

Enter the Cube

*by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin
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Chapter 16: Speed up, honk your horn, and stand your ground

“Excuse me -- um -- sir,” said Tennyson, taking a wild guess.

“I *beg* your pardon, young man!” said the portly zombie matron, shedding bits of rotten flesh on the shiny terminal floor as she attempted to spin around to confront him. “You have something against zombies?”

“I had no idea you were a zombie!” Tennyson replied. “Why, you look like you’ve hardly been dead a week,” he lied.

“You -- you don’t really mean that,” said the corpse woman.

“Oh, but I do!” Tennyson continued as he sidled around her broad skeleton. “Anyone would say you’re fresh out of the grave.”

“Well -- well, my friends do tell me I’m remarkably well-preserved. I always took care of myself when I was alive, and I’m confident the salutary effects have continued past my demise. Let that be a lesson to you, young man!” She waved a brightly-colored bottle at him; Tennyson could just read part of the label: *THWISH*.

“Yes, thank you,” Tennyson continued, bowing as he retreated. “I’ll keep that in mind. A pleasure to have met you.” *Well, that went well*, he thought. *I managed to get around her without having to touch her. Yuuuuck!* He continued down the narrow corridor, past a group of briefcase-toting business squirrels having a loud argument about booking receivables against inventory before collecting the nuts, and came out into the wider main waiting area.

The security line turned left and proceeded a short distance down the glistening hallway

to an inspection station. Tennyson moved out to one side and was finally able to see what was causing the holdup: three uniformed airport inspectors and a couple of armed police were gathered around a diminutive visor-faced fellow. Piled high on the tables around him were several opened trunks and suitcases and a collection of what Tennyson's now-trained eye immediately recognized were explosives of every description. As he neared the dispute, he was able to listen in. One of the inspectors seemed to be finishing up reading from a list:

“...seventeen hand-grenades, eleven pressure-sensitive land mines, fourteen shallow-water contact mines, three bridge demolition packs with timers, fifty-four cherry bombs, five hundred twenty-two firecrackers, and two rack-mount laser-guided cluster bombs. So, Mr. Bomberman, you expect us to believe that this is your typical carry-on luggage?”

“No, of course not, this is just my, whatchacallum, personal effects. I have some real bombs in my carry-on luggage over here..” The little guy did look sincerely disconcerted. He nervously reached into his hip pocket and withdrew several long thin objects, which he tossed to the floor one by one in a distracted fashion, where they exploded loudly.

“Harry, you missed the blasting caps!” said the inspector to one of her colleagues.

“Couldn't be. Impossible. I checked him with the metal detector and I scraped that stuff off his shoes and put it in the analyzer, and then I x-rayed his wrist-watch, and I checked the density of his cell phone by immersing it in water and measuring the displaced volume, and I compared his profile to the profile in the database, and I questioned him while he was standing under the placard that says lying to an inspector is really, really bad.”

“Great, Harry. That's all very scientific. Did you look in his pockets?”

“No. Why?”

“Are you -- done here?” asked Mr. Bomberman. “Can I have my bombs back and get on the plane?”

The inspectors, engaged in an increasingly irascible exchange of accusations, ignored him. He began to shove some of the smaller minutiiions into his capacious pockets, while the pig-man who was next in line snorted loudly and charged forward through the metal detector, muttering loudly: “Well, *I'm* not carrying anything other than a pistol and a couple of tomahawks and I have a flight to catch!” At this, the frustrated potential passengers surged forward, overwhelming the limited organizational abilities of the overworked airport staff, and streamed

through the security stations without paying much attention to the beeping metal detectors or weapons sensors.

“Gee, I guess we could have taken our weapons along after all,” Tennyson said to himself. Tennyson decided it wasn’t worth trying to get past the putrid zombie woman again; since the line was moving, he might as well wait for the rest of the kids. As he lounged snatches of conversation reached him from the surging line:

“I told you, piece o’ cake, Jack! They’ll never even notice. We could’ve brought in a kilo of PS2’s in the other suitcase.”

“I think the X-boxes are enough, Daxter. We’re just lucky the inspectors are distracted. Try to look like everybody else in line.”

“Oh, ticked off?” The pair continued their dispute as they passed the ineffectually-irate inspectors along with the stream of other guests. The alarms in the metal detection frames were going off continually as passengers shoved their luggage bodily through the overstuffed x-ray machines and argued at the exit over which portable game machine belonged to whom. Crystal and the other kids rolled out into the corridor, and Tennyson shepherded them through the chaos to the boarding lounges.

While Crystal and the kids traveled in tourist fashion, the disassembled Arwings were being shipped by TeamRocket Express (*When it absolutely positively has to blast off again*) to Tails’ workshop in the Mystic Ruins region outside of town. Fox had been cagey about his means of travel, noting merely that he would meet the kids at the hotel. Mr. Saturn had left early and was waiting for them at gate 23C. Cane immediately parked himself in front of the large-screen television set.

“All right! check it out!” he said to Brian. “This is great!” On the screen two nomadimice appeared to be fencing with carrots equipped with glistening diamond tips. ‘*A touch! Palpably a touch!*’ said the speaker below the monitor.

“What is it?” asked Brian.

“Oh, it’s *The Calipers of Fate*, episode seven -- Burn ‘em, Wood! -- or maybe it was Ham, Let Her Feel Ya’ -- I don’t remember. See, in the last episode Mercushio and Lysander were having this big battle over the first girl they saw after they got exposed to the love potion when they were supposed to be murdering the Shogun’s wife for washing the blood off her

hands, but then we had to leave the hotel so I figured I'd never find out whether Nero burned the concert hall down or not. I hope the plane's late! Then I'll be able to watch episode eight, that's where we find out the real name of the Rows."

"Uh, okay, sounds like I needed to see the other episodes," replied Brian.

"No, it's pretty simple, really. Do you want me to tell you the plot? See, it all starts when Pa Seiden loses his mermaid franchise and has to sell the Titanic, but then --"

"Never mind, maybe I'd better not get started," said Brian. "Then I'd be disappointed if we didn't see all the rest of the episodes."

"Oh, yeah, you're right, what if we never get to number twelve? That's the one where Inspector Klue So confronts Mort Vole, the rodent with an attitude!" While Cane continued to agonize over the potential of episodes he might never see, Brian made his way to the currency exchange window, where Erin and Mr. Saturn were arguing over how much cash they needed.

"Don't you think the Princess is going to get wise to you sooner or later?" said Erin.

"Certainly," replied Mr. Saturn. "That's the plan. We want her to react irrationally. It is our conscious intention to be obviously abusive."

"Are you sure this isn't just an excuse to act the way you like to act anyway?" replied Erin. "An irrationalization?"

"Rationalization. And no, it isn't. I usually prefer ambiguity."

"Aren't you guys supposed to be getting some cash for the trip?" asked Brian.

"Yeah, but Mister Saturn wants to put everything on Zelda's credit card," replied Erin.

"Not everything, Erin. We don't want to dull the impact of grand theft with a boring list of petty larcenies."

"Well, fine, which items are you going to charge?" asked Brian, pulling a list from his pocket. "Crystal and I worked out the budget last night, so we can just remove anything you're going to pay for and get cash for what's left."

“Brian, it’s meticulous planners like you who take the joy out of impulse stealing. I was going to use the card for the hotel bill and the Arwings.”

“Really.” Brian looked thoughtful. “Doesn’t that make it particularly easy for Princess Zelda to figure out where we are and what we’re up to?”

“Precisely, Dr. Watson,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Aww, I wanted to say that!” said Erin.

“All right, Holmes, go ahead,” said Mr. Saturn, chuckling skeptically. “Show me how the scheme works out.”

“Come, LeStrade, what do you take me for?” answered Erin in the accent Nicholas knew too well. “A crucial aspect of the plan, Doctor Watson, is to arrive at Ark under the guise of having been repulsed. Leaving aside for the moment the requirements of practising the deception, it is necessary to consider the foibles of those upon whom it is to be practised. An exercise, Watson: what sort of mind is most easily deceived, a confident mind or an open one?”

“Confident,” Brian answered warily.

“Precisely. And of all the classes of creatures upon the earth who is most confident, and most without warrant, in their own conclusions?”

“A -- car salesman?”

“No, no -- a politician! A ruler! A Very Important Princess, as she characterized herself. We must give Zelda the opportunity and the incentive to become the self-appointed defender of the Project, tossing aside the obfuscations of the so-called Committee and taking control of the station to crush our pathetic invasion. Her credibility as leader will become dependent upon her apparent victory, such that she can hardly tolerate any question of its validity during her suppression of the resentment and rivalries that will be occasioned by her assumption of power. Did you follow all that, Watson?”

“I think so. But what’s to stop her from just picking us up at the hotel?”

“Timing, right, LeStrade?”

Mr. Saturn raised an eyebrow. “Astute, Holmes.” He turned to Brian. “It’s pretty hard for anyone in Hyrule to conceive of credit card fraud, so the Finance Ministry doesn’t watch as carefully as they should. Our little excesses won’t be caught until the quarterly system-wide audit, due next Tuesday. The emergency meeting of the Committee at Ark -- the meeting that Zelda spent a lot of political capital to force, that she can’t possibly miss -- is Thursday. She can’t mess around looking for us and she won’t think to try. She’s going to show up at Ark and parade this evidence of the conspiracy as her opening gambit at the meeting, angle for control of the defenses of the station, and triumphantly destroy our attacking force to validate her assumption of power.”

“Isn’t it going to seem awfully convenient that we’re revealing our plans on her credit card statement?” asked Brian, still skeptical.

“She’ll present it as if she let us take the card in order to track our progress,” said Erin.

“Gee, how do we know that’s not true?” asked Brian.

“We don’t,” said Mr. Saturn. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s our trap, or whether we’re using her trap to trap the trapper.”

“And I thought you liked her,” said Brian.

“That was a long time ago!” said Erin.

“It was? I mean, it was a coupla’ weeks but you seemed pretty serious about it back then.”

“Oh, that was just, like, infatuation. I’ve gone way beyond that. Wendy is different. We’re really soul mates.”

“Oh?” said Clara. “Tell us more. Who is this Wendy? Oh, but first, Crystal told me to remind the boys that we’re boarding in about three minutes and where the heck is our cash?”

“Gee, I was going to ask the same thing until I got distracted,” said Brian.

“Well, we’re back to where we started. How much money do we need?”

“No, we’re not,” said Brian. “Mister Saturn told me what he plans to spend on the card.

