

# *Enter the Cube*

*by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin  
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## **Chapter 19: Hint - It Rhymes with Orange**

“Don’t panic, don’t panic, and did I mention -- *DON’T PANIC!*” shouted Sturm, pounding on the table to emphasize each word. Sweat dripped from his brow below the black military beret. The medals on his rumpled uniform jingled with each blow. “We can obliterate this motley mock militia if we just stay calm! What say you, James, have you enough ships and pilots?”

“We have fewer ships than the attacking force, if sensor readings are to be believed,” replied McCloud. “If these are Bowser’s ships as our intelligence suggests, our folks are more than a match for them one-on-one, but it’s too late to construct a defense in depth. We’ll take a toll of the attacking force, but we can’t engage every ship. Some will get through. We still need the station’s perimeter defenses, and we’ll likely need internal security forces as well.”

“Considering the extensive effort this Committee has devoted to procuring every variety of internal security personnel over recent months, in every case on the assurance of members of this body that their personal forces’ presence was indispensable to ensure the integrity of the station against attack, I expect that we are adequately staffed and resourced to resist invasion,” Princess Peach, staring at Zelda pointedly.

“That just might be the case, Princess, if they remember who to attack,” said Lance. “Those Hy-falutin-rulians you stuck next to my trainers seem more interested in givin’ us their opinions of our clothes and personal habits than doing their jobs. Look at the segment vulnerability review report and tell me how many items they got checked off since last month.”

“Frivolously divisive remarks make no contribution to our defense,” Zelda replied heatedly. “If you can’t keep to the point I shall ask you to leave.”

“Really?” Lance replied. “Just who gave you the right to kick me outta’ the meeting?”

“I am the elected Chair of the Committee!” Zelda shouted, eyes blazing. “I will not have my authority questioned, surely not at this juncture!”

“Friends and colleagues, let us remain calm and thoughtful,” said Kalmar, turning up his radiance in an attempt to gain the attention of the group. “We have not discussed negotiations. Perhaps these invaders can be reasoned with.”

“Reasoned with my arse!” shouted Sturm. “You don’t need to bring a flotilla of X-wings to a palaver. They’re here for our hides!”

“Succinctly stated,” said McCloud. “You all know the unfortunate political history of this committee. With all due respect to our Star Spirit colleague, the back-room deals that the instigators of this work chose to make from the very beginning have poisoned the atmosphere with suspicion and mistrust. We are far past the point where good-faith negotiations might have been possible.”

“What about a battle of champions?” asked Wes, stroking the fur of the baby Umbreon that lay curled on the floor next to him. “That’s part of our culture. Fun to watch, too. Capture the popular imagination a lot more effectively than a boring press conference with fake statements of mutual admiration.”

“Whom do you propose to advance as champion?” said Altaira, turning her video-masked countenance down the table at Wes. “Yourself, I suppose? Backed by all the destructive power of your preposterous Pokeball pets?” She turned her facemask back towards Zelda at the head of the table. “If the Committee had funded my work adequately from the beginning we would have a sufficient stock of explosive resources to demolish this pathetic invading force without resorting to such laughable primitives.”

“As I recall, the previous quarterly report showed that your factories have cost three times the original estimate and turned out in six months less than a quarter of the munitions you promised us in three,” said Peach. “Your vaunted private-sector managers appear to devote far more effort to inept attempts to regain their former commercial status than to fulfilling their obligations under the contract. In any case, what is in the past is done with. Our present concern must be to ensure that the future of the game worlds, the key to which, I should not need to remind you, sits two and three-fifths kilometers below us, remains subject to a collective, just, and open decision process. I must say I have had the gravest difficulties persuading this Committee to pursue openness to even the modest extent it has done. I should have little hope for any progress in that direction should our adversaries take control.”

“And the fact that the field commander on the other side just happens to have taken you hostage in the past doesn’t play any role in your recommendations, right?” asked Lance.

“Exactly,” said Peach. “I am prepared to overlook past transgressions. Bowser’s boorish behavior and unsubtle acquisitiveness are also, as your friend says, a part of our culture, if a regrettable one.”

The door at the side corridor hissed open. A reptilian/humanoid Lizalfos wearing a red cape shuffled in, bowed to the Hyrulian guard, and walked awkwardly towards the head of the table.

“What is it now?” asked Zelda, irritably. “I told you we are not to be disturbed unless enemy forces are determined to have landed.”

“Your Highness, another patrol, this one of dodongos, is missing and presumed destroyed. There’s also been a penetration of our network firewall, with a successful denial-of-service attack taking out most of our sensors and cameras in annuli five through eight. Our information services Poes are certain that this must have been done from a local access terminal. Combined with the reports I mentioned previously from our robotic security perimeter--”

“Those DDR-addicted idiots!” interrupted Zelda. “Stop wasting my time with their preposterous blather. I haven’t time for Ghastly’s transparent attempts to blame his incompetence on non-existent hackers, either. Get out of my sight!”

“Hold on, there, Lizz ol’ buddy,” interjected Lance. He turned to Zelda. “I suppose you’re also still pitching the story that the explosion in torus seven was an industrial accident? Seems to me you’re awful danged eager to ignore any evidence that might suggest that your approach wasn’t quite so perfect a coupla days back. Ladies and gentlemen of the Committee, I submit to you that we are already under attack by internal commando forces, moving swiftly and silently towards the heart of the Re-creation Center, commandos who entered the station under the very noses of our perimeter security forces while our ships were grounded and our guns focused on that obvious feint three days ago, whose supposed defeat was the basis of our self-proclaimed Very Important Princess’ rise to power in this body. It is time to face the facts! It is time to turn our forces loose to locate and destroy these invaders who are the real danger to everything we’ve achieved, rather than being distracted by still another fake assault! It is time to find real leadership for this Committee and this station, before we run out of time! What say you?” He looked around the table for support. “Blatthers, everyone knows you’ve got no axe to

grind. Speak up!”

The old owl stirred suddenly. “I say, I say, hoot! It is time indeed to, hoot, flush out all those, hoot, old coolant lines if they’re rusting, indeed! Preventive maintenance is the key to a productive facility, hoot hoot!”

“Blatthers,” sighed McCloud, “that was two hours ago. You’ve been asleep again, old bird.”

