

Enter the Cube

by **Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin**

Chapter 17: Sand in your eyes

“Captain’s Log, Star date thirty-two-seven-eight point five. Our situation is desperate. We are adrift in endless space, with limited supplies of oxygen and power. It is perhaps ironic that our cold dead bodies will float forever to the limits of known space -- and beyond, exploring in death what we could not in life.”

“Erin,” complained Brian. “We’re maybe five hundred meters from the station, for crying out loud. Endless space. Give me a break. Besides, I’m the captain, I should be doing the log.”

“You *were*,” said Erin. “I don’t know if you get to still be captain when you let your ship get blown up.”

“I didn’t let it get blown up, Cane blew us up! You could have shot the bomb before it got us if you hadn’t been so busy slicing Wendy’s initials in the gun tower.”

“I was not, and besides, your own guys aren’t supposed to shoot at you!”

“Well, this is Cane, you ought to know by now he isn’t very careful. Things were pretty hairy anyway. I mean, with laser blasts flying everywhere and security robots popping out from behind the asteroids, and Fox and Tennyson competing to see who could fly the most incomprehensible course around the cannon, it isn’t really surprising if you got confused about who you were shooting at.”

“I didn’t get confused, it was Cane! And I was not carving Wendy’s initials, either.”

“You told me you liked her.”

“I do. She’s really something. You’ll have to meet her. But what’s the point of carving her initials on Ark? She’ll never see them.”

“Oh, never mind, just enough of this lost in space stuff, okay?”

“No problem. That was an awful show anyway. I used to watch reruns on channel forty-four.”

“Why’d you watch it if it was awful? Oh, forget it. I wonder if it’s safe to start towards the entry area. I mean, if you think about it, this is pretty much what we were supposed to do, we just lost our ship a little bit early.”

“Hmmm. We better check the long range channel to see what the rest of them are up to.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We don’t want to go blasting around if they’re coming back over here.” Brian squinted at the heads-up display as he adjusted his communications system to pick up the encrypted intership traffic. “I hope they’re all right.”

“-- the idiot’s on your tail, spin around and take him!” It was Fox’s voice.

“Good point, boss,” replied Tennyson’s voice. “There we go, all yours, Clara.”

“Fish in a barrel,” said Clara’s voice.

“Keep turning and you’ll be able to take comm tower eight,” said Fox.

“We’re through the screening structures and in range of the outer rim locks,” said Nicholas’ voice. “Whoah -- robot at three o’clock high, I’m rolling, take him, Cane! Good shooting, we’re okay, I’m positioned for perpendicular assault run. Wings report!”

“Free and climbing, we’ll be there,” said Tennyson’s voice.

“Just give us a minute for Crystal to leave a little calling card on the administration tower -- nice shot, honey. Okay, ramp to hundred percent, little tight turn, we’re on course.”

Brian switched back to the local channel. “Looks like they’re about to hit the target area. That’s almost completely across the station from here. Do you think we could risk a little thruster impulse?”

“Weren’t you listening to my log entry? I mean my earlier, more primitive logs. The ones on the way through the van Allen belt.”

“Truthfully, no. I was busy with course corrections, you know.”

“Well, if you *had* been listening you would know that my rocket pack isn’t compatible

with the networked bus. That thing Tails stuck in just before we left. Doesn't work for squat."

"Geeze, why didn't you *tell* somebody before we took off?"

"I didn't find out before we took off."

"Checklist. C-h-e-c-k-l-i-s-t. You review it before you take off so you don't forget anything. Item eighty-one, verify individual thrust manpack control integrity."

"Geeze, Brian, what is it with you and memorizing things? Do you know the whole phonebook for Daly City? Some of us have a life!"

"Is that supposed to include you? I thought yours was all imaginary. Enough already, just jet over here and we'll hook together."

"Just what am I going to jet with?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, well, throw something in the other direction. That hand pack."

"That has Wendy's picture in it, I'm not throwing it away!"

"When did you get her picture?"

"She gave one to me before I left. It's the one of Turtle Island. She thinks it isn't very good but I like it."

"Well, he who cannot throw away a treasure in need is in fetters."

"Lord of the Rings, Aragorn to Pippin."

"Merry."

"Pippin. Anyway, you didn't make it up. Fine, you throw away something then. Why don't you just turn on your jet pack?"

"Because I'm trying not to attract attention! I don't want to use it more than once. Never mind, what's that other thing?"

"That's my extra -- um -- water supply."

"Water? We've got water in our suits. Oh, come on, you brought books to read, didn't

you? No wonder my weight and balance calculations were all messed up. Well, throw them away! Towards that asteroid with the blue gantries, over there. And do it with both hands so you don't go spinning."

A toss send *The Subtle Knife* (stolen after Brian had finished it), *Ship of Dreams*, *The Silmarillion* and *The March of Folly* spinning towards the aforesaid rock, while Erin tumbled rather more gently in the other direction. Fortunately he had retained *Longitude* for last-minute course corrections; with the aid of its departure he managed to hit Brian more or less in the gut. Brian latched on with his line, but in the process unintentionally converted Erin's linear momentum into angular momentum, leaving them both tumbling rather more vigorously than before. "Geeze, it's going to be hard to get the direction right now," said Brian. "Do you have any more books?"

"Just *The Amber Spyglass*."

"We can't throw that away, I haven't read it yet!"

"Who was lecturing who?"

"Whom."

"That's not the point! I thought we weren't supposed to worry about how much we liked the book. I haven't even started *The March of Folly*."

"Oh. I thought you were pretty far along."

"I got that joke. Who do you think you're talking to, Cane? Just forget it, I'll throw the book."

"No, no, I'll throw it."

"Who's the course correction expert here? Besides you're too upset to get rid of this piece of trash. I'll do it."

"I said I'll do it. Give it to me!"

Erin stuck his tongue out at Brian. This had little effect inside his suit helmet but was satisfying anyway. He gaged their axis of rotation by the stars and made to toss the book, but as he did so Brian said "Not *that* way!" and tried to grab it. The book went flying off in a direction unintended by both would-be navigators, increasing their rate of spin still further.

“Nice job,” said Erin. “You’re the big expert, you fire your stupid jet pack. I just got us all home from the exploded asteroid when everyone else gave up hope. Don’t ask me how to do it.”

“Fine, I won’t.” Brian was actually getting dizzy, which perhaps ought to have inclined him to request assistance but in practice enhanced his irritability. He watched the little entry port, just visible on the now-distant station, rotate into view and tried to guess when to fire the rocket pack. He was queasy and sweating in his suit and wished there was a window to open. “Okay, here goes -- *now.*” *Fwooooooshhh!*

Unfortunately, just at that moment Erin craned his neck to see what Brian was doing, twisting the rest of his body the other way and offsetting the center of gravity of the Erin-Brian binary system enough to undo Brian’s attempt at centering the thrust of the jetpack. The pair went zipping off at a much higher rate than Brian had intended and about thirty degrees to the left of the target, though by accident Brian had almost eliminated their rotation so at least they could see where they were going.

“Geeze, Erin, can’t you sit still for one second? Now we really are floating off into empty space!”

“I’m always right, it just takes a while for you to figure it out.”

“We are not gonna die of suffocation and you’re not right and would you let me do the thinking if we’re ever gonna’ get out of here back to the station like we’re supposed to!”

“I had everything under control until you started crabbing about which books you hadn’t read. What about what I want to read? I like reading more than you do anyway! Now we’re stuck dying out here with nothing to read! You’re right, we won’t suffocate, we’ll die of boredom!”

“Will you stop yacking about suffocation? In fact, why don’t you just shut up while I figure out how to get us out of this!”

“You figure it out? Fat chance! It’s time you listened to my advice instead of your dorky ideas.”

“You forgot to do your checklist, that’s how we got into this! I could have just left you floating out in space until the patrols picked you up, you know.”

“Well maybe you should have!”

“Well, next time maybe I will!”

“Fine. Just fine. Since when is there going to be a next time?”

“Oh, there you are!” said a familiar female voice. “That’s a pretty good encrypted voice channel, it took me almost a minute to tap into it. Did you guys want a ride or something?”

As both boys tried to look back over their shoulder at the same time to identify the source of the puzzling if welcome interruption, conservation of momentum prevented either from actually turning. They had to wait impatiently for their rotational velocity to expose the rear hemisphere to their view: a space-suited figure, inverted, riding what for all the world looked like a rocket-equipped snowboard.

“Wendy!”, exclaimed Erin. “What are you doing out here? This is great!”

“Just a little well-deserved recreation after two more very profitable smuggling runs! We moved the Starlight Highway run out here after the Antilles folks threw us out.”

Wendy was tumbling out of view again; Erin felt awkward talking to her while turning his back. “How did you know we were here?”

“Who else could it have been? ‘EH loves WL’. That was so sweet of you. I never had my initials done with a blaster before. So, did you want a ride or what?”

“Well, we’re supposed to be sneaking into recreation access port fifty-two a,” said Brian. “Can you help?”

“Gee, I park my ship in fifty-seven, it’s only a little elevator ride away, sure!”

“You can fly right into Ark?” asked Brian, incredulous. “I mean, without getting blown up?”

“Sure; they let me dock here in exchange for doing an occasional late-night pizza run planetside.”

“Wow. All that training and practically getting killed and who knows if the other ships are okay and -- wow. That’s amazing.” Brian was silent for a long moment.

“That’s my Wendy,” said Erin. “I told you she was special.” Wendy tumbled back into view, flashing a glowing smile as she nudged the board over to them with a few thruster taps. She dragged them onto the board and killed the remaining spin. Brian sighed with relief.

“Thanks,” said Brian. “Wow. Thanks a lot.” Just then a series of very bright flashes illuminated the flat bottom face of Ark. “That must be the others, blowing their ships.” Brian switched channels for a moment: ‘Yow! that was too close!’ said Crystal’s voice. ‘Pedal to the metal, good luck, we’re outta here!’ came Fox’s voice. “I hope they’re okay,” said Brian, back on the short range link.

“They’ll be fine,” said Erin. “I told you it would all work out. You shouldn’t worry so much, Brian.”

“You did not. You told me we were going to suffocate in endless space!”