Just gimme a second... hm, thirty-five less nineteen, carry a four -- okay, twenty-two hundred coins. Here, I've got them bagged in hundreds." Brian handed a set of bags out of his pack to Erin, who tried to keep them from falling out of his arms as he approached the window prominently marked EXCHANGE - CAMBIO - ARGENT. Next to the window was a large display entitled *CURRENT CURRENCY*. It said:

	COINS
RINGS	45
BELLS	27
RUPEES	25
YEN	0.25
BANANAS	0.10
GOLD	10.0
TICKETS	0.067

and so on. As Erin watched the exchange rate for gold shifted up by a tenth.

The window was designed for taller folks than Erin, particularly when slumped with his load of coins, and the booth appeared unoccupied. He leaned over and pressed the little button next to the window labeled CALL with his nose.

A winsome face appeared in the window, topped by a disheveled mop of red-brown hair. Absurdly elaborate mismatched ornaments dangled from her earlobes, one eyebrow was multiply pierced with what looked like a spring, and her left cheek bore a tattoo of a striped hot-air balloon with the international NOT symbol overlaid. "Oh, a customer! Can I help you? Do you need help? Maybe you're good at juggling coins. I knew an owl who could juggle coins once. He ran off with a pussycat and they got arrested for moon dancing in broad daylight. That never made any sense to me, they should have been arrested for juggling without a marriage license. I can exchange currency for good wishes, you know. Or was that ask if the customer wishes for a current exchange? You know, like the exchange interaction in the Hartree-Fock model of a conductive solid, except that nobody uses that any more even though it is the basis for pseudopotentials. I read that in a book on solid state pornography once, I haven't the slightest idea what it means. Did you go to juggling school or are you just talented? You'd better hurry up, I think your flight is boarding now."

Even Erin, not one to be tongue-tied, was rather overwhelmed by this unexpected soliloquy. "Uh -- yeah, I'm in a hurry, I think -- don't I know you?"

“Oh, everybody says that, it’s because of my stupid cousin, I mean my second cousin twice removed on my mother’s side, she’s Daisy, everyone knows her.” The girl reached through the window to shake Erin’s unavailable hand; he was unsurprised to note that she wore multiple mismatched rings on three fingers and her thumb, as well as a golden bracelet with several tiny ornaments suspended from it on fine silver chains. “Please to meet you, I’m Dipsey!” She jiggled her wrist; the ornaments rang sweetly. “These are my dangling participles. I’ve been here two months now and everything is really going well. My strategic plan allows another three months before I begin my rise to the top of the cotton denim jean pool. I’m going to be the Frogger of Finance, the Bowser of the Bucks, the Luigi of Liquidity! I’ve got it all worked out. Some day people are going to say, ‘there goes Daisy, she’s Dipsey’s nephew!’, oops, I mean, ‘she’s Disney’s cousin!’, oops, I mean, ‘she’s Dipsey’s aunt’, oh, you know what I mean. I hate being related to a famous person, it’s so demeaning. Are you famous? I could be your relative.”

“I see why the line at the window was short,” Erin mumbled to himself. “Look, that’s all great, but like, I need to exchange these coins for rings.” He glanced over his shoulder; Cane was disappearing past the boarding gate and Crystal was waving urgently at him. “I mean, now. Right now. Quick. Can you do something quick?”

“I threw up once five times in succession, I mean that happened one time, and everybody told me it was all over really fast but it seemed to me it took forever--”

“Now, N-O-W. That’s forty-eight rings, more or less. Here.” Erin shoved the bags onto the counter; clunking sounds announced the excess falling to the floor as Dipsey tried unsuccessfully to organize the incoming valuta.

“Oh, okay, don’t you want your free ticket to my Chautauqua lecture? It’s good anytime through November of next year, except that actually I’ll probably get bored and stop lecturing long before then. A hundred forty-eight, you said? Here, oh, look at that, it matches my bracelet! I’ll keep that one, here’s a different one, is that a ten or a hundred? Oh, well. Thanks for your business!” she called as Erin grabbed the rings and ran full tilt for the boarding gate, snagging his pack from the chair in passing.

“Bye, thanks, you can keep the receipt!” he shouted over his shoulder.

The flight was generally uneventful, save for some minor excitement when the Yoshis in

row 32 started bazooka vomiting from having been fed stewed blowfish (intended for the ichthyosaurs in row 31) instead of blowfish stew, and the little incident between the foxes in 17a,b,c and f and the hounds in 18c,d, and e, with the porcine steward caught in the middle, and the fire in the left back restroom caused by Cane's attempt to warm his hot chocolate to the sea level boiling point when they were at cruising altitude. After a relatively relaxing couple of hours, they found themselves once again waiting in line, this time in line for the incoming Customs inspection. While Cane tried to keep up on episode 11 of *The Calipers of Fate* showing in the visitor's lobby across the hall, Crystal searched repeatedly through her knapsack, growing increasingly agitated as they neared the head of the line.

"What's up?" Clara whispered, not wanting to attract attention from the security guards at the exits.

"I can't find our entry papers," Crystal replied. "Fox gave them to me before we left."

"Is it such a big deal? Aren't we just going as tourists or something like that?"

"Oh, it's not that simple. You can't enter on a tourist visa unless you're with a licensed tour. We were going to be game beta testers -- there's a big test industry here and Fox managed to get his hands on an invitation back late last year after Dinosaur Planet. But now we're stuck. We can't go back without arousing suspicion. Besides then we'll be late; there's not another flight until tomorrow morning."

"Let's just ask Mr. Saturn," said Erin. "He's usually got some sort of illegal way of getting around problems like this."

"Too late," said Brian. "Didn't you notice? He went off with the ground crew while the rest of us were waiting to deplane."

"Oh, yeah, you're right. Hmm. Didn't even say goodbye."

Nicholas chimed in: "Can't we just call him on the phone?"

"No time, we've only got one more person in front of us," said Brian, thus generously characterizing the floppy-eared Gungan, who was apparently overwhelmed with the task of trying to carry his luggage, visa, and passport simultaneously.

"We could just stand to one side while you call," suggested Clara.

“I’d rather not attract attention,” whispered Crystal. The Gungan managed to display his passport to the inspector at the cost of spilling open his soiled underwear all over the booth, providing them with an extra minute to ponder the problem.

“Wait a minute,” said Erin. He reached into his pack and pulled out two dirty crumpled sheets of paper. “This should do it.” He collected the forged passports from the kids and strode confidently up to the booth as the Gungan stuffed clothes back into his overcrowded suitcase.

“Passports,” said the bored-looking inspection robot. One arm ended in a huge gun, which would have been frightening if it didn’t have the remains of a hot dog sticking out of the barrel. The robot’s blue polka-dotted bow tie was stained with what looked like lubricating oil dripping from the neck joints. An ill-fitting hat labeled *PORT AUTHORITY* kept sliding onto the side of its head, blocking the document inspection camera.

“Here ya’ go,” said Erin, laying the little plastic squares on the counter.

The robot scanned them and make a grinding sound somewhere between a beep and a belch. “Reason for entry?”

“We’re attending the Officer Jenny convention.” In the background Crystal silently mouthed to Clara *The what??*

“That’s invitation only, I’ll need to see documentation,” said the robot.

“Here you go,” said Erin, handing him the slips of paper. “Two invites, one from Officer Jenny, and one from, er, Officer Jenny.”

“Looks okay. Well, the convention center is through those blue double doors over there by the SuperNES diorama. You might want to hurry up; the opening ceremonies have already started. All right, move along now. Next!”

“That’s right, let’s move along!” shouted Erin, leading the way towards the convention center (conveniently forgetting to go back for his luggage).

Crystal caught up with him about half way down the hall. “Where the heck are you taking us? What convention?”

“Officer Jenny. It’s all right, they’ll never actually find me. I mean, the Officer Jenny’s who invited me. There’s probably a lot of Officer Jenny’s here.”

“Invited you? What is going on?”

“That’s our Erin,” said Clara. “A girl in every port, two if possible.”

“Gee, I feel kind of left out, too,” said Tennyson. “How many girlfriends do you have now, Erin?”

“They’re not my girlfriends, I just kindof met them at the minigames park. Remember, when we were looking for Luigi’s key?”

“Yeah, but you never told us you met Officer Jenny there.”

“Two of them. And I did so. You just didn’t listen.”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough,” said Nicholas. “Let’s just figure out what we have to do, now. We don’t really have to go to this convention, do we?”

Crystal looked back over her shoulder at the robot. “I think we’d better. They usually have surveillance cameras in the terminals, though they aren’t always careful about monitoring them. If we said we’re going to the convention we probably ought to go, at least for a while. No one is going to care if we don’t stay very long.”

“Well, okay,” replied Nicholas. “We’ll just be an hour or two late at the hotel; that should be okay. So Erin, you’re the authority: what’s the plan?”

“Hmm. Why do we need a plan? So far I’ve been doing pretty well just pretending to know what’s going on.”

“You mean you don’t know anything about the Convention?”

“Diddly over squat.”

“Great.” Nicholas pondered for a moment. “Well, the key is not to split up and get lost. Everybody stay together when we get through the doors. We’ll check things out and then decide

what's safest and doesn't look too suspicious. Okay, Crystal?"

"Sounds good to me. I don't know anything about the Officer Jenny organization, but usually at these sorts of meetings there will be some classes and maybe some sort of trade show; that's probably pretty safe to wander through. We don't want to wander into one of the administrative meetings, though: that's where everyone knows everyone else, so we'd look incongruous. Besides, anyone who shows up usually gets stuck with two or three jobs to do."

"We sure don't want that!" said Cane.

As they neared the doors the foot traffic was increasingly dominated by apparently identical and very pretty girls, walking in groups of two or three, all dressed in the same short leather skirts slit at the hip, and satin blouses, each bearing a little golden badge worn on the left shoulder, all with the same bleached-blond hair with just a tinge of blue at the roots, all talking loudly and in unison. This was only the appetizer: beyond the doors was a huge open area with a tall domed ceiling, swarming with identically-garbed Officer Jenny attendees, shepherded from place to place by a second class of Officer Jennys in black leather coveralls with red SECURITY badges emblazoned across the breast(s).

A huge display screen hung from the rafters just beyond the entrance. The kids made their way towards it and read:

WELCOME OFFICER JENNYs

<i>Plenary Session</i>	Eggman Empire Ballroom
<i>Community Policing Tutorials</i>	Mystic Ruins Rooms F, G, W
<i>Nurse Joy Liaison Training</i>	Green Hill Conference Rooms
<i>Pokemon Reclassification</i>	skateboard park
<i>Planning Committee</i>	Toxic Pool
<i>Motorcycle Vendor Exhibition</i>	Gigapolis Hall

TOM NOOK SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

<i>Selling to Squirrels Symposium</i>	Rock Garden
<i>Harvesting the Moon special session</i>	Observatory Penthouse
<i>Home Financing Tutorial</i>	Angel Island Ballrooms I, II
<i>Accounting for Raccoons</i>	Ice Mountain Rooms
<i>Developing the Inner Tom</i>	Takumi Lounge Meeting Rooms

"Somehow, I don't think we're going to fit into any of these sessions," said Tennyson,

looking at the rows of identical policewomen in front of him, and the hordes of indistinguishable suit-and-tie-garbed raccoons beyond them.

