

Enter the Cube

*by Nicholas and Dan Dobkin
January 2002 ...*

Chapter 18: Zen Bomb

The swim wasn't really difficult; as Kent had promised, the current took Cane along for the ride. All he really needed to do was to keep in the center of the channel and avoid bumping into obstacles. The channel was initially just large enough to fit through, but as several feeder pipes joined the stream, the chute widened into a comfortable passageway. The place was filled with an eerie bluish light from little glowing glass bulbs spaced along the trip: Mr. Saturn could have told him that these were mercury lamps, using bubbled oxygen to generate ozone to purify the water, but Mr. Saturn was up ahead with the others.

After a few minutes the pipe opened out into a large chamber with an assortment of windows and ports, and several churning propellers of some sort near the bottom. The chamber had an air space at the top. Cane floated up and tried taking a breath, but thought better of it as soon as the stink penetrated his face seal. After a brief search he found the outlet and paddled over to join the exiting stream down another long passage, curving to the left, dumping out into a second holding tank, this one vigorously agitated by air or some other gas bubbling up from the bottom.

By this time Cane was beginning to regret his rash decision to join the expedition, but his change of heart hadn't extended so far as to battle back against the current. He turned on the external helmet speaker and tried a few half-hearted "Anybody there?" inquiries, but garnered no response. The jacuzzi environment made it difficult to determine the direction of the water currents; he spent several minutes before he discovered the outlet, hidden behind a row of perforated tubes busily adding their bubbles to the mix. This final passage was unlit, but mercifully short: he slid out headfirst into a little waterfall, ending with a plunge into the less-murky water.

Cane found himself in a small rectangular tank with panels of lights blinking in various locations around the periphery. As he looked up, he saw pairs of finned feet sticking down from the reflective surface. "About time!" he mumbled to himself, as the buoyancy of his air-filled suit drew him upwards towards the group. He arrived at the surface with a splash, expecting to be welcomed with surprise. However, no one paid him any attention. Clara was not visible, but she could be clearly heard from somewhere nearby using a number of words that Cane had not believed she knew as well as a few new ones he was obliged to tuck away for future reference.

“Clara, calm down!” said Nicholas when Clara paused to take a breath. “We need to know what happened if we’re going to help.”

The initial response was another burst of indecent recommendations, but after what was probably a deep breath, Clara managed a strained reply: “That damned thing blew practically blew my foot off, that’s what happened! And no I’m not okay!” At this point she appeared to have reached her current limit for coherent speech, as another now somewhat repetitious round of profanity followed.

“You told us she had three or four seconds!” said Nicholas, turning towards Kent (recognizable by his Harvest-mask). “What’s the deal? You trying to get us killed?”

“Calm down yourself, Nicholas,” said Tennyson. “Kent’s risking his skin trying to help us.”

“Yeah, you’re right, I’m sorry. But we have to figure this out or we’re stuck.”

“We must have done this fifty times. I don’t know what’s wrong. Let me go take a look,” said Kent, and disappeared again under the water. Clara’s complaints had faded to gasping groans.

Cane took advantage of the momentary lull: “Say, guys, what’s the haps? Problems?” said Cane.

“Oh, you’re here,” said Nicholas. “I thought you were staying behind.”

“He’s just trying to get attention,” said Brian.

“Clara went in first through the lasers,” said Tennyson. “She stuck in her block like Kent told us -- and the laser just blew it right up, it was scary -- and then she went right in like she was supposed to, but it couldn’t have been more than a second before the laser went off again, got her in the foot. And she’s the fastest by far, except maybe Mister Saturn.”

Kent burst back up out of the water. “Oh, boy, we’re in trouble. It’s a different laser assembly.”

“What do you mean?” said Brian.

“The old one had a big blue faceplate with two locking bars. This one has some sort of grate and a bunch of lights. It must charge up a lot faster than the old one. What the heck do we do now?”

“Okay, let’s think about this, maybe we can work something out,” said Nicholas.

“How long do we need to wait?” said Tennyson. “Clara needs help now.”

“Why don’t we just blow up the laser with one of our bombs?” said Brian.

“That would set off a maintenance alarm,” said Mr. Saturn, who was bobbing next to Erin. “We’d have a repair robot to deal with for sure.”

“Hmm, I’d rather not do something that would attract that sort of attention,” said Nicholas.

“You’d rather have Clara bleed to death?” said Tennyson.

“As long as she does it quietly,” said Erin. Clara was not being quiet.

“Look, let’s try blasting something with the Q laser,” suggested Brian. “Maybe we can do enough damage to shut the laser down without setting off a major alarm.”

“If you hit the pump laser control, the whole assembly might explode anyway,” said Mr. Saturn. “Of course, that would enable us to help Clara, if she survives the explosion.”

While the discussion continued, Cane splashed over to one of the glowing panels, detaching his pack (which was difficult in the water). He rummaged in his pack, splashing water everywhere, as several small items floated away towards the outlet. After a moment he withdrew a small white book and began to flip through the sodden but waterproof pages.

“Let’s ask Clara if she has any ideas,” said Tennyson. “Clara! Should we try shooting out the lasers? What do you think?”

“Just do something!” came Clara’s reply, followed by a loud resonant pounding sound, presumably the result of her whacking the exit tank wall with something to take her mind off the pain in her foot.

“Well, I’m going to try blasting it,” said Tennyson. “You guys can go back up the inlet channel if you want, so you’ll survive if it blows up.”

“That’s no good, who’ll help if you get hurt?” said Nicholas. “Erin, Kent and Brian go back up the outlet. Tennyson and I will go try to blast through to help Clara. We’ll need--”

“There!” said Cane. “That oughta do it.” He splashed himself around to face the rest of the group. “You can go in now. The lasers are off.”

“What?” said Nicholas. “What are you doing over there?”

“Great!” said Tennyson, diving beneath the surface.

“Wait!” said Nicholas. “Be careful! Let’s figure out what’s going on--”

“Oh, you found a cheat code!” said Kent. “We heard there was one but no one could ever guess it.”

“Oh, I knew it was there,” said Cane, holding up his cheat code book, “but I have to admit I sortof forgot ‘cause it didn’t seem very useful to be able to turn the lasers off after you got through them! I never thought I’d be going backwards.”

Mr. Saturn swam over to join Cane. He stared at the panel for a moment and then said, “Yep, they’re off all right. Looks like they’ll stay off until the next maintenance recycle, which will be later today. Good job, Cane.”

“What was it?” asked Kent.

“Townes sucks,” said Cane. “Whatever that means.”

“Hey, can you get in here!” came Tennyson’s shout from the next tank. “She’s still bleeding pretty bad, and I can’t hold her up and open the exit port by myself.”

“Well, wow,” said Nicholas. “Great job, Cane! Kent, can you get the tank door open?” The teenager, already swimming toward the exit, waved an affirmative. “Erin, Brian, cover Kent from the wings when the door opens in case there’s someone out there, Erin AK-47, Brian silenced Magnum, stay out of each other’s way. The rest of us will help Clara out.”

Kent led the way into the adjacent chamber, followed in quick succession by the other kids. A short channel led to a huge tank, much larger than the others. Three white pillars extended from the base to the frothy surface. The tank was lit by the eerie glow of a plethora of ultraviolet lamps along the walls, and little bubbles were constantly boiling off the pillars and rising up to the surface, scattering the light in wierd foamy swirls. Dark whorls and vortices descending from the surface made a trail to Clara’s copiously-bleeding form. Tennyson was holding her left arm around his shoulders and kicking vigorously to keep her at the surface. Cane swam up to the surface and grabbed her right arm to support her.

The port was at the top of the chamber, a good bit above the surface, with a short ladder dangling downwards. Kent had already gotten it open, apparently without incident, and was reaching down to help Brian make his way out. By this point Clara was obviously losing

strength and depending on the boys for support. Tennyson and Cane dragged her over to the ladder and then, treading water vigorously, pushed her up to where Nicholas and Erin, hanging with one arm on opposite sides of the ladder, could grab her arms. As her body rose out of the water and consequently regained its full weight (in addition to pack and suit), the boys were unable to push her high enough for Kent and Brian to drag her up. Mr. Saturn, who had stayed behind to configure the lasers for reactivation after they were finished, wriggled his nose as he appeared at the surface. Clara's now nearly inert form suddenly grew lighter; Nicholas didn't stop to wonder, but took advantage of the opportunity to shove her upwards. Blood still poured from the burnt and shattered boot to cover Tennyson's faceplate, blocking his view. By this time all four boys in the tank had mounted partway up the ladder to push from below, while Kent and Brian each pulled on an arm. Nicholas was sure that under other circumstances he'd be in big trouble for shoving Clara in the behind, but at the moment she didn't seem up to complaining. In a moment Clara was high enough to rest her belly against the rim of the exit port. Kent dragged her out and down the sloping outer surface of the tank; Brian grabbed her legs and together the two boys laid her out on the metal grating floor surrounding the tank.

While Erin reached back to help Mr. Saturn up the ladder, Tennyson slid down from the exit port and dropped next to Clara, kneeling down to get her faceplate open. Her lids were open but her eyes wandered in a frighteningly aimless way, and her skin was pallid. Tennyson unclamped her helmet and cradled her head in his lap.

Nicholas dropped down next to Tennyson. "Brian, medical kit. Erin, guard duty. Cane, help me get her boot off."

It didn't take long for Nicholas to regret assigning himself what turned out to be a grisly task. The front half of Clara's right foot was mostly gone, with pieces of bone sticking out of a bloody mass. He fought down the urge to puke and held up the foot so Brian could reach under to wrap a tourniquet around the girl's ankle. At least the bleeding slowed noticeably once Brian had snugged the band in place.

"How is she?" asked Nicholas, wrapping some bandage around what was left.

"She's out," said Tennyson. "This is bad. What are we going to do now?"

"Oh, man," said Kent, helping Nicholas with the bandage. "I feel awful. I mean, this hasn't happened since Billy Miller. Billy Miller! Of course, he was mooning Wendy Jane, that's what Cyrus said. Got his butt half burned off! I never thought Clara would be like that."

"You mean Mr. Miller?" said Cane. "At the party? He seemed to have more than enough butt to me."

"Oh, well, they fixed it, of course. Wendy had a heart container, she fixed him right up.

After she gave him a hard time about it, that is.”

“A heart container!” Brian slapped his forehead. He ripped his backpack off and began frantically tossing its contents on the grating. “Here, here it is!” He held up a curious little piece of what looked like nondescript sheet metal.

“Oh, yeah, I remember that,” said Cane.

“That’s where that went,” said Mr. Saturn. “I thought the Yoshies had thrown it into the river.”

“This is yours?” said Brian.

“To the extent that temporary possession determines ownership, you could say that,” replied Mr. Saturn. “I picked it up during my last visit to Hyrule. The one where I didn’t show up for my meeting with the assistant minister. If you knew him you’d understand why.”

“Good, how do you use it?” said Brian.

“Pull the cover plate off the top, wrap it around her foot, and press the red button.”

“Okay, what does that mean?” Brian replied, having completed the prescribed procedure, and pointing to a little glowing pair of characters displayed on the top of the apparatus.

“That’s the price. Hmm, two hundred fourteen coins if I recall Hyrule exchange rates correctly. You didn’t think this was free, did you?”

“Well, where’s your card?” asked Tennyson. “Come on.”

“Unfortunately, my young friend, Zelda’s financial administration finally clued,” replied Mr. Saturn. “I’m broke, or perhaps I should say I’m back to my normal state.”

“Well, Brian, we’ve got lots of coins, don’t we?” said Tennyson.

“So?” replied Brian. “What am I going to do with them? There’s no coin slot.”

“Yeah, only major credit cards,” said Mr. Saturn.

“What?” said Tennyson. “I can’t believe this. What are we going to do?” He was beginning to sound a bit desperate.

“Calm down,” said Nicholas. “We’ll figure something out.”

“You always say that. What?”

“You mean you guys just need a credit card?” said Kent. “Here. Here’s mine. A little expensive but, well--” He held out a slice of plastic.

“Oh, don’t worry, I have lots of coins,” said Brian. He reached into his pack.

“Brian, you can pay him later, swipe the card!” shouted Tennyson.

“Yeah, go ahead, you’re good for it,” said Kent. Brian nodded and slid the card through the little slot in the heart container next to the display. There was a little warbling beep and then the heart container began to glow a deep blue. It grew increasingly bright, producing a nearly subsonic humming noise, until the boys closed their eyes and plugged their ears. Then suddenly there was silence. Tennyson opened his eyes just in time to see the heart container split apart and fall inert on the grating. He felt Clara stir in his lap. Brian reached over to loosen the tourniquet.