“I knew Wendy would save us.”

“You did not!”

“Gee, this is nice, it’s almost like having Dave back,” said Wendy cheerfully. “While you guys are arguing, can I get us beamed up into my ship?”

“Oh, yeah, that would be great,” said Erin. “Did you get the phase adjustment done?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s okay again, even Dave didn’t puke.”

“Can we not talk about puking?” said Brian.

“We’re talking about beaming, not puking,” said Erin.

“Yes, now that I’ve got the phases properly matched again the tractor beam hardly ever makes people puke,” added Wendy. “Besides, you shouldn’t puke inside a space suit, it smells terrible! Wait until we get on board. Then you can use the bathroom. Here we go! Hey, did I tell you today is my birthday? We can have a party!” A blindingly bright chartreuse light from behind her cast Wendy into silhouette and Brian felt his stomach drop from under him as they were dragged towards the source of the glow. In the dizzying confusion he could hear Erin:

“Captain’s log, supplement. Who would have imagined a last-minute rescue by a gorgeous Amazon from outer space? Since the last war with the Romulans, when the Federation outlawed action-adventure genre cliches, we’ve had to make do with social relevance and moral quandaries. But since we had to throw all our books away, we can return to what truly makes us human: girls and junk food.”

“We can’t waste time looking for them now,” Clara said. “We’ve got the advantage of surprise; let’s use it!”

“I don’t agree,” said Nicholas. “This is a different sort of surprise attack. You told me yourself; it’s based on -- missection? midilection? oh, yeah, missed direction, I mean, misdirection. I think we really don’t want to show up right away. We want them to believe they got us and let their guard down. So a little delay doesn’t hurt.”

“But if we go outside again, we risk being detected,” added Clara, not willing to give up. “Then we would really be in trouble.”

“You’re both right,” said Tennyson. “We should lie low, not a peep, no hint that we’re not dead. That means we can’t really risk any kind of rescue mission.”

“But what if -- like, if their jet packs malfunctioned and they went the wrong way?” said Nicholas. “Eventually they’d freeze or run out of air. Can you leave your friends to die like that?”

“All they have to do is turn on the open channel on the radio and call for help,” said Tennyson.

“But then our cover is blown for sure!” said Nicholas.

“I don’t know,” Clara chuckled. “You don’t learn much talking to Erin even if you’re his friend; by the time he’s done, he’ll have them chasing Meta Knight in the Beanbean kingdom. Maybe we should have planned to have him captured!”

“You’re terrible!” replied Nicholas. “We’re not gonna’ intentionally set up someone to get captured.”

“Nicholas, you’re worrying too much,” said Tennyson. “I think they’re just fine.”

“Yeah, they’re probably, like, eating cake and ice cream right now while we’re starving!” added Cane, who had long ago cleaned out the meager ration store in the Arwing and was thoroughly sick of protein bars anyway.

“Just how would they be eating cake, Cane?” said Nicholas. “We’re out in the middle of empty space.”

“You just watch!” Cane returned to searching through his backpack for edible items for the fourth time.

Suddenly the door to the corridor hissed open: Clara whipped her beamer up and nearly decapitated Erin as he strode in through the door, scraping the last of a piece of chocolatey layer cake off a plastic plate with his fork.

“Hey, hey, great to see you, too!” said Erin. “No need to get huffy, Brian has enough cake for everyone.”

“Cake!” said Cane. “Here I was gonna’ apologize for blowing you up but I guess it worked out better this way. Where’s the food?”

“How’d you get here?” said Nicholas. “We were about to start looking for you.” Brian strode into the room behind Erin, carrying a little platter with several slices of confection in his left hand.

“Yep, we thought you’d been blown to smithereens, and here you are glowing with happiness and high blood sugar,” said Tennyson. “Awfully thoughtful of you to provide some for the rest of us.”

“You should thank Wendy,” said Brian. “She’s the one who insisted we save enough for the rest of you. But it’s a little late for that; she said she had to leave for a business meeting or something, so anyway she’s gone again. Do you want the pieces with the little pink frosting flowers or the purple stripes?”

“Wendy?” said Clara. “I guess you were right about him, Tennyson. Erin, how the heck did you arrange to meet your girlfriend right in the middle of a war?”

“Here, take a flower piece,” said Brian, handing one of the plates to Nicholas.

“Let me see, how *did* I arrange that?” said Erin. “I used the thirty-two thousand coins I won at Hide and Sneak and bribed the MBHL to pay off Saturn’s library fines -- no, wait a minute, that doesn’t make sense.”

“When did that ever stop you?” said Clara.

“Come on, Erin,” said Nicholas, holding up his plate. “It was a piece of cake!” The other kids groaned.

“Hey, why don’t we call up Saturn?” said Cane. “What’s he up to anyway? How come

he wasn't with us? Too dangerous? I still think he's in league with the parrot."

"The parrot got shot! Don't you remember?" said Tennyson.

"We just heard it on the phone, maybe they faked it," replied Cane.

"You and Erin ought to spend more time together," said Clara. "You can compete to see who's crazier."

Nicholas finished his joke prop and sighed. "That was good. Well, we'd better be getting on. Brian, where do we go now?"

Brian opened his suit pack and pulled the GBH out. A bit of control manipulation and: "Here's where we are. The entry tunnel to torus four, at radial five. This is a service torus around the outer rim. There's no direct passage from here to the core cylinder; that's why they don't have any security here. Now, we need to move clockwise along this torus to the vertical riser service passage, corridor five A twenty-four, which should take us to the agriculture torus."

The interior of the station was segmented into a number of independent pressure vessels, shaped like huge torii -- doughnuts -- save for the central core, a vast cylinder with hemispherical endcaps that stretched the whole vertical extent of the colony. Connecting the pressure vessels were cylindrical radial and vertical passages, sealed by self-closing pressure-capable doors at each end, to prevent a leak in a single torus from endangering the whole colony. The largest torus, running around the rim of the hemispherical outer shell, providing easy access to natural light and also relatively exposed to cosmic radiation, had been reserved for agricultural pursuits. After the abandonment of the station as a functioning space colony, the agriculture torus had been sealed up as unneeded. When the core was refurbished as a hidden research facility, the relatively miniscule staff could be easily served with stored air; there seemed to be no need to operate the oxygen-generating section. The research staff inhabited the innermost core, with security guards also assigned to the base torus, which provided convenient access to the surface weaponry.

Brian led them down the corridor of the service torus. The service passage was so small that the curvature of the walls was readily visible. As they moved away from the transparent access ports, the light of the sun slowly failed; they continued using their suit lamps into the stale-smelling but perfectly clean corridor, punctuated every thirty paces or so by access doors adjacent to dimly illuminated control panels. Brian checked each door placard with his hand lamp: after what seemed an interminable passage but was objectively only a five-minute walk, Brian nodded and turned back to the group: "This is it." He pressed a button and a door hissed open, exposing a long dark corridor that hardly looked big enough for a grownup to walk in.

"Okay," said Nicholas, drawing his beamsword hilt, "We don't know what's at the other

end of the corridor. I'll take point, Clara is rearguard, Tennyson and Cane, Erin and Brian. Ray pistols and knives at hand for close quarters, and don't shoot each other! Let's go." Nicholas strode carefully past the threshold, almost falling as he did: "Whoah! Careful, there's no gravity in here."

The kids moved silently into the passageway, enduring the disconcerting transition as they passed over the threshold back into zero G, then sliding hand-over-hand into obscurity. The trip became monotonous after a while: left-hand right-hand left-hand right-hand... Tennyson found himself drifting into a reverie, interrupted when he bumped into Nicholas' butt.

"Oww! what's up?" said Tennyson.

"Shhh!" whispered Nicholas. "Everybody quiet! I heard something." The group stopped, floating in the tunnel, each held in place by a fingertip or two on the guide rails. A faint, repetitive *tap - scrape - thump* was distinctly audible now that the kids were still. Nicholas pressed the button to extend the beamsword blade and whispered, "ray pistols drawn, don't fire without my order. Lamps off, glowplugs only. Let's go, and keep quiet."

They moved on cautiously, their way illuminated only by the feeble glow of the weapon panels, as the scraping sound grew louder, until with a thump Nicholas' head bumped into the end of the passage: "Ow!"

"Shhhh!" hissed Tennyson.

"Sorry," replied Nicholas. He turned on his lamp, shielding most of the light with his hand. "Oh, the panel illumination was just off," he whispered. *Scrape - thump - scrape*: the noise was obviously right on top of them now. "Tennyson, Cane, Brian to the top, Clara and Erin bottom, grab the rails and set up a crossfire if we need it -- but try not to get me, okay? I'm going to open the door manually."

The kids floated into position and whispered "ready" one by one. Nicholas twisted the lever past the detent and slowly slid it down to the OPEN position. Nothing. He pushed on the door: it seemed free of the locking mechanism, but something else was holding it closed. He closed his beamsword, and reached with his feet for something to provide leverage, finding Tennyson's face: "oh, sorry!" His feet found a set of gratings set into the wall; with the extra purchase he was able to raise the door a hint: dim light flooded in through the crack. "Hmm. Tennyson, float over here and give me a hand, everyone else hold your positions."

With the efforts of both boys the door swung upwards; through the opening flooded a burst of dust and dry plant matter. In the semi-darkness the swirling invasion was initially frightening, but then Tennyson recognized the smell: he laughed aloud and said, "It's hay! We're

under a barn.” He turned his lamp on, exposing the broken brown stalks floating in the gravity-less tunnel.

“Shhh!” said Nicholas. “We still need to be careful. I’ll go first.”

Mounting the lamp on his headband, he forced his way up into the pile, temporarily disoriented as his head and then shoulders entered near-earth-gravity while his torso still floated free. The others watched him kick and flounder as he struggled up, then saw his feet disappear. There was a bit of grunting and then suddenly “OWW!!”

Tennyson jumped into the opening and thrust his head up through the hay. “What happened? Are you okay?”

Nicholas, buried in hay just beyond him, nodded and sighed. He turned back to Tennyson and handed him a gleaming metal sliver with a red droplet at the end.

“Ah. I see. You found a needle in the haystack.”