Two Jennys were already cooing over Erin: “I invited him!” “No you didn’t, *I* invited him! He’s going to Liaison Training with me!” “No, I’m taking him to the show!” “You are not, I saw him first!”

“Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!” said Erin, extricating himself with difficulty.

“Let’s go to the restaurant!” said Cane. “I always wanted to develop my inner Tom. It’s not as good as Barry but at least it’s better than Herman. Besides, it’s time for lunch.”

“I think Cane’s on to something there,” said Crystal. “That’s probably the most innocuous thing we can do. Nicholas is right; let’s be careful to stick together. Why don’t you lead the way, Erin?”

“And an ignorant child shall lead them,” Erin recited pompously as he proceeded confidently if blindly down the broad hall, trying to move rapidly enough to prevent any Jennys from focusing their attention on him. “For lo! they of little wit, they shall be elevated unto the highest place, and they shall beat their swords into personal digital assistants, and search the world until they cometh upon he who sayeth, ‘what is that outdated boat anchor you’re carrying there, friend?’, and they shall name him Leviathan, for so that it soundeth more dreadful than Fred or George.”

“I think being around all these pretty girls is getting to him,” said Nicholas.

“Makes sense to me,” said Tennyson.

“That’s the restaurant, the big wooden doors,” interrupted Clara, forcefully directing Tennyson’s attention away from the crowded Empire Ballroom entryway by grabbing his head. “We’re going there. Right?”

“The restaurant,” pronounced Erin. “Right. I knew that.” Not yet willing to cede his newfound status, he shoved his way past Brian and Clara to barge into the swinging doors below a glowing kanji sign.

The noise of conversation rose to a roar as the rest of the kids strode through, leaving Erin to manage his own escape. Inside was a swirling mixture of Jennys and Toms, interspersed with

human and feline waiters and waitresses. A cheerful female gorilla garbed in a brief shirt and a halter top stood at a podium, nearly lost in the crowd of would-be diners despite her bulk. Erin tried to make his way to the receptionist, but was delayed by the simultaneous assault of a group of three Officer Jennys: “Isn’t he *cute!*” “And such good hair too, ooh! I could run my fingers through it all day!” “Get away, he’s *mine!*” “I saw him first!” Taking advantage of his discomfiture, Clara slipped and shoved her way through the crowd to the podium.

“Hi, we’d like to get lunch, party of seven,” she said.

“Oh, my, honey, we’re really busy as you can see,” replied the ape. She shouted over her left shoulder: “Luanne, extra waters to sixteen and don’t forget the crepes! Sorry, dear, where were we? Oh, yeah, party of seven, no where to put you right now. Give me your name and I’ll call when we’ve got something. You can wait in the bar, over there.”

“Okay, Clara, party of seven.”

A tall dark waiter in a tuxedo waltzed by, an amazingly large tray laden with dishes precariously balanced above his head. “Twenty-two and twenty-four are gonna’ open up in a minute, Candy!” he shouted as he hurried by.

“Oh, are you DK’s sweetie?” asked Clara.

“I should say not!” the ape replied. “Why, he is the most irresponsible simian since *Sinanthropus!* You tell him from me that we are through! If I never see him again it will be one week too soon. Jenny and Jenny, party of two, your table is ready!” Six pairs of identical girls tried to squeeze towards the podium, forcing Clara to one side before she could follow up on this interesting revelation. Surrendering to circumstance, she returned to the group and led them to the bar.

Three television sets surmounted a polished wood counter, with innumerable flasks and glasses dangling by their stems in racks above the rows of bottled liquors and beverages. It seemed like the whole room was filled with pairs of Jennys and Toms. As Nicholas walked up to the bar, all the Tom Nooks said in unison: “*You are the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen!*”

“*I’ll bet you say that to all the Officer Jennys,*” replied the girls in synchrony.

“*Of course not,*” replied the Toms. “*Why, I’ve never met anyone like you.*”

“Can I get you something, kids?” A handsome young waiter balancing a tray of drinks in each hand was addressing them between a pair of amorous Tom Nooks. The waiter dropped one tray off with the Toms, and spun around to deliver the other three beers to the corresponding Officer Jennys. He leaned over Crystal’s shoulder and said in a lowered voice, “It’s sure nice to have someone different in here! Not that I have anything against Jennys, you understand, or Toms, but it gets dull to say the least!”

“Just a round of Aquastars,” said Crystal. “Unless Nicholas wants to have another Margarita.”

“I’d like to keep my head, thanks,” said Nicholas. He turned to the waiter. “We’re waiting for a table for lunch. Will they call us?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s piped into here, and repeated on the inset,” said the waiter, pointing to the flat-panel display above the bar. Sure enough, there was a little blue square in the bottom right with an updating list in bright yellow letters:

Jenny party of three your table is ready
Jenny party of four your table is ready
Tom party of two your table is ready
Jenny party of six your table is ready
Tom party of two your table is ready

“Not all that helpful, is it?” said Clara.

“Well, yeah, today is a special case. But it shouldn’t be a problem for you -- I mean, you’re name’s not Jenny, is it?”

“Clara,” she replied.

“Clara! What a lovely name. Welcome to Takumi’s. You need anything, just ask for Ken-Ichi, that’s me.”

“All right, all right, that’s my girl!” said Tennyson, stepping between the two. “Seven Aquastars, right?” Clara was simultaneously irritated and touched.

“No problem, right back,” said the waiter.

“Oh, so you guys are officially an item now?” said Crystal. Between the television, the band in the next room, and the continuing synchronized propositioning of the other occupants of the bar, it was necessary to lean close to Clara and Tennyson to be heard.

“I don’t just go out with anyone, you know,” said all the Jennys.

“We’re -- friends again,” said Clara, her possessive embrace belying her words.

“I thought you told us not to use our real names!” Cane shouted above the din. “How ‘come Clara gets to use hers?”

“But I’m not just anyone! I’m financially sound with a promising future,” said the Toms.

“It doesn’t do us any good to use pseudonyms if you tell everyone we’re doing it,” said Brian.

“You know, you can talk all the Russian you want, Brian, I don’t care,” said Cane.

“Latin,” said Erin.

“English derived from the Latin,” said Brian.

“Ixnay on the atinlay, I say!” said Nicholas.

“The only good Latin is pig Latin!” added Cane.

“Can we be back in time for the first-night party?” said the Jennys.

“Is it a hosted bar?” replied the Toms.

“Oh, there you are,” a familiar voice said from below the neighboring table. “Come on, we’ve got a table by the kitchen, perfect for a fast exit if we need one.”

“Mister Saturn!” said Erin. “Where the heck have you been? And what’s a hosted bar?”

“Sorry, kid, but if you knew Wendy would find out. And a hosted bar is where you don’t have to pay for the drinks.”

“Here I thought I was keeping up on my charges,” said Crystal. “What’s this about Wendy?”

Mr. Saturn glanced around the bar. “Let’s get to the booth and I’ll fill you in.”

“Hey!” said Erin. “Don’t I have a say in this?”

“Not really,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Here are your Aquastars!” said Ken-Ichi, returning with a laden tray.

“Grab the drinks, kids,” said Mr. Saturn. “Crystal?” The fox nodded and tossed a ring to the waiter as they made their way through the door towards the dining area -- just in time, it turned out, for a moment later:

“Oh, that would be fun! Let’s go right now before the others think of it!”

“Sure thing, honey! Hey, get out of my way, I was going first!”

“You get out of my way!”

Mr. Saturn led the way through the crowds to the back of the dining area. An unending stream of servers poured in and out of the swinging doors to the kitchen, bearing trays and bowls of steaming delicacies. Paper dividers graced with pen-and-ink sketches of flowers and mountain landscapes created a semblance of privacy for a number of alcoves containing low tables surrounded by cushions, mostly packed with now-monotonously-lovely Officer Jennys. Mr. Saturn waddled into the only unoccupied booth, just to the left of the kitchen doors. Crystal followed, leaving her shoes tucked neatly in the recess next to the entry.

“Geeze, wait a minute, I have to take off my shoes to eat?” Cane complained. “Where are the chairs, anyway?”

“Yes, and no,” said Brian. “Traditional Japanese seating. No chairs. And you take off your shoes.”

“Of course, in places where such behavior is common it is also the custom to bathe frequently,” added Mr. Saturn, wriggling his nose without psychic intent. “Fortunately the ventilation is good here at Takumi’s; a very advanced system with distributed wireless sensors

controlling the wastegates. Squeaky-clean restrooms, too.”

“Great, Cane can eat in the bathroom!” said Clara.

“I am not! Although at least there’s something to sit on, unlike here. Don’t anyone steal my shoes!”

“In the interest of time, I took the liberty of ordering for the group,” said Mr. Saturn. “Tsukemono and bean curd to start, with udon and assorted water Pokemon in broth up next. Ah, here we are.” Two smiling hedgehogs dressed in a bizarre mixture of tuxedo jacket worn over kimonos bowed as they entered the alcove; in a trice the square table was laden with elegantly tiny plates graced with perfectly - arranged colorful lumps of salted vegetable and quivering white tofu topped with helices of dark sauce.

“Yow, I thought I was used to the game world but this is the wierdest yet!” said Cane, contemplating his plate with less than his usual culinary avarice.

“Really? This is just like Japanese restaurants at home,” replied Brian. “Haven’t you ever had tsukemono? It’s just a sort of salty pickled vegetable. I don’t know how you could compare this to, like, treasure-hunting on Luigi’s yacht.”

“Yeah, or riding on an up waterfall!” added Nicholas.

“Or dinner cooked by a giant Toad and served by a ghost,” said Clara.

“Or a cafe in Star Haven!” said Erin. “Now *that* was weird!”

“Let’s keep our voices down about Star Haven,” said Mr. Saturn, checking the surroundings. “But I agree, that is one weird place.”

“I think,” said Tennyson slowly, “that it’s weird to be arguing about what’s weirdest. This whole thing is stupendously incredibly bizarre. I mean, was anyone -- except Erin, he doesn’t count -- was anyone planning on a quick trip into a video game after school, two weeks of military training, nearly getting killed ten or twelve times, traveling in space like it was a trip to the supermarket to invade a giant space station on the off chance that it would get us home?”