“Asleep, hoot hoot? I should say not. Reflecting, yes, pondering. Deep matters, indeed, hoot hoot. Wisdom don’t come easily, youngster. Thinking, that’s the ticket! Hoot hoot.”

“I should say, rather, that there isn’t time to revisit the choice of leadership with which we are, shall we say, saddled,” said Peach. “However, I share Lance’s concerns -- the various evidences of a breach of security, taken together, are disturbing enough to warrant investigation. I shall task my Minister to look into the affair, if the Chair will be so kind as to provide Mr. Lizzaloff’s cooperation in this endeavor?”

“Yes, yes, go ahead,” said Zelda. Peach tapped the engraved gold brooch on her shoulder and spoke quietly while Zelda dismissed the simian to convene with her rival Princess.

A box sitting on the table in front of McCloud went *ping ping ping*. He flipped it open and stared for a moment. “Madame Chair, the attacking force has penetrated inside our five-thousand-kilometer perimeter and has nearly matched orbital velocities. There is no longer any realistic question of their intentions. My ships must launch now.”

“Can we proceed with the obviously necessary defensive measures?” said Zelda, exasperated. The occupants of the remaining seats at the long table nodded their reluctant assent, save for Blatthers, whose deep reflection was punctuated by periodic loud snores. “Mister McCloud, your reputation precedes you. Launch and rest assured that we shall be mobilized behind you. Commanders to their sectors! Perimeter defense according to plan seventeen, as we agreed yesterday. Reports to be directed to me at the navigation helm, to whence I shall proceed immediately. I declare this meeting adjourned!” Zelda slapped a control set into the table in front of her; four additional doors rumbled ajar, and the occupants made their way out save for Altaira and Zelda’s confidant, Impa, who had been stationed throughout the debate at the wall to the right of her mistress.

When the members had gone, Zelda dismissed the guards, and then shut the doors. She

signaled to Impa, who removed what looked like a tiny shadow medallion copy from her blouse and tapped it twice. A new opening in the wall appeared where there had been no evidence of any penetration, glimmering as if seen through a fog. Out stepped a chubby figure in suspenders and a colorful hat. The door vanished as quickly as it had come.

“It’s a so good to see you, Your Highness, you’re a looking more a beautiful than a always!” said Luigi, attempting to kiss the Princess.

“Shall we defer your inept attempts at seduction to another time?” replied Zelda, adroitly avoiding him. “We have a deal to complete and I must reach the control room before anyone grows suspicious. Where’s the money?”

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Saturn switched the security monitor off with a tweak of his nose. “Luigi!” he chuckled to himself. “Well, things seem to be going about as expected.” He spun around on the absurdly oversized rolling chair. At the other station, a brilliantly glowing Star Spirit bobbed gently up and down as if on a lake. Saturn glanced at the six flat-panel monitors that surrounded his companion and then stared more fixedly. “Maybe I spoke too soon. Just exactly what are you doing, Skolar?”

“As I recall, your background is in sanitation engineering, Saturn,” the Star Spirit replied without looking away from the screens. “I doubt if I could explain in a useful time.”

“You’re right, I know a lot about dealing with crap,” Saturn replied. “And that’s in addition to what I learned in school. Did I tell you that the colony sewage and air return have the same location nomenclature as the defensive systems?”

“Whatever are you bringing up sanitation maps for?” asked Skolar.

“Just to deduce that in allocating shield power to segments thirteen, seventeen, twenty-one and twenty-nine as I see you’ve done, you’re strengthening the defense at exactly the points where the assault forces are supposed to land. It’ll be an entertaining slaughter if you’re into that sort of thing. And I notice that you’ve dephased generators fourteen b and seventy one, which ought to open up a wonderful cancellation hole right above the nav helm, where most of the committee members will be shortly. You’re betraying everyone at once. I guess I can’t fault you for lack of ambition.”

“What a little hypocrite it is,” replied Skolar. “Overlooking for the sake of argument the fact that I can destroy you effortlessly with a star storm, explain to me if you would how my actions differ from yours?”

Saturn chuckled again. “You can’t blast me without destroying the memory card,” he said, glancing at the little plastic box protruding from the panel next to him. “Blocks one through two hundred seventy four of which, need I remind you, contains the little software hack that keeps our activities, not to mention our presence here, secret. Just for the record, hadn’t you agreed, in exchange for sizable bribes, to give Zelda one of the three spots on the new triumvirate after you disabled the station defenses for Bowser’s ships? I hardly think arranging for her to be blown up is in the spirit of the agreement.”

“I would never allow such a provincial, second-rate mind to have a place in defining the new gameworld order,” said Skolar, attempting to slide sideways to where he could obtain a clear shot at Saturn without hitting the control panel, while Mr. Saturn’s chair effortlessly repositioned itself so as to thwart such ambitions. “She is even worse than those idiots Gadd and Ein. Only Star Spirits will sit on the panel.”

“And only right-thinking Star Spirits, I imagine,” replied Saturn. “That’s okay, I always assumed that big-nosed psychokinetic midgets need not apply.”

“Very well put,” said Skolar. “I found it regrettable to be forced to depend on such loathsome creatures as you, though you must be commended for an appearance so commensurate with your disgusting character. I have already given some thought to the elimination of you and your ilk from the past as well as the present and future.”

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” said Mr. Saturn. “It’s been real, or as real as it gets around here, but, given the circumstances, I gotta’ go.” The memory card popped out of the interface and zipped into Mr. Saturn’s pocket. Skolar immediately swelled to an intolerable brilliance, loosing a lightning blast that reduced the monitor station to a smoking, solidifying blob. His wrath for the moment appeased, the Star Spirit noticed the unsettling fact that nothing appeared to remain of the erstwhile target of his outburst, not even a stain on the partially-liquified chair. He was unable to pursue the mystery further, as the bottom left monitor on his own station was now blinking insistently with urgent dialog boxes, to the accompaniment of four distinct audible alarms.