Nicholas grunted assent and continued up and sideways. Finally he shoved aside the last bits of chaff and stuck his head out. Before he could even figure out what he was looking at, his head was swamped by another load of dried stalks. “Hey!” he said.

“Yup, ‘course it is. What about it?”

Nicholas tried to shake the hay from his eyes but before he could identify his interlocutor he was swamped yet again. “Would you cut it out?” he said.

“Ah’m a’ pitchin’ hay, not a’ cuttin’ stuff. What fur ya’ climbin’ around in mah haystack, anyway?” The laborer tossed another forkfull; this time Nicholas covered his face with his arms to preserve his vision. He managed to pull the rest of his body out of the stack before the next toss, and slid down to a dusty landing. A teenager, dressed in faded blue coveralls all covered with chaff, with a long hay stalk sticking out of his mouth, continued to work on the pile in front of him with his oversized pitchfork.

A moment later, Tennyson stuck his head out through the opening, only to receive his own facefull of dried vegetable matter. “Hey!” he said.

“You folks shore have a hankerin’ fur statin’ the obvious,” said the boy.

“Would you cut it out?” said Tennyson, struck a second time.

“Y’all are sure consistent, too,” said the boy.

“Tennyson, tell the rest to climb on out,” said Nicholas. “And tell them to cover their eyes!”

By this time the boy had finished emptying the bin of hay, and walked over to hang his pitchfork on a rack on the wood-veneer aluminum wall. “Whatchya’ say yer name was?” he asked Nicholas as he hitched his overalls up.

“I didn’t. Nicholas. Look, we need to talk to -- um -- Mary Ellen, that was it. Mary Ellen. Could you help us?”

“Seems ta me yer a’ talking jus’ fahn, ‘cepting fur having a funny furrin sorta accent. Y’aint gonna need mah help fur ta talk.”

“No, no, I mean, help *find* her. Can you show us where she lives?”

“Ain’t no point fur ta do that, she ain’t a’ gonna’ be home nigh on all day.” As the boy spoke he collected a straw hat and a rough walking stick.

“Did she leave the station?”

“Leave the what?”

“The station. Ark. Where you live.”

“Lan’ sakes, no! She’s a’ jus’ helpin’ out with the weddin, what’d’ya think? Well, yer only kids, ah guess y’ain’t a’ gonna’ know much important stuff. Tell ‘ya what, I’ll take y’all ta’ see ‘er, ah’m a goin’ that way anyway. Come on, nuthin’ fur ta’ be a’ skeered of.” He stuck out a not-very-clean hand. “John Jacob.”

“Pleased to meet you. That’s Tennyson, Cane, Brian, Erin -- and there’s Clara,” added Nicholas, as Clara dropped lightly down from the hole, energy knife in one hand and 9 mm automatic in the other.

“Ain’t she a cutie,” said John Jacob, chewing on his haystalk. “Maria’ll wanna’ meet ‘er fur sure. Well, come on.” The boy led them out the *faux* wooden door of the barn and into the bright light. The scent of fresh cut grass replaced the stale barn air as they came out into what ought to have been sunshine. A long row of uncut hay blocked their view directly in front of the barn. To the left, laid out in neat little squares, was a meticulously-kept garden: Brian recognized cucumbers, artichokes, and cabbage. On the right were a number of rabbit cages. The

bucolic illusion was shattered as soon as his gaze rose past the local environs: about a hundred meters away on each side the curving walls of the donut, festooned with vines and creepers, wrapped completely around to meet above their heads in rows of brilliant white lights. The floor curved more gradually along the torus, so that the rows of apple and plum trees seemed to rise up on the side of a rolling hill, above the top of the nearby hay, until they disappeared in the horizon defined by the artificial sunlight. Brian felt a certain claustrophobic discomfort that he had never experienced in the cramped confines of the Arwing, as if somehow farming demanded more space than even a huge space colony could hope to provide.

The older boy, insensitive to the contradictions of his world, led the kids down a narrow path along the edge of the hayfield. They passed another barn and a cornfield, and then a low red building with big windows. Brian glanced in as they walked by. “Hey, look, it’s a school!” he said. Nicholas stopped to poke his head into an open window: Thirty or forty kids, from little kindergarteners to what looked like middle school kids were seated at neat rows of desks. An older woman wearing a dark blue blouse and gray striped pants, her graying hair gathered in a tight bun behind her head, was pointing to writing on a white board. The kids were all reciting together:

“In nineteen eighty six, the Super NES was released, setting new standards of performance with its new sixteen-bit processor.” One of the littler kids raised his hand:

“’scuse me, Missus Luna, what are they bits of?” A couple of the older kids in the back rolled their eyes.

“Ah kinda furgot y’all are sorta little, did ‘ya wanna go to school with t’other kids?” asked John Jacob as he continued his unhurried pace past the school garden. Nicholas turned back to the trail with mixed feelings.

“Are you kidding?” said Cane. “No way! Everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten!”

“Yep, looks kinda’ lahk that,” said John. He led them past what was obviously a church, a very modest retailing area with a flower shop, a general store, a restaurant or saloon or both, and a little diner / soda fountain, then around a modest park and bandstand. A few folks were about their business, paying little attention to the kids or anything else. By this time the barn through which they’d entered was quite out of sight around the curved roof. The trail passed between two surprisingly voluminous oak trees and came out in front of a modest two-story wood-veneer structure, white with red moldings around the windows, behind a modest sign labeled in precise block capitals: COMMUNITY CENTER. “Y’all ‘ll fahnd Mary Ellen ‘in the meadow, a’ working up the decorations fur tamarra. Ah’ll see ya’ll at the bachelor party tonaight, ‘ceptin ‘a course for the little lady, gotta’ mosey on now.”

John Jacob took off down the trail, now apparently oblivious to the kids. Nicholas led the way, trying to act as if he knew what Mary Ellen looked like. Girls in plaid dresses and boys in denim bustled in and out of the community center building, carrying vases, boxes, trays of hors d'oeuvres, chairs, rolls of ribbon, paper decorations, and bottles of drinks. A large grassy meadow surrounded by elms and willow, just past the building, was partly filled with folding metal chairs and tables, and decorations hung from ropes tied to the tree limbs. A wooden dance floor filled a corner of the meadow, near a platform and some large speakers. "No wonder it was so quiet in town," said Nicholas. "It looks like everybody is here. Excuse me, we're looking for Mary Ellen," he said to a middle-aged woman who was directing the hanging of a large floral wreath.

"Up a bit -- to the left -- that's fine, tack it in place, thank you," said the lady to her two teenage helpers. "Now, what was that, dear? Mary Ellen? She's over there by the head table, but I'm afraid she's quite occupied." The woman stopped for a moment and actually looked at Nicholas for the first time. "I don't know you, do I? Are you Gray's relatives? I heard he has some folk from Outside."

"Uh -- well, no, not really, but -- well, Jack and Ellie sent us, you see," said Nicholas.

"Who cares who sent us, look at that cake!" said Cane!

"Now, now, son, that's for tomorrow," said a stocky fellow in coveralls as he passed carrying a big wooden keg.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Nicholas, and trundled off towards the indicated table. The scene was a bit intimidating socially but didn't look very dangerous: discipline seemed unnecessary, and the others followed half-heartedly, and then began to wander as their interests took them.

The head table was a buzz of activity. It wasn't hard to guess who was Mary Ellen: all the conversation seemed to center on the tall, wrinkled, gravelly-voiced lady in the flower print dress. "We need the fairies now, Mary Ellen, that batch of grapes just isn't ripe yet! Nobody could eat them."

"Well, you'll just have to wait until they finish with Anna's punch," said Mary Ellen. "If we keep changing their tasks faster than the tasks can be completed, nothing will get done."

"But Mary Ellen!" "We don't have time to wait!" "I thought you promised us--"

"Enough! I won't have your petty squabbling ruin the mood for tomorrow's special day.

Behave yourselves and make up.” She sighed and sat down in a folding chair, turning her back on the crowd in dismissal. Nicholas saw his chance and advanced.

“Excuse me, ma’am, but Jack and Ellie said that I should talk to you when we got here.”

“They did, did they, young man?” she replied. She smiled warmly but her eyes were calculating. “When exactly was that, now?”

“When? Wow. It seems like a long time ago but -- let’s see -- you know, we’ve been so busy I’ve kindof lost track of things. I think it would be three weeks today, or was it the day before that?”

“Three weeks, that’s not very long ago. But perhaps you have been otherwise occupied, dear. Where were you at the time?”

“Luigi’s mansion. I was going to say at dinner, but I guess we actually met Jack when he was cosmic bowling with Bonapa T. They were using bombs for bowling balls -- it seemed kindof silly, I have to admit. But it was later at dinner that I got to talk with him and his wife.”

“I declare, that jibes exactly with what Ellie told me when I spoke to her. Now, one more question, if you’ll tolerate an old lady’s eccentricity for a bit more -- did you give them anything?” Nicholas had the distinct feeling that more than eccentricity was behind the inquiry.

“Sure, I gave Jack this golden hammer that Erin and I found in Mario’s toolbox. Mister Luigi said it was okay.”

“Hmmm. Well, it all seems to fit. I must say that when I spoke to Ellie she obviously never imagined you’d actually get here. Your friends would be -- no, no, it’s good for me to work this out -- Erin you named yourself, Tennyson, Clara, Byron, and Cane is over there with his hand in the cookie jar.”

“Brian.”

“Oh, yes, of course. They are all here -- easy enough to place them from Ellie’s descriptions. So then it’s true about the golden hammer. And from there to here in three weeks, indeed.” She stopped and looked Nicholas over again. “I declare, you are a remarkable young man. There’s more of you than is apparent on the surface.”

“I had a lot of help, ma’am. Speaking of help, could you help us?”

“Yes, of course, now that I’m sure who it is that I’m offering to help. What do you

need?”

“We need to find a way to get from here to the central core, preferably without attracting any attention. We have a plan of the station but it doesn’t show anything going that way.”

“Really? The core? Are you sure that’s wise?”

“I hope so. It appears to be our only choice.”