“Tennyson? What’s going on?” she said. “What did you do with my boot?” Nicholas held up the remains of her footwear. “Oh. Wow. I remember now.” Tennyson saw her toes wiggle. “This is wierd. It doesn’t hurt at all.” She sat up and looked quizzically at her foot. “Am I losing it? I could’ve sworn I practically got my foot blown off.”

“You pretty much did,” said Tennyson.

“And it was totally gross,” added Cane.

“Brian fixed it, though,” said Nicholas. “That was excellent. I completely forgot that he had that heart container.”

“Yes, a story element cleverly hidden until now,” said Erin. “And so ends chapter two-hundred and thirty-seven, Cantankerous Clara and the Lasers of Doom. Don’t miss next week’s episode, Donuts of Doubt! Same time, same channel, same recycled plot!”

“I hope it doesn’t take a week to get to the donuts,” said Cane. “I’m hungry.”

“We’re in the donut, we’re not eating it,” said Brian. “But I have to admit, Erin’s right, I’d completely forgotten I had it until Kent reminded me. Besides, I never would have figured it out without Mister Saturn. And Kent to pay the bill. Speaking of which...” he leaned over to Kent and handed him several coins. “There you go. With interest.”

“Oh, that’s okay, but thanks. I’m gonna’ be in enough trouble over this trip as it is. It’s
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just as well if I don't have to borrow money from my dad as well."

"How do you feel, Clara?" said Tennyson.

"I'm fine," she replied. "What are you guys all standing around for? Let's go."

"You sure you're okay?" said Nicholas, dubiously. He was having trouble reconciling the mess he had just cleaned up with the wiggling foot.

"Well, I'm not sure what I'm going to wear. I mean, for a shoe."

"Shouldn't be a problem," said Tennyson. "I think we're done with the space suits. We probably need to go back to regular clothes anyway."

"Tennyson's right," added Nicholas. "Let's get into our regular clothes and stash the suits. We're going to need to go fast and light from now on."

"Yeah, I've got my tennis shoes in the pack." Clara unsealed her pack and rummaged around.

Nicholas was still staring at her and shaking his head as he disassembled the pieces of the pressure suit. "Mister Saturn, where should we stash this stuff? We don't want it to be found any time soon."

"Good point, son. I'd say the right thing to do is to hide it in plain sight -- that is, over there in the emergency supplies locker with the other backup pressure suits." He directed Nicholas' glance to a set of tall metal cabinets near the walls, bright yellow with red stripes at the edges. As Mr. Saturn had suggested, one of the cabinets contained a number of space suits of varying sizes hanging in pieces from a rack; the kids' stuff made an inconspicuous addition to the pile. Kent stowed his underwater gear beneath a pile of what looked like old raincoats, apparently a standard hiding place. While Cane and Clara stood guard at what was apparently the only entrance to the corridor they were in, Nicholas had the rest of the group check their weapons and supplies. Then he gathered the group in a little service closet, hidden behind mops and buckets.

"Okay, Kent, what's our next move?"

"We've got to get to Bribe O," said Kent. "He always knows what's going on. Otherwise we'll be flying blind."

"The bribe claw?" asked Mr. Saturn.

“Yeah, right, you know him?” replied Kent.

“If it’s the same one,” said Mr. Saturn. “Used to hang out around SnowHorn with some no-’count velociraptors -- my kind of dinosaurs -- after he got thrown out of the Guard for graft. Ran an assortment of cons, always into some unsavory scheme or other. Got caught selling second-rate military supplies to Scales, had to get off-planet real quick -- I’d heard he retired.”

“Yeah, sounds like Bribe O,” said Kent, nodding. “He came here for his health, that’s what he always tells us. We figured that means if he stayed home they would’ve shot him. But for a criminal conniving slimy rat he gets around, always knows what’s going on here in seven, and he’s pretty reliable.”

“You mean he stays bribed,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Yeah, right. As long as you keep paying him he’s straight.”

“Sounds like the sort of help we need,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Do you know any honest people?” Clara asked Mr. Saturn.

“Talk to Socrates, I live in the real world,” said Mr. Saturn. “Or what passes for it around here. I’d say we let Kent take the lead. Nicholas?”

“Sounds good to me,” said Nicholas. “Where are we going? Do you expect trouble on the way? How far?”

“Well, we need to go one level up and over to his apartment. It should be pretty quiet -- we’ve never seen anyone else living on level seventeen, though we’ve run into some of Bribe O’s other visitors every once in a while. Most of them seem just as interested in privacy as we are. We should be okay as long as we’re careful.”

“Fine, let’s do it. I’ll take point with Kent. If we do run into trouble we need to deal with it quick and as quietly as possible -- let’s see how long we can keep secret in here. So Clara and Cane, silenced Magnums -- oh, sorry, Brian, swap handguns with Cane -- Clara in front with me, Cane rearguard. Everyone else keep your assault rifles handy but don’t shoot unless I give the word!” Nicholas pulled his beamsword out of the pack, extended the blade for a quick test, and then retracted it and clipped the hilt to his belt.

“You guys sure you know how to handle all these guns and stuff?” asked Kent.

“Don’t worry, if you get in the way we’ll just shoot right through you,” said Erin cheerfully.

“Erin, shut up and look after Mr. Saturn,” said Nicholas. “Let’s go.”

Bribe O was an aging allosaur, a couple or three times taller than Kent. He wore bright purple pants (which also covered his tail), torn in several places, held up by orange suspenders. His right hand was missing, replaced by an awkward-looking and oversized artificial claw. He had the look of having been fearsome in his youth, but now he wheezed as he laboriously maneuvered his paunch out of the way in the narrow entry corridor, and limped noticeably as he guided the kids into the little dining area in his apartment. He settled himself into a curious contrivance that appeared to play the role of a chair for someone with a large tail, and exposed a number of missing teeth as he stretched his mouth into a sort of grimace that was presumably meant to pass for a smile.

“Ain’t seen you in a heap of months, boy,” he said. “Been too busy to come visit with ol’ BribeO, eh? A girlfriend in every segment, I wouldn’t wonder at your age, some smoochin’ and such, better than a wheezy old guard ‘saur, you betcha.”

“Not hardly, old saur,” said Kent, blushing. “Not nearly that interesting. The council’s gone down hard on us, couldn’t hardly go to the outhouse without a leash. But what’s the deal around here? The place is packed with Bomber folks. We had to hide in the old backup storeroom for twenty minutes before we got a clear minute to make your place. And that was filled with a bunch of water bombs, or at least that’s what they looked like.”

“You’re telling me? I can’t get a moment’s peace any more, what with those fella’s arguing in the halls, and then they’re setting off all sorts of tests in that firing range they have outside near the ring nine exit spar at all hours. Makes it hard to sleep, you betcha. And the storeroom isn’t the only place: they’ve filled dam’ near every empty room with bombs. Broken bombs, new bombs, defective bombs, obsolete bombs, out-of-style bombs. A fellow without my military background would be scared of getting all blown up accidental-like.”

“So -- what’s that all about?” asked Kent. “Can we still get over to segment m without being seen?”

“Over to m? Hmm, that’s a tough question, I’ll have to give that some real thought,” said Bribe O.

Kent nudged Brian and whispered “Ten.” Brian dug into his pack and handed a glistening gold-colored coin towards Bribe O. He grasped the tiny coin with his claw, displaying surprising dexterity with the primitive-looking prosthetic. “Your best bet would be to go up two levels so that you can access transfer gate b eleven. Them bombers usually take some sort of siesta about

three, they call it a coughing break or something like that, that's the best time to go. Use the service elevator to go up, not the ramps."

"Transfer gate? What's wrong with the tube?" asked Kent.

"The tube? Oh, well, I just heard somethin', what was that?" Kent glanced at Brian, who produced another coin. "You are such considerate folks, that brought it right back to mind. War game. Gonna' be a exercise, maybe today, maybe tomorrow. Preparation for the invasion. Metroids'll be in the tube. In the transfer field, too, but you can see them there. Safer than in the tube."

"Okay, that gets us to L," said Kent. "Is that all?"

"Mostly," said Bribe O, an acquisitive look in his eye. "The situation in L is -- umm -- sort o' complicated, but a group like you, you're up to it." Another pair of coins changed hands. "See, the bomber folks have converted levels two through seven of the old industrial segment into a kinda bomb factory. They're makin' everything you could imagine: water bombs, fire bombs, plasma bombs, the whole shebang. Three assembly areas, four or five stockrooms, clean area for specialty fabrication, some thin film reactors. But you don't want to go there anyway. Best bet is to grab a couple three bombs out of the storeroom and dress up as delivery folks, go in through the loading dock. That's why I sent you to b eleven. Clerks in Receiving make a spike-tail look smart; you can fool 'em. Go in through their warehouse, fills darn near the whole of level six, then you can cross to m no problem. Whatcha' doin in m anyway?"

"Oh, just the old passageway in the Personal area," said Kent.

"Personal? Oh, you mean back o' nine?" Bribe O raised his eye ridges meaningfully; by now Brian knew to pass him another ten coins without being asked. "That's a theater now! So many folks comin' in last few months, guards, maintenance -- every dang Committee member has to have their own private army, that's what I hear."

"A theater?" said Kent in surprise. "Oh, boy, this is going to be harder than I thought. What sort of theater?"

That answer only cost 5 coins: "Multiple. Six full-sized screens. Snack bar. Really poor layout too, everyone has to wait in line three times. Lounge with video games. They converted the old Personal into restrooms for the theater."

"Okay. I guess once we're going to the movies," said Kent.

"Great, what's playing?" said Cane.

PSKOW! PSKOW! byooooooooong! The kids were sheltering behind the transfer gate entrance as blaster bolts and whistling projectiles went flying past outside little tunnel. *BOOOOOOOOOOMMMMM!* A distant explosion resonated into the little tunnel. Silhouettes of koopa paratroopas could be seen maneuvering cautiously from stairway to loading port to ramp; invisible defenders fired bombs that exploded, spattering some sort of red glop over the attacking paratroopas. The koopas used air pistols and handheld bombs to clear their landing points of metroids -- floating wads of tentacles and jelly -- that had secreted themselves in favorable nooks and crannies, waiting to attack at close range.

“What the heck is this place, Kent?” asked Nicholas, in the lead with Kent. “I can’t make head or tail of it. Where do we need to go?” The view beyond the tunnel edge was very confusing: stairways going up were next to stairways going sideways, and signs and labels going left were next to different signs going to the right. It gave him a headache just looking.

“It’s an intersegmental transition zone,” said Kent.

“Oh, yeah, I heard Ellen’s mom had to have one of those in the hospital,” said Cane.

“I think Kent is referring to a region of high gravitational vorticity,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Am I?” said Kent. “I never heard it described that way. Mister Armour, the schoolteacher from Titanium Town, says that the artificial gravity generators need to twist around a certain number of times or something like that. In our torus the gravity axis just gradually turns -- you can’t even notice it unless you’re looking for it -- but in a torus like this that’s organized into corridors and floors and stuff, they make all the twisting take place in the intersegment regions. The twisting is too fast for some reason so gravity gets all messed up.”

“That’s what I said,” said Mr. Saturn. “You have to have an integer number of twists to maintain phase continuity across the quantum state.”

“Fine, how do we get across it?” said Clara.

“Well, it’s not that hard normally,” replied Kent. “Nobody lives out here most of the time. We need to extend the transfer gate out about half-way. Then we jump off the end and hit the gravity switch -- over there on the plumbing bulkhead, with the little red indicator lamp -- as we fall. Gravity reverses locally and slows us down just as we land at the supply entry -- by that yellow placard. There’s another switch there to set things back for the next person.”

“Is that the placard that says ‘DANGER, RADIATION SOURCE -- MAINTAIN 10 METER CLEARANCE’?” asked Brian.

“Yeah, right there. Don’t worry, it’s only dangerous if you stop for lunch.”

“Hmmm,” said Nicholas. “The gate goes straight out?”

“And a little to the left,” replied Kent.

“I don’t like that much,” said Nicholas. “We’re mostly hidden from view by that pipe rack, but anyone who’s over on the left is going to be staring right at us. Maybe we’d better wait until they finish this silly exercise.”

“Wait?” said Clara. “What do you think they’re practicing for? They’re getting ready for that stupid invasion thing that Erin said. If they’re still on schedule that’s tomorrow. We don’t have time to wait!”

“Gee, Mister Saturn, this is really strange,” said Erin. “I mean, the almost irresistible impulse to contradict Clara is being challenged by the shocking disclosure that she believes what I said.”

“Cognitive dissonance, my young friend,” replied Mr. Saturn. “In simpler terms -- don’t bite the hand that strokes your ego.”

“That’s a mixed metaphor,” said Brian. “We covered that in literature circle last month.”

“The only mixing is in your mixed-up brains,” said Clara. “Let’s go!” With that she slapped the large red button next to the exit of the tunnel. There was a hissing sound and a platform wide enough for two kids to walk abreast began to extend out from just below the tunnel end. With her assault rifle in one hand and the small rocket launcher in the other Clara leapt lightly out of the tunnel and started down the still-moving ramp.