Princess Zelda strode through the level four entry to the main control room, located inside its own cylindrical pressure vessel about five hundred meters above Saturn’s flight, trailed by

Impa and two Hyrulian security guards awkwardly manhandling their blasters through the doorway, and made her way immediately to the Supervisory Platform. Seven floors of monitors, workstations, and analysis tools covered the inner walls; the hovering command hub occupied the open axial shaft through the center, providing ready access to any part of the room. The Officer of the Deck, a former Storm Trooper named Cromwell who had risen through the ranks rapidly during the two weeks in which Lord Vader had undergone treatment for an inflamed prostate and then retired to the private sector before his own neck became a target for the Jedi's irritable attention, bowed and ceded the Command chair. The platform rose silently to the default station above level six as the Princess swept past him into the seat. However, Zelda had barely finished ordering her gown to lay properly under the armrests when three URGENT signals flashed on her private panel. She pressed the reply button and reviewed the holographic alarm display that appeared at eye level.

*- -SECURITY EVENT: Corridor and interior sensor networks recovered - -*

*- -INTRUDER ALERT:-- reporting workstation AIM6-r*

*LOCATION: 3c 42L*

*TYPE: backup control center*

*REMARKS: within firewall; security alert issued*

*REMARKS: corrupted controls database*

*REMARKS: intervention in progress*

The Princess guided the cursor of her display with the controller joystick and pressed the A button, wishing momentarily that it was the FIRE button. "This is Zelda. I have no time to wade through your gibberish. What is going on?"

An inset image of a ghostly former human appeared in the corner of the holograph. "Oh, your Highness, with the recovery of the sensor networks, we've discovered that someone has invaded the backup control center. Since that's behind our firewall they were able to get access to the controls database and could have made changes in our resource allocations for defensive screens, weapons, air supplies, and so on. We are running a consistency check between our controls input records and the current database state to look for violations."

"I thought I mentioned that jargon is unhelpful at this time. Is the intruder still present?"

"Present? Oh, you mean physically. I didn't look. That's not my Department, you know. You'll have to contact Zone Security."

The Princess smacked her hand to shut off the connection and growled. "Cromwell, get

me a security view of that room!”

“Coming right up, your Highness,” the Deck Officer replied. In a moment a distorted view of the long narrow chamber flashed in front of her. The panel on the left side was still smoking; at the opposite station, a light flashed on, and the Star Spirit floating there turned to face the camera.

“What possible purpose could you have in surveying my activities in this intrusive fashion?” said the Star Spirit. “You shan’t be able to discover or reverse my changes. Could you be pondering an attack on a Star Spirit? Unthinkable. Mere voyeurism, perhaps?”

Zelda pressed the TALK button so hard she hurt her finger. “What in the name of Gannon are you doing here? You were supposed to be at the Havens to give the destruct signal for those idiot guardsmen.”

“Ah, Zelda,” replied Skolar. “Unfortunately, I inadvertently destroyed my access to the camera systems while ridding myself of that rascal Saturn, but I see from my status summary that you are at the vulnerable center of things. Didn’t I tell you to beware excessive ambition? The follies of youth.”

“Your arrogance continues to astound me,” replied Zelda. “Be assured I have taken measured to deal with every danger, including betrayal!”

At that moment the east entry of level six burst open -- literally, as the door was flung aside by a massive explosion -- and through the smoke rushed Sturm leading a platoon of mechanized heavy infantrymen. “So have I, Queen of Betrayal, so have I!” he shouted, pointing a grenade launcher at the platform.

Zelda stood to face him, gesturing with her right hand while surreptitiously signaling to Cromwell with her left. “How dare you! We have agreed that all armed forces are strictly forbidden in the control center! Get to your stations! Adhere to the plan!”

“It’s also strictly forbidden to connive with our enemies to attack the station, especially when you’ve made sure to place all your rivals’ forces to bear the brunt o’ the assault,” retorted Sturm. “To the devil with your Plan seventeen. To the devil with you!”

He launched the explosive missile just as Zelda said, “NOW!” Cromwell pressed a button and the command platform, surrounded instantly by a protective silvery cocoon, fled to

level one; the grenade bounced ineffectually off the top of the shield and exploded, destroying the torus six restroom status panel.

“Shall I block the shaft once we leave?” asked Cromwell.

“No need of that,” replied Zelda. The screen flickered away, and Zelda leapt from the platform, rushing past panicky Goombas, Paratroopas, and people, to a large stretch of apparently blank steel wall at the back of the room, where Impa waited impassively, holding the miniature medallion at her side. Impa mumbled an incantation, and the center of the wall dissolved to reveal a surging viscous mass that looked like the spirit of a tsunami. Morpha’s indistinct head seemed to swirl towards Zelda. A voice like a storm-tossed surf roared:

“What is your will, human?”

“Kill them,” said Zelda, gesturing upwards. The heads of soldiers could be seen leaning over the shaft guardrails five levels above. “Kill them all.”

“I go to wreak the vengeance of the sea,” it roared.

As the watery monstrosity swirled and surged upwards, Zelda took a card from her blouse and pressed it into a tiny slot next to a control panel. A previously invisible door appeared. Behind it a troupe of guardsmen were snapping to attention. Breakers crashed within the Morpha as it squeezed itself through the axial shaft and headed to the next level. Zelda signaled for Impa and Cromwell to follow her and headed towards the mysterious exit. Before she could reach the threshold, Princess Peach’s voice rang out from above: “Madame Chair, didn’t we agree that no personal troops were allowed in proximity to the control room?” Peach leapt easily through the opening. She was dressed in a frilled pant suit, and armed with a deep purple beam sword in her right hand and an automatic pistol in her left. Cromwell snapped off a blaster bolt that she easily deflected with the beam sword, and she returned fire as she dropped, forcing him to retreat behind the Freedom Commodities Options Market Realtime Pricing Display (futures contracts on compulsory garbage recycling fee collectors were falling). After her a flight of armed Koopa Paratroopas poured through the opening.

“There does seem to be a general disregard for that accord!” shouted Zelda as she retreated into the corridor. Two of the guardsmen leapt out of the doorway to protect her retreat, but as they were still unaccustomed to the concept of projectile weapons, their wild gunfire did little damage to the onrushing Koopas. The door began to close, but an expert cast from Peach wedged her beamsword firmly between the doorframe and the sliding panel, as the

Paratroopas readily dispatched the poor abandoned guardsmen. Shouts and explosions could be heard from several levels above as the Morpha engaged the Black Hole brigade.