“All right, I’ll do what I can. But I’ve no idea how to manage such a trick. I’ve heard tell that some of the young men will venture quietly into torus seven -- that’s the next one in -- when they’re feeling a bit adventurous, though of course such a thing is strictly forbidden. Can’t have those nosy ivory tower types suspecting that we’re here, now, can we? We’ll have to call a council to decide what we can do to help you, and that can’t possibly happen until tomorrow evening.”

“Tomorrow?” said Nicholas, trying to hide his distress. “That’s cutting it awfully close.”

“Can’t be helped, dear, the whole town is consumed with preparations for the wedding right now. Land sakes! how I’m behaving, forgetting my manners completely. You must be tired and hungry. There’s a lounge in the Community Center where you can change out of those flight suits -- do you have other clothes with you, dear? And get a shower if you like. And then of course the boys must attend the bachelor party, we wouldn’t think of leaving you out!”

“A what?” said Nicholas?

“The party, tonight before the wedding, of course.”

By this time Cane and Clara had wandered into earshot. “Party!” shouted Cane. “Whoah yeah! Is there gonna’ be food?”

“Why of course, young man,” replied Mary Ellen. “Enough food to choke a horse, I’ve no doubt -- though of course I haven’t seen a horse for nigh on fifteen years.”

“This Ark thing wasn’t such a bad idea after all,” said Cane, turning to Nicholas.

“Gee, thanks, I’m glad you noticed.”

“That would be nice,” said Clara, “as long as I don’t have to sit with Cane! I’m really starved.”

“Oh, no, no, dear, it’s a *bachelor* party, for the boys only,” said Mary Ellen. “You’ll be helping Maria with her trousseau. You can tell us of your travels; I’m sure it will help calm Maria, she’ll be a bit nervous. Come with me, dear, we’ll find you something acceptable to wear.”

Clara stamped her foot, raising a little cloud of dust from the bare spot she was standing in. “I won’t be left out again! I’m better than any of these boys.”

“Of course you are, dear, Ellie told me all about you. But there’ll be no fighting at the party -- at least, I hope there won’t be, not like Cyrus and Alice’s wedding last year. My, my, that was a disaster. Besides, that’s not the point. My dear, being equal to the boys does not mean you have to be the same as they are. Heaven forbid!”

Tennyson had kept a half an ear on the discussion while he tried to talk an older boy into providing an early taste of the punch. “Clara, you should go,” he said quietly from behind her. “You never know what you might find out there.”

“Fine, fine, never mind.” She sighed and offered an arm to help Mary Ellen out of her chair. “I guess there’s something to be said for a shower and clean clothes anyway.” She turned back to Tennyson. “You stay out of trouble, then. Don’t get drunk or anything.”

“Gee, I think that’s the point of a bachelor party. Well, we’ll do our best.”

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“When should you strike a match?” asked Nicholas, pausing for dramatic effect. “Only when it *turns violent!*”

The crowd of teenagers and young men around him, already mildly inebriated, laughed wildly. “When it turns violent! Turns violent! That’s a crackup!” said Clemm, the butcher. “Oy, stop, I’m gonna’ break a rib!” said Lewis, the metalworker’s apprentice.

“All right, let’s see, I got another one: what animal keeps the best time?”

“A cow?” said Bill, the barkeep’s son.

“A cow? It’s a bird, ya’ ignorant drunkard!” said Mr. Miller, the baker.

“A bird? What’s a bird?” said Mr. Baker, the miller.

“You’re all wrong,” said Nicholas. “It’s -- a *watchdog!*”

“A watchdog, of course!” roared Lewis. “You’re killin’ me! A watchdog!” He slapped Bill so hard on the back that his beer ended up on Mr. Baker’s shirt. Mr. Baker didn’t seem to notice.

“Okay, okay: what did the dog say to the child pulling on his tail? Anyone? No? Okay -- ‘this is the end of me!’”

“The end of me! Oy, that’s right, I’m gonna die laughing!” guffawed Lewis.

“Those jokes are really not very funny,” said Erin. “I guess people are already pretty drunk.”

“Well, remember that these people appear to be sort of isolated,” said Brian, sipping a fruit punch. “This kind of humor could be quite new to them.”

“New jokes that aren’t funny still aren’t funny,” replied Erin, taking another slice of pumpkin cake. “And a good joke is still funny the hundredth time you hear it.”

“Maybe, but I think novelty plays an important role in humor,” said Brian.

“Interesting point, but the more interesting question is whether humor plays an important role in novelty.”

Erin jumped out of his chair. “Mister Saturn! What are you doing here?”

“That’s a fine welcome,” said the diminutive fellow, floating himself up onto the empty chair next to Brian. “I’m meeting you, what did you think?”

“Well, the way you disappear without explanation these days, it’s hard to be sure,” replied Erin.

“He does have a point,” added Brian. “We’ve hardly seen you since we got to Tails’ place, and Fox and Crystal didn’t say anything about how you were going to get here, or even if you were coming. I assumed you had other things to do.”

“You assumed correctly, as is often the case, my astute young friend. Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on your point of view, those things conspired to deliver me here. For one, I’m on in -- two more minutes.”

“On? On what?” said Brian.

“A show business term, son. The colonists here are pretty provincial in most ways, but even they recognize that their isolation gives them limited insight into the gameworlds music scene.”

“Ah -- you’re the deejay,” said Erin.

“I prefer to think of it as the entertainment administrator,” replied Saturn.

“Well, my mom calls the garbage men sanitation engineers but they’re still garbage men,” said Erin.

“And women,” said Brian.

“I don’t think it’s nice to talk about a garbage woman,” said Erin.

“Now this is no time ta’ speak like that about womenkind,” said Gray, the groom, sitting down somewhat unsteadily beside Erin. “Tonight is a celebration of the glorious opposite sex, ya’ know.”

“If we’re celebrating girls,” said Brian, “why don’t we have any here?”

“It’s probably easier that way,” said Mr. Saturn. “And safer, given how drunk these fellows are likely to become.”

“Saturn!” said Gray. “Weren’t you supposed ta’ be supervisionally -- supervisisinational -- doin’ the music?”

“I was just musing about that, yes,” said Mr. Saturn. “I thought we’d start with the sound track recordings from some of the classic silent films,” he added, waddling towards a small raised platform surrounded by speakers.

“I don’t get it,” said Gray, looking puzzled.

“Trust me, it’s not funny, and I know not funny,” said Erin.

“Say, you’re a one o’ them outside fellas, right?” Gray looked around conspiratorially and lowered his voice. “Ah’m feelin’ a mite worried, ya’ know, I ain’t never been married a’fore, what’s it like? What ‘m I supposed ta’ watch fur ‘n like that?”

“You’ve come to the right place,” said Erin confidently, putting his arm around the

shoulder of the older boy. Brian rolled his eyes and drank more (non-alcoholic) punch. “The first thing is, you have to make sure you take out the trash.” A high trill from a clarinet, followed by a hard-thumping bass, announced the beginning of the musical entertainment.

“Take out the trash, right, take out the trash. Out to where?”

“Well, out of the house, to where the garbage collection folks can get it, you know. The cans.”

“The who? Ah’ didn’t know folks collected garbage, ah’ thought that was what ya’ threw into the recyclin’ piles for ta’ be mashed up ‘n stuff.”

“Well, you see, once it gets old and rotten enough they call it an antique and then it’s valuable again,” said Erin. Gray nodded uncertainly. “Now the next thing is: don’t ever tell her she’s storing up fat for winter time, Bobby Villadsen said that to his mom and now his parents are divorced and he has to live with his Aunt Mathilda!”

“Now wait, yer sayin’ Bobby said that to his mom? But I’m not marryin’ my mom, I mean, I’m marryin’ my sweetheart, it’s different. Not to say that I don’t like my mom, ya’ understand.”

“Well, that’s okay, we all have our faults. Oh, yeah, mothers, that reminds me. The next thing is, don’t ever tell your wife about how you’re visiting other women, they get all upset and go home to their mothers.” Brian hid his head in his hands.

“You mean they cain’t visit their mothers after they’re married?”

“No, no, that’s okay on Tuesdays and bank holidays,” Erin replied confidently. “But the rest of the time you’re stuck with ‘em!” Brian took out *The Amber Spyglass*, which Wendy had very kindly rescued for him before she took them into the station, and picked back up at page 127.

“A -- bank holiday? What’s a bank?” said Gray.

While Erin provided a misleading summary of the operations of a financial system, Kent, the son of the chief of hydroponics, was attempting to initiate Tennyson in the appreciation of fine wines. “Now this is a mixture of cabernet and merlot grapes from tanks thirty-seven and fifty-two, ripened to around fifty Brix, aged in real imitation oak. Moderate acidity, with blackberry, blueberry, and a bit of plum.” He handed Tennyson a small rounded glass. Tennyson took a cautious sip.

“Hmmm. I suppose I could taste the plums if I could get past the gutter water and chalkboard eraser,” he said, grimacing and coughing. “Are you sure this is the part you’re supposed to drink?”

“Yeah, okay, I guess it is a bit tannic. Forget it, let’s try a white.” Kent pulled another bottle from the rack and poured the slightly pink liquid into a fresh glass. “This is a white Zinfandel. A bit of residual sugar and just a little hint of carbonation.”

“Carbonated? You mean like soda?”

“Yeah, yeah. I won’t say anything this time. Just try a sip.”

“Right,” said Tennyson dubiously. “Hmmm. Hey, this one is okay.” He took a more substantial swig. “That’s not half bad! Maybe I could get used to this wine stuff after all.” He tilted back the glass and took a mouthful, then sputtered and spat the liquid out on the table and his companion.

“Slow down!” said Kent, wiping his glasses with a napkin. “A sip at a time! You can’t appreciate the subtleties when you’re guzzling.”

Tennyson took the advice and indulged more carefully. “Kinda’ tingles on your tongue, all right. This is really good.”

“Okay, great, but don’t get carried away! You gotta watch yourself, this is your first time.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Do you drink a lot of wine?”

“Oh, yeah, we have a glass every day with dinner. My dad says dinner without wine is like day without the lighting panels on. We have a different wine each night of the week. Monday is Gamay Beaujolais, for the start of the week, Tuesday is sauvignon blanc, Wednesday is merlot, like that. Yesterday we had a real Moon Mountain cabernet.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember Moon Mountain from the N sixty-four.”