“You’re right, I never thought of the part with the military training,” said Erin. “Way too boring.”

“Yeah, I mean, what’s that word, neuralgic?” said Nicholas. “Oh, yeah, *nostalgic*. That’s it. I remember that we used to just *play* these games. It was really easy. Only your thumbs got tired. And if you got killed you just went back to the last save. And dinners were Mom’s cooking, and weird was when Dad decided to make something for dinner that no one else would eat.”

“Well, it’s not that different in some ways,” said Brian. “I mean, like, all of us have been on, say, Speed Highway a hundred times! That’s how we’re getting to the hotel, isn’t it?” Crystal nodded as she ripped a tentacle off a broiled tentacool. “It’s a little different being there, but maybe not so much.”

“Oh, wow, that’s right,” said Nicholas, looking concerned. “Doesn’t Speed Highway have lots of, like, inverted loops and upside-down offramps and things?” He put his hand to his head. “Do we have to?”

“Well,” said Mr. Saturn, “we considered the Twinkle Park route, but I thought you’d appreciate skipping the roller coaster after your last experience, not to mention the inverted hovering bumper cars.”

“I hope it doesn’t last too long, at least,” said Nicholas.

“It’s called Speed Highway!” said Clara. “Duh.”

“You’ve never seen it during rush hour,” said Crystal.

“What’s in a name?” said Erin. “A nose by any other name would smell Cane’s feet.”

“You mean, like a traffic jam?” asked Tennyson. “What’s that, anyway?” he added, pointing to a striped greenish lump floating in broth.

“Gridlock is a better word,” replied Mr. Saturn. “Road courtesy is not a habit here. You could walk faster if you could walk upside down. And that’s braised barboach, held by goombas to be beneficial for the heart and liver.”

“I always walk on speed highway,” said Tennyson. “I mean, controlling Sonic or Tails. I guess I should say, run. Seems to go fast enough.”

“I like Knuckles more,” said Brian. “Maybe he’s not quite as fast as Sonic but I always found it easier to get through Station Square.”

“Tails is fastest, at least after he gets the jet anklet,” said Nicholas. “But I guess they’re all pretty fast, except Big the Cat! He’s terrible.” The waiters cleared the last empty dishes as Mr. Saturn exercised Zelda’s finances again.

“Not as bad as Amy. She’s about as fast as a snail!” said Cane. “But what do you expect, she’s a girl.”

Clara laughed. “You should talk! Who’s been last in every race since we started training? Who complained about Peppy going too fast? You couldn’t catch Amy Rose if you tried.”

“Come on, come on,” said Crystal, trying to get the kids moving as the staff cleared the dishes. “Get your shoes back on and let’s get going. I think we’ve been here long enough.”

“I am not so slow!” said Cane. “It’s just that I was wearing my crappy shoes when we got here. I’m a lot faster in my Reeboks!”

“You don’t have any Reeboks,” said Tennyson. “You were always taking mine to show off!” he continued, holding his worn sneakers up to demonstrate. “And they don’t even fit you. Why don’t you just get some better shoes?”

“Have you seen a shoe store here? If I had a good pair of shoes I’d run you guys into the ground. You’ll see! I’ve got speed to burn. I could run Speed Highway faster than you can drive it!” Cane was so busy boasting he wasn’t paying much attention to the task of donning his shoes: in fact, he wasn’t. As he tied the footwear on, a pointy-eared fellow from the next booth stuck his head around the partition, knocking his oversized dark glasses askew, and shouted in dismay: “Hey, those are *my* shoes!” But it was too late. Cane finished snugging the laces, took a step, and disappeared in a blur of motion.

“I thought you didn’t want to be seen, Sonic?” said a voice from behind the partition.

“Keep it down, would you?” replied Sonic, replacing the concealing glasses.

“Sonic! Wow! This is cool!” said Nicholas.

“Oh, geeze, why don’t you tell everyone?” said Sonic. “Come on, Knuckles, let’s get

outta here before the crowds come.” Sonic reached to the table, grabbed a ceramic container and downed the contents in a gulp, tossing the empty onto the cushions beside the table.

“What’s the point of buying expensive sake if you’re going to guzzle it like that?” asked his companion, a diminutive but feisty long-nosed fellow with a face almost concealed in dreadlocked red fur.

“What, you want it like last time?” said Sonic. “Get your stuff.”

“What’s the problem?” asked Clara.

“It’s difficult for someone as famous as Sonic to go out in public without being mobbed by his numerous fans, admirers, and groupies,” said Knuckles, rather sarcastically. “Or so he tells me. I don’t have this problem, you’ll understand.”

“Them that can, do, them that can’t, complain,” said Sonic. “You comin’ or what?”

“Sonic, you gonna’ go barefoot?” Knuckles asked, glancing at the shoe rack.

“Can’t be helped, and stop saying my name!” Sonic gathered a dark cloak and hood from the coat rack next to the booth and started to walk hurriedly away, but before he could take more than a couple of steps, a pretty human waitress burst out of the kitchen doors and called loudly: “Mister Sonic! Mister Sonic! Wait a minute!”

Sonic stopped, sighed, and turned back to the inquiring servitor. “For cryin’ out loud. Okay. What is it, kid? You want an autograph? A smile? No -- ah, a kiss? I get it -- you’re holding out for a night of passionate romance?”

The waitress held out a slip of paper. “No, no, Mister Sonic -- you forgot to pay your bill!”

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“Orange you glad I didn’t say banana!” said Nicholas. Laughter did not follow.

“Don’t you ever run out of dumb jokes?” asked Clara.

“I don’t think so,” said Tennyson. “He did this the whole time we waited in line for the

hot jump rope.” Fox and Crystal had given the kids a rare and welcome night off; they were in a very long slow-moving line for the giant pinball game in the casino next to the hotel.

“I remember you told me about that. Didn’t you get a key?” Clara replied.

“Yep, still got it in my pack in the room, though I haven’t the slightest idea why. It’s kindof pretty but it’s hard to imagine we’d ever find a use for it.”

“Everything since we got here is hard to imagine, except for Erin,” replied Clara.

“True,” said Brian. “So speaking of things that are hard to imagine -- where exactly did you say you met Doctor Robotnik?”

“Aggressive driving school,” said Nicholas. “It was wild. I mean, we went by one room where they were practicing a distrust exercise where one person stands in the middle of the circle and closes their eyes and all the others try to be the first one to push them over. See, if you’re lucky everybody tries to push you down at once and they end up holding you up instead. It’s supposed to teach you how being obnoxious builds teamwork or something like that.”

“Yeah,” added Tennyson, “and the next room -- that was a classroom, they were having a kind of group oral exam, like when Mr. Classen does recitation -- and the teacher--”

“She was a koopa!” interrupted Nicholas.

“Koopas, right,” continued Tennyson, “so she says, ‘It’s late at night and as you come around a corner, you see two headlights heading straight for you in your lane, on the wrong side of the road. What do you do, class?’”

Nicholas broke in again: “And everybody shouts out, ‘speed up, honk your horn, and *stand your ground!*’”

Tennyson continued: “And she was just about crying at that point, you know, ‘I’m so proud of you I could just burst!’ ”

“Yeah,” said Nicholas, “and then she said, ‘Get out there and smash some fenders!’ I mean, Mr. Classen never treats us like that.”

“You still haven’t said what happened with Doctor Robotnik,” said Brian.

The line snaked back and forth on the catwalk, suspended by no obvious means over rows of slot machines. The conversation was briefly interrupted while the kids watched as a gang of rampaging chaos armed with hammers and explosives attack the slots, blowing the machines to bits and stuffing the coins into impractically-large cloth bags. The chaos weren't very good at burgling and tended to blow each other up with ill-considered charge placements, while coin shrapnel flew wildly. The displaced customers had gone up to their rooms to get their weaponry, and began to return about the same time as a crew of blue-uniformed security guards streamed in through a trap door in ceiling, landing on top of each other as well as a pair of chubby ladies who had continued to ply the slot machines obsessively through the minor disturbance.

"Yeah, yeah, I was getting to that," said Nicholas. "So Mister Saturn drags us into this other room, and like it's real dark inside and there's this one wall that you can see into another room, but they can't see you, a one-way leer--"

"One-way mirror," corrected Tennyson.

"Right, so there's this weird looking sortof fat guy with a big mustache, and he's talking to a bowser, but the bowser guy is, like carrying a clipboard and wearing a necktie, and he's saying, um, 'Mister Robotnik, no one is going to judge you here, we're just trying to fix up your miserable attitude and distorted sense of priorities. I'm not telling you you're wrong, just that you're messed up in the head a little bit.'"

"Oh, so that was Robotnik," said Clara. "Of course he's messed up, he's always trying to blow everything up."

"No, no, that wasn't it," said Tennyson. "'Cause the fat guy is -- you know, actually he reminded me of Skolar, that star spirit we met at Peach's. He was talking about how his moral -- impersonations?"

"Imperatives," suggested Brian.

"Oh, yeah, that was it. His moral imperatives had shifted to disallow destruction without cause, that was what he said. Kinda' got me to thinking. He went on for several minutes about how you shouldn't cause trouble unless there's a legitimate reason, and how the eternal search for enlightenment should extend to every aspect of the world including driving, and so that's why he let the other guy at the stop sign have his turn."

The chaos having been rounded up or disposed of, the gamblers below returned to parting with their coins. A sort of jazz band composed of penguins, who were having significant difficulties playing the wind instruments as their beaks didn't fit the mouthpieces very well, made the rounds of the slots, drawing many catcalls, some thrown food, and rather little applause. A spinner, a chubby fellow suspended from a propellor around its waist, floated by the blackjack tables, the backwash sending playing cards flying everywhere, as the dealers (all foxes) shouted imprecations. The spinner, apparently their supervisor, took no notice, moving into the grand foyer past the huge statue of Sonic.

“Oh, yeah, that was funny!” interjected Nicholas. “I mean, when he said that, the bowser guy went off the deep end. Like, ‘after all the time we’ve spent on this you’re still in denial! Still blabbing this obscene nonsense about taking turns. What does it take to pound some sense into that oversized peanut of a brain of yours!?’”

“And then,” said Tennyson, “Robotnik said, ‘look on the bright side, with all the hours you spend with me you’re that much closer to completing your internship.’”

“What does any of this have to do with us?” asked Brian.

“Oh, yeah, I was getting to that,” said Nicholas. “While we’re quietly in here listening to this stuff Mister Saturn takes out his cell phone and then the bowser guy gets a call, you see it’s Saturn imitating somebody else, I guess his boss or something, and he goes out, and then we sneak in through some kind of hidden door into the room.”