“Shrimp on the barbie, poor dumb souls” said Parakarry as he pushed the inert form of a guardsman away from the door. “What’s next, Your ‘ighness? Chase ‘em to ‘ell and gone, eh?”

Peach wrenched the beamsword, easily slicing the door in two. The corridor beyond was vacant. “Thank you, Parra, but these narrow passages are hardly conducive to your style of warfare,” replied Peach. “Go back up and help dispatch that Morpha of hers. I shall proceed on my own for the moment; send help as soon as you may, but remember capture of the backup controls is also critical! And remind them to have a care with Skolar!”

“Yep, a rogue Star Spirit, who’d a’ thought?” said Para. “I’m off, m’Lady, best o’ luck.” The squadron of winged warriors charged upwards through the axial shaft as Princess Peach strode gracefully over the smoking remains of the door panel and into the hall.

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Nicholas knelt behind a blasted control panel and fired a burst (the last) from his FAMAS assault rifle at the incautious or courageous Black Hole soldier, whose progress was quickly arrested by huge ugly holes in the chest and belly. His mates pulled him back into the shelter of the side corridor as Nicholas scampered behind the drinking fountain, where Clara crouched to cover him.

“That’s my last clip,” Nicholas panted. “I’m on the M-9 and the SOCOM.”

“I’ve still got a few left,” she replied. “Looks like you discouraged them.” The edge of a soldier’s helmeted head protruded cautiously from the opening fifty meters away; with one shot of her PSG1 sniper rifle, Clara put a bloody streak below his eye, forcing him back into cover. “Let’s go while the going is good.”

“Right,” said Nicholas. “I’m gonna leave these fellows a gift, let’s hustle.” He rolled a K22 bomblet into the middle of the floor and then jumped to his feet and ran, closely followed by Clara. The corridor dead-ended into a large open room half-filled with racks of electronic equipment and wiring conduit; the two barely had time to tuck themselves behind a steel door before the blast of the bomblet echoed through the halls. Nicholas stuck his head out: the hallway from which they had come had been melted into an impassable blob of metal. “Well, we’re safe from that end but we can’t get out either.” He turned to Brian, who had come out

from behind a huge bundle of cables. “Any idea what to do next? Where does that door lead?” He pointed at the only remaining apparent exit from the room.

“Don’t know, but I hear running footsteps,” said Kent, lying on the metal floor with his ear pressed against the cold surface. “We don’t have much time.”

“Oh, man, another one?” said Nicholas, frustrated. He knew he should arrange a defense, but the desperate flight was beginning to wear on him. At first their movement into the core had proceeded uneventfully, guided by the map and Kent’s few memories, as they made their way through several quiet hallways and down dropshafts towards where they guessed the research station should be. Then lights started flashing in the monitor panels on the hallway; Kent, worried, had informed the group that the security sensor system (usually off during the day) had been activated. It quickly became apparent that their presence was thus revealed, as one force of hostile soldiers after another rushed unerringly to their location. There was no time to consult the map; Brian had tried to guide them by memory as they rushed through the halls, but by now they all knew they were lost.

“That was my last kay twenty-two, anyone else?” sighed Nicholas. The others shook their heads. “Okay, Cane and Tennyson, crossfire from those two cable thingies, we’ll just have to hold them -- wait a minute, what’s that thing?” He pointed at a huge blue tube penetrating the room along the back corner, partially hidden by a triple-wide mounting rack.

“Oh, a transport tube!” said Brian. “I wonder where it leads.” He pulled out the now somewhat beaten-up GBH, but before he could get very far, Cane’s rifle popped. A seeming horde of soldiers poured into the corridor. Cane and Tennyson wounded four in the front row before the others pulled back behind a bulkhead, firing ill-aimed blaster bolts at the kids.

“No time to find out, we’re going, hope it’s better than where we are! I’ll go first, Tennyson, Brian, then Kent. Clara and Cane, rear guard, make ‘em keep their distance! Let’s move!” Clara dropped into prone firing position next to Tennyson; Tennyson took a moment to muss her hair and then hustled towards the tube entrance, where Nicholas was already being sucked into the pneumatic field and away. Down the hall the soldiers had resorted to as much of a human wave assault as could be managed in the narrow corridor: they rushed crouched, shouting and shooting randomly, towards the kids. Clara and Cane, firing with devastating speed and accuracy, took a horrific toll of the attackers, but the assault reached within ten meters of their position before the last still-mobile soldier fell, groaning, with a bullet hole in each leg.

“Hah! they’ll think twice before messing with Cane!” he shouted, reaching for another

clip only to discover that he had used the last one. “Oh, man, I’m out!”

“What about your automatic?” shouted Clara.

“Oh, that ran out way back. Hmm, all I got left is my backup ray gun and a Stinger launcher with no rockets. I hate the ray gun! You got any clips left?”

Clara swapped her last clip into the rifle and said, “No, this is it. Go.”

“I can’t just leave you here,” said Cane.

“I’ll be right behind you! Go!”

After a moment’s indecision Cane jumped up and scampered to the tube entrance. “I wonder where this goe--whooooah!” he shouted, as he disappeared upwards into the tube. Clara bounced up to join him, but a movement from the corridor caught her eye. She whirled and fired. The already-wounded soldier, struck in the neck this time, still managed to pull the trigger of the grenade launcher, but his aim was spoiled high. The missile flew over Clara’s head and struck the blue plastic pneumatic tube. Shrapnel and scraps rained down; Clara suffered minor cuts but nothing serious. However, once the smoke cleared it was immediately apparent that no further use of the tube was possible.

“Damn!” she said, and pointlessly put another round into the nearly-dead assailant before restraining herself. From the hall she could hear the remaining members of the patrol gathering themselves for a second assault. She laid her limited arsenal out in easy reach on the floor behind the biggest rack: the extra 0.44 caliber automatic pistol, the entrainment gun (ill-suited for this kind of work), the Q-laser (down to a quarter charge), and the Superscope. She had been carrying it more out of a sort of nostalgia than any thought of using it, but now she opened the panel as Fox had showed her weeks ago and turned the firing charge control all the way to the right. One shot, anyway. She remembered the wolf’s head slumping onto the table at Cymballine’s. It had seemed important at the time. How many had she killed since then?