“Yeah, it was smuggled in.” Kent sighed. “Gee, I wish I could see one.”

“A smuggler?”

“No, no, a mountain. Did you ever see a mountain?”

“Geeze, of course. I mean, the whole Bay Area is surrounded by them. They’re not very high, of course -- maybe three thousand feet.” Kent looked puzzled and stared at his shoe. “Oh, what’s that -- um, a thousand meters high’.

“A thousand meters? Come on, nothing could be that big! Do you think I’m dumb?”

Tennyson looked puzzled. “Well, it’s not all that high -- I think the tallest mountains are down near San Jose. Anyway that’s not particularly big for mountains. I mean, the tallest mountain in the real world is Mount Everest -- that’s, um, twenty-eight thousand feet high. It’s so high you have to have oxygen tanks to stand at the top. I’ve never seen that except on teevee. But we’ve gone up skiing a couple of times in the Sierras. Those are real mountains! There are places where if the car went off the road you’d still be rolling!”

“Wow. You’re so lucky. I can’t even imagine something that big. Obviously. I can’t imagine anything bigger than this.” He waved his arms at the surroundings and then laughed. “Not the bar, of course. I mean the torus. Here you’ve been in mountains and I’ve hardly ever even been outside our home torus.”

“This seems like a really nice place to live,” said Tennyson. “The weather’s always good -- well, there isn’t any -- and no bugs, and everybody seems really nice.”

“Oh, I guess it is, but it’s so boring! The only thing there is to do most weekends is walk around to the other villages to visit.”

“Oh, how many other villages are there?”

“Six, pretty much evenly spaced around the perimeter. They’re okay. Heck, my best friend, Benjamin, lives over in Titanium Town -- that’s the one across from us. But it just gets old. Same villages every weekend. Every month. Every year.” He looked around conspiratorially and then leaned close to Tennyson. “Of course, every once in a while we sneak into seven, that’s the one next to us. But the council cracked down on us after Cyrus almost got caught, so now it’s really hard to get away with it.”

“Oh, how do you get in?”

“Through the drains. You have to swim.”

“Like a river?”

“How would I know? *I’ve* never seen a river.” He took a big swig of the cabernet, but unlike Tennyson didn’t cough or spit. “What’s it like? Oh, here, you’re empty.” He filled

Tennyson's glass halfway. "You fill the glass partway, you see, so that the aroma can collect."

"You know, we went to upstate New York once, to visit my great aunt, and we saw the Hudson River. Now *that's* a river. It's just incredibly big: you'd think you're looking across a lake."

"Is it -- like -- bigger than the whole torus?"

"*Much* bigger. It must be, oh, maybe as wide as Arc is high."

"Naw. That's crazy."

"True. It's so far it would take you fifteen-twenty minutes to walk across if you could walk on the water."

"How could there be so much water?"

"That's not a lot of water -- you should see the ocean! It just keeps going. Thousands of miles, halfway across the whole world. When we fly down to LA, you can look out the window to the west and there's just nothing but waves and clouds forever."

"Wow. Can I go with you?"

"I don't know. Can't you just fly down to the surface? Don't you guys ever, like, visit Capital City?"

"Hardly ever. Oh, you get to go on a trip when you get married -- Gray's going to Casino Park. But otherwise you're supposed to stay home."

While Tennyson was trying to decide whether to commiserate or conspire, the conversation was interrupted by a commotion as two of the older boys flung open a double door at the back of the bar. Two more teenagers pushed a creaking wheeled cart supporting a huge frosted cake through the doors. Mr. Saturn turned up the volume on some sort of raucous jazzy music that Tennyson felt he ought to have recognized and took over as master of ceremonies.

"Gentlemen of Pear Tree Town, guests, friends, men, boys, and sundry creatures! It's the moment of truth, the tempest in a torus, the bildungsroman without buildings! Good or good enough. Cinderella or cinders? Will Gray make the grade? Or will he be bowed before this loud crowd? Yes, it's time for the cake, make or break, make no mistake!" Whistles and catcalls rose from the crowd.

“What is this? Are we gonna’ talk or eat?” said Cane impatiently, reaching out to grab a fistful of frosting as the cake creaked by his chair. The cartmaster slapped his hand away: “Not yet!”

In a moment the cart was parked before where Gray sat at the improvised head table. Gray stood up, wavering slightly, slopping beer onto the table from the mug in his right hand. Mr. Saturn cut the music abruptly. An expectant silence wafted over the crowd. Gray inhaled and began to chant what was obviously a time-worn incantation:

*Hear me now, the time is nigh
When with my bride I’ll only lie
In this last night of single freedom
Grant our wishes if you can read’em
Impassive while we lust and leer
Harvest Goddess now appear!*

The crowd (except for the kids) joined in shouting the final two lines. Nicholas half-expected a genie to materialize magically from nothing, but in fact the Goddess’ entrance was a bit more mundane: the top of the cake burst upwards and outwards, releasing a strikingly gorgeous woman, completely naked save for a coating of frosting on her hair and back. She rose until she was floating head high above the enthusiastically cheering crowd. As she passed serenely above Cane, who had already finished consuming the fragments of cake that had landed on him during her entry, he reached out and took a swath of frosting from her hip. Nicholas remembered something vaguely like this in a video his parents had been watching late one night; he gave some thought to shouting ‘take it off!’ as he recalled the folks in the movie to have done, but then reflected that the advice seemed redundant.

“Wow,” said Erin. “She has green hair!”

“You’re looking at her *hair*?” said Clemm, puzzled.

The Goddess took a breath to speak. The crowd grew instantly silent. “Thank you all, it’s always such a pleasure to visit with my devoted worshippers,” said the Goddess, as she slowly rotated suspended before the now thoroughly devout male audience. Her voice was as sweet as her smile. “As you know, we Harvest Goddesses exist only to brighten the lives of those truly devoted to the cultivation of the bounties of nature. On such a night as this, by ancient practice and tradition, we offer to grant one wish to the faithful, anything at all so long as it is pure of heart. According to custom we turn first to the fortunate bridegroom.” By this time she had spun to face Gray, who was staring wide-eyed up at her from an arm’s length away. She began to sing:

*“Loyal, obedient, patient Gray,
what is it you wish today?”*

Before Gray could so much as seriously think about speaking, she shook her head in dismay. “Uh uh uh! Naughty, naughty! You know I don’t do that sort of thing.”

“But I didn’t say anything!” Gray said, distraught.

“Didn’t say anything!” laughed Lewis. “Didn’t *say* anything!”

“Get a clue, Gray, this is the Goddess!” shouted Mr. Baker from the back of the room.

The Harvest Goddess’ gaze fell upon Brian, who was sitting a bit apart from most of the crowd, by the fire, drinking fruit punch, waiting to get back to *The Amber Spyglass* (he had reached page 154). She sang again:

*“Child who’s passed through ghosts and fires
What is it your heart desires?”*

“Well,” said Brian, as the crowd turned hopefully his way, “I’d feel more comfortable if you’d -- uh -- put some clothes on.”

“BOOO!!” “WHO LET HIM IN?” “DOWN WITH WHAT’S-IS-NAME!” “WHO THOUGHT OF THAT?” The crowd was not impressed. However, the Goddess found Brian’s idea appealing: the frosting swirled away onto the floor and a glistening gown of leafy green wove itself from her feet and rose up to be clasped by an amber brooch at her shoulder.

“Another groom, another failure,” said Mr. Miller, taking a deep draught of beer.

“What went wrong?” asked Nicholas.

“Oh, it’s always this way,” said Lewis. “Everyone knows that on the eve of your wedding the Goddess will grant any wish except the one that every groom can’t help but wish for when she’s floating there in her birthday suit.”

“Yeah, in fact, it’s pretty unusual to find anyone in the crowd who’s able to make a wish she’ll grant,” said Mr. Green, the mushroom farmer. “That boy is the first since -- oh, my, since Virgil Tweedy’s bachelor party three years ago!”

“Yes, and remember how that one turned out!” said Lewis. “Billy wished to never have to do homework again so she turned him into an azalea!”

“Right purty one, too,” said Mr. Miller. “He’s better off as a plant, anyway.”

“Yep, got the brains for it,” said Lewis.

“This is not the ideal time to change your mind,” said Mr. Saturn, taking another sip of the beer floating in front of his nose. He was taking a break before doing his last set of the evening. “Ark is not going to be the quietest rest spot in the game worlds for the next few weeks, and as I recall you destroyed all the Arwings specifically to forestall this eventuality.”

“Yeah, I guess we did,” Erin replied. “I don’t know, I’m not used to this sort of thing. When you’re a kid you get to back out of stuff most of the time.”

“It’s certainly not that simple. Let us for the moment ignore minor issues like deserting your friends and breaking your promises and deal in practicalities. If you don’t want to go on, you can stay here in Pear Tree Town, but be aware that I plan to bring the village council up to date on the outside situation at the meeting tomorrow after the wedding. I have no idea what their response will be. If you stay behind and don’t get planetside soon you could find yourself in the middle of a battle that makes this morning’s look recreational. Can you contact Wendy?”

“I have her number, I guess. Gee, I don’t know. I mean, what excuse would I use?”

“You could tell her the truth.”

“That I’m -- I’ve -- got a crush on--”

“Erin, if you can’t say it it isn’t worth risking your life. Are you in love with the girl or not?”

“I think I am -- but how are you supposed to know? I mean, we’ve hardly been together. That’s the problem! I don’t want to leave right now, I want to spend more time with her.”

“In love as in war -- much must be risked and all may be lost.”

“I hate it when other people quote books at me.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“Was there one?”

“Yes. You have to make a commitment before you’re sure. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Wow. Is this what being an adult is like?”

“Nonsensical? It does often seem that way. Let me know what you’ve decided tomorrow and I’ll see what I can do. Oops, I’m on in a minute.”

“Oh, yeah. What are you going to play next?”

“*Into the Woods*. Sondheim, you know.”

“Of course I know.”

“Yes, you would. Well, around here it’s exotic, since there aren’t any forests and not much mystery, at least inside the torus.”

“You’ve got enough mystery all by yourself, without the woods. Where the heck have you been anyway? You brought up Wendy just to distract me.”