By this point the kids were nearing the head of the line (finally). A smiling attendant directed participants towards one of four control stations, from which each directed one of the four giant flippers in the huge pinball machine.

“And the fat guy sees us coming in,” said Tennyson, “and is he surprised or scared, like you’d think? Fat chance. ‘About time you got here, Saturn. I was about to die of boredom. Who are your friends?’ So Mister Saturn is explaining how we need to get to the reality dissimulator or whatever, and then Robotnik says ‘Yeah, I know all about it, they haven’t accounted for the possibility of divergent positive back feeding--’”

“It was ‘feedback’,” interrupted Nicholas. “And then Saturn and the fat guy got into this big argument about all kinds of computer stuff, and then the counselor guy comes back and instead of chasing us out or something, he joins in the argument! So they’re all going on about loops and detractors--” (“--attractors--” added Tennyson) “--right, attractives and control

alchemisms, and Tennyson just walks right up to the fat guy and says, ‘Hey, while you guys are talking, do you suppose you could tell us the security code for the recreational doors on the station?’ And the guy says ‘of course, here, it’s not hard, it’s just a generalized hibachi series’” (“--Fibonacci--” added Tennyson) “right, and he scribbles a bunch of stuff on the back of a driving vest.” (“--test--” added Tennyson.)

Tennyson held up a coffee-stained slip of paper. Brian could read part of the printed text: “INTENTIONAL DENTS ARE USED TO INTIMIDATE OTHER DRIVERS WHEN...” “And he told me how to find the safe entrances -- some of them have traps that make you tell bad jokes and stuff--”

“Nicholas must have already gone through one of those,” said Clara.

“So anyway they were all still arguing when Nicholas and I left. And then on the way back, we were getting hungry so we stopped at Amy’s diner, and who do you think we found there?”

“Mario?” said Clara?

“Tails?” guessed Brian.

“General MacArthur?” said Erin.

“No, Cane! Eating!” said Nicholas.

“Redundant,” said Brian.

“And from the look of it he’d been eating for quite a while,” added Tennyson. “I counted eleven empty plates on his table and that didn’t include the pot pie” (“and raspberry sherbet ice cream”, added Nicholas) “yeah, and sherbet he was finishing up when we got there.”

“That’s a lot even for Cane,” said Clara.

“Well,” replied Tennyson, “he said that running ten or twelve miles in the light speed shoes gets you really hungry.”

“And it’s lucky we showed up ‘cause he didn’t have any money with him!” added Nicholas. “We had to pay the bill and it used up pretty much all the coins we had with us.”

“So what were you guys up to while we were gone?” asked Tennyson.

“Crystal and Clara spent the whole afternoon talking girl talk,” said Erin.

“How do you know?” asked Nicholas. “You listened in?”

“No, no, I was just -- looking for a phone.”

“So, what were you talking about?” asked Tennyson. “If it’s not too private.”

“If you must know -- Crystal was talking to me about staying here in the game worlds. She thinks I could be a successful mercenary soldier after my apprenticeship. So she was telling me how the different specialties work, like bounty hunting, assassins for hire, military work, bodyguards, kidnapping, treasure hunting, all that stuff. And stuff about whether you join a company or work for yourself, where to get money to start a business, how much money you need to live in the different worlds.”

“Wow,” said Tennyson. “So you’re deserting us to become a businesswoman.”

“Businesswoman and murderess,” said Erin.

“Redundant,” said Brian.

“Hey, whoah, you didn’t tell me that!” said Nicholas. “How are we going to get through Ark without you?”

“Hold on, there, I’m not deserting anybody,” replied Clara. “I’m just making sure I have a backup plan. You know, we still don’t know much about what’s in Ark. We could get to the whatever-it-is and still not get home.”

“You’re right that we might not get home,” said Brian, “but I’m not sure it’s fair to say that we don’t know anything about Ark. There are four different routes from the colonized farming areas to the research area, which is certainly where the simulator is. The power conduits seem likely to have regular maintenance access, though the old sanitation tubes may be unattended. There aren’t any --”

“Okay, okay, Brian!” said Tennyson. “We know you’ve been studying the maps. Clara

should have said everybody but Brian doesn't know much about Ark, right?"

"Besides, she wasn't really talking about knowing our way around inside," said Nicholas. "It's more like what the simulator thing really is and whether we can figure out how to use it or find someone to help."

"Is that what she was talking about?" asked Tennyson.

"She's just making it all up," said Erin. "I'll bet it was just girl talk. You know how girl talk is. First they spend hours discussing the boys they like, and then they spend more hours talking about what sort of stuff they should wear to get the attention of the boys they like even though everybody knows that boys don't ever notice what girls wear, and then they complain about how the boys never notice them for a couple more hours. I'll bet that's what they were doing."

"You're the one that's infatuated, not me," said Clara. "Just what were you looking for a phone for, anyway? Probably to call some mystery girl whose name starts with W?"

"I was not. I was just -- ordering pizza for Cane."

"Come on, you're sweet on Wendy."

"I am not! I'm was just pretending to like her to find out about the smuggling ring."

"Okay, we'll tell her that when we see her. Oh, and about how you were flirting with all the Jennys."

"I was not calling Wendy, and besides she said she doesn't mind about the Jennys."

"There you are!" It was Cane on the neighboring catwalk. That was the line for the occupants of the pinballs: it was much shorter, so that Cane had caught up with the others despite his late arrival. "You guys deserted me again!"

"I thought you had dessert!" replied Nicholas. "More than once, if I recall."

"Are you sure you want to be in that line?" shouted Brian.

"Why, what about it?" But by this time Cane was first; a helpful monkey-like kiki

took his ticket and helped him into the door of a huge white pinball twice as tall as a kid, with a PacMan smile painted across the front.

“Be sure to latch the decoupler first and the door second once you’re inside,” said the Kiki. “Decoupler first, door lock second!”

Cane as usual paid no attention. “I’ll see you guys after I get a hundred thousand points or so!” The door closed with a *CLICK-CLACK*. The Kiki pounded on the outside, shouting “No, no, decoupler first!” but it was too late: the ball rolled down a track into the chute next to the huge plunger and another giant Pacball rolled up to take its place.

While this was going on, the other kids took up positions. The week’s special theme, explained by a huge banner hanging above the playing surface, was Pacball. The board had been redone in true PacMan style; points could be had by rolling over little round dots that looked like freeway lane markers, and on the board prowled mechanical ghosts that were worth 500 points if taken from behind, but could take 1000 points from the unwary player who allowed their ball to be captured. Some of the monstrous bumpers, marked ‘TNT’, would blast the ball across the playing surface at a high rate; others, spring pads, projected the ball high into the air to fall unpredictably onto the board. It was a challenging task for the flipper team to keep the ball in play, though of course that paled beside the challenge of surviving the noisy, bumpy, roller-coaster environment inside the ball (even when the decoupling linkage was properly engaged).

Nicholas and Tennyson had the two left-side flippers and Brian and Erin took the right side pair. Clara got the launcher control and the projectile gun. The latter, positioned on a turret in the center of the huge board, could fire blasts of dry ice to deflect the ball, though considerable skill was required to strike the fast-moving ball with the narrow stream. A successful run depended on teamwork from all, combined with clever manipulation of the rolling ball by its occupant. The current high score, shown on the top of the stupendous score wall, was 454,217 points, by the *1619 Twos*; the *Sons Of New York* were in second place with 411,021.

Clara pulled the plunger lever, her action mirrored by the huge simulcrum below her, and released: the big piston struck Cane’s ball and the game began.

Now, when properly installed (i.e. when the decoupler was engaged prior to locking the door), the chamber within the ball was suspended on internal tracks so that it stayed upright, allowing the player to see and respond to the board, shifting his or her weight to subtly influence the passage of the ball across the playing surface. Unfortunately, Cane had engaged the door lock

first, so that the decoupling linkage could not seat properly; thus he plummeted head-over-heels, belly-around-butt, and on several other axes as the ball was pounded by the flippers and bumpers, absorbing Pacdots and messily squashing piles of apples, pears, and strawberries. In consequence, he was entirely too occupied with his own difficulties to notice the gossamer shape poking its head above the gunwales of the *ersatz* pirate ship suspended above the gambling floor to the left of the pinball arcade. The figure was shielded by the second bumper from the view of Brian, the only other member of the group who would have recognized a real Pac ghost. Having established the identity of its quarry, it retreated briefly back into cover. There was a loud whining noise, barely audible above the clanging of the pinball bells and the shouts of the gallery as Cane unwittingly overran an imitation ghost to gain the team 500 points.

Suddenly a huge silvery shape bounded into the air above the pirate ship, heading towards the pinball arcade. Brian and Tennyson, involved in a difficult cross-board handoff to try to get a clean shot at the ramp to Cleopatra, paid no attention. Even Clara, absorbed in the game, barely gave the object a glance. But Nicholas, who had never been a pinball enthusiast in the real world and felt even more awkward manipulating a flipper bigger than he was with hundreds of folks watching his every mis-step, was mentally ready for a distraction. He couldn't immediately identify the gleaming bug-eyed craft or creature but it looked entirely too bizarre to ignore. He pulled the hilt of his beamsword from the belt holder he had taken to using to avoid a repetition of the awkwardness at Cymbaline's. Tennyson shouted, "Come on, Nicholas!" as Cane's ballcraft slipped right by his idle flipper, but Nicholas was vacillating about extending the blade and didn't heed the admonition.

As the creature cleared one of the roof support beams, its mouth opened. Something about the view staring down its throat decided Nicholas, and just in time. As his energy blade hissed out of the hilts, a brilliant yellow and gold flaming shaft shot out of the mouth at lightning speed, heading straight towards Brian. Nicholas' many hours of surreptitious defensive practice, disparaged by Peppy, took over: the sword swung in an arc to meet the glowing beam. There was a spark-spitting, screaming, screeching clash as the two energy weapons met, but the parry deflected the attack into the partition next to Brian instead of his head. "The killer frog!" Brian shouted, ducking a bit too late but reaching immediately for his ray gun.

The arcade broke into tempestuous chaos as the slightly-truncated tongue zipped back into the flying frog. Before the frog could alight on the crowded flipper line catwalk, Clara had snapped off two rifle shots, spanging off the stainless steel exterior as she searched unsuccessfully for the vulnerable lubrication cover plates at the leg joints. Tennyson managed to get under cover behind the snack vending machine; Erin stood on the hazardously-narrow barrier wall surrounding the pinball floor, brandishing his pinball program like a conductor's

baton and shouting, “jump, frog, jump!”