Just at that moment, four koopas dropped (if you could describe it that way, since two fell from the top left and one each from below and directly right, all apparently downwards) onto the ramp. “Get back in cover!” said Nicholas. Clara spared him one contemptuous glance, turned, and moved down the four figures with a burst from the assault rifle. Some sort of projectile struck her on the shoulder, splatting red but appearing to do no other harm. She spun on her heel and cleared out three other koopas on the ramp above, pulverized a little skirmishing group of paratroopas and metroids below her with a rocket, and ducked under a blaster bolt to return fire from a pair of koopas in cover across the way. A brief pause at the end of the platform sufficed to gauge the leap: she dropped with frightening rapidity in a spiraling trajectory towards the gravity switch, popped it with a quick whip of the launcher as she passed, and landed lightly on the platform below.

“Wow. I hope she never gets mad at me,” said Kent.

“That’s my line,” said Tennyson.

“Ready to cover!” shouted Clara, heedless of being overheard.

“Okay, let’s go,” said Nicholas. “Whatever they’re shooting doesn’t seem to be very dangerous, but stay alert anyway. I’m rearguard. Kent, you help Brian and Tennyson with the bombs. Erin and Cane cover them from the tunnel end, then drop. Do you need a hand, Mister Saturn?” The little guy shook his head. “Okay. Go.”

There was barely room on the ramp for the three boys and the rack of bombs that were to support their deception in the next segment; Kent ended up replacing Brian at one end and he and Tennyson half-carried, half-dragged the ungainly object. As they neared the end of the ramp, a couple of projectiles splatted on it. Nicholas snapped off a shot with his ray gun (set to low level -- unlike Clara, he could see no reason for deadly force at this point) at the two offending koopas, forcing them into cover behind a power panel. “Kent, you have to get the gravity switch! Brian and Tennyson, shove the rack over right after he goes! Now!”

As the three boys and the bomb carton plunged downwards (more or less), Cane was hit with two projectiles with a *splat!* He turned to return fire, and then stopped, sniffed, and licked his now-dripping shirt sleeve. “Wow! Raspberry!” He stepped out onto the platform, waving his weapon, and shouted “Down here! Come on, bet you can’t get me!” In response, a number of projectiles and several less-welcome stinging blaster bolts flew onto the platform, but most missed the inviting target.

Erin took advantage of the distraction to rush by and jump off the platform end (“Board couriers -- *we deliverrrrr!*”), while a squadron of assaulting koopas soared around the pipe rack and transformers, launched a burst of fire, plastering Cane with raspberry jam. Cane squeezed the viscous stuff off his tee-shirt into his mouth while Nicholas dragged him to the end of the platform and leapt off.

Erin was helping Tennyson wrangle the bomb rack from where it had landed, wedged between two aluminum girders, when he heard a familiar voice from the platform above. “Wow, that is so convincing! You koopas are so committed to your roles. Anybody would think you’re dying!” The speaker was not visible, though Erin could see a koopa at the platform edge. It must have been one of the ones Clara shot -- it was bleeding something yellow and coughing. “You know, I played Zelda in the school production of *Ocarina of Time* and I got shot with an arrow! I think it was from Cupid. Then Ganondorf -- that was Billy Hatcher, he was an awful singer, he burped once during his solo, did I tell you it was a musical? -- invaded and we all got exiled to Shiver City until the end of act three.” The poor koopa spat something onto the metal platform and shook uncontrollably. Erin gave a thought to going to the dying creature’s

assistance, but it was obviously too late to offer any useful help. “You know, Young Link -- that was Irving -- a Dodongo killed him but you’re much better at it, he started laughing after the fake blood went up his nose.” The koopa wasn’t moving much by this point. “Well, there’s the ending bell, I have to go back and submit my referee’s report now. Gee, you just stay right there in character. You should think about a career on the stage. See ya!”

As the unseen speaker departed to the tromping of boots on the metal grating, Mister Saturn drifted slowly down onto the platform. He stared at the motionless koopa for a moment. “Alas, poor Yorick,” he said. Then he turned to Erin. “Well, some broken eggs later, the constituents of the omelette are ready to be cooked. Shall we proceed?”

“What is it?” whispered Nicholas.

“There’s a guard!” replied Clara, also whispering and waving the rest of the kids back. The rest of the troupe shrunk back against the corridor wall, taking what cover they could find between the shrouds and door panels, while Nicholas and Clara peered around the corner using the detached viewer from her Superscope. Three obviously-armed robots stood at the intersection of three corridors, next to one of the huge vertical shafts that spanned the industrial segment.

Nicholas’ brow wrinkled. “Crystal covered these guys in tactics. Day five, I think. Boy, that seems like ages ago. Tennyson told me about it.” He waved Tennyson up to the front and handed him the scope. Tennyson cautiously extended the end around the corner, looked for a moment, and then nodded. Nicholas tapped Clara on the shoulder to indicate she should hold her guard position and by gesture directed the rest of the little troupe into the shelter behind a large air duct.

“I remember these guys, all right,” he whispered. “Big hammerbots, or something like that. Hmm...what did she say? Oh, yeah. Heavily armored, carry blasters and cannon in addition to those big clubs, but not too bright. You have to get their helmets off. Otherwise they’re really tough. They have an unprotected comm port on the back of their heads -- a hit with a ray gun will cause an overload.”

Nicholas nodded, then sent Cane to swap places with Clara. “Clara, we have to blow their helmets off. Can you do it with an assault rifle? One shot, it has to be fast.”

“Easy. But how do I get them to turn around after that?”

“You don’t. We split up into two groups, hit ‘em from the front and then ray guns in back. Kent, there’s a corridor coming in there from the left, in front of the robots. Can we get

there without being seen?”

Kent looked around in thought, and then he and Brian conversed briefly over the GBH map. The two turned back to Nicholas: “Yeah, we go back to close to where we entered the segment. There’s a radial corridor that you can access from the second panel. Here, then around, and over two, up two.”

Nicholas shook his head. “That’s complicated,” he whispered. “Clara, take Brian as guide, and Cane. Assault rifles.”

“Brian?” whispered Clara. “He can’t hit the broad side of a barn with a rifle. Give me Tennyson.”

“He did okay in the final drills,” said Nicholas. “Anyway we’re stuck, that’s the only way we can split it up. I need Tennyson here to position our attack. So Erin, Tennyson, and me with ray guns -- Kent, just stay back out of the way with the bomb rack. Three taps on the wall is the signal. Give us ten seconds to take positions, then you take corridor center, fire prone, knock their helmets off. We’ll hit ‘em from the back with ray guns as soon as they’re exposed. Questions?” Clara glared but didn’t say anything. “Okay, let’s go.”

Clara moved back up the corridor, gathering Cane and Brian with the GBH, while Nicholas, Tennyson, and Erin carefully peered around the corner and diagrammed their motions on the floor. They swapped the silenced pistols they’d been carrying for ray guns and put the packs with the bomb rack for Kent to watch over. Mister Saturn was ignoring them, having found what for all the world looked like a television set in one of the control panels in the wall. Fortunately Cane had departed with Clara.

he three boys crouched silently, backs against the corridor wall. “Which room has no doors, no windows, no floor, and no roof?” whispered Nicholas.

“Mushroom!” said Tennyson. “You told me that one in the KoopaGal gift shop.”

“All right, what starts with ‘e’ and ends with ‘e’ but has only one letter?”

“Envelope,” said Erin. “That was in the bookstore. You need some new jokes.”

“He needs some jokes, period,” said Tennyson.

Three soft metallic *PINGS* -- “Go!” said Nicholas. The three boys quickly crossed the facing corridor, backs against the opposite wall out of sight of the robot guard, and sidestepped along the wall. Nicholas was counting: “seven ... eight ... nine ...” He led the boys into the open area behind the robots just as three nearly-simultaneous rifle blasts echoed through the

halls. As the robots turned towards the source of the fire, the helmets of the rightmost and center guards flew into the air. A bullet *spanged* off the left robot but the helmet was not dislodged. Nicholas snapped a ray gun blast right into the blinking patch on the back of the exposed head of the right robot, while Erin similarly disabled the center. The third robot launched one blaster bolt before a second pair of rifle shots ripped its head off; three ray guns simultaneously finished the remaining guard. By this time Clara had already swapped her rifle for a silenced handgun and spun on her heel to check the other intersecting halls.

“Okay, clear, good work,” said Nicholas, signaling to Kent to join them.

“Good work?” said Clara. “Brian wasn’t even close. I had to rescue him.”

“You mean, I rescued him,” said Cane. “I hit him right smack on the placard!”

“Never mind, it worked.” Nicholas glanced down the facing corridor at the two double doors marked with block letters: SHIPPING AND RECEIVING. “That was noisier than I thought. I can’t believe they didn’t notice anything. Okay, let’s get changed.”

Kent reached them, pushing the wheeled rack of bombs, on top of which he had stacked their backpacks. “Geeze, I take back everything I said. You guys are scary good. Even Ed Bookman never claimed to have done anything like that.”

“Are you kidding?” said Clara. “Sloppy. Nicholas took forever to stuff that thing after I blew the helmet off. And Brian was pathetic.”

“I hit the helmet!” protested Brian.

“You hit the rounded edge!” said Clara. “I told you you had to get the flat plume on top. Even Cane did it.”

“Enough,” said Nicholas. Let’s grab these coveralls and go.” These had been provided by BribeO (thirty coins) as part of what seemed to Nicholas like a very thin cover as delivery personnel. Stenciled across the back of each in yellow characters was the legend ‘PTERA. BILL EXPRESS’ and below that ‘Q. Earthwalker, Prop.’ BribeO didn’t explain how he had obtained them. Kent distributed the ragged, ill-fitting garments, still smelling of whoever or whatever had last worn them, and led the way towards the doors.

As Kent swung the portals wide it was immediately obvious why the confrontation in the corridors had attracted no attention: extremely loud music assaulted Nicholas’ ears:

Drop the BOMB!! --- - - -

Let's drop the BOMB!! - - - - -

Can't stand another minute, drop the BOMB!!

Beyond was a sizable chamber. At the right a ragtag collection of boxes and crates were piled haphazardly against the perforated metal walls. Towards the back of the room Nichoolas recognized an entrance port for one of the huge pneumatic tubes that moved supplies within the segment; the door appeared to have been blown off its hinges, and a sign declaring *OUT OF ORDER* in block yellow letters had been hung over the cracked end of the tube. Against the left side were a series of workstations, each equipped with a flat-panel display and keyboard and manned (creatured?) by fellows in a sort of plastic armor with their heads hidden by TV-set facemasks: bomberfolk. Above the first of the putative employees a recognizable boom box was the source of the music. One of the technicians was sporadically typing at his keyboard as he sorted through a small pile of boxes; the other two appeared to be singing along with the music while gesturing in rhythm with their arms and fists, though their contribution if any was quite inaudible over the cacophony of the radio.

Drop the BOMB!! - - - - -

Let's drop the BOMB!! - - - - -

By the time the song ended with a public service announcement about segment pressure integrity, the kids had all collected in the little open area next to the first workstation. “Yow! I love that song!” screamed the first bomber person, leaping out of his roller-equipped chair backwards into Kent. “Whoah. Who are you?”

At this point the other two noticed the visitors. The second one, who had a wildly blue and gold striped helmet, reached up and switched the music off just as a new song was starting.

“What was that for?” said his companion.

“We’ve got a delivery, dork!” said blue-and-gold. “We’re not just paid to listen to music, you know. We’ve got an important job to do!”

His companion, whose helmet was decorated with little mushroom clouds, seemed taken aback. “I though we were paid to listen to music.”

The first fellow, burnished unadorned stainless steel, broke in: “Don’t you read the contract? We get paid fifty percent to listen to music and mess around and scream and stuff, but the other fifty percent is an appearance bonus.”

“Yeah, we have to look just like we’re working,” said blue-and-gold. “It’s not easy to

emulate every aspect of productive dedication without actually accomplishing anything,” he continued, turning to Kent. “It takes years of training. Can we help you? See, just like that. Sounds sincere, doesn’t it?”

“It sure does, friend,” replied Kent. “I’ve hardly ever seen a receiving clerk who sounded more able to log in a shipment than that!”

“You’re a sharp cookie, bud!” said mushroom cloud. “That’s what we do, all right. If we didn’t receive in all the deliveries nobody would have anything. Without us this whole company is just a big bomb.”

“No, that’s with us,” said stainless steel. “We’re really swamped as you can see, so let’s kinda’ get your stuff in the system so we can get back to our singing. Where the heck is the tag on this one?” he asked, grabbing Mister Saturn, who had taken advantage of an empty slot in the bomb rack to get a free ride.

“I’m complimentary,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Funny, I hadn’t noticed,” said Tennyson.