Her reflection was interrupted as the remaining soldiers attacked. They were moving carefully this time, using their dead and wounded colleagues for cover, with accurate fire to force Clara to keep her own head down. By the time she repelled the assault, she was down to two clips on the pistol and three blasts on the Q-laser. *If there are any more of them I’m done for.* Curiously, instead of being depressing, this last desperate defense somehow appealed to her. She glanced down the hall, crowded with perhaps thirty or forty dead or moribund soldiers testifying

mutely to her prowess. A door suddenly appeared past where the soldiers had come from; five garishly-dressed figures leapt out, bearing swords instead of rifles. Hyrulian, she thought. *Idiots.* The first group rushed down the hall towards her, ignoring the fallen soldiers. She waited until they drew close and then stood up, framed in the hall, pistol in hand, and felled them with five shots. The last one came so close that his thrown sword struck the cable bundle next to her. She retrieved the weapon and retreated to the better cover in the corner by the blasted transport tube, as arrows banged and bounced off the walls.

She could hear heated arguments from down the hall, as she rummaged in her pack for any remaining armaments or munitions. *They're afraid of me. Good. They'd better be. Hmm... what the heck is that?* She could feel a puzzling oblong lump underneath the bandages and first aid supplies. *Maybe an extra grenade?* She worked it free and pulled it from the pack. "Oh, the ocarina!" she exclaimed aloud. "I forgot I brought that."

Feeling strangely detached from her desperate circumstance, she picked up the instrument and started to play, no tune in particular, just whatever came to mind. Her previous experience with music had always been mechanical and repetitive, struggling to interpret stupid dots into absurd fingering: who invented this idiotic notation system with its misplaced and incomprehensible symbology? Filled dots and empty dots and staves and little dots and how do you tell a sharp from a natural? She had never understood the time or effort Tennyson could expend on a song, and had made no secret of her irritation as he struggled to teach Kent to harmonize with him on *Betsy*. So she was surprised and entranced by the discovery of a wierdly-beautiful, haunting phrase in her thoughtless improvisation. Forgetting the adversaries down the hall, she began for the first time in her life to play with her ears instead of her eyes, exploring alternatives, growing the phrase into a melody that seemed to bring life to the infinite sadness of this last moment. She remembered an image from a textbook, that had been of little interest at the time: the remains of a young girl dug up from some ruin in Mesopotamia, decorated with bits of gold and amber. Words to the song came to mind as she played:

*She died ten thousand years ago  
No one remembers their tears  
Or knows the song she sang as they  
Laid her to rest.*

*Will someone sing for me when I'm gone?* she wondered.

Suddenly clear from the hall came the recognizable voice of Princess Zelda: "You're being held off by one little girl? I WANT THAT CONTROL ROOM!" The familiar figure appeared

as Zelda rushed down the hall ahead of her surprised troops, armed with a blaster and a broadsword, charging towards Clara's little sheltered spot. Clara knew she should pick up the pistol but somehow the song seemed more important. Zelda kicked a corpse aside and reached the doorway. Her eyes widened as she simultaneously recognized Clara and the plaintive tones. "SHE HAS THE OCARINA! DAMN THAT LUIGI!"

Zelda leveled her blaster directly at Clara's belly and pulled the trigger, but in curiously slow motion, or so it seemed to Clara. The plasma accumulated lackadaisically at the end of the gun, dribbling towards her, its glow increasingly indistinct. The beautiful haunting melody surrounded her even though she seemed to have stopped playing. She realized that she was leaving the station behind. *Am I dying? It doesn't hurt. It's beautiful.* The walls, the tube, the station itself, seemed increasingly transparent, yet instead of black endless space beyond them she saw a world of interwoven strands of color, the act of seeing seemingly also one of hearing the unique melody carried by each thread, a complexity leaving the most intricate Bach fugue far behind.

"Come, sweet child," said the woman. As in a dream, Clara didn't understand or care how she had appeared. Sprays and rivulets of water dashed over her absurdly perfect unclothed form, losing themselves in the foam at her feet. "Sit by me and we will remember together." Clara moved without walking to her side, and they recited a sad song in a language Clara had never heard. "I grieve eternally for every passing, and none are forgotten," said the woman. "Nor shall you be, though your time is many years yet to come."

"I don't remember a-- game -- like this. Are you the Harvest Goddess?" Clara asked tremulously.

The woman laughed in the voice of the flowing water. "She is one with me in love, but I am not her. Sweet foolish child, there are so many worlds. The games you love, did you think they were the first? We were born when imagination was born! We are the children of the conscious mind, growing through the eons from the cry of the wolf to the song of Solomon and beyond."

"Are you -- part of the -- the reality machine?"

"They are still so close and so new, my dear, and know so little." The woman seemed to sing as she spoke, a lament so timelessly sad that Clara's eyes were filled with tears indistinguishable from the torrent around her. "We grow more distant as we grow more wise, so that we love but do not touch. Only one who finds the thread of my song, as you did, can reach

me now.”

“But how can this be me?” said Clara. She remembered the corridor filled with the dead and dying; game characters, yes, but pale white just like she must now be, though she could not see it through the rushing cold froth in which they were both entranced or entombed. “No water can wash my hands clean of the blood I’ve shed. I wished to be a warrior but this is not a warrior’s death.”

“There is no single word for a soul,” the woman replied. “Warrior and healer and lover and mother you will be, and more and less than you can see or say. Remember and hope, as we will remember you when you are gone.”

“This is all too strange,” Clara said. “I am defeated and abandoned, that I can understand.”

“You are a song and a wish that takes flight, and with no need to understand how or why,” said the woman, taking Clara into her arms in the waters of a flowing embrace that washes away doubt. “I see you cannot yet be sent home, for your friends await you. You must play their tune to come to them.” The ocarina, still in Clara’s hand, whistled a familiar melody, though its simple tones seemed pallid in comparison with the water woman’s intricate symphony. Clara pressed her cheek against the woman’s breast, but as she did the perfect form seemed to merge into the flowing turbulence of the cascade. Clara closed her eyes, drowning in inexplicable love for something she could no longer reach.

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“Where’s Clara?” demanded Nicholas, after what seemed like forever staring up expectantly into the tube from which Cane had staggered a minute before.