Meanwhile, Nicholas decided that the best defense was a good offense and charged down the catwalk, beam sword at the ready. The frog turned to the attack, but its view was blocked by the wildly fleeing crowd of folks on the catwalk, so that Nicholas was able to close the gap unchallenged. Up close, the tongue was an awkward weapon, easily avoided as it shot out, brushing past Nicholas’ shoulder to knock a spinner sideways down to the floor. Nicholas could see a wide-eyed blue ghost figure behind one of the eye-like windows of the craft as he pursued the only attack he knew, a head cut followed by a slice downwards towards what would be the shoulder of a human. His blade sunk partway into one of the legs of the creature before it fled back into the air, knocking him harmlessly onto his behind. Remembering Brian’s experiences at the mansion and leaping to an inspired conclusion, he shouted “It’s Blinky!” as the frog flew over his head.

The frog landed awkwardly on the right-side ramp (which led to a realistic miniature PacBay Harbor), squishing an orange melon. Erin nodded and said to no one, “Frog with three legs, thirty feet,” as a ghostly head extruded itself out through the top of the frog and shouted, “The murderer Brian dies!”. The frog twisted to position the tongue for a shot at Brian through the partition wall. Unfortunately for the ghost’s plans, Cane’s PacBall, which had been heading around the top of the board, struck the TNT bumper at this point and was projected at high speed off the retaining wall and down the ramp. It rolled right over the frog, reducing the craft to silvery road kill, legs flying in all directions. The scoreboard, undisturbed by the chaos, went *ching!* and added another 500 points to their tally.

Blinky the ghost, at this point a deep aquamarine, floated above the wreckage of his craft, ineffectually trying to reattach the broken joint of the left front leg. “Get over here and help me!” he shouted pointlessly to the mechanical Inky as it methodically made its way past him towards the trampoline. Clara had produced an ectoblaster from her pack, but deprived of his armament the ghost didn’t seem to represent a significant danger. As the flipper teams were thoroughly distracted, Cane’s Pacball had finally rolled into the exit chute. Clara jumped over the wall onto the pinball floor and brandished the blaster. The Kiki tried to shoo her off the pinball surface, while Tennyson and Brian scrambled over the barrier to join her. Nicholas shouted from above, “Just stun him!”

Erin jumped down and walked over to the smashed frog and shouted, “Jump, frog, jump!” He nodded to himself and muttered, “Just as I thought, frog with no legs, deaf.”

Tennyson approached the glowing blue figure, ray gun at the ready. “Blinky, I gather.

Let me introduce my good friend, Brian. He did in your buddy Inky. He could stop there -- if you feel cooperative today.”

Blinky moved towards Brian only to be halted in his tracks by a blast from Clara’s pistol. “Ow! I’ll get you next, you stinking bitch.”

“I see you have the same charming habits as Inky,” said Brian. “Didn’t help him, won’t help you. Do you think we should let Cane eat him or do the honors ourselves?”

“Up yours, you PacPunk! I’ll blow you up like the trash you are!” screamed Blinky, trying to un wedge the frog leg he’d just shoved into the joint to use it as a bludgeon.

Clara raised her blaster threateningly, as Nicholas shouted “Get down!” from above and behind them. By this time, the kids were in the habit of obeying orders: they did. Just in time, as a crackling brilliant green lightning bolt leapt from behind and above, striking the ghost full on. With a wailing cry he exploded, spewing yellowish ectoplasmic slime onto everything nearby.

An armored figure dropped from the support rafter, a frightening-looking cannon of some sort attached to its arm. “Cover!” shouted Nicholas. He had swapped to an armor-piercing blaster, but the others had left their packs at the flipper control stations and would be exposed to fire from the mystery soldier if they tried to scamper back. The silver figure dropped with a thud onto the remains of the frog and probed at the goop where Blinky had been with its foot, ignoring the kids and the other customers.

A spinner floated over the wall into the pinball floor and approached the soldier. “Firing major weapons on the premises is completely against the terms of use which are clearly posted at all the entry doors--” it started to say officiously. The armored figure turned its cannon towards the spinner and a different blast of red fire shot out. The spinner drifted erratically to the floor, a head-wide hole blown right through the middle.

The soldier twisted off its glistening helmet, revealing a familiar shock of short blond hair. “Clients are not permitted to compete with a bounty hunter once she’s hired. Clearly stated in the contract.”

Clara remained in cover but spoke: “Aren’t you still trying to kill us?”

“Not now, ” answered Aran. “Client misbehavior terminates any obligations by a hunter, except to terminate the offending party.” She stepped on the mush. “Nothing left of this one

but the tax writeoff.” She turned back towards the hole in the roof through which she’d entered the complex and pulled a rope gun from her belt.

Clara stepped out and advanced towards Samus. “I see you’ve got places to go so let’s make this quick. Would you train me as a bounty hunter? Like you?”

Aran stopped and considered Clara for a moment. “Thought you were leaving. Come to my house if you capture Ark and live, and I’ll consider it.” Then the Amazon donned her helmet and fired a grapnel through the opening in the roof. She rocketed up the rope and was gone by the time the Casino security guards finally appeared in the corridor below.

“Is your dad looking to remarry?” said Erin. “We could take her home with us.”

“Where does she live?” wondered Clara aloud, ignoring Erin.

“Near the train station,” said Brian. “Down the street from Luigi’s place. We walked by her place, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” Clara was thoughtfully silent for a moment.

Fox poked his head over the retaining wall to take in the scene. “Can’t I leave you kids alone for an hour without you blowing something up?”

Nicholas dropped over the wall to the pinball track, ignoring Fox and the shouts from the security guards to stay off the play area, and called to the kids. “Come on, let’s get Cane out.”

“Yep, we owe him one this time,” said Tennyson, leading the way down the exit chute, as Fox and Crystal leapt down to make sure the kids were all right. They found the Kiki struggling to force the jammed PacBall door open. Tennyson and Brian joined forces with him, and together the three dragged the lever down. The door swung open. “Bleeeah!” said Tennyson, as the unpleasant odor wafted out of the little chamber.

Brian poked his head into the door and pointed. “Oh, look, there’s the pot pie. And the raspberry sherbet.” Cane’s voluminous lunch was plastered all over the spherical interior chamber. Cane himself, looking just as slimy as the kids but smelling much worse, was shivering on the bottom of the chamber. He obviously hadn’t bothered to clamp on the safety harness, either.

The Kiki called out, "One for the showers! Clean up crew!" Three gray-clad staff members wearing rubber gloves and respirators helped Cane out and supported him as he walked unsteadily down the catwalk towards the shower room, with the kids walking behind (and upwind).

"Way to go, Cane, you squashed him good!" said Tennyson. Cane didn't respond.

"Tennyson's right, that was a great job," said Clara, trying to be supportive. "You really saved us all!" She slapped him on the back and then wiped her hand on her slimy trousers: "yuck."

"Hey, we can buy you another dinner when we get back back to the hotel," said Brian, meaning to be kind.

Cane turned his head (slowly) back to look at Brian. "As God is my witness -- I'll never be hungry again."

"Do you think he's serious?" said Nicholas, sounding concerned, as Cane returned to his slow amble towards the shower room.

"I wouldn't worry about it," said Tennyson. "After all -- tomorrow is another day."

"When the going gets tough," said Erin, slapping the swagger stick against his palm for emphasis, "the tough go shopping. Your job is not to die for your country, it's to make the other poor bastard dine on his countrymen!"

"You know, I've been thinking," interrupted Nicholas.

"Go back to sleep son, you're the only one here who knows what he's doing," replied Erin.

"No, really, I was trying to remember Madame Clairvoya's other predictions. I mean, you remember that mine was the party ball, and then Cane found the light-speed shoes."

Erin looked disconcerted. "Pure coincidence, son! On the battlefield you can't trust to good fortune, you need bribery." He slapped the stick hard against the toyshelf. The clerk, a

bored-looking young lady wearing a pair of headphones over her bleached-blond hair, looked up and said without rancor: “You break that stick, you bought it.”

The kids were at the Dry Dry Outlet, Capital City. It was a spanking new shopping mall set on a little rise looking over the bay. They were under strict instructions from Fox to be highly visible tourists, and Nicholas and Erin were attending to orders enthusiastically. Brian was taking in the view from the top of the stairs: he was feeling a bit homesick, and the site reminded him of San Francisco seen from the hills above Cow Hollow. Cane had flirted with a look inside the Chaotic Jewelers (“the chaotic bracelet: strangely attractive!”, or so said the window display), but then headed to the Chao Cafe, looking for copious quantities of chow. It can be presumed that God wasn’t looking, or at least Cane assumed he had snookered the Man Upstairs, as he was more than ready to recover the meal lost the previous evening.

Tennyson pointed to a brilliantly-lit, almost garish storefront across the already-crowded walkway: “Ollie’s” written in huge glowing script hung over an animated display of wands chasing flying keys through the air. “Looks interesting -- what do you think?”

“Sure, I always wanted a magic wand,” said Clara. A chimed version of *That Old Black Magic* greeted them as they passed the threshold. Smartly appointed displays of wands of various sizes and colors alternated with instructional posters and shelves stuffed with neatly-stacked, colorful boxes. A smartly dressed young man with his long hair caught up in a ring at his shoulder hustled from the back of the store to greet the kids.

“Welcome to Ollies! Wander no further, we want to please. How may I be of service?”

“Is this the same as Ollivander’s wand shop?” asked Clara. “It’s not the way I imagined it, somehow.”

The young man shivered distastefully. “Gad, no, certainly not the same. Awful lighting, terrible product presentation, pathetic market positioning. Outdated, deficient inventory management. Awful cash flow. Ollie’s is a fully modern integrated source for prestimanipulative products and accessories. We’ve retargeted our message and reconstructed our image to go after a more desirable demographic.”

“Oh, you mean customers with lots of money,” said Tennyson. “Erin was telling me about that. Do you mind if we browse a bit?”

“By all means, be my guest! Perhaps you’d be interested in some of our exclusive

product lines.” He guided Tennyson and Clara to a stepped display that looked rather like Tennyson’s model of a ziggurat from History class. “Here we have the most extensive collection of Weasleyized wands available anywhere.”

“Weasleyized?” asked Clara.

“The spells are directed backwards, towards the user, young lady. Perfect for weight loss charms and acne preventatives. Or perhaps the iWand, here: we have platinum, cherry, jet black, or transparent.”

“Does the color of the wand affect how it works?” asked Tennyson skeptically.

“No, not at, all, but our wand employ only natural magical ingredients, and we offer a free power boost with every iWand: honey melon or bubbler’s yeast.”

“Do any of these wands actually do anything in the nonmagical game worlds?” asked Clara.