“We’ve got a delivery of some bombs here,” said Nicholas, stepping in front of Tennyson. “We can just run them back into the, um, warehouse.”

“Wait a minute, we gotta check this against our purchase orders,” said stainless steel. “What’s the number on that placard?”

“F739B52 dash 390,” read Brian.

“You sure?” said mushroom cloud, staring at his terminal. “That should’ve been here two weeks ago -- is it dash 490?”

“Yeah, yeah, that must be it,” said Brian.

“Wait a minute, that’s the one they’ve been waiting for up in the board room!” said blue-and-gold. He pointed at the bottom rack: a slightly-undersized silvery spheroid with eight rounded protruberances and three little glowing lights. “Been gettin’ no end of hassle from the holos.”

“The what?” asked Kent.

“The holos. The executives. They have holographic faceplates on their helmets, duh.”

“Oh,” said Tennyson, nodding. “We’d say the ‘suits’.”

“What weird place are you from?” asked stainless steel. “Who would want to have a lawsuit when they could just blow everything up?”

“Good question,” said Mister Saturn.

“Come on, come on!” said blue-and-gold. He grabbed Erin, who happened to be next to him, by the shoulder. “You gotta get that up to the board room right away! It was supposed to be here an hour ago!” He handed Erin the silvery bomb and started to shove him towards the pneumatic tube entrance, then stopped abruptly. “Oh, yeah, don’t work, I told you we were supposed to ship and then arm, not arm and then ship, but would you listen?” While stainless steel responded to the accusation, blue-and-gold pushed Erin into an elevator compartment, pressed a button, and turned back. The door slid closed with a hiss and Erin felt a stomach-twisting sideways acceleration as the car headed up and sideways in the shaft.

In just about the time it took for Erin to start wondering what he’d gotten into, the door hissed back open. Not knowing what else to do, Erin stepped out onto the first carpeted floor he’d seen within the space colony. Before him at a low desk sat another bomber person; the helmet, decorated with intertwining wildflowers, as well as the shape beneath the armored suit, suggested a female. At her right were two computer displays, one with a long list of numbers and the other divided into segments, each filled with an image from what appeared likely to be surveillance cameras. Next to the desk was a large bin marked GRENADES -- TAKE ONE, filled to the brim with them. A flower pot with several very large Venus flytraps partly covered the nameplate:

MS. GLAUBER
ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT

Erin laid the heavy bomblet on the desk to rest his arms. The bomberwoman looked up from her spreadsheet. Erin saw himself reflected in her polished faceplate as she spoke: “Oh, that must be the emulsion bomblet! You’re way late! Go on in right away. It’s over there.” She gestured towards an elaborately decorated wooden door.

The room beyond the door was dimly lit, presumably to enhance the visibility of the screen at the front. In the center ran a long brown table. Bomber folks sat on rolling chairs, holding tables, with portable displays and paper files on the table next to them. Even in the dim light Erin could see that they really did have spiffy holographic face plates. Each one wore a large photo identification badge. Erin couldn’t quite see the point of the photos, since each depicted a substantially identical helmeted bomberperson. Below each photo was a name in block letters: SOBRERO - BACON - BICKFORD - COOK - SMITH - BACON - NOBEL. Everyone’s attention was apparently focused on a presenter who droned monotonously on as he

pointed to a display screen at the front of the room

“On this slide we see focus group results for all four proposed product lines. In every case they perform dismally versus the least popular of the competitor’s bombchus in all categories of consumer desirable properties. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that any of these product lines will address the ongoing erosion of our competitive position. Since the product development path appears completely hopeless, in this slide we show some results of the contingency planning exercise from last week. We looked at several alternatives to succeeding in the marketplace with superior products. For example, we evaluated bombing our competitor’s factories, but we can’t figure out where they are. We considered blowing up their retailing locations, but since our products are sold in the same facilities that didn’t appear to offer any benefit. We also considered blowing up our competitors’ actual and potential customers, but we verified that this would result in elimination of the customer base for our products as well. We evaluated blowing up government officials in order to force them to change their policy, except that the government won’t tell us what their policy is so we can’t tell if intimidation has resulted in the desired effect. As a final alternative we looked at blowing up the government. This appears to be the most promising path, except that since the government appears to be based here in Ark, we haven’t been able to figure out how to blow the government up without blowing ourselves up at the same time. In conclusion, we haven’t the slightest idea what course of action to recommend. I want to acknowledge the contributions made by Mister Sobrero, Ms. Bacon, and Ms. Bickford to this presentation. Thank you for your attention.” The presenter sat down at the table to the accompaniment of polite applause. Erin’s arms were getting really tired holding the heavy bomb while waiting to be noticed.

“Well,” said the big fellow sitting at the head of the table, “thank you for the excellent summary, Julius. Anyone have anything to add?”

In the back corner of the room, a bomber guy in what looked like a very old-fashioned low-resolution helmet looked up and said, “Carthago delecta est.”

“Yes, thank you, Marcus. I couldn’t have said it better myself. I guess it’s pretty clear that our position is completely hopeless despite our solid balance sheet and strong positive cash flow. As President and CEO, it’s my responsibility to state the obvious: we give up. Keisलगuhr, I want a press release detailing our complete capitulation to hit the wires first thing tomorrow!”

“Yes, sir!” said a smaller bomberfellow sitting on the President’s right. He began to scribble on a tablet. “Did you want to blame Bill Gates, social decay, or excessive SuperNES games in your youth for the catastrophe?”

“Hmmm,” replied the President. “All of the above, that should do.”

“Right away, sir.”

“He’s so decisive!” whispered Ms. Bickford, a plump bomberwoman seated across the table, to her neighbor, Ms. Bacon. “No wonder he’s the big boss!”

By this point Erin had reached the end of his upper body endurance. He stepped forward and laid the heavy bomblet down on the table with a *thunk!* He looked up to see the whole room of bomberfolks staring (presumably) at him. “Sorry but this thing is kinda too heavy to carry forever,” he remarked with a sigh.

“A burden too heavy to carry!” said Bickford. “Brilliantly symbolic!”

“Profound and yet disturbingly relevant,” said Sobrero.

“Carthago esse delectam,” said Graecus.

“The fellows in Receiving asked me to bring this up for you,” added Erin. “I guess you’ve been, uh, waiting for it?”

“Receiving!” said Smith. “Of course! Only the inspired genius of the Shipping and Receiving Staff can save us now!”

“By gad, I think you’ve got something, Julius,” said Nobel. “Well, son, what novel, innovative paradigm-shattering revelation have you brought from down there where the real work gets done?”

“I was just delivering this bomb here,” said a puzzled Erin.

“Yes, we recognized the symbolism,” said Nobel. “Go on. We’re all ears.”

“You’re -- relying on me to solve your business problems?” asked Erin, puzzled.

“Not just to solve our problems--” said Bickford.

“--to save the company and maybe the universe!” said Cook.

“Oh. Hmmm. Well, have you thought about a solution that doesn’t involve blowing something up?”

“Thinking out of the bomb!” said Bacon. “That’s unbelievably exciting. But we’re executives, you see, we aren’t as mentally flexible as the folks in Receiving. I’m afraid that’s not going to help.”

“There’s always pointless complaining,” said Erin. “Like ‘blow, ye stormy winds, blow, and crack the cheeks of hurricanes and tomatoes.’ Or something like that.”

“I don’t understand,” said Bacon. “There’s no weather here. It’s a space station.”

“You’re not supposed to understand these things, Robin,” said Sobrero. “You’re a manager.”

“Are you saying we could create a storm on the station and drown the government?” said Bickford.

“A storm,” said Erin. “Oh, yeah, that’s what you need. A brainstorming session.” He reflected on how amazingly useful it could be to know someone as boring as his cousin Evan, who had described the practice several times in much more detail than Erin had ever imagined he would need to know. “Somebody stands at the board and everybody shouts out ideas and the person at the board writes them down. And -- um -- it kindof doesn’t matter how stupid they are or what, you don’t try to be perfect, cause then it’s not creative. And you can, like, steal somebody else’s idea and improve it, that’s okay.” He was half talking to himself, not really noticing how the other occupants of the room were hanging on his every utterance.

“Brilliant!” said Nobel, handing Erin a whiteboard marker. “Let’s do it! Ms. Glauber! Ms. Glauber!”

The bomberlady from the desk poked her helmet in the door. “Yes, sir, what is it?”

“We won’t be going to lunch after all,” replied Nobel. “We’re going to be stormbraining! Send out for pizza!”

“Right away, sir!”

Erin stood in front of the expectant gazes of the executive staff, reflecting on how much easier it was to carry a marker than a bomb, and the implications that observation had for his future career, assuming that he had a future and it had a career in it, neither of which seemed probable at the moment. “Okay, who’s first?” he said. The spiffy holographic displays reflected his face staring out from under the bill of his PTERA BILL hat as the staff stared expectantly at him. “Does anyone have an idea? You know, something new?”

“What would a new idea be like?” asked Ms. Bacon.

“That’s a stupid question!” said Ms. Bickford. “A new idea is -- different from our old ideas! Anyone knows that.”

“How do you -- do that?” asked Ms. Bacon.

“Well, you just imagine things!” said Erin. “You turn into someone else and think like they would. It’s easy.” Blank staring faceplates. “Hmmm. Okay. Hmm. Well, what did you have for breakfast this morning?”

“Chocolate-covered beets with baking soda, like always,” said Bacon.

“Okay,” said Erin. “So use what you know.”

Erin could almost see her brow furrow behind her visor. “Chocolate -- covered -- bombs?”

“That’s great!” said Erin. He turned to the board and wrote in the neatest front-of-the-class block letters he could manage (they weren’t very): CHOCOLATE COVERED BOMBS.”

“Oh -- oh -- I’ve got one!” said Bickford.

“Go ahead,” said Erin.

“What about -- bombs filled with chocolate?”

“Chocolate ice cream!” said Sobrero.

“Chocolate covered beets with baking soda --” said Smith.

“--and vinegar!” finished Bacon.

“Brilliant!” said Nobel. “Brilliant. Write that down, Erin!”

“What about strawberry ice cream bombs, with chocolate syrup?” said Kieselguhr.

“Brilliant! Write it down, Erin.”

“Wait, wait,” said Sobrero. “what about exploding bowling ball bombs? So you’d always get a strike, you see.”

“I think that one’s been done,” said Erin.

“Prior art is no barrier to the determined monopolist! Intellectual property is anything you can get your hands on!” said Kieselguhr.

“Brilliant!” said Nobel. “Write it down, Erin.”

The staff picked up momentum as they went, and were soon bombarding Erin with so many wacky and absurd proposals that it was all he could do to get them recorded. Soon three boards were covered with his increasingly-illegible scribbles:

bread bomb

matzoh bomb -- explodes if you try to leaven it

shopping bomb

encyclopedia bomb

omb bomb

bom bomb

zen bomb --- bomb that explodes only when you don't expect it to

baseball bomb

potential bombs -- no fuse or trigger but they could explode at any moment

really bad movies that make the audience explode

champagne bombs -- explode when shaken

book bombs -- explode if read

book bombs -- explode if unread

book bombs -- explode if reader is a reviewer

book bombs -- explode if pitched on TV talk show

riddle bombs -- answer riddle to set them off

mystery bombs -- solve mystery of who set off the bomb to set off the bomb

history bombs -- if you see one you're history

calm bombs -- only explode when bored

maraca bombs -- explode when clacked in 4-4 time

a bomb to blow up Carthage (this one appearing at the end of every completed board)

Erin pulled down the fourth and last board. “So what about a bomb that implodes instead of exploding?” Sobrero was saying. “There could be a tractor beam on the inside that pulled everywhere!”

“Brilliant!” said Nobel for the fiftieth time.

“I don't think you can do that with a tractor beam,” said Bickford

“What do you mean?” replied Sobrero, peeved. “Of course you can. You can use a bifurcated electrode that supports resonances at the third and fifth spherical harmonics. Right, Erin?”

“Yes, Erin, what about it?” said Nobel.

Erin hadn't the slightest idea what they were talking about, but he was hungry enough to start getting irritable. "Using a bifurcated electrode to access spherical resonances? What a dumb question! Why -- anybody knows the answer to that question!" *Just how am I going to get myself out of this one?* "Why -- why -- I'll bet the pizza delivery girl can answer that question!"

Wendy had just swung through the double doors pushing a cart piled high with cardboard boxes. She took the marker from Erin and sketched with her right hand while sliding pepperoni and mushroom pies onto the side table with her left. "The usual approach to a quasi-isotropic attractive potential does involve a bifurcated electrode but you get folded singularities at the edges of the Riemann sheet that cause shear distortion and collapse of the pseudo-Schwarzschild radius in five or ten milliseconds. In my experience the best way to emulate an implosion using a quantum convolved tractor generator is to use a quasi-solenoidal electrode lying on inward-directed Kruskal-Szekeres equipotentials. Anyone for olive and bell peppers?"