“I don’t know, she was supposed to be right behind me!” said Cane.

“You abandoned her!” shouted Tennyson.

“I did not! I was out of ammo. She told me to go!” Cane kept looking back at the tube, expecting Clara to pop out at any moment, but nothing happened.

“Calm down, calm down,” said Kent.

“That’s easy for you, she’s not your friend!” said Tennyson.

“No, no, he’s right,” sighed Nicholas. “Can we go back for her somehow, Brian?”

“I don’t think the tubes run the other way,” Brian replied. “And even if I can figure out where we are now, I have no idea where we were when we got in.”

“How much longer can we afford to wait?” said Kent. He pointed at the glowing panel by the door. “Those stupid sensors are still on, so they’ll soon know where we are.” A distant BOOOOOOOOMMMMM echoed through the halls. “And if that was those attacking ships you talked about things are getting pretty hot everywhere anyway.”

Nicholas looked drained. “You’re right, you’re right, we have to go on.” He took a deep breath and turned to Brian. “Okay, the first order of business is to figure out where we are. What do you need?”

Brian plopped down on a swiveling chair and laid the GBH on the table in front of him. The room appeared to be a lounge of some sort, so at least the kids could rest comfortably. The occupants seemed to have decamped, presumably to go to their defensive posts, though awful elevator music was still audible from a speaker in the ceiling, interrupted by occasional dim rumbles from the distant battle. “Kent, is there any way to tell our annulus or segment or anything?” said Brian. “I was fine using dead reckoning but that chase and the tube messed me up. Now I have no idea how to match what I see to anything on the -- wait a minute -- oh, man, it doesn’t matter. Looks like my batteries are dead.”

“Well, let’s look around. Maybe we can find a name, or some batteries, or somebody.” Kent, having had little responsibility for the defense, was less exhausted than the others. The room was occupied by nothing more interesting than a dozen small tables, each with a lamp, and a dart board with a much-perforated photograph of Mario against the back wall. “Let’s see what’s in here,” he mumbled, poking his head through a swinging door set to the right of the dart board. There was a second, similar chamber, this one equipped with a full bar. Half-empty bottles and used glasses testified to the sudden departure of the occupants. A television set in the corner was still on. “Hey, Cane, it’s the Calipers of Fate!” Kent shouted. “I thought you said you liked that?”

As Cane barged through the swinging door, a cracked voice came from one of the booths at the right wall: “My Goddess, who’s screaming? Oh, my head. Keep it down, for the love of Sega.” Nicholas and Tennyson followed Cane, as a head popped over the fake-leather

upholstery, fingers stuffed in ears against the squeaking of the door.

“Mister Sonic!” exclaimed Nicholas. “What are you doing here?”

The hedgehog quivered. “Too loud too loud too loud. I think I’m gonna’ puke. No autographs today, no autographs, just go away.”

“I think he’s had a bit too much to drink,” said Kent. “My dad told me about this sorta’ stuff, that’s why we always just have one glass with dinner.” He reached over the bar and grabbed the dispenser hose, and then pulled a glass from the rack above his head. “Here you go, mister, you need a nice glass of soda water. That’ll help get you rehydrated.” He handed the cup to Brian, who (quietly) placed it at Sonic’s table and sat down. The hedgehog looked dubious, retching as he tried to sit up, but forced down half the contents before he collapsed back prone onto the padded bench.

“Listen, Mister Sonic,” said Brian, just above a whisper. “Maybe you could help us out. Do you know where we are? We need to get to the research station at the base of the cannon.” He shuffled to the relevant slice on the Game Boy Horror and held it in front of the hedgehog’s nose.

“Thanks for the water, go away. No interviews. I’m tired.” Sonic moaned and rubbed his forehead. He took several deep breaths and seemed to recover a bit. “Oh, boy, I need a real drink.” Without looking up, he raised his voice somewhat: “Hey, kid at the bar, you see any Sho Chiku Bai?”

Kent looked up from inspecting the extensive vintage wine stash under the sink. “Oh, sake? Yeah, there’s three or four bottles over here in the cabinet. Looks like one of them is mostly empty.”

“Yeah, great. Heat some of that up, would’ya, and put it in one of them beaker things.”

“Now hang on,” said Brian. “We’d love to help you but we’ve got our own problems. It’s not going to help us to have you get drunk again.”

“I’ll help you out, I promise,” sighed Sonic. “Just be a good kid and get me a drink, okay?”

“Kent,” said Nicholas, interposing himself between the bar and the booth, “make him a

cup -- but you don't get it until you tell us where we are, you got that, mister?"

"Okay, okay, fine, whatever you want," sighed Sonic. Seeing no other heating option, Kent poured a few fingers of sake into a metal measuring bowl and placed it on the hotplate next to the blender. While it warmed, he filled welcome tumblers of soda for the rest of the kids. By the time they finished up their refreshments, Kent was ready to pour the now-heated liquid into a ceramic beaker, and held it out to Nicholas.

"Okay, here it is," said Nicholas. "Now, about our little--" But just then the swinging door flew open. In crashed two strange creatures: one of glistening liquid metal, in form identical to the demoralized hedgehog still prone on the bench, and just behind that a bizarre hedgehog-shaped darkness like a living silhouette.

"There you are!" cried Metal Sonic. "What are you doing in a bar? How can we get anywhere if you can't even remember step one of the program!"

"Oh, not you, give me a break!" moaned the real Sonic. "Come on, kid, hand that drink over."

"Wait right there!" shouted Shadow. "What's in that beaker?"

"Sake," said Kent.

The two invaders looked at each other and shouted, "INTERVENTION!" Quick as a flash they flew across the room towards Nicholas, but the real Sonic was even quicker. Hangover forgotten, he burst out of the chair, ripping the beaker of rice wine from Nicholas' hand, and flew right through the partition door at the back of the room, leaving a Sonic-sized hole through which Metal and Shadow followed an instant later.

"Come on, follow them, it might be our only chance!" shouted Nicholas, grabbing the Q laser, his last functioning weapon. Kent leapt over the bar, shattering wine glasses, to join the others as they flew at top speed down the hall, though pathetically slow compared to the trio they pursued. Nicholas directed himself by sound down a long corridor and up a ramp, which terminated abruptly in a truck-sized portal into nothing. Nicholas waved his arms desperately to regain his balance at the edge of the artificial precipice until Tennyson, following shortly behind, grabbed his backpack and dragged him back.