“I brought up Wendy? An interesting interpretation of the evening’s events. One more set, we can chat afterwards.”

“You’re giving me lectures on commitment and here you are ducking out again!”

“Yep. Welcome to adulthood.” Mr. Saturn waddled back up to the stage while Erin tried with little success to find out what it was about beer that was supposed to be helpful in situations of this nature.

“That’s just like us!” said Kent. “Right, Wal?”

Kent’s friend Wally nodded. “Yeah, we learn all the songs in first form, and the kids have to sing them every year. I guess it’s exciting when you’re little, but by now it’s awfully dull. I wish we could sing something else.”

“Oh, come on,” said Tennyson. “Let’s hear one.”

“Oh, man, I don’t know,” said Wally. “They’re really dumb.”

“Tell you what, I’ll sing one of ours and we’ll see which ones are dumber.”

“Okay, let’s see.” It was obvious enough that Wally was actually thrilled to have an audience for whom the material might be new. He took a deep breath and began to sing in a clear tenor, joined by Kent:

*Winter brings despair
ice is in the wind
Snow thickens in the air
fear is in our kin*

“What’s wrong with that?” said Tennyson. “It’s kindof pretty.”

“You’re kidding,” said Wally. “It’s so trite.”

“Come on, your turn,” said Kent.

Tennyson began to sing acapella

*Well I come from Alabama
with this banjo on my knee
And I’m bound for Louisiana
my own true love for to see*

at which point, Cane added a high harmony from his seat at the bar next to the large bowl of pretzels and mixed nuts:

*It did rain all night the day I left
the weather was bone dry
The sun was so hot I froze myself
Susannah, don’t you cry*

*I said, Oh, Susannah
now don’t you cry for me
Cause I come from Alabama
with my banjo on my knee.*

“Boy, your world is really strange,” said Kent. “Dry weather when it’s raining? Freezing in the hot sun? I thought Capital City was weird.”

“That’s just made up,” said Tennyson. “It’s sort of a joke. At least I guess they thought

it was funny then. It's a very old song. More than a hundred years."

"You're kidding!" said Cane. "I thought Mrs. Amherst wrote it for the second grade talent show."

"Alright, alright, your turn again," said Tennyson.

"What's next, Wal?" asked Kent.

"Hmmm, the pasture song." Despite his protests Wally was obviously getting back into the swing of performing. He hummed a B-flat and the pair begin to sing again:

*There are no blasters
in the summer air
The sheep are in the pastures
where the wind whips your hair.*

*A flower flies into your hand
a fleeting beauty lent
But any one who works the land
knows how soon it will come to an end.*

*The stream cools you down
we're off to fishing
But we don't forget the trials of life
that drive us all to wishing
Live like each moment is shiny as a polished knife.*

Tennyson and Cane applauded, though in the noise of conversation and continued consumption no one else took much notice. Kent took a sip of his white wine, and Wally a chug of beer. "Come on, your turn."

Tennyson turned to Cane: "Betsy?"

"Yeah, sure, I like that one." And they sang:

*Have you heard tell of sweet Betsy from Pike
She cross the wide prairie with her lover, Ike
With two yoke of Oxen, a big yellow dog,
A tall Shanghai rooster and one spotted hog*

*One evening quite early they camped on the Platte
'Twas nearby the road on a green, shady flat
Betsy, sore-footed, lay down to repose
In wonder Ike gazed on his Pike County rose*

Erin and Nicholas came over to the bar to listen. Gray and Lewis joined them. The room slowly grew quiet as the two boys continued to spin the tale of an old West they'd never seen:

*Out on the prairie one bright, starry night,
They broke out the whiskey, and Betsy got tight.
She sang and she shouted and danced o'er the plain,
And she showed her bare arse to the whole wagon train*

Mr. Saturn joined in with a simultaneous bass line and parallel thirds from Tennyson's melody:

*They soon reached the desert where Betsy gave out
And down in the sand she lay rolling about
Ike in great terror looked on in surprise
Saying, Betsy get up, you'll get sand in your eyes*

*Sweet Betsy got up in a great deal of pain
Declared she'd go back to Pike County again
Ike, he just sighed, and they fondly embraced
And she traveled along with her arm round his waist*

*They swam the wide rivers and crossed the high peaks,
And camped on the desert for weeks upon weeks.
Starvation and hard work and mountains so tall--
They reached California in spite of it all.*

The room burst into applause. Cane bowed, knocking the pretzel bowl onto the floor. Tennyson looked up surprised: he hadn't noticed the audience. "They reached California in spite of it all," Kent recited. "Wow. California."

"Hey, I know a good one!" said Cane, figuring to enjoy the spotlight while he had it. "We're gonna need some help, though."

"Aww, do I hafta sing?" complained Clemm.

"Naw, you don't need to sing, you just need to drink!" said Cane. "How many bottles of

beer do you figure there are?” he asked the crowd, waving up at the bar.

“Thirty-seven!” said Mr. Miller.

“Seventy-six!” said Lewis.

“Nine million!” said Baxter, the tailor’s son.

“You’re all wrong!” said Cane. “I’ll bet there are exactly -- precisely --”

*Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall
ninety-nine bottles of beer --
You take one down and pass it around”*

(which he did, twisting the top off and handing it to Wally on his left)

“Ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall!”

Kent, Virgil, and Mr. Baker were quick on the uptake and joined in for the next verse, while the bottle made the rounds of the hangers-on:

*Ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall
Ninety-eight bottles of beer --
You take one down and pass it around”*

(this one started with Clemm)

“Ninety-seven bottles of beer on the wall!”

Brian and the Harvest Goddess were on their fourth fruit punch, deep in a discussion of comparative religion. “So then Buddha is the God of Enlightenment?” asked the Goddess, still a bit puzzled.

“No, no, the Buddha was a real person. Gautama Sakyamuni. I think. Something like that. He lived a couple or three thousand years ago. He had these ideas about how people are reincarnated.”

“I’m sorry, what was that term?”

“Reincarnated. It means that you live one life and then you’re reborn as something else, and the thing you’re reborn as depends on the level of enlightenment you achieved in the previous life.”

“Oh, yes, you mean they’re replaced.”

“No, no, it’s actually the opposite. I mean, here if someone gets killed or dies, that person is replaced with a similar person with a similar personality, right? But not the same person; they don’t have the specific memories the original had, and stuff like that. At least, that’s what Fox told us. But reincarnation is kind of the other way around, where it’s the same person at heart, potentially even with the same memories, but in a different body, maybe even a different species.”

“Now I’m puzzled again. What has this all to do with worshipping obesity?”

“Oh, gosh, I’m not explaining this very well. Buddhists don’t worship obesity, but they build big statues of the Buddha -- this Gautama fellow -- who happened to be pretty chubby. At least, that’s how he’s always shown. I think the chubbiness is supposed to show how happy he was. Somebody once told me you rub the Buddha’s tummy, I mean the statue’s tummy, for good luck.”

“Oh, that sounds like an entertaining idea for a ritual,” said the Goddess. “Let’s try it. Do you mind?” She pulled her gown up to expose her not-very-Buddha-esque midriff. As the concept of undergarments had not occurred to her, this resulted in a level of exposure which was highly appreciated by those nearby members of the party who were not occupied with beer bottle number seventy-two. “Go ahead, dear, give me a good rub,” she continued, ignoring the catcalls and wolf-whistles.

Brian took a deep breath and leaned forward, carefully keeping his gaze focused on her navel (*why does a Goddess have a navel anyway?*), and gave her belly a good rub as he’d seen friends do to the little statue in the Man Bo Duck on Castro Street in Mountain View. His whole face felt like it was glowing white hot. He cleared his throat and said, “That’s pretty much it. You could -- put your dress back now.”

“Oh, that was quite nice,” said the Goddess. “I like that idea. Do you feel lucky?”

“I’d say he’s lucky!” said Bill. “I’d like to be lucky, too-- can I have a rub?”

*Fifty-four bottles of beer on the wall
fifty-four bottles of beer,
You take one down and pass it around --*

“Hey, Virgil? Virgil? Aww, he’s zonked. Here, Lewis, you start this one.”

Fifty-three bottles of beer on the wall.

“I forgot again,” said Kent, frustrated. “What was the next verse?” He and Tennyson were closeted in the far corner of the room, behind the fireplace.

“They soon reached the desert where Betsy gave out,” said Tennyson.

“What is that anyway? A desert?”

“It’s a place with no water. A place where it doesn’t rain.”

“I read about rain. That would be cool. Of course we have the stripelands where we have sprinklers up on the roof but it doesn’t seem the same.”

“Yeah, it can be pretty neat. When it rains hard you can go stand in the gutters and kick up a storm.”

“What’s a gutter?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s how the water drains away.”

“Okay, okay, never mind. Let’s see: They soon reached the desert where Betsy gave out, and down in the sand she, um, pushed up her snout?”

“Rolling about.”

“Oh, yeah, down in the sand she lay rolling about. You know, I really liked that song.”

“I noticed.”

“Come on, Brian, we should get some sleep,” said Nicholas. He was dragging Erin behind him. Brian looked at the pendulum clock next to the fireplace: it was after eleven.

“Yeah, I guess I’d better get going,” said Brian.

“My, how the time flew by!” said the Goddess. “I shall be late for the mid-autumn ritual.” The Goddess floated up off her chair and drifted horizontally towards Brian. “You can

join my worshippers any time you stop by," she said, delivering a lingering kiss on his cheek. Then she drifted slowly upwards while becoming increasingly transparent; by the time she neared the ceiling she was nearly invisible.

Brian sat slack-jawed and blank-eyed until Nicholas jogged his shoulder. "Come on, Brian, let's go."

"Let him be," said Mr. Baker. "Getting kissed by the Goddess like that is -- well, it's gonna' get anybody's attention. He'll recover by and by." He yawned. "Guess I'll be moseying on, too, after givin' my respects to the lucky fellow. Ain't as young as I used to be, you know."

"Come on, let's collect Tennyson."