"I guess that was pretty dumb," said Sobrero.

"It's okay," said Bickford. "Everybody makes mistakes."

"Thanks, Wendy," Erin muttered while helping her to unload boxes.

"For what?" she replied. "Well, that's the last one! Thanks for your business! Call any time!" She jabbed Erin in the ribs and added, "Hey, you wanna' come eat with me on the balcony? There's a cool view of the flashing lights on the cannon."

"Sure! That'd be great!" Erin said, but then stopped himself and turned back to the bomberfolks. "Are we -- done here? You guys don't need me any more, right?"

"Why, sure, Erin, go ahead!" said Nobel, munching a slice of Ranch House Special. "You Delivery folks had better get on with your work -- you know we're relying on your innovative thinking to ensure our future!"

"Well -- we were just going to eat lunch together," said Erin.

"That's a great idea!" replied Nobel. "Why, take the whole afternoon off! Have a nice meal, stop for coffee -- see a movie! That reminds me -- Ms. Glauber! Ms. Glauber! Didn't we have a bunch of complimentary movie tickets left from that tour we held for the Deaf and Blind Pokemon Convention?"

"Yes, sir."

“Well, get them out! Erin, take whatever you like. It’s the least we can do.”

“Hey, that’s great!” said Wendy. “There’s a picnic lounge by the theater, we can just eat there.”

“Bye, Erin!” said Bickford. “Thanks for everything!”

“Bye!” said Sobrero. “Thanks! Oh, and thanks for the emulsion bomb sample, we forgot about it but it’s still important! Great meeting you!”

“Cathago delenda est!” said Graecus.

“We’ll be sure to destroy it if we see it!” replied Wendy brightly, taking Erin’s hand.

“Thank you so much,” said Ms. Glauber as they walked towards the exit. “Don’t forget to take a grenade! Why -- take two! Each!”

“This is kindof tough the first time, but I figure you can handle it,” said Kent. “Anyways it’s a lot faster -- if we walk we have to climb down two vertical shafts and up another one.” He reached over his head with his left hand, holding himself in place on the ladder with his right, and hooked the little wheeled rack onto the rail. “You grab both handles and push off the ladder, then you just coast. You have to be careful not to torque the rack too hard -- I’ve never come off the rail but I heard a couple years back, Sally Mae lost it on this rail and broke her leg. They had to carry her back and make up a story about a cow sitting on her. When you get to the end, the rail goes level, takes a hard left, and then heads up. You have to jump off when it turns up or you’ll hit the spring bumpers. Got all that?”

“Sure, no problem!” said Tennyson, below him on the ladder.

“That’s okay,” said Nicholas, still on the ground as rearguard. He growled to himself. “Well, we can’t wait for Erin any more. Kent, go ahead!” Without further ado, the teenager leapt from the ladder, grabbing the second handle on the rack, and pushed. He accelerated rapidly down the curved rail and then disappeared, flying feet last, as the rail took a sharp turn right under a set of storage racks and out of sight.

“About time,” said Clara. “I told you he’s probably telling the bombers about that stupid girlfriend of his. Let him stay with her.”

“He may,” said Mister Saturn, his brow wrinkling with concentration as he slowly floated up past Tennyson. On his head was balanced a wheeled rack similar to those borne by the kids,

with the handles removed. "I'll just be a moment." In the promised interval the little fellow was perched atop the rail, balanced on the rack as if it were a skate, a position no doubt precarious in the absence of psychokinesis. "I haven't done this in a long time. Should be fun. See you at the lab."

"The what?" asked Tennyson, but Saturn was already whizzing after Kent.

"Come on, Tennyson, let's go," said Nicholas. "I'd rather disappear before those poor guys get found." The Receiving bombers had been more attentive to their responsibilities than their behavior suggested: they had refused to allow the kids into the warehouse until they could match the bomb rack to a purchase order (which of course was not possible since the bombs were stolen). Kent had tried to talk his way through the problem, but Clara grew increasingly irritated and finally shoved Kent aside. She had meant to use the ray gun to stun the technicians, but in her haste she grabbed the entrainment gun: the beam sliced stainless steel in half. Clara immediately realized there was no turning back: blue-and-gold and mushroom cloud were dissected as they scrambled towards the bomb racks at the back of the room to arm themselves. It was much uglier than a video game: underneath the suits the bomberfolk were humans. Blood had splashed everywhere. Blue-and-gold had twitched and gasped for what seemed like forever to Nicholas before he died. Nicholas was sick to his stomach and furious at Clara -- yet he shared her intuition that time was running out.

Kent had looked a bit green as he led them into the warehouse area, but calmed down enough to help them find the rail rider racks, which had gotten moved out of their previous spot and placed in a storage cabinet behind two large shelves filled with bomblets. Nicholas found refuge from his doubts in driving the team forward. "Come on, Brian, move it! Oh, I see -- Clara, can you help Brian? He can't reach the other handle."

"Geeze, can't you do anything?" she said, but she stepped up a rung and held Brian's foot up until he had a grip. She then shoved his behind rather harder than necessary to start him down the rail. In a moment she scaled to the top, swung her rack over the rail and leapt to grab on in a single motion, and wheels singing plummeted down the rail. Nicholas began to climb up the ladder as Cane struggled awkwardly but in the end successfully to grab the plastic handle: off he slid.

Nicholas had assigned himself rearguard purposely, if perhaps not wisely: the handles still reminded him of the parallel bars in the playground. He didn't want the others to see him mess up, though as he neared the top of the ladder it occurred to him that that also meant there was no one to help him if he fell. A momentary hesitation was quashed as the shocked sounds of someone entering the Receiving area penetrated the echoing warehouse. It turned out to be much less difficult than he had feared: the kid who had struggled to hold himself up for a few minutes on the Pokefloats was three weeks of intensive training in the past. He had to agree with Mister Saturn: it was a wild but entertaining ride. George and Akbar (from Mrs. Turnbull's class) had

frequently teased Nicholas because he was too scared to go on the Top Gun roller coaster at the Great America theme park back home; wait until they heard about this one!

After two left turns, a corkscrew right, and a stomach-floating drop into a darkened shaft, the rail turned up. Of course, the racks used by all the other kids, abandoned when they jumped, were now collected at the lowest point of the rail: Nicholas lost his grip as he banged into the pile and flew off the rail, sliding uncomfortably along the slick metal flooring to come to rest on his butt.

By Kent's account, the rail would lead them to an unused storage room, partially filled with flattened shipping cartons but otherwise unoccupied. It seemed, however, that his information was not current. The room was brightly lit by white glowing panels in the ceiling. In the open area in the middle of the room, four metallic pillars twice as high as the kids stood, covered with blinking lights and surrounded by a maze of thick cables. Next to each pillar was a chair with what looked like a computer keyboard and screen. Two long plastic tables at the right were covered by all manner of mechanisms, apparently in various states of assembly or disassembly, along with tools recognizable and mysterious scattered between them. Against the left wall were a set of four tall metal cabinets; the doors on one were wide open, revealing neatly labeled racks of some sort of parts containers.

Between the two central pillars, a large spherical metal object with a number of protrusions hung by two wires from a support rack. An unusually tall bomberman, his armor in subdued grays graced by a red cape, was adjusting something on the bottom of the sphere. Kent and the other kids, puzzled, had hung back near the rail exit, but Mister Saturn, apparently unsurprised, had waddled up to join Kent next to the mystery bomber. Brian turned to help Nicholas up; the rest of the group was intent on the discussion.

"Saturn, since you're standing there, could you hand me that multimeter on the table?" the mysterious bomberman in a deep, rumbling bass.

"Sure, Max," said Mr. Saturn. "Whatcha' buildin', anyway?"

"Hyper plasma bomb," said Max, taking the little plastic instrument from Mr. Saturn without looking up from his labor. "Magnetic confinement simultaneous implosion and burst mode. Ten or twelve kiloton yield captured in a hundred meter radius."

"That's pretty small. What's it for?"

"What it's for?" replied Max thoughtfully. "I haven't decided. It could be for different things. The koopas asked me to blow up the station. They're going to attack. Did you know? They wanted me to blow up the station if they failed. Interesting. I don't like the koopas. Perhaps I should use it to blow them up. Zelda asked me to blow the koopas up. That would be

interesting. But I don't like Zelda. Perhaps I'll blow her up. Or maybe just the bomb factory. That would be ironic, wouldn't it? Can you reach up and press that black lever?" the last directed towards Kent. "Good, hold it down." Something arced loudly inside the bomb. Black smoke started to pour out the top.

"Should I stop?" asked Kent.

"No, no, keep pushing. That's supposed to happen." Max stuck his arm way up inside the sphere and twisted something. There was a loud buzzing sound and then a POP! The black smoke was briefly replaced by billowing white vapors. Max stood up and seemed to reflect while staring at the bomb. The smoke slowly dissipated. "You can stop now," he said, without looking at Kent.

"What's going on?" Nicholas asked Brian.

"Kent says we need to get through the passage over there behind the big rack of spiky things," said Brian pointing at a door partially hidden by the aforesaid equipment. "But he didn't expect anyone to be here."

"Well, is there a problem?"

"I don't know. Why don't you ask?"

"I will." Nicholas advanced towards Max. "Hey -- um -- sir, we need to go through the port over there," indicating the sealed pressure door. "We'll be careful not to disturb your experiment stuff, it shouldn't be a problem."

"You mean pressure seal door five a to segment bulkhead e fifty two?" responded Max.

Nicholas looked helplessly at Kent, who nodded. "Yeah, that's it."

"Hmm. Interesting. I wouldn't go in there if I were you."

"What's wrong?" asked Kent. "Is there a pressure vessel integrity failure outside?"

"No," said Max, glancing at a gage on the wall. "Not yet."

"What's the problem, then?" said Kent.

"Who," replied Max. "The relevant question is not a what but a who. Mermaid. I told her no. She was unhappy. I had to lock her in. She doesn't like getting locked in."

“You mean just locking the port door?” asked Kent. “Why doesn’t she just leave the other way? The tube still leads straight through to the m transition, doesn’t it?”

“Kindof depends on what you mean by ‘straight’. I’ve never found anything about women to be straightforward, personally.”

“Geeze, are you guys gonna’ blab here forever?” said Clara. “I’ll take care of this, let’s go.” Max looked at her for a moment, shrugged his shoulders, and went back to his plasma bomb. Clara made her way around the equipment racks and scattered parts toward the door. The arrangement reminded Clara of a naval ship: there was a wheel in the center that controlled four large steel shafts engaging locks on all sides of the doorframe. She spun the wheel to free the lock shafts, grabbed the 9 mm pistol from her belt to complement the beamer in her left hand, and swung the door open. From the inside of the tunnel came a very loud female voice:

“You are the most arrogant uptight capricious self-centered excuse for a male I’ve ever seen!” At this point Clara whipped both her weapons up and fired four bullets and three laser blasts in rapid succession. Six muffled explosions showed that she was almost perfect: a bluish object that looked like a Nerf football flew over her head into the room as she slammed the door closed again with her foot and dived to the floor behind the bulkhead. The other kids took only a half-second longer to find cover. The grenade fell to the floor and rolled towards Max, who grabbed a sort of hemispherical metal cover from his workbench and tossed it on top of the explosive device, then casually sat on top. There was a deafening BOOM!, as the [Max+cover] assembly flew up to the ceiling and bounced off and smoke poured from where the blue bomb had been.

Nicholas looked up from behind the electronics rack. The hemisphere had apparently absorbed much of the impact of the blast: the lab was merely disordered rather than demolished. As soon as the explosion stopped reverberating, he ran to the door and began to turn the locking wheel back; Clara joined him a second later, and between the two kids the door was secured once again just before another muffled KAPOW! signaling the continuing displeasure of the occupant of the other side.

Max rose a bit stiffly from where he and the cover plate had descended. Brian went over to help him up. “Thanks, Mister -- umm -- Max, that was quick thinking.”

“No thanks needed,” replied Max.

Brian looked around. “But I guess your lab is pretty messed up.”

Max turned back to what remained of his plasma bomb. “My lab? It’s not my lab.”

“Not yours?” asked Brian. “Were you working for somebody else?”

“Hmm. Working for someone else? Interesting. I was just on the way to the restroom and got distracted. Guess I still gotta’ go.” Without another word he walked behind the wall cabinets to another portal and disappeared down a corridor.

“Okay, that was strange,” said Tennyson.

“No,” said Mr. Saturn, “that’s actually about typical for Max. Kent, alternate route?”

“There probably are some but I don’t know them,” Kent replied. “This whole section used to be completely deserted, you know, we didn’t have any of these problems. I guess we’ll need to use that map thing that Brian has.”