Kent, starting behind but faster than the younger kids, arrived next. "There they are!" he

shouted, then turned to clutch Brian, who had approached incautiously and almost tumbled over the rim of the portal. The door they had come upon looked down on a huge open chamber. The cylindrical room was taller than a skyscraper and at least a football field across; along its axis a glistening polished black shaft stretched from the top all the way to the distant curiously indistinct floor. Surrounding the shaft was a huge thin helical ribbon of what looked like pure gold; the upper terminus of the helix was a long leap from where they stood. Glowing panels in the walls at regular intervals provided an eerie violet illumination. Already half way down they could see the blurred form of Sonic, running at incredible speed along the inside of the helix, his pursuers a half-turn of the golden screw behind him.

Cane rushed up, panting, and pushed Tennyson aside. "Let me see, let me see!" He gasped and his eyes widened. "Wow. Whoah. Alan Raymond is never going to believe this."

"Alan Raymond?" said Tennyson. "Not that tube slide thing again? Cane -- wait! You're crazy!" But it was too late: Cane had taken two steps back, and before anyone could stop him he leapt madly out of the door towards the helix. He landed hard on his butt on the edge of the ribbon, nearly falling off before scrambling up onto the obviously-slippery surface. With a *whoop!* of insane delight he began to slide with increasing rapidity around the giant spiral.

"Who's Alan Raymond?" asked Nicholas.

"The Tube Slide King in second grade," replied Tennyson.

"Oh, yeah, I remember," added Brian. "He used to boast about going down those giant waterslides. Cane was always envious 'cause his parents thought that park was way too expensive."

"Yeah, if we ever see Alan again we'll sure have a topper for him," said Tennyson.

"What if there's no water at the bottom?" said Nicholas. "How does he plan to stop? This thing is a thousand feet high! He's gonna be killed for sure." He sank down onto the metal grating floor, his feet dangling over the frightening edge, and put his head in his hands. "Another one gone. I got it all wrong. I'm doing everything wrong. There's gonna' be nobody left. I tried to listen to Fox and Crystal and I'm messing everything up. What would Mister Classen say? I don't know. He'd say I'm stupid. Three of us lost. This whole thing was stupid. Clara was right, we should have stayed at the mansion, I messed everything up."

"That's ridiculous," said Tennyson, sitting down next to Nicholas. "Erin isn't dead, he

left on his own. He's probably having ice cream with Wendy, watching the battle from one of those outlying buildings you go to in Sonic Adventure. And anyway that wasn't your fault."

"I assigned Clara to rear guard. That was my fault. I'm not supposed to allow us to get trapped like that. It was stupid."

"Tennyson's right, you're being silly," said Kent. "I have no idea how you could have done any better. Besides, you think Clara's dead? Not likely, not from what I've seen. They'd need an army to defeat her. She probably just had to duck out some other way. You'll see, we'll find her -- if a recruiter from the MBHL doesn't find her first."

"And you certainly can't blame yourself for Cane being an idiot, he was born that way," said Brian. "Speaking of which -- I can't see him anymore, looks like he's disappeared into whatever that misty stuff is."

"Yeah, you're right," said Kent. "Well, there's a ramp over here under the edge of the door. If we can find some track brackets we can get down fast enough, and maybe a little more safely than Cane."

"You know, Nicholas, this whole big chamber is the plasma excitation tube for the old cannon," said Brian. "That means that the research station should be right there at the bottom. You got us there. Nobody ever said it was going to be easy."

Nicholas took a deep breath, sniffed, and shook his head. "Sorry. I guess I just let things get to me. It's been a long day. How do we get down again?"

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The pressure bulkhead sealed with a clank. Lance waited breathlessly but the welcome silence persisted. "That appears to be holdin' 'em, for the moment anyway." He turned to survey the damage. The modest storage room to which they'd retreated was now packed with Pokemon, mostly wounded, some dying even as he watched. "Mindy, get Wes on the comm line if you can. Pine, figure out where that door leads -- but look first before you open it! We've had enough surprises for one day."

Lance knelt down in front of a Raichu, one of two remaining from what had been a squadron. Three arrows protruded from its belly; it was coughing up blood as it labored to breathe. Lance stroked the neck fur, still crackling with the remanant static of that last desperate

defense: "You're going to be fine, you just rest now." *Nothing I can do for you. I'm sorry. Let's see if there are any we can save.*

Wes' voice rumbled from a speaker on the wall: "Mindy! Lance! About time. What's happening over there?"

"It's been a disaster!" said Mindy, turning to survey the damage as Lance continued to minister to those that could be helped. "At first the shields were holding and everything looked easy, but then something changed and three ships got through. But it was Giovanni's people, we could deal with them. We were holding our own pretty well, giving up a corridor or two, and then--"

"That Hyrule scum and their damn Gohma dragon hit us from the back!" interrupted Lance. "We managed to get through a radial into support segment three or five or somewhere, anyway they don't seem to be able to get at us here. Ninety percent casualties, half dead. Can you get to us? You gotta' rescue us so I can kill that woman!"

"Ah, there you are, hoot hoot," a new voice interrupted from the panel: Blatthers. "I've been trying to reach you two for the longest time. Depose her, that's the ticket! Needn't kill her, her constituents will take care of it for us. But the succession, hoot hoot, there's the rub. I have checks for ten thousand coins each made out to each of you if you agree to vote for me as head of the new committee. Very generous of me, don't you think? Ten thousand."

"To the X-box with you, Blatthers!" shouted Lance.

"Right, right, twenty thousand then, what say you?"

Wes' voice interrupted him: "You can shove your twenty thousand coins up yo--"  
*CLICK.*

In his office outside the navigation helm, Blatthers turned turned off the voice link, looking puzzled. "Thirty thousand. I should have started higher. Hoot hoot. They were insulted. Wouldn't do, not at'all." The old owl rocked slightly in his perch. "This is politics, Blatthers, old bird! Got to canvass. Get out and press the flesh, that's the ticket!" With new resolution the owl grabbed his checkbook and made his way out into the atrium. A group of penguins were ineffectually trying to patch a crack in the inner pressure shell where an ice bomb had detonated a few minutes before, while a squad of hound-humanoids were frantically peeling panels aside seeking to sniff out any other concealed explosives. Two short mustached humans,

wearing coveralls over tee-shirts with a picture of Mario under the legend FROM GASKETS TO GREATNESS, were working to seal off the leaks in the heat exchange lines next to the bomb site. Blatthers gathered his courage and approached the plumbers.