*One bottle of beer on the wall,
one bottle of beer --
youi take it down, you pass it arou--*

"Hey! Where is everybody?" He stood with the bottle for a moment, surrounded by sleeping boys and men. The barkeep (one of the few people left awake) was staring at him with a meaningful expression as he counted the contents of the cash drawer. Cane looked around and then pointed at the stool against which Gray was slumped, snoring peacefully. "Put it on *his* tab!"

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The girls were gathered around Maria, who was dressed only in her white linen slip, her long black curls draped over bare shoulders. Mary Ellen sat at the table next to the group making a couple of last-minute adjustments to the wedding gown.

"So these two blondes are going to go to Casinopolis for their vacation, and they're walking along when they come to a fork in the road," said Maria. "There's a big sign that says, CASINOPOLIS LEFT, so the blondes shrug their shoulders, turn around, and go home."

The girls broke into laughter, except for Loraine. Loraine was a guest from Phantasy Star, invited due to her friendship with Muffy's second cousin, Sandra. She was a tall platinum blonde with a protruding bust that seemed to have no respect for the laws of gravity, dressed in a halter top and shorts. "I don't get it," said Loraine. "Is that funny?"

"Probably not if Nicholas told it," said Clara, mostly to herself.

“Nicholas?” asked Loraine. “I thought her name was Maria. I was sure of it.”

“Okay, I’m done, let’s try it on,” said Mary Ellen, rising somewhat awkwardly from her chair holding the gown in front of her. The girls backed off to give Maria some room to don the dress; Loraine, turning without looking, struck the shorter Clara in the eye with her left breast.

“Ow! Watch where you’re going with those!” said Clara.

“I’m sorry, they just keep getting in the way,” said Loraine, meaning the other girls.

“You could have them surgically removed,” said Clara, meaning the anatomy beneath the halter.

“Oh, does it work that way?” asked Loraine. “Usually after they’re around me for a while they leave by themselves.”

“Clara, come help me with the buttons,” said Mary Ellen, interposing herself between Clara and Loraine.

“Why does she get to help? She’s just a kid!” said Louise, the schoolteacher’s daughter.

“If you can’t recognize character when you see it,” said Mary Ellen, “trust those who can. Maria, dear, inhale and hold, please. Clara, you start at the bottom and have a care to lay the pleat flat at each step.”

“Oh, Maria, you look ravishing!” said Karen, the winemaker’s daughter.

“I wish I had her figure,” said Muffy.

“Why?” asked Loraine.

“Never mind, you wouldn’t understand,” said Sandra.

“Come on, Maria,” said Muffy, “do you have big plans for your future?”

“I’ll bet she has big plans for tomorrow night!” said Karen, giggling.

“What kind of big plans would she have?” muttered Clara, but not low enough to be unheard.

“Is that what you think about the folks who you come to for help?” said Mary Ellen. “Perhaps you should listen before you draw conclusions. And do that one over -- the cambric is twisted.”

“Well, perhaps our plans wouldn’t seem very big to someone like you,” said Maria over her shoulder as Clara undid the sixth button and relaid the fabric. “I admit I haven’t traveled all over the gameworlds, killing everything in my path. That’s not our way. But we have our own dreams, Gray and I.”

“I heard from Alice that you were going to expand the library!” said Muffy, wide-eyed.

“Oh, much more than that,” replied Maria. “We’ll start with a book store here in the village. I know that Jill and Martin failed, but we think we have a better business model and an improved supply chain management approach.”

“Wow!” said Sandry. “Your own store. That’s amazing!”

“Oh, that’s just the start. I’ve been working with Amelia and Ryan in Emerald Town on a possible franchising agreement, and Gray has friends in Titanium Town who might be interested.”

“You don’t think small!” said Muffy. “Why, in no time you’ll be the biggest business in the torus.”

“The torus? Oh, my, that would be thinking small. We believe that Boarded is overextended and highly vulnerable if we can manage the financing. Is that it?” the latter being directed to Mary Ellen, who was closing the top button.

“Yes, there we are,” she replied. “Thank you, Clara.”

“I guess I -- owe you an apology,” said Clara, holding the hand mirror so Maria could see her back. “I sort of thought -- you know -- that you were like some of the girls I know, all they want to do is get married and go shopping and change dirty diapers.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with diapers!” said Muffy. “I mean, with children. I want to have children some day.”

“Well, of course!” said Maria. “We certainly hope to have children. I know it’s not easy to mix family and career but I think we’re ready for the challenges.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” said Clara. “I guess -- I mean I suppose being a mother is

important. I don't remember."

"You don't remember?" laughed Sandra. "You mean you were a mother? To what, a doll?"

"I mean, I don't -- remember my mom. Not very well. It was a long time ago. I -- can't even remember what she looked like."

"What do you mean?" said Muffy. "Was she replaced?"

"People don't get replaced in the real world," said Clara. "It's not like here. She just died and she was gone."

"I'm sorry," said Mary Ellen quietly. She drew Clara to her side and turned to the other girls: "Come on, now, Maria, that is the loveliest gown for the loveliest bride, if I do say so myself. There's some wine and cheese in the office, and punch for the little ones. Shall we?" She led the party down the hall. The office furniture had been neatly piled by the wall; set out on the conference table was quite a bit more than a bit of wine and cheese. An upright piano had been wheeled into one corner of the room. Jillian, the village administrator, began to play one of the traditional wedding songs; most of the girls gathered round and joined in:

*Oh they had a little party down in Stone Town
there was Harry, there was Mary, there was Grace
Oh they had a little party down in Stone Town
and they had to carry Harry from the place.
Oh they had to carry Harry to the ferry
and they had to carry Harry to the shore
and the reason that they had to carry Harry to the ferry
was that Harry couldn't carry any more.*

"What's a ferry?" asked Loraine.

"Oh, a little creature that flits around people's heads in the forests," said Sandra.

"What does it mean, carry Harry to the ferry, then?" asked Loraine.

"Oh, just to get him blessed because he has a bad back, that's why he can't carry things," said little Melanie. Maria laughed and mussed her hair.

Clara felt ill at ease, hanging back by the door. "Are you all right, dear?" asked Mary Ellen.

“I’m fine, I just feel sort of silly here. I mean, I don’t know any one. And I keep -- everything I say is coming out wrong --”

“Social skills must be practiced, Clara. It will come with time. Of course, you need to make an effort, too. Not many girlfriends back home?”

“Many? Any. None of the girls like me very much.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised. Clara, you don’t make yourself an easy person to like.”

“Tennyson likes me. Sometimes, anyway.”

“He adores you, dear, it’s obvious to anyone. But he’s like that.”

“You’re right. You sure seem to know a lot about us.”

“I had a long talk with Ellie, dear. You all made a big impression on the folks at Luigi’s place. Of course with that sort of publicity, it’s a mite astonishing you made it this far. You must know there are folks who find your presence inconvenient.”

Clara chuckled. “Let’s see -- dropped out of the ghost train, chased by the rocker wolves, blown off an asteroid, ambushed by the Black Hole army, Blinky and his giant tongue, Capital City and the copyright cops, and of course the Ark security folks meant to do us in with our Arwings. I think I figured out a while ago that we’re not completely welcome here.”

“Oh, my, this is interesting,” said Maria, who had been listening with half an ear until now. “Ambushes? Exploding asteroids? Copyright violations? With the proper promotion this could be a hot seller in either the reality-as-fantasy or true-confessions genre. We’ll have to make you older so you can have a more serious romantic interest, and, oh, we can edit some of the photographs, too.”

“What? What are you talking about?” By this time the rest of the girls had gathered around Maria and Clara; Mary Ellen, chuckling, quietly exited to the piano bench.

“Why, a book deal, of course. Exclusive to us, naturally. What a nice wedding present! We’d just need to get Aran to agree to do the back-jacket blurb. It’s a natural!”

“You want me to write a book about us kids?”

“No, of course not. We’ll get a ghost writer, I know one at Luigi’s who would be

interested, and just tweak the truth a wee bit here and there to keep the story tight and broaden the appeal.”

“Ummm -- Cane told me that there’s already a book about us -- that Star Spirit we met at Peach’s had it.”

“Great Goddess! You’ve been inside Peach’s and talked with Star Spirits? This is too good to be true.”

“But what about that other book?”

“Oh, don’t worry, I know about that one. It’s preachy and pedantic, and way too long: only Star Spirits would read it. Tiny market niche. With a girl as the focus of the story, we’ll get good penetration in the young female creature segment, and if we show some flesh on the cover the boys will go for it.”

“Some what?”

“Don’t worry, we’re not talking about a nude shot -- got to leave something to the imagination. Besides, you’re really cute but a little young -- maybe we’d borrow a bit of Loraine’s anatomy and edit it into the picture. That okay with you, Lori?”

“Anything for a friend, Maria,” said Loraine, peeling off her top. Unlike the Goddess, she had heard of undergarments, but apparently hadn’t been convinced. “Besides this is your night! What angle did you want?”

“You’re going to stick those things on me?” asked Clara.

“Just on the cover shot, dear, we can use the real you on the insert.”

“No one would believe it! I mean, I couldn’t walk around without falling on my face.”

“It doesn’t have to be believable, we’re just trying to get them to look.”

While the older girls searched for the most plausible approach to merging Clara’s head with Loraine’s chest, Clara beat a hasty retreat to Mary Ellen at the piano. “I don’t think that helped my social skills,” said Clara.

“Maria can be a bit overwhelming when she gets riled up over something,” Mary Ellen replied, absent-mindedly picking out a chord on the piano. “She’ll test Gray’s patience often enough, I’m sure. But then, married life is often a test of patience.”

“Are you married?”

“I was. Dear Albert. He passed away last year.”

“Oh, doesn’t he just get replaced?”

“We’re a simulation people, Clara, not a shooter people. When one of us dies, the relatives name a child after them, and they grow up as our replacement.”

“We’d call that a godchild.”

“Yes, that’s what we call it, too, at the naming ceremony. So there’ll be another Albert, perhaps for another Mary Ellen -- but not for many years. I’ll be long gone by then. I hope they’ll be as happy as we were.”

“But -- do you know about the army and the attack on the Ark and --”

“Yes, yes, we know enough for our purposes. We’ll discuss it at the Council tomorrow. You needn’t trouble yourself about us. The young must live their fates and let the old worry about the consequences. But someone will carry on. They always do. As long as there’s folk tilling the land for their bread, even on the farthest star, our way of life will not wholly be lost.”