“I don’t know if we can afford to go looking for another way,” said Nicholas. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you, but somebody had already found Clara’s handiwork when I was getting on the track. It won’t take them long to figure out where we went. We’ve gotta’ get rolling. Clara, what do you think? Did you see her?”

“I just got a glance. She’s sitting in some sort of little swimming pool or something, but it looked like there was a whole pile of bombs or something like that next to it. About twenty, thirty yards from the door. The tube beyond the door isn’t much bigger than the door so there’s only room for one of us to go through at a time. If we rush her, we might get through, but --”

“Not all of us are likely to survive the experience,” Nicholas finished her sentence. A weird ringing sound came from behind Nicholas.

“That would be a transport being mounted on the rail,” said Mister Saturn.

“I don’t want to be fighting on two fronts,” said Nicholas. “If we’re gone when they get here maybe they’ll just figure we were blown up or something. We’re going to have to chance a rush. Clara, you and Cane are the best shots. Is there room for both of you side by side?”

“I’m not standing right next to her!” said Cane. “Let Tennyson do it! He likes her better than me. Besides she’ll mess up my aim with her stupid elbows.”

“So you admit you like her now? Come on, Cane, Tennyson can’t shoot like you can. Between you and Clara you should be able to deal with the first rush of this whoever it is. She seems to need a few seconds to reload; that should give the rest of us time to get in to back you up. Saturn, Kent, stay behind in here until we’re clear.” Nicholas spent a moment working out the remainder of the attack plan; a resonant singing sound from the entry door, obviously something heading down the rail, indicated to all the wisdom of proceeding with alacrity. Nicholas and Tennyson turned the wheel on the door as silently as they could. Cane and Clara

stood side by side -- Cane still jabbing her with his elbow to get clearance for his favored high-velocity Johnson semi-automatic rifle -- as Brian pulled the door ajar.

Clara, crouching to make sure she was out of Cane's line of fire, moved immediately into the tunnel. The mermaid figure, apparently involved in some personal monologue when the door was opened, was grabbing weaponry from the pile behind her, giving Clara a second to take a position behind the modest cover of a standpipe before the projectiles began flying her way. She blasted two blimp-shaped water bombs with her beamer easily enough but missed the third spherical concussion grenade; Cane put a hole through it before it could reach her and with his next shot blew another blue football right out of the mermaid's hand. The female bomber, screaming more additions to Cane's growing illicit vocabulary, retreated behind her pool, allowing Cane to take prone position behind Clara. Nicholas and Tennyson, brandishing relatively unlethal but easily aimed ray guns, rushed into the narrow hallway and flattened themselves against the wall.

With four weapons in play, they managed to intercept another round of munitions without undue threat, but they were still pinned down and unable to advance down the hall: the standpipes were the only cover in the otherwise straight hallway between them and the bomber. There was barely room for Brian, who shouted "They're here!" as he flung himself to the floor. Kent and Saturn appeared a moment later, closing the door behind them.

"And they're not in the mood for negotiations," said Mr. Saturn, crouched in the corner next to the door. "How are you doing over here?"

Before Nicholas could answer, the kids dealt with another assault, this one of four javelin-like thermal detonators. One, only partially disabled by Tennyson's ray blast, exploded in a fiercely-bright flash, making Nicholas' skin burn where it had been exposed to the direct illumination of the charge. Clara tossed her beamer, charge exhausted, behind her and reached for the Superscope, still in her pack. Cane shouted "reloading", just as the Mermaid appeared, holding a large pink spherical bomb with a hissing fuse on the top above her head. Nicholas glanced at the object, leapt from cover and charged towards the Mermaid, screaming: "I'm Nicholas and I am sick and tired of you!" Clara tried unsuccessfully to grab him as he went by, then attempted to take out the Mermaid directly, but it was impossible to get a clear shot past Nicholas' rushing form in the narrow hallway.

"What the he--" she started to say. Then Nicholas threw himself to the ground as an explosion shook the hallway. When Clara could see again, Nicholas was walking calmly over to where the lower half of the mermaid bomber was slumping slowly to the floor. He knelt down beside the spheroid, lying seemingly unharmed on the floor next to the remains of the bomber.

"Thanks, Bom Bette. I could always count on you."

“Oh, it was nothing,” replied the little bomb. “I was so pleased that I could help!” The sentient munition turned to Clara, who was approaching down the hall, followed by the rest of the group. “Let that be a lesson to you, children! Kindness is never wasted.” She turned back to Nicholas. “I’d love to stay and chat, dear, but it is just a social whirl down here for a bomb! Hardly a moment’s leisure. Don’t bother to unlock the door, I’ll just blast through. Don’t disturb the guard robots at the other end! They’re quite occupied, there’s a good boy.” Orange feet flopping on the floor as she waddled down the hall, she stopped for a sort of courtesy to Mr. Saturn and then tramped awkwardly towards the bulkhead door.

“I thought Erin was the one with a girl in every port,” said Brian, staring at Nicholas.

“I thought that was Tennyson,” said Cane, ignoring a frosty glance from Clara.

“I think it’s good to have friends,” said Tennyson. There was another BOOM as Bom Bette made her way through the bulkhead door.

“That ought to occupy the bomberfolk for a minute or two, but maybe we’d best be moseying on,” said Kent.

“Just a second,” said Nicholas. “Clara, aren’t those kay twenty-two’s?”

“Yeah, they might be useful. And there’re some ice bomblets under the pile over there.”

“Everybody grab two or three of these,” said Nicholas, pointing towards the green bumpy baseballs, “and anything else you recognize. Things are getting hairier. I’m going to leave a gift for anyone who follows us.” From the bottom of the pile he dragged an oblong box with six rows of blue buttons on its face. “Brian, you remember the code for these?”

“Yeah, sure, you just enter a time delay in seconds in binary, and then an arming code, usually zero one zero zero one one. How long do you want?”

“Give us two minutes.”

“Hundred and twenty, well, how about one twenty eight? That’s easy in binary.” The buttons turned red when pressed, and started to flash in unison when the final code was entered. “That’s it, we’d better go.”

“Nicholas, perhaps you can put that in the pool before it blows,” said Mr. Saturn. “The water will damp it enough to make sure it doesn’t go right through the walls and dump the air in our little tube into vacuum before we have time to get out.”

“Got it!” said Nicholas, tossing the device into the mermaid’s little refuge. “Let’s go!”

Move it!” They ran down the corridor, which after about 10 paces took a sharp left turn and descended noticeably.

“You know, Nicholas,” said Tennyson as they jogged down the tube, “I’m getting pretty hungry. Do you think we could stop for lunch some time?”

“Just a minute (pant), ninety-eight ninety-nine one hundred...” gasped Nicholas as he led them down the slope. “One hundred ten, everybody down!” Nicholas dropped belly-down onto the grating floor, next to Mister Saturn (who was already there and didn’t need to take any special measures). “So what do we do if you were wrong?” said Nicholas.

“Hold your breath,” said Mr. Saturn. There was a crack and a long rumble. The walls of the tube shook. The lights went out.

“Lamps on,” said Nicholas, pulling his off his belt. “I think we’re safe from that side for a while. Everybody okay?”

“I’m winded,” panted Kent. “I’m not in the shape you guys are. Can we rest for a minute?”

“Clara, hear anything?” asked Nicholas. Clara laid her head onto the solid metal wall and exhaled. The others were silent for a long minute.

“There’s some kind of thumping but it doesn’t sound like pursuit,” said Clara, drawing a breath. “I think it’s ahead of us. What did that little bomb say to you?”

“She said there were security robots at the end,” replied Nicholas.

“Not exactly,” said Brian. “She said not to bother the security robots.”

“Hmmm. You’re right. I wonder what the heck that means.”

“I don’t know but it sounds good to me,” said Tennyson. “I’ve done enough bothering lately to last me. Live and let live, that’s my new motto.”

“Kent, you rested up?” asked Nicholas. The older boy nodded. “Okay, let’s roll. I’m point, with Clara; Kent and Saturn in the middle; Tennyson, you’re the nice guy, you get rear guard.”

The kids got to their feet. Clara visibly hesitated as she walked past Cane, then stopped and said “Nice shooting, Cane. Thanks.”

“About time you recognized me for the marksman I am!” he replied. “Bring ‘em on! Grenades, greybeards, grandchildren -- I can handle it!”

“Son,” said Mr. Saturn, “she’s trying to learn to be gracious. You can help. Your line is ‘thank you, Clara’.”

“Oh. Right. I knew that. Thank you , Clara!” By this time she had passed to the front with Nicholas.

“Quiet!” whispered Nicholas. “I want to be able to hear. Let’s go.” He started down the hall. Clara turned and mouthed, YOU’RE WELCOME.

“I know that song,” said Cane, half to himself. “It’s Holic!” The group had just passed back into a powered region of the tube and had stopped for moment to allow their eyes to adapt to the mercilessly bright lighting. The thumping was now clearly audible to everyone.

“What do you mean by that?” said Nicholas.

“No--he’s right,” said Saturn. “That’s Holic, all right.”

“Yeah, it’s one of my favorites,” said Cane. “I got a hundred twenty-two combo on that one.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Clara. Cane was suddenly silent.

“It’s DDR!” said Tennyson. “You’ve been dancing, Cane! You never told us. Have you done Paranoia Rebirth? I can’t even get through half of it!”

“Cane dancing!” said Clara, chuckling at the thought.

“What’s so funny about that?” said Cane. “Besides, all the teenagers do it! I mean, lots of guys at the arcade do DDR.”

“I didn’t know you guys did Dance Dance Revolution?” said Kent.

“I didn’t know he did either,” said Brian. “Why didn’t you tell us? Could you show me how to do La Senorita?”

“Oh, are you allowed to play?” asked Kent. “We would get into big trouble if we got caught. I’ve only gone a couple of times. I did with Baby Gimme Your Love with Amy Lou

once.” His eyes grew distant. “She’s so cute.”

“Hmm,” said Nicholas. “Do you think that’s what Bom Bette meant? Well, I can see now. No where to go but forward. Come on.”

A few more steps ahead the tube corridor terminated in a partly-open pressure bulkhead door. Nicholas and Clara slid the door silently ajar. Beyond was an ordinary straight-walled corridor, gently curving to the left, the right wall broken by conventional pneumatic doors at intervals. The thumping grew louder as they proceeded; soon the music itself was readily audible. As they advanced, an oversized door was revealed on the left wall, casting brilliant yellow light into the corridor and spilling music into the air. Nicholas waved the group into cover behind a ventilation control panel and silently slid to where he could poke his head around the edge of the opening.

A curious sight met his eyes. Two huge security robots, each at least twice as tall as an adult and armed with laser cannon built into both arms where their hands ought to be, were jumping and thumping in unison as they stared at a glowing, pulsating display screen. In the remainder of the room were a number of portable benches and tables which had been pushed up against a wall to make room for the dancers, and a weapons rack and control panel at the back. From where he stood, Nicholas couldn’t see their feet, but it didn’t take much to guess that they were on top of a dance pad. Even though he had suspected something of the sort, the mechanical *pas de deux* was so bizarre and incongruous that he passed an unintended minute watching them, until he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“What’s going on?” whispered Clara in his ear.

“See for yourself,” said Nicholas. Clara couldn’t repress a smile as she took in the scene. She noticed a screen on the control panel depicted a human or humanoid face, apparently screaming in anger, though no sound could be heard over the racket. Nicholas, his attention restored, signaled to the others. One by one they carefully made their way by the open door, but the caution was unnecessary, as the attention of the robots seemed quite consumed by the mechanical ballet.

“Well, that worked out rather well,” Mr. Saturn said quietly once they were out of earshot.

“What?” asked Tennyson. “Don’t tell me you had something to do with that.”

“Just another backup plan. It was actually Crystal’s idea. I paid Jak and Daxter to smuggle a bunch of PS2’s in.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Tennyson. “In the airport. But I thought they had X-boxes.”

“That was later,” replied Saturn. “And more expensive. They raised their rates after the Tasmanian devil chambermaid episode.”

“Say what?” said Tennyson.

“Keep it down,” said Nicholas, turning back towards Tennyson. Then he stopped. “Hey--wait a minute. Where’s Cane?”

They looked around. Indeed, no Cane. Clara’s eye’s met Nicholas’. “You don’t suppose--” she whispered.

“Probably,” replied Nicholas. “I can’t believe this. Now what? We can’t just leave him behind. We’re already down one. We have to look after each other.”

“But we’ve got to go!” said Clara. “This is taking too long already.”

“Come on, Clara, where would you have been if he hadn’t had that cheat code?” said Tennyson.

Clara sighed. “You’re right. We’ve got to get him out. But how?”

“I’ll go get him,” said Tennyson.

Nicholas rolled his eyes but nodded. “Okay, go. Everybody else stay here and stay quiet.”