“I don’t know -- I’ve been so busy running the store, I haven’t had a chance to actually take one out and try it.” The young man appeared honestly distraught. “By Gad! I shan’t waste another moment.” He grabbed a wand off one of the displays and seemed to check it over. “This appears to be in fine shape. Let’s see -- vidiveritasum, I believe. A temporary spell that causes the subject’s true nature to be revealed. I should think that upon such gentle and innocent children as yourselves the effects should be quite modest. Shall we?” He pointed the wand at Clara. As he started to speak she realized that he had pulled the wand from the Weasleyized section, but it was too late: “*Vidiveritasum!*” said the young man, pronouncing it with an accent on the third and fifth syllables. There was a *poof!* and he turned into a gray, hunched, bespectacled old man in a ragged overcoat.

“Now you look like the Ollivander I imagined,” said Clara.

The no-longer young man looked in the mirror and tried to scream, though what came out was rather more a prolonged wheeze. He didn’t look pleased. Tennyson took Clara’s hand and said, “Perhaps we should come by another day.” They made their way out while Mr. Ollivander Jr. tried unsuccessfully to scrape the whiskers off his cheeks.

Outside they met Cane, looking distraught. “How was the cafe?” asked Clara.

“It was terrible! The food was awful, and such small portions, too!” Cane replied.

“I thought you weren’t going to be so hungry any more,” said Tennyson.

“What? Did I say that? I meant I wasn’t ever going to be hungry *yesterday*, not now.”

“Brian?” said Clara, ignoring Cane. “You okay?”

“Yeah, come on, Brian, let’s check out the bookstore!” said Tennyson.

Brian sighed and made his way down the stairs. “Okay, I guess you’re right.”

“Bookstore?” said Cane skeptically.

“Store with books in it,” said Clara. “Remember books? Those are the things you never open unless a book report is due.”

“I do so,” replied Cane. “I read *The Golden Stopwatch* from cover to cover last summer!”

“Oh, from front cover to front cover?” replied Clara.

“Compass,” added Brian. “The Golden Compass. That was a good book. I wonder if they have real world books here.”

“Come on, let’s go find out.” Tennyson led the way into the glass doors under the Boarded Books sign. The store was huge and brightly lit. Colorful signs hung over long rows of bookshelves: GAMES, HISTORY -- GAMES, RULES -- GAMES, POLITICAL SCIENCE -- ROMANCE -- PSEUDOSCIENCE -- SELF-SERVING BIOGRAPHY -- HONEST BIOGRAPHY (that was a small shelf in the corner) and so on. Big racks near the door held special displays of books on sale, featured works, and new releases.

While Brian wandered over to the FICTION section, Clara pointed to one of the piled volumes near the door. “Look at this -- *Luigi’s Private Diary, volume three, the unauthorized inside story.*” She turned the book over and read the back. “*Continuation of the best-selling series of exposes -- the secret lives of the rich and famous. The famous Luigi’s private journals, written without the slightest idea they are destined for publication. (Don’t tell him!)* Hmm. How did Erin find time to do a publishing deal?”

“Erin?” asked Tennyson. “Oh, you mean that book he had in Mister Saturn’s bag. He probably just gave it to Saturn. We have no idea what he’s been up to -- Saturn, I mean -- he probably took it to a publisher or something.”

“Hmm, but this is volume three,” replied Clara, picking up one of the books. “Does that mean that Mister Saturn stops by the mansion a couple times a year to steal Luigi’s private diary and Luigi never notices?”

“Sound plausible to me,” said Tennyson.

Clara began to flip randomly through the book. “What the heck is this?” she said, chuckling, pointing to a photograph of a smiling Luigi, a Poltergust on his back, hat in his left hand, and the carpet cleaning adaptor in his right. His hair was chaotically bedraggled, obviously soaked as well as sporadically covered with soapy foam. She read the caption: “I discovered a new fast way to wash my hair today.”

“Hey, let me see that,” said Cane. He took the book from Clara’s hands. “Wait a minute. That was my idea! Hey, Brian, didn’t I invent this?”

“Invent what?” asked Brian. He was looking through the BOWDLERIZED CLASSICS row, just next to REFERENCE and behind REVERENCE.

“Using the Poltergust to wash up,” said Cane. “Remember, while you were wasting your time with those stupid treasure chests.”

“That’s true, at least the part about the Poltergust is. I don’t know if you were the first person to ever apply one to personal hygiene but you did do it.”

“Hey, I’m gonna complain. Wait a minute, let me write this down.” He borrowed a pencil from Tennyson and took an advertising flyer from the display table. “Okay, page two fifty three, what does it say, um -- ‘I discovered a new way to wash my hair today--’” As he wrote, a port on the back of the book opened up. Clara shouted “Drop it!” and whipped her ray gun out as a small gun popped out of the port and began firing blaster bolts at Cane. It took three full-power blasts of the ray gun and one from Cane’s slower but accurate beamer to put the nasty weapon out of commission, by which time Cane had suffered a couple of nasty burns on his belly and thigh.

“What the heck was that about?” he shouted, as Clara stomped the book with her heel.

“What’s your problem over there?” asked the desk clerk, a tall young fellow with thick glasses, looking up from his textbook.

“What’s our problem? This book was shooting at me!” shouted Cane.

“That’s just the copy protection device. All rights reserved, says so on the front cover. You’re not allowed to copy anything without the express written consent of the publisher. And remember it’s illegal here in Freedom to defeat copy protection.”

“But it was my idea!” protested Cane.

“What does that have to do with anything?” asked the clerk. “You’ll need to pay for the book.”

“You want us to pay for a book that’s openly stolen from the author and tried to kill us for copying enough of it to prove that it’s stolen?” asked Tennyson.

“Is that unusual?” asked the clerk.

“No,” said Clara. “Not in the least.” She took the flamethrower out of her pack and pointed it at the pile of Luigi diaries. It just took a few moments to reduce the pile to cinders. Then she pointed it at the clerk and smiled. “I’ll have Mister Luigi pay the bill. I’m sure he’ll be happy to take it out of his royalties. When he gets them.” The clerk glanced at the smoking pile, then at Clara (still holding the business end of the flamethrower), nodded, and returned to his textbook. An older lady sitting at the cafe complained knowingly to her companion, “They always over-roast the coffee beans here -- smells like a burning book or something!”

Brian picked up the first and now the only remaining copy (the gun slot still smoking slightly), put it in his pocket, and laid two rings on the counter. “I think I’d like to read it after all,” he said.

“I’m getting out of here!” said Cane, charging out through the glass doors. “I knew there was a reason I don’t like book stores. Okay, this looks safe enough.” The adjacent shop window display was filled with flowers and decorative plants. The sign said *Little Shop of Borders*. Cane wandered in and inhaled the moist odor of potting soil and peat moss. “All right! Someplace where you don’t get shot just for standing around.” He wandered up to a row of tall bulbous plants with brilliant yellow-and-green flowers, bumping his head on a wooden placard

hung above them. It said: PIRANHA PLANTS: DANGER. DO NOT TOUCH. “Hey, what are these?” he asked, reaching out to touch one.

“Watch it!” said the shop attendant, an older man dressed in a tattered suit. “Can’t you read the sign?”

“What sign-- OW!!” The plant had snagged his fingers between its suddenly sharp jaws. The old man grabbed a chisel and unsuccessfully tried to pry the jaws apart.

The door chimed. Mr. Saturn and Erin wandered casually in. “Spit that out,” said Mr. Saturn “You don’t know where it’s been.”

The plant spat out Cane and turned (to the extent a being without eyes can) towards its diminutive interlocutor. “Feed me, Saturn!” said the plant.

“You know I’m not your type,” replied Mr. Saturn. “What’s wrong, Mushkin? Run out of Rh negative again?”

“Naaw, it’s just greedy,” replied the man. “Seymour!” he shouted. “What am I paying you for, to sit in the basement and mope? Get up here with the whole blood!”

“Come on, Cane,” said Mr. Saturn. “We told you to get noticed and you’ve done a great job, now it’s time to roll.” He led the kids back out of the shop just as a mousy little fellow in coveralls came out of the door at the back of the room, behind the giant rhododendron, wheeling a cart loaded with crimson bottles. Mr. Saturn looked around to make sure they were unattended and then said quietly, “Stay right behind me. Cane, you have your thirty-two long with you?” Cane nodded. “Good, we might need to take out a security camera or two. Let’s go.” Mr. Saturn led the kids down a row occupied by several women’s clothiers, furniture stores, and other items of little interest to the kids. The corridors were beginning to fill up with browsers and shoppers as the morning wore on. They passed a gift shop with tiny magnetized Diddy Kong Racers on display in the window, just beyond which was an entry marked RESTROOMS. Mr. Saturn led them through; a long hallway with subdued tile walls and track lighting led into the bowels of the mall. The hall was deserted at this relatively early hour. A little box hanging from a bracket on the wall near the ceiling was broken apart and smoking. Mr. Saturn nodded and said, “Good, Clara’s been here already. Let’s go.” He led them to a doorway marked EMPLOYEES ONLY -- DO NOT ENTER, and went in. Erin and Cane followed; Erin locked the door behind him.

The room led down another hallway, lit only by emergency lights mounted on the walls, moving slightly down hill. As they proceeded, they could detect an odor that at first was merely unpleasant and grew overpowering by the time they reached the end of the hall. The corridor opened into a larger room occupied by a number of wheeled dumpsters; the floor was covered with scattered refuse and detritus. Brian was sitting on an inverted trash can, holding his nose. Clara and Tennyson were behind him, talking quietly together. Nicholas was standing watch by the other entrance to the room, a large metal garage-door apparatus that looked like it rolled up on tracks.

“Glad to see you made it,” said Mr. Saturn. “You all have done an excellent job of being seen and hopefully a similarly excellent job of not being seen in making your way here.”

“We were pretty careful,” replied Clara. “The code you gave me for the door worked first time, and I don’t think anyone saw us go in. I took out the camera from the turn in the hallway so they wouldn’t have gotten a good look at who did it.”

“So hopefully you can tell us what was so important about the trash heap that we had to come and see it,” said Nicholas. “It really really stinks in here. Reminds me of when my sister’s diaper pail was in my room.”

“Your attitude will need some adjustment if you decide to get a degree in sanitation engineering,” said Mr. Saturn. “Or your nose. In any case, in addition to being another character-building experience, this sojourn has considerable practical value. The Dry Dry Outpost Real Estate Investment Trust has conveniently placed a warp pipe to a location in the Mystic Ruins quite close to Tails’ workshop in this very facility.”

“A warp pipe here?” asked Tennyson, puzzled. “Whatever for?”