She plinked out the tune with one finger as she sang:

*A flower flies into your hand
a fleeting beauty lent
But any one who works the land
knows how soon it will come to an end.*

=====

“I thought we were done wearing these things?” Cane complained. “This helmet smells terrible every time I have to put it on!” Kent was leading the kids along a narrow trail between piles of broken farm equipment and empty wooden crates.

“If you would brush your teeth a little more it would smell less,” said Clara.

“Didn’t you listen to anything I said?” said Nicholas, a bit peeved.

“How can I pay attention when Clara is insulting my space suit?” replied Cane.

“I wasn’t insulting your space suit, I hadn’t gotten that far yet,” said Clara.

“Do you guys always argue like this?” asked Kent. “I mean, all the adults were telling us how we should learn discipline from you and stuff.”

“They were?” asked Brian.

“Yes, ordinary, modest, self-effacing Brian,” said Erin. “It’s time for you to realize that your fame has preceeded you! Brian Chang, Citizen of the Galaxy, the Rememberer of All Things, beloved of the Harvest Goddess, envy of ordinary mortal men.” Erin inserted himself in front of Brian, shoving Clara and Kent to the side. “Stand aside! Brian comes. He takes large steps.”

“That’s the second time I’ve heard this stuff,” said Clara. “What exactly is it with Brian and this Harvest Goddess thing?”

“Thing?” said Erin, shocked. “Thing? How dare you characterize the lovely Goddess in such a gender-neutral fashion! She was unquestionably, definitely, authoritatively a she! Green hair, too.”

“Okay, she’s a girl,” said Clara. “With green hair. What has that got to do with Brian?”

“Only that he spent the whole party talking to her!” replied Erin.

“Yeah, but by that time she had clothes on,” said Nicholas.

“What?” said Clara.

“Well, she was naked when she popped out of the cake!” said Cane. “Except for the frosting. I got some off her hip. Delicious!”

“Ah, does that make her a sweetie?” said Erin.

“The Harvest Goddess was wearing frosting?” Clara continued.

“Not really. She wasn’t really wearing anything, she just got some frosting on her butt when she popped out of the cake,” said Nicholas. “But then Brian wished some clothes on her so she would sit with him.”

“I did not!” said Brian.

“Well then why did you tell her to put clothes on?” asked Kent. “All the guys look forward to seeing her for weeks before the wedding. Usually we get to stare at her for fifteen or twenty minutes before she finally gives up.”

“You mean you just go to the party to leer at a naked girl?” said Clara. “Boys!”

“No way, we went there to eat!” said Cane.

“Speak for yourself,” said Kent.

“I believe Kent’s view of the situation is probably more generally accepted,” said Mr. Saturn. “Though a considerable amount of eating and drinking -- especially drinking -- also takes place.”

“Besides you just brought this up to distract me,” said Cane. “I don’t want to wear my suit! I can’t figure out how to pee in it.”

“Geeze, just go in the water, it doesn’t matter,” said Erin. “I did.”

“What?” said Clara.

“What water?” said Cane.

“The water we’re going through,” said Brian. “Although that doesn’t help, Erin: the suit is sealed so if you don’t use the catch tube you’d just pee on your legs, even in the water. Unless you just wore your helmet. That would work.”

“You guys are disgusting!” said Clara. “Anyway, don’t you think we ought to be thinking about what’s next, Nicholas?”

“Yeah, you’re right, except that we don’t really know too much. I mean, even I remember a little bit of the map, but it doesn’t say anything about who’s in what room or whether the security systems are on or stuff like that. Right, Brian?”

“What map?” asked Kent.

“Oh, this one,” said Brian, taking the GBH out of his pocket. “We have this nifty three-dee model of the station, and if you freeze the slicer and click on a room with the joystick pad like this, you get a little dialog box. But it doesn’t tell you very much.”

“Oh, wow, that’s neat!” said Kent. “You guys have such cool stuff! So -- what is it you’re worried about?” They passed by a large fenced-in area, posted with big signs CAUTION -- LOW GRAVITY AREA, in which were kept several chicken coops. The chickens were flying happily around, easily avoiding a large fellow in faded coveralls with TWEEDY’S FARM on the back.

“Well, what sort of guards we’re going to run into, whether we can sneak by them, stuff like that,” said Nicholas.

“Oh, why didn’t you say so? I can help you with that stuff. At least to, um, about here,” Kent replied, pointing with his finger to a spot about 1/3 of the way around torus 7. “Before we got shut down we used to come in here a couple times a year. We know all the ways to get around without getting caught.”

“Oh, that would be great!” said Tennyson. “I thought you were just going to get us to the door.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m supposed to come back, aren’t I.” Kent sighed. “Well, maybe I can go over some of it with you. What room are you trying to get to?”

“Weren’t you listening at the council?” said Nicholas. “We’re trying to get to the central cylinder.”

“Oh! Gee, nobody ever told me that!” Kent looked around as if to check for eavesdroppers and then gestured for the kids to gather close. “We know a secret passage into the core. It’s behind the theater.”

“Really,” said Mr. Saturn. “It would have been helpful if you’d spoken up at the Council.”

“Geeze, Saturn, I can’t do that! I’d be in big trouble.”

“We? Who’s we?” asked Clara.

“Well, Cyrus taught me about it -- but I don’t think he found it.”

“What do you mean secret?” asked Nicholas. “Does that mean there aren’t guards at the entrance?”

“Oh, there aren’t any guards on this passage!” said Kent, laughing. “But you’ll never find

it. I'll have to come."

"Oh, that would be great!" said Tennyson. "But -- shouldn't you ask your parents?"

"I think this is one of those items where you ask forgiveness rather than permission," said Mr. Saturn.

"Yep, that's the idea," said Kent. "Besides, I'm not due back in school for a couple days, no one will notice."

"Well, having a guide sounds good to me!" said Tennyson.

"Yeah, that's great," said Nicholas. "Everybody okay with Kent joining us?"

"I'm still waiting for somebody to tell me what the spacesuit is for!" said Cane. "I thought we were staying inside the station?"

"The space suit is so you can breathe when we go through the water!" said Nicholas. "Unless you want to hold your breath the whole time."

"Water? What water?" said Cane.

"We have to swim through the passage to the storage tank and then trigger the hatch to let us out. Didn't you pay any attention at all at the Council meeting?" asked Clara.

"Oh, you mean like the big water tank in Sonic Adventure?" said Cane. "I've gotten through that a bunch of times. It's easy, you just have to keep hitting the time switch so you can swim against the current."

"No, no, we're going with the current," said Kent. "The water flows from here into the main electrophoresis plant in seven for treatment; we just need to hitch a ride."

"A very advanced system for its time, as I recall," said Mr. Saturn. "We studied it in school." said Mr. Saturn. "Seems to me there were some provisions for solids removal that might represent a significant obstacle for solid objects like us."

"Well, yeah, besides the currents being pretty fast, there's the lasers at the entrance to the storage tank. You have to be careful, obviously," said Kent. "We have to bring along something to set the lasers off for each of us. They take about three seconds to recharge, so you shove your junk in and then zip in during the dead time."

“Yeah, yeah, I know all this stuff from Sonic Adventure two,” said Cane.

“Battle,” said Brian.

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” continued Cane. “This is gonna’ be easy. I always get through this stage on the first try. Piece of cake! Whoah, that cake was good. I’ll lick the Harvest Goddess any day.”

The path led to a door in a metal partition near the curved wall of the torus. Above the door was a worn placard reading SANITATION AND RECYCLING.

“Why are we going into the sanitation department?” asked Cane, stopping at the door. “You gotta go or something?”

“This is where we get in,” laughed Kent. “What did you think?”

“What? I mean, shouldn’t we start at the river or something like that? It’s the water supply pipe, right? Like in the games.” Kent pressed the buttons next to the door in some complex sequence and pushed it wide. He pointed to a series of large pipes passing through the back of the room, each with a tee joint terminating in a large hinged cover.

Nicholas rolled his eyes. “You just don’t pay any attention, do you? They just cleaned it up for the Sonic games. It’s a sewer pipe! Geeze. Come on.”

“Swimming in poop?” exclaimed Cane. “NO WAY! I knew I should’ve stayed at the Mansion. Forget it, I’m staying where the food goes into my mouth, not where the result comes out!”

“Well, that’s your choice,” said Nicholas. “We haven’t got time to argue about it.” He turned to the rest of the group. “Let’s go. Remember the briefing: we have to get through the feeder lines to the main storage tank.”

Kent directed the kids to a pile of aluminum blocks. “Grab one of these to set off the lasers, that’s what we usually do.” He walked over to one of the covers and flipped a lock away; a pneumatic lift popped the big steel cover up, exposing rapidly flowing, foul-smelling water below. While the kids grabbed blocks, Kent rummaged in a locker behind the pipe and pulled out a sort of aqualung, some rubber gloves, and swim fins. “Put these on, too, we’ll go a lot faster.”

“I’m not going!” said Cane.

“Fine, you said that,” said Nicholas. “Okay, Kent will lead since he’s the guide. I’ll take rear guard this time, Clara with Kent, Tennyson and Brian, Cane -- oh, yeah, never mind, Erin with me. Mister Saturn, can you keep up?”

“No problem. I’m actually faster under water than on land.” The little guy produced a curious sort of mask.

Nicholas continued instructions: “We’ll surface in the degassing chamber before the main storage tank to finalize before we go for the main tank and the exit. Masks on, let’s go.”

One by one the kids disappeared into the pipe. Erin gave Mr. Saturn a lift and then jumped in. Nicholas checked around to make sure they weren’t being watched and then reached back to close the cover, sparing a wave goodbye to Cane, and then disappeared.

Cane, left alone in the foul-smelling sanitation headquarters, paced back and forth for a moment. He started to walk out the door, stopped, turned back, and then stopped again. He took a deep breath, sighed, and shook his head. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.” He donned a pair of fins, popped the lid back up, and sat on the pipe edge, staring down into the dun-colored water flowing rapidly past. “But they’ll never make it without me.” He dropped into the pipe and was gone.

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