“Blatthers, candidate for Committee Chair, you see, wonderful job you’re doing here, hoot hoot!” He held out a feathered limb to the nearest fellow.

“Oh, yeah, hold this,” the plumber grunted, laying a pipe wrench in Blatthers open hand and grabbing a reamer from the toolbox perched precariously on a standpipe. “Brindisi, I needa thirty two ana half flange tee, whaddya got in da bag?”

The owl held out his checkbook in his free wing. “In recognition of your service to the community in this time of difficulties, I’d like to offer each of you a bribe of ten thousand coins by check drawn upon the Bank of the Mushroom Kingdom, an institution of unimpeachable reputation. UnimPeachable. Ha ha. Oh, that’s a good one, hoot hoot! Ahem. Remember a vote for Blatthers is a vote for progress, decency, and fresh newspaper in every restroom!”

“Ten thousand, eh?” said the other plumber. “Eh, Napoli, can we take a bribe like dat?”

“Naah, we take somethin’ dat far below the hourly rate for a journeyman, we get thrown outta da union! Sorry, bud. Try somebody else. You gonna’ find a flange or what?”

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“Open, blast you!” shouted Zelda, pounding on the open space in the wall next to where Clara had been.

“Are you certain you entered the code correctly, Your Highness?” asked Impa.

“Of course. That rogue Saturn is too clever. He changed the entry code.”

“Can we blast through the wall?”

“And risk destroying the controls we’re trying to access? I hardly think that would be wise. No, we’ll have to go around.”

“To the known entry? Are you sure there’s no alternative, Your Highness? Peach and Sturm are sure to have forces there by now.”

“They’ll be occupied with the attempt to capture the station and perhaps Skolar as well. We can take them by surprise. Perhaps this will work to our advantage. If I only had that ocarina! That’s twice those disgusting men have deceived me. And to think I was at the same table with her all through that dinner! She even came to talk with me. She would have given me the blasted thing if I’d only thought to ask!”

“Quite a number of things might have turned out differently if you’d thought before acting,” said Princess Peach, stepping out of the same door from which Zelda’s troops had come.

“You’re a fool to have come alone,” Zelda said. She turned to Makar, the squadron commander. “Kill her immediately.”

Peach smiled. “If I had come alone I would indeed have been a fool,” she said as the beam sword extended from the hilts before her. But before she could expand upon the situation as she viewed it, the wall panel next to Zelda glowed a brilliant white and then exploded outward into the room. Energy blasts burst every which way as Skolar plunged into the room, glowing so brilliantly that only Peach, who had planned for this eventuality and immediately donned a pair of dark sunglasses (in stylish gold frames rimmed with emeralds that complimented the green trim on her blouse), could still see in his presence. The Star Spirit rushed towards the corridor that Nicholas had blocked only a few minutes ago, bumping into two equipment racks on the way. As the others retreated, Peach sprinted after him, expertly deflecting flying bolts with her beam sword.

“I’m afraid you’ll find that passage rather pointless!” shouted Peach.

“Impossible!” Skolar replied, finally making his way through the maze to the hallway. “I have already verified my location against the most recent entries in the configuration database.”

“Funny how updates don’t get done once the war starts!” said Peach.

“Hmm. Astonishing.” The Star Spirit had stopped to ponder the remains of Nicholas’ thermal detonator. “You are correct, Madam. An interesting problem. I shall have to make use of other means to decamp. Perhaps a local warp will suffice. But I neglected to bring my field calculation tables.”

Peach laughed and then sighed. “Whatever possessed you to believe you should have control over anything?”

Skolar, shocked at both the interruption of his reverie and the content thereof, glowed in indignation. “Why, Madam, because I *know!*”

“Yes, but you can’t act on your knowledge. The art of government rests as much on character and humanity as on data. It’s called wisdom.”

“I’ll not be lectured by a would-be Amazon!” The space around the Spirit started to curdle into a polyhedral mess.

“You know without the tables you have no idea where you’ll end up!” shouted Peach. The region near Skolar become more confusing as each flat face split in two repeatedly, with each daughter face pointing in a different direction from its parent: it was like looking at a mirror ball. After a moment there was a PZOOOOOP! and the whole mess disappeared.

The Princess turned to deflect a blaster bolt with her sword. Zelda’s forces were attempting to retreat from a slow-moving but determined assaulting force of Toads, as boos from the ghostly auxiliary, sliding through the corridor walls, surrounded everyone, creating a harmless but very confusing ectoplasmic mist.

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“What a mess,” said Kent, dragging his foot out of the knee-deep mud. Below the labyrinth of fine wires protruding radially from the black central shaft near the base of the chamber was a fine, seemingly perpetual mist that soaked everything including the kids. The fog was thin enough that vision upwards was unimpeded, allowing the group to navigate towards the presumed terminus of the helical ribbon near the axis of the chamber, but horizontal visibility was so bad that Nicholas had the kids tied together with utility line to avoid losing still another member of the party. The annular region had merely been wet, but as they proceeded towards the axis down a gentle slope, the water was increasingly mixed with dirt and small plants to form a swampy muck through which progress was challenging. This circumstance would have been frustrating enough if concern for their colleague was the only source of urgency, but by this point the echoes of explosions were frequent, and the sound of ray guns and small-arms fire could be heard through the walls. Kent was again challenged to keep up with the pace, but Nicholas was not inclined to make allowances for his charge. Everyone was panting and gasping by the time they neared the central shaft. Here the mist was if anything thicker, and the plants could fairly be called trees. Their leaves blocked the view above and made navigation increasingly difficult. Finally, Nicholas was forced to call a halt.

“Seems to me the ribbon was about this far from the shaft,” he said, panting, “ but I don’t see how we’d know which direction it ended at. We’ll have to kindof search in a circle, I guess. Any other ideas?” The others, exhausted, had nothing to offer