“Certainly not for our convenience,” said Mr. Saturn. “The holding company was very unthrilled with the exceedingly high cost of a waste disposal permit from the local authorities, so while a small fraction of their rubbish is delivered to the city to avoid arousing suspicion, the greater part is dumped through the warp pipe into an illegal but convenient repository. Ecologically dubious but financially beneficial.”

“So we’re going down the trash dump?” said Cane. “Wait a minute, I think I’ll go back to the bookstore.”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea,” said Mr. Saturn. Just then, there was a descending

screeching noise ending in the low thump of an explosion. “Ah, that would be a squadron of Bowser’s Koopa Krushers. Right on time. With any luck, in their eagerness to find and eliminate you kids, they’ll accidentally blow this rubbish dump to smithereens, ensuring that little or no trace is left of our escape.”

“Blow up!” said Cane. “What about us being in it? I’m getting out of here, where’s the warp pipe, let’s go!” He flung open the steel door behind him and plunged into a dark room, the spring-loaded door swinging closed behind him.

“Cane!” said Nicholas.

“What?” said a muffled Cane from behind the wall.

“That’s the broom closet! I looked.” Cane somewhat sheepishly returned, scattering brooms and mops around him as he struggled out of the crowded storage room.

“Quite so, Nicholas,” said Mr. Saturn. “The warp pipe is hidden behind the wall panel here, to deflect casual observation. Let’s just enter a little encrypted packet or two here... and there we go.” A seemingly-fixed concrete panel slid back and to one side, exposing a chute arrangement into a foul-smelling pipe; above the stink of old trash they could detect the ozone scent of the warp field.

“Don’t we need storm troopers shooting blaster bolts down the hallway to encourage us to jump in?” said Erin.

“If we wait very long you’ll get your wish,” said Mr. Saturn, as the sound of more distant explosions shook the floor and walls. “I hear the whine of patrol hover cars; that would be the Freedom copyright cops. They should keep the Koopas busy for a while. I’d suggest we sacrifice Erin’s Star Wars nostalgia and go while the going is good.” He waddled up to the chute, stepped up the metal ladder at the side, and slid in: *zoom!* he was gone.

Nicholas took over. “Clara, Cane, Tennyson, Brian, Erin, in that order. I’m rear guard. Go!” The kids disappeared one by one until only Nicholas was left. He reached into his pack and pulled out a little thermal detonator packet; a twist sufficed to arm the explosive device. He tossed it into a pile of used food containers. “They really ought to be more careful about letting stuff rot here,” he said to no one, and slid down the chute. “It could catch fire, you know. Garbage dump, here I come. I hope Tails’ place has showers!”

“*Scheherazade*,” said Tennyson. “*The Planets. Beau Soir.* Beethoven’s Pastoral symphony. *Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis* -- I love that piece. I didn’t know you listened to this kind of music.” Tennyson was flipping through the music files on Tails’ music system, looking for something to play for takeoff. He was supposed to be checking the connection to port fifty-two.

“Jeez, don’t get me started!” replied Tails. “Dat’s all dat junk what Sonic is into ‘dese days, it’s a joke! Or it would be if I didn’t hafta hear it. All full o’ dem whatchacallem, violences.”

“Violins,” said Tennyson.

“Yeah, dem things. Everybody knows dey’s dangerous to your mental health, make folks go crazy an’ start playin’ X-Box ‘n stuff. Enough anyway, let’s get back to work, we gotta’ get ‘dis done in two hours!”

“All right, all right, let’s see: port fifty-two, MAC address zero one zero three seven niner five eight.”

“Check, ‘dat’s it! Next port.”

Tennyson sighed. It was very boring work. “Port fifty-three. MAC address five eight four one seven seven seven two. Remind me what the point of all this was again.”

“Geeze louise, you kids just ain’t got no patience! We’re replacing ‘da whole analog communications system in ‘da Arwings wid’ a modern shared medium addressable real time interrupt driven bus, dat like saves maybe twenny, maybe thirty kilos. ‘Dat’s ten meters shorter turning radius, might save your butt in ‘da process, ‘ya got it?”

“Not really. Pull out one wire, put in a different one.”

“Ain’t no wire, it’sa whatcha call fiber optic cable, never mind. Just read ‘da next port.”

“Okay, okay. Port fifty-four. MAC address two two three three three seven one zero. What would you do if you were in our shoes?”

“What? Oh, ya’ mean like if I was lost or somethin’. Well, ain’t so different from leavin’ all ‘da old Sega worlds behind. When ‘da big blast hits ‘ya gotta go, ‘dat’s what I say, if ya’ was supposed ta’ go back your eyes would point ‘dat way. Next port.”

“Fifty-five. Niner niner three niner one five one four. It’s not quite the same. I mean, it just seems like a big decision. If we go we’re heading straight into who knows what, maybe getting blown up with the ships, I don’t think we get replaced like you do. If we don’t go we’re abandoning our homes and families. Or maybe not. Maybe our real selves are still back at home living their normal lives and we’re just figments of some giant game machine imagination. How would we know? Fifty six: eleven eleven eleven twenty-seven.”

“Ain’t no use speculatin’ about what might be if ‘ya ain’t gonna find out. Twenty-seven? You sure ‘dat’s not twenty-six?”

“Nope, says twenty-seven on the label.”

“Okay, we gotta swap ‘dat one out, wrong one. Here’s ‘da screwdriver. ‘Ya know, if I was you, I tell ya’ I wouldn’t waste no time wid’ all ‘dis worryin. Ya’ know ‘dat place is ‘da biggest thing in ‘da whole game worlds, everybody wants ‘ta be in on it, an’ you wanna’ get away? Crazy. No, no, take ‘da top screws out first! Yeah, okay. Gimme ‘dat one, put ‘dis one back in. Not to say I’m tryin’ ta’ get rid o’ ya’, kid, you’re okay even if ya’ ain’t got no taste in music. Just so’s ya’ don’ start takin’ cello lessons like Sonic, drives me up ‘da wall, sounds like a cat wid’ it’s guts bein’ ripped out!”

“I tried viola but it didn’t work out. I’ll stick to singing. Okay, twenty-six should be hooked up.”

“Check. Next port.”

“Okay, that was -- um -- fifty-seven. Three four five seven six one one two. Was it dangerous doing Sonic Adventure?”

“Naah, not really, ‘dey got everything worked out. Most of the stuff is on big sound stages anyway. Some stuff on location ‘round here, an’ over in Capital City. We did do one big shoot at Ark, but we were so busy what wid’ ‘da schedule and ‘da retakes and whatnot, hardly saw anything but a coupla’ rooms. I didn’t even get a chance ta’ take a look at ‘da station whatchacall infrastructure, power an’ lighting an’ such, probably real interestin’ if ya’ like ‘dat stuff like I do. Was a lot more fun back in Genesis days, everything was always in chaos, ya’

never knew what you were gonna' do until an hour before, but exciting!"

"Sometimes I feel like that. We went to the Monterey Aquarium when I was seven, and it was so cool! Everything was amazing. And then we went back last year, and it just wasn't the same. It made my feel like everything great is already done. Pretty silly for someone who just turned eleven, I guess."

"Ain't got 'da slightest idea what 'dat Monterey thing is, but you're right, you're bein' pretty silly for bein' just a kid. I figure all 'dem kids back where you was goin' ta' school -- every one o' 'dem 'd probably sell their sister for to get to do what you guys are doin'. An' skippin' school too. Course, maybe 'dat's a bad choice, dey'd sell their sister anyway just 'ta get rid of her. You know what I mean. If you go through ya' life makin' decisions cause o' what you're afraid of, y'ain' never gonna' have a life. You keep worryin' about what could happen but you ain't thinking about what could happen! Ya' could make your best friend 'dere, ya' could meet some fox -- I mean a girl, ya' know -- ya' could whip a sand golem for real! Jeez, lookit dat', ya' just doin' dis to get me started up so we don't finish our work. Port fifty-eight, come on, only two more ta' go!"

"Seven three seven niner two one zero five. Life belongs to those who are not afraid to lose it, eh?"

"Yeah, ya' could say it 'dat way. I'd say 'dem what's too afraid ain't got nottin' ta lose."

"I think I just want to fly. If I can do that it's okay."

"See, d'ya think ya were gonna' get to fly anything like this beauty if ya' were still at home? Fat chance! Ya' don't come here, ya' never find out what your true callin' is. Who knows what da' next big challenge is gonna teach ya? Course ya ain' gonna' fly nowhere in 'dis here Arwing until we get this last port entered in! Fifty-nine!"

"Five one three seven four four four zero."

"Great, dat's it, lemme' run a final check ... yep, we're good ta' go. So let's go on to 'da next one."

Tennyson climbed down the ladder and helped Tails carry the toolbox to the next glistening craft, singing softly to himself:

*Un conseil de goûter le charme d'être au monde
Cependant qu'on est jeune est que le soir est beau
Car nous nous en allons,
Comme s'en va cette onde:
Elle a la mer,
Nous au tombeau.*

“What da’ heck you singin? I heard ‘dat somewhere,” asked Tails as he plugged into the communications bus while Tennyson opened the access panels.

“Beau soir. You have-- I mean, Sonic had it in that collection, you probably heard it when he played it. It’s in French, Bonapa T. could translate it for you. It’s something like, enjoy life when you have the chance, while you’re young and the night is fun. That’s the title, beau soir, beautiful evening.”

“Interestin’, I wonder what it would sound like wid’ a real backup tune an’ some lead guitar. Well, ya’ know you’re gonna’ get it.”

“Get what?”

“A beautiful evening for takeoff. By da’ time we finish, it’s gonna’ be maybe four-thirty, an’ meanwhile all da’ other stuff is gonna’ get loaded in -- I figure ya’ gonna’ get outta here just about sunset. Gonna be a pretty one, too.”

“What will you do after we leave?”

“Geez, I got lotsa work on my plane from ‘da last time I crashed it, and some more work for ‘da Professor, too. Course I gotta go get toasted in ya’ honor, first.”

Tennyson put the fourth plate down on the ground and turned to Tails. “I hope I make some new friends like you said, ‘cause I’m leaving a good one behind. Thanks for your help, Tails. Where would we have been without you?”

“Ya’ never anywhere widout your friends, bud, don’t ya forget it. Okay, ya’ got all dem wires yanked, let’s go, fifty-nine comm ports ta’ install. Can’t stop in da’ middle, ‘dis thing ain’t gonna fly anywhere ‘till we’re done. How’m I gonna’ miss ya’ if ya’ don’ go away?”

In chapter 17, the assault on Ark begins inauspiciously with a friendly fire incident, followed by rescue by a familiar friend in a surprising place. Songs, weddings, smooching, friendships, hazards and hangovers occur, not necessarily in that order.