The minutes passed. Clara was getting very impatient and Nicholas was growing apprehensive. Finally, Cane came stomping breezily down the middle of the hall, followed by Tennyson.

“What took you so long?” said Clara.

“Cane had a two hundred combo going in the middle of Perfect Free!” said Tennyson. “It was amazing. But then he lost it when the robots started clapping. He got a ‘good’ and it was over. Oh, well.”

“Hey, you didn’t tell them how I figured out the three-step DDR Max. Those robots are so dumb! They couldn’t even work out the turnaround step without falling over.”

“Doesn’t that take too much time?” asked Brian.

“The whole things takes too much time!” said Nicholas. “Let’s go.”

“Maybe you made a mistake not sticking with the Whirlindas,” said Mister Saturn.

“Yeah, I coulda’ been a star -- wait a minute, they were insane! I had to dress up and crazy stuff like that. What are you talking about?”

“Just helping you follow your dream,” said Mr. Saturn.

“You got somebody to produce the Stupid Ghost Show? That’s great! Where do I sign?”

Back in the guard chamber, K211 “Beast Basher” 52 stomped both feet triumphantly on the front and back panels to the final chord of *Drop the Bomb!* “Death to Spies” 9E applauded by stomping on the already-dented floor panels, adding another few centimeters of distortion. “Whoah, that was great! Way to go, Beast-O!”

“The little guy was right, I just needed to turn my heels,” replied Basher. “Phew, time for a break.”

“Hmm. Weren’t we supposed to be looking out for some kinda’ human like that?” said Spies.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right. That must be it! They musta been sending us a dance teacher, we were supposed ta be waiting for him.”

“Oh, yup, yup. Good one, too. They sure know how ta look after a fella. That’s why they’re the big bosses.”

“They sure are! Wanna’ try Holic again, now that we know how to do the spin and twist?”

“So what is this stuff?” asked Kent. He and Tennyson were seated a bit apart from the others. The cluster of fake-wood picnic tables nicely complemented the unconvincing plastic grass and painted blue sky of the Reserved Birthday Party room, located just to the left of the entrance to the Robotnikolodeon MiniMultiplex.

“It’s called pizza,” replied Tennyson. “Just a sort of baked bread with cheese and sauce. You just pick up a slice and eat it, like this.” He proceeded to demonstrate the art of consuming a

slice with minimal floor loss. “You guys have cheese, don’t you?”

“Mmmm (munch munch), this is great! Yeah, we eat cheese sometimes, but never this way. What are these other things?”

“Ummm -- that’s some sort of pepperoni. That’s a kind of sausage.”

“This is really good!” Kent gulped down the remainder of the crust and munched thoughtfully for a moment. “We miss so much stuff. Being simulation people, I mean.” He sighed. “I used to pretend that I ran away to fight in Super Smash Brothers. I thought it would be cool to be a warrior and just blow my rivals away! Pow! Blam! That’s why I came with you guys -- I thought I’d get to do all the stuff we’re not supposed to, and maybe I’d even shoot somebody, and everyone would be impressed when I got back. Of course, by now I’m not so sure about all this warrior stuff.” He picked up another slice of pizza -- Tennyson had to show him how to separate the stringy cheese. “I thought at first it was just that I didn’t have the right training, like when you took out those guard robots -- I figured maybe I could do that if I got to practice with guns instead of just learning hydroponics. But then -- those Receiving guys -- I can’t imagine ever being able to slice folks up like that and go right onto the next task like stepping on a bug. I’m not tough like you are. I guess I’m a coward. Maybe I should go back. You don’t need me any more.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” said Tennyson. “First of all, there’s Clara and then there’s everybody else. Clara really is tough. She’s tougher than any grownup I ever met -- except her dad, of course. And she’s just like him. The rest of us are just kids.”

“Yeah, right,” said Kent. “Did you see yourself charging into the tube against that mermaid lady? I mean, bombs and ray blasts are flying, and then the other bombers are jumping out of that damn monorail car, and Saturn says, ‘Kent, we better go’ like we were late for supper! I thought I was gonna wet my pants, I was so scared. And you were just flattened up against the tube wall calmly blasting thermal detonators like they were water balloons! And then Nicholas runs straight down the hall at her, I thought he’d lost his marbles, and she’s blown up, and you guys just waltz down the hall and steal her bombs. This stuff does not happen in the agricultural torus. So don’t tell me you’re just a bunch of kids.”

“Well, I guess we have changed a bit, haven’t we?” Tennyson took a long thoughtful sip of Moon Mountain Merlot from a plastic cup. “Like drinking wine! I’m not allowed to do this at home, not ‘till I’m twenty-one. That’s ten more years! But really, Kent -- our home is in front of us, not behind. We don’t have any choice. We have to go on or we’ll never get home.”

“California, right? You made it sound so cool. I wanted to see all that stuff. Mountains. Rivers. Wild trees. Wild animals! Wow. I thought it would be easy. I could just tag along with you guys. I thought that was what I wanted, too, just like you, to go to California. But right

now a boring life in Pear Town seems really attractive.”

“You can go back if you want. You’ve already done way more than anyone expected. We didn’t mean for you to risk your neck for us! At least, I didn’t.”

“Aren’t you listening? I wasn’t doing it for you, I was doing it for me. Honestly, if I’d known how dangerous it’s gotten here in seven I never would have come. But now that I’m here I might as well show you the passage. I don’t suppose there’s anything too dangerous in the restroom! Besides it’s kindof hard to describe how to open up the panel -- it’s easier to show you.”

“Well, suit yourself. I feel a lot better having you with us. I think everyone feels that way. But you do what’s best. You wanna try some onion and bell pepper?”

At the other table, Clara was seated so that she could watch the door, eating with her left hand while maintaining a clear line of fire for the beamer in her right. She ignored the dubious table manners of the boys and asked Wendy: “So what happened to the bounty hunting?”

“Oh, smuggling pays better and it’s more fun,” said Wendy, sipping her glass of merlot. “And the interplanetary pizza business isn’t bad either.”

“So you just fly right into the station?” said Clara. “Why did we have to fight our way in?”

“Got me. I just responded to a public tender for covert suppliers. The RFQ is posted right on the Ark web site,” said Wendy. “You just go to the Purchasing page and click on ‘ILLCIT VENDOR SERVICES’.”

“RFQ?” asked Clara.

“Oh, sorry, request for quote. That’s where they ask you how much you’ll charge them for something.”

“So you get to go anywhere in the station?”

“Well, really, I’m supposed to just use the peripheral docking station and hand everything off to the internal secured courier service -- but they never show up on time and you know how people are when they’re hungry! After a couple of foulups, they just gave me a contractor’s badge so I could make the deliveries myself.”

“You mean if we had those badges we could just waltz right into the core?” asked Clara.

“I’m not sure,” replied Wendy. “I’ve never been in the core -- just here in torus seven, and some of the exterior stations. For a couple of weeks I was making two runs a day for the cannon maintenance crew. There were a couple of raptors who just loved anchovy and herring guts with sun-dried tomatoes. Did you want the last slice?”

“No, go ahead.” Clara turned to address Mr. Saturn. “What’s the deal, Mister Saturn? Not that I mind since it worked out, but it would have been a lot simpler to sneak into the station, wouldn’t it?”

“Why, Miss Dumont, I’m quite touched that you deign to address a question rather than a veiled or overt insult in my direction,” replied Mr. Saturn. “Ironic, isn’t it, that the latter would probably be justified in this instance. Since my appetite is more occasional than yours, I’ve had some moments to reflect on exactly that topic while you children refreshed your energies here. I’m afraid the fault is entirely mine, in that for reasons of my own, I was reluctant to direct the attention of our colleagues Fox and Crystal to the vendor base as a means of entry.”

“Ah, is that how you got in here?” said Brian. “I’ve been wondering about that.”

“Precisely,” replied Mr. Saturn. “I knew that my connections would be sufficient to ensure my own safe arrival, but that, shall we say, the particular conduit I employed was of inadequate capacity to provide transportation for anyone else. It never occurred to me to that analogous alternatives might be available for the remainder of the party.”

“You’re right, I should have insulted you,” said Clara. “Do you even care how dangerous things are for other people?”

“Do you?” replied Mr. Saturn.

“Enough, enough,” said Nicholas.

“No it isn’t!” said Cane, gulping down a huge glass of punch. “I wanted another slice of pepperoni and mushroom.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Nicholas. “It’s pointless to argue about what’s past. We made it, it doesn’t matter whether maybe there was an easier way. What’s next? We need to find the passage that Kent was talking about, right?”

“Gee, Nicholas, you sound a lot more rational than you did ten minutes ago,” said Erin.

“I’m a lot less hungry than I was ten minutes ago,” replied Nicholas. “Kent!” he called to the neighboring table. “Do we need to get into the movie theater to reach the passage?”

“It looks like,” said the older boy, placing a half-finished slice back in the box as he began to appreciate just how filling the newfangled dish could be. “Were you going to shoot your way in like you usually do?”

“Actually, it seems a lot easier to have tickets,” said Nicholas. “Brian, how’s the money supply?”

“Oh, wait a minute, you don’t need that!” said Erin. “Here, we’ve got lots of tickets!” He reached into his pocket and brought out a sheaf of rumpled cardboard placards. “Let’s see -- oh, yeah, we’ve got more than enough. Wendy and I only need these two.”

“Wendy’s coming with us?” asked Clara.

“Well -- not exactly--” said Erin.

“We’re going to see *Metroid Melodrama*” said Wendy. “I hear it’s great!”

“Erin, we don’t have time to see a movie!” said Clara.

“That’s okay -- you guys can go on ahead,” said Erin, not meeting Clara’s gaze.

“Okay, so you’re staying,” said Nicholas. “I guess Cane was right.”

“I knew it!” said Cane. “About what?”

“Don’t you remember? You were the one who said not to worry about Erin -- you even guessed right about the pizza.” Nicholas put out his hand. “I guess it is time for me to stop worrying about you, Erin. Thanks for the tickets. Good luck.” They shook hands; then Nicholas wiped his mouth on his sleeve and gathered his pack and rifle. “Okay, let’s move. We’re gonna’ try just waltzing into the multiplex, but stay alert: it might not be that easy.”

“Hang on a second,” said Brian. “Erin, did you want your share of the coins first? Remember, Nicholas, we said that if someone didn’t come they could take their part of the money.”

“I don’t know how much he earned!” said Nicholas, remembering his mansion-cleaning adventures.

“No, that’s okay, I’m gonna’ work with Wendy,” said Erin. “You guys are gonna’ need it more than me. Thanks, though. You’d better go.”

“Put ‘er there, bud!” said Cane, presenting a greasy and slightly tomato-sauced right hand.

“Cake and pizza! You sure found a girl with good taste!”

“This is wierd,” said Tennyson. “I want to say keep in touch, but I’m not even sure it makes any sense.” Clara started to speak twice and stopped, then turned away and checked the clips in her 9mm and sniper rifle.

“Encountering someone who listens to my advice is indeed a sobering experience,” said Mr. Saturn. “I shall consider placing myself under a vow of silence.” He turned and waddled towards the multiplex. “Cane, I believe if we hurry we can catch the preview of *Calipers of Fate: The Movie II* on screen four.”

Getting into the multiplex was no problem with the tickets from Erin, but it had turned out to be impossible to tear Cane away from *The Calipers of Fate*. Fortunately the preview was followed by an educational film (*Born of the Inferno: The Story of the Solar Wind*), from which he fled in dismay. Nicholas led the group through the corridor, past a pair of robot security guards carrying bags of ball bearings soaked in machine oil (“Oh, dear, I forgot the graphite! We’ll have to go back to the concession stand.”) and a fellow wearing an ice pack on his head and an IN Security patch on his back, who was trying to put his arm round the waist of his female companion despite her consistent efforts to escape. The men’s, women’s, and androgynous-and-monsters’ rooms were at the end of the corridor by a fire extinguisher and an emergency pressure suit.

“Oh, yeah, great idea!” said Cane. He started towards the men’s room, catching up with Clara, while Nicholas stopped to check the side hallways. “Where are you going?” Cane said as they both reached the door together.

“In the bathroom, duh,” replied Clara.

“The girl’s room is over there!” said Cane, shocked, blocking her way.

“Get a clue, Cane. There’s no passage in the girl’s room.” She paused and turned back to Kent. “Is there?”

“If there is the girls never told us about it,” Kent replied.

“Well -- you can’t go in here!” Cane objected. “Not while I’m peeing!”

“Cane, maybe you should use the girl’s bathroom,” said Mr. Saturn. “Since Erin is no longer with us, the burden of inventing the content of a PBS special on the hidden erotic aspects of female sanitation falls on you.”

“What are you talking about?” said Cane.

“He’s just trying to get rid of you,” said Tennyson, taking Clara’s arm. “Why don’t you go pee and then when you’re done we’ll all go in, okay?” Cane swung through the door and disappeared.

