and ran towards them, floppy green felt hat bouncing crazily.

“Thank goodness I found you! We have to fly back, right now! It’s urgent!”

“What?” replied Wendy dubiously. “What’s urgent? We don’t have anything scheduled all day tomorrow, I’m sure of it.”

“No, no, you don’t understand. We’ve got to go! I’m in so much trouble! You have to fly me back right now!”

“Why are you in trouble?”

Dave looked around warily, as if checking for eavesdroppers. Then he looked down at his absurd buckle shoes and wiped his nose and mouth several times with his brilliant magenta handkerchief. “Jingle called. Jingle called. They need the sleigh! We’ve got to get it back right now. Oh, how could this happen?”

“What? Who needs it back? My lease runs through next month.”

“Oh, yeah, the lease. The lease. Well, um, to tell the truth -- Jingle doesn’t really, um, exactly, um, own the sleigh.”

“Okay. Do you own it?”

“No, no, no, it’s not mine. I just do scheduled maintenance.”

“Well, then, who does?”

“Oh, the big guy. It’s his. And he needs it tomorrow.”

“But what about the lease agreement?”

“Uh, uh, well, we didn’t exactly tell him about the lease agreement.”

“Oh, I get it.” Wendy laughed. “You guys were just, like, renting it under the table to make extra money!”

“Well, of course. Do you think I could afford to dress this well on an Elf’s pay?”

“Who’s Jingle?” asked Erin.

“Jingle the black-nosed reindeer,” Wendy replied. “He’s sort of a jerk. Actually, I guess he’s really a jerk. I mean, I had to fill in all these credit reference things and provide a deposit and everything, and now it turns out it’s not his sleigh anyway!”

“Well, fine, you’re right, Jingle is a jerk. Hey, that’s a good one.” Dave began to hum to himself:

*Jingle the black-nosed reindeer
Was a really slimy jerk
But if you ever told him
You would soon be out of work!*

“Oh, dear, what am I doing making up Jingle jingles at a time like this?” Dave interrupted himself. “We are going to be in such trouble if the big guy finds out his sleigh is missing. They’ll cut my buttons off in front of everyone! It’s ghoulish. Can we have the sleigh back?”

Wendy rolled her eyes. “Enough, Dave, of course you can have the sleigh back--”

Erin the Business Development manager stepped in front of Wendy. “For a price, of course. First there’s the lease abrogation clause and the penalty fee, plus consequential damages. We have work to do, you know. I think that would come to, oh, fifteen thousand bells. And then there’s the little matter of paying for silence. It wouldn’t do you a lot of good to have the lease contract floating around the big guy’s office, now, would it?”

“You wouldn’t? Would you? You seemed like such a nice kid. Ugly, but nice. Oh my gosh. I’ll call Jingle. Let me call Jingle and see. I’ll get right back to you.” Dave pulled out an object that looked like a striped candy cane but was apparently a cellphone, twisted the ribbon on the top, and started to mumble in a strange language into the chocolate bells dangling from the candy.

Erin turned back to Wendy and whispered: “What were you going to get for that bounty hunting job anyway?”

“About two hundred coins. That’s, um, around fifty-four hundred bells. I think.”

“Jingle says there’s no way he’s going to pay for his sleigh,” said Dave, trying to be assertive.

Erin laughed. “That’s fine, because you’ve already admitted that *it isn’t his!* Thirty thousand bells, one sleigh. A fair deal. That’s our offer.”

Dave mumbled into the chocolate and then tore his ear away from the candyphone as an audible burst of incomprehensible imprecations followed. “See? See? He’s not happy. Not happy at all.”

“Ask me if I care,” said Erin. He grabbed the candy cane from Dave and shouted into where he gathered the mouthpiece was. “Thirty thousand bells or we walk! Last chance before venison. Take it or leave it!”

“Oh, he’s not going to like that at all. He hates it when you say that word.” Dave cringed as he accepted the candyphone back from Erin. “Yes? Okay. My credit card? Why mine? Oh, all right.” Dave reached into his back pocket and pulled out a slip of plastic. “Here. Thirty thousand bells. Charge it to me. You win.”

Erin (who hadn’t the slightest idea what to do with the card) took it from Dave and handed it to Wendy. “Calm down, Dave. It’s Jingle’s bells, not yours, right? We’ll just pop right back up to the ship as soon as everything’s --” Wendy, who had been doing something with the card and a device from her belt, nodded to him. “--completed. See, we’ll even leave our dinner behind, that’s what great folks we are. Let’s go!”

Dave, somewhat relieved, ran towards the sleigh, while Erin turned back, meaning to take Wendy’s hand and lead her back to the shuttle. Wendy was not interested in looking cool, however. She grabbed him around the waist with both arms and squeezed: “That’s so much money! who needs bounty hunting? You are the greatest!” at which point she leaned over and demonstrated a kiss that was not merely friendly.

Dave had to come drag them back to the sleigh.