Nicholas returned to the group. “Looks clear. What’s going on? What are you guys doing out here?”

“Waiting for Cane to pee,” said Clara. “I guess he can’t go if anyone’s around.”

“He did have a lot of punch,” said Tennyson. “I think he drank the whole carton.”

“All right, all right, but we’ve wasted too much time here,” said Nicholas. “As soon as he’s done we’ve gotta go.” He paced impatiently outside the door for what seemed like a long time. Finally the door swung again and Cane reappeared -- but just as he did, a wheezing, overweight man dressed in torn army fatigues, carrying what Nicholas’ now-trained eye recognized as a Johnson semi-automatic rifle, limped around the corner from screen six (*In the Heart of Hyrule*, showing at 2:30, 4:15, and 6:45), obviously heading for the restroom. Nicholas pulled the group back and pretended to examine the *coming attractions* posters. “I hope he’s just peeing,” he whispered to Kent.

“I’ll go take a look, I gotta go anyway,” Kent replied. A moment later he reappeared, shaking his head. “He’s in there reading the newspaper!” Kent whispered to the group. “And in the stall we need to get to. This was a lot easier when the place was deserted.”

“Geeze, I can’t believe this,” said Clara. “The one time I need to get into the boy’s bathroom, too! Yuck.”

Just then there was a *click!* and a familiar female voice, amplified to an unpleasant level, overrode the half-heard soundtracks of the nearby screening rooms. “Attention all security personnel. Attention all security personnel. This is Princess Zelda speaking for the Ark Research and Security Educational Committee. Sensor Central report sighting of a fleet of fast-moving craft approaching from the nadir at sixteen thousand kilometers. The station is likely to come under attack shortly. All personnel report to combat posts immediately. This is not a drill. Further instructions will be forthcoming directly. I repeat: all personnel should drop whatever you are doing and report to combat posts immediately.”

A flushing sound could be heard, and the old soldier reappeared, holding his rifle strap in his teeth while he pulled his pants back up. “Better get to yer posts, lads!” he growled to Nicholas as he passed.

“Yes, sir!” said Nicholas. “We’re -- assigned to theater defense. Clara, cover that hallway! Brian, we’ll set the blaster up by the concession stand!”

“Good work, soldier, carry on,” the old man said. He finished cinching his belt, picked up his rifle, took a slow breath, and strode down the corridor, shoulders no longer slumping and the limping gait mostly gone.

“Quick thinking, Nicholas,” whispered Brian, once the soldier was out of sight.

“Thanks.” He checked the corridors -- people and creatures were still hurrying this way and that, but ignoring the kids. “Okay, let’s get into the bathroom -- if that’s okay with you, Cane?”

“Yeah, sure,” Cane replied, pulling his pants. “See? All zipped up.”

Kent led the way in. The restroom had four sinks along the right wall, beneath a wall-covering mirror. Along the left were two urinals and three stalls. Kent led the way towards the farthest stall, which was located against the unpainted steel wall. Clara stopped momentarily staring at the urinals. “What the heck are -- oh, I get it.”

Kent checked under the door to make sure the stalls were empty, and then pushed the door open. “Oh, my Goddess. How did I forget?” He slumped down on the toilet (fortunately the lid was down) and put his head in his hands.

“What’s wrong?” said Nicholas, sticking his head into the stall.

“I completely forgot,” said Kent, pointing to his left, where three rolls of toilet paper stuck out from a large flat brushed-steel plate. At the top center of the plate was a slot within a cylinder. “We need the key! We used to have one but Cyrus lost it. I spaced completely. Now we’re stuck.”

“You lost me,” said Nicholas. “Why do we need to get more toilet paper? Did the soldier use it all up?”

“No, no, the passage is behind this cover. We have to get it open. I can’t believe I forgot. We came this whole way for nothing.”

“Hang on, we’re not exactly unarmed here,” said Nicholas. “Maybe we can blow through the plate somehow. Clara, what did you pick up from the Mermaid bomber’s pile?”

While Clara and Nicholas searched through their packs, Brian squeezed into the stall.

“Where did Cyrus lose the key?” he asked.

“Oh, gosh, he was on his honeymoon. And he couldn’t even tell Emily! So they couldn’t look for it. He tried, later, but it wasn’t any good.”

“Where was the honeymoon?”

“Oh, man, I don’t remember. Gallopers? Galcit? Gallopy? I don’t -- oh, yeah, Goomba Gals. The mini-games park.”

“Really,” said Brian. He rummaged in the bottom of his backpack. “Did it look like this?” He held up the key he and Clara had gotten from the melancholy penguin at the bobsled.

“Holy Harvest Goddess! That sure looks like it!” Kent took the key from Brian and turned towards the wall. “Look at that! it fits.” He twisted his wrist. “Hmmm -- maybe not -- oh, there it goes! Just had to wiggle it a bit. All right!” The panel swung down on a concealed hinge. Behind was a tube barely big enough for the kids to crawl into. It was dimly lit by glowing panels spaced along the top of the passage, and stretched into distant invisibility.

“Great job, Kent!” said Nicholas.

“Don’t thank me, it was Brian who had the key. Where the heck did you get it?”

“At the bottom of the bobsled ride. And it wasn’t me. I think the Penguin gave it to Clara.”

“Penguin?” asked Kent, puzzled.

“You kept that thing?” said Clara. “I thought we threw it over the rail after Mr. Luigi didn’t need it.”

“Well, that’s great, whoever did it,” said Nicholas. “Kent, what’s at the other end?”

“The tube comes out in a huge heat exchanger of some sort. Pipes all over the place. We used to be able to wander around some, but since the security forces moved in a couple of years back we’ve kinda been limited to a coupla rooms near the exit. So I’ve never been very far in. Oh, and the pipe goes to zero G a little way in -- but you guys seem to be okay with that.”

“Yeah, we can handle ourselves okay without gravity. And we’ve got the map. Thanks for everything!” Nicholas shook his hand. “You can just close the panel after us and head back home.”

“You sure you’ll be okay?”

“Well, not completely,” chuckled Nicholas. “But so far we’ve been able to get by. Okay, I’ll take point, Clara with me. Tennyson, Cane, Er-- oh, yeah. Tennyson, help Mister Saturn. Brian, can you handle rearguard? Great, in we go.” It was awkward to get into the tube - like climbing up a tube slide at the park while wearing a backpack and carrying a rifle-- but with a good shove in the behind from Clara he managed to get started. The others followed as Nicholas pushed and struggled the first few steps -- then he felt the twisting sensation at the edge of the artificial gravity field, and found himself floating. After that movement in the tube was much easier.

Brian stopped to shake Kent’s hand, and then struggled into the tube with Kent’s aid. “Good luck,” said Kent. He reached down to grab the panel edge, when there was the *boooooom* of a distant explosion, followed by the faint whooshing sound that a denizen of a spacecraft never wants to hear. Shouts and cries could be heard from outside the door. Another more distant explosion followed. Then a louder *C RASH*, and Kent saw smoke leaking in under the bathroom door.

“California, here I come,” he said to himself. He stood on the toilet and squeezed into the tube feet first. *How am I going to turn around in the tube?* he wondered as he reached down to grab the panel and snug it into place. He twisted the locking handle and felt the detents snap into place. *I sure hope it’s pressure-tight.* He pushed himself backwards along the tube until he reached the zero-G stretch, where he was able to get spun around.

“Kent, you back there?” he heard Brian call.

“Yeah! I figured you guys are gonna need me after all. That, and I left my pressure suit back at the water treatment center.”

“Okay, well it’s good to have you.” Brian’s voice became fainter; presumably he had turned back up the tube. “Kent is coming after all. And he thinks there was a seal breach back in seven. If they don’t get it closed up we couldn’t go back anyway!”

“Good to have you!” he heard Tennyson’s voice call. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s go!”

“Okay, let’s roll!” Nicholas’ voice rang back through the tube.

“So, Mister Saturn,” said Tennyson, as he pulled himself hand-over-hand along the ladder rungs set into one face of the tube wall, “should we even bother? I mean, if the station is already under attack we’ll never get to the core on time.”

“What makes you think the attack has begun?”

“Didn’t Brian say the seal in torus seven was breached?”

“The attacking force didn’t travel sixteen thousand kilometers in the five minutes between the announcement and the explosion, Tennyson. They have to slow down to match velocities with the station if they’re going to have an attack that lasts more than a few milliseconds. You remember what Max told us, don’t you? It’s unlikely he was the only bomberman to whom such an offer was made. That explosion was local sabotage coordinated with the external attack. They’re trying to interfere with the ability of the security forces to reinforce perimeter defenses.”

“But won’t they do the same thing in the core?”

“Not very likely, since that’s what the attacking force is presumably trying to secure. No point in destroying your target until you’re sure you can’t take it. You kids need to get there before that happens.”

“Quiet down back there, I’m coming up to the end!” they heard Nicholas whisper, weirdly distorted by propagation down the tube.

About 20 meters from the other end of the tube was a second gravity transition. Nicholas, not knowing what was down, ended up flat on his back as he went through. With his bad example to guide them, the others were able to orient themselves more sensibly. Within a minute the group was collected at the exit end. There wasn’t room for Kent to squeeze up to the front, but the control panel at the exit was clearly labeled, and (for once) included a sensor panel and display screen, so that Nicholas and Clara could verify that the area around the port was deserted before they opened it. “I’ll cross to the left as I exit, Clara right, alternate as we go, so we have a crossfire if needed,” whispered Nicholas. “Kent and Saturn remain in the tube until we’re sure there’s no defense.”

“Nicholas, I suspect this level of precaution isn’t really needed,” said Mr. Saturn. “I can pop out quite readily through the passthru tube and check things out if you’re concerned.”

“The what?” asked Nicholas.

“Passthru tube. The entry chamber is just to the left of the control panel.”

“Oh, yeah. Is that what that is?”

“It’s a miniature airlock to enable you to pass small items in and out of the tube in the event of a pressure integrity breach, so repair crews can work without having to constantly

evacuate the service tube or wear pressure suits inside of it. Way too small for you but just big enough for me, if you would be so kind as to cycle the doors.”

“Well, that sounds good if you’re willing,” Nicholas replied. “Oh, yeah, here’s the menu, I didn’t even think to look at it. Internal, external door, pressurize -- looks easy enough. Here, lemme’ open up the lock.”

There was a pneumatic hissing sound, and an opening appeared next to Nicholas’ left leg. Mister Saturn waddled into the little antechamber, which was a tight fit even for a small creature. “Okay, shut me in,” said his muffled voice. Nicholas complied, and after a moment pressed the OPEN EXTERIOR DOOR selection. *PSSST! flop flip flop flip.*

“Why don’t you bring up the display again so we can see what happens?” said Clara.

“Oh, yeah, good idea,” said Nicholas. He moved the little joystick and pressed the select button; most of the panel monitor was replaced with a camera view of the pipe-filled heat exchange room. The exit of the maintenance tube they were in was slightly out of the field of view, but in a moment the familiar figure of Mister Saturn waddled onto the screen. He seemed to check around briefly, then started to walk towards the opposite end of the room. Halfway to the first rack of pipes he stopped and turned until he was staring directly into the camera. He mouthed something to the camera and then made a curious gesture with his nose: the screen went black.

“What was that?” Nicholas wondered aloud. “Did somebody attack? Was he saying it was okay? What’s going on?”

“Play it back,” said Brian. “See, there’s a menu item over there.”

“Oh, yeah, there is,” said Nicholas. The system worked more or less like a typical video recorded; they were able to rewind to where Saturn appeared and watch the scene again until it turned dark.

“One more time -- slow it down,” said Brian. Clara made room so he could squeeze his head close to the screen. “Yep, that’s it. *So long, and thanks for all the fish.*”

“What the heck does that mean?” said Nicholas.

“It’s from *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*,” replied Brian. “It’s what the dolphins say to the humans when they’re leaving, just before the earth gets destroyed to make way for a hyperspace bypass. Or something like that, I read it a long time ago.”

“I still don’t get it,” said Nicholas.

“We’ve served our purpose and now he’s dumping us,” said Tennyson. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Seems likely,” said Brian. “I guess we were just like those lane marking bumps and he’s the driver. And I thought it was Fox you had to worry about.”

“I don’t like this either, but let’s not jump to conclusions,” said Nicholas. “We’re no worse off than we were. We’ve always known less about what’s going on than maybe we’d like, but somehow we’ve always made it through. But we have to assume that our cover is blown. No more sneaking around; it’s time to burn up or blow up anything that gets in our way. Kent, you can go back if you want.”

“Nicholas, I don’t know if there’s any way for me to go back. Guess I’m going to California!”

Nicholas picked up his 9 mm pistol and pulled the beamsword from his belt. “Hopefully, so are we. Clara, you ready? Brian, open the door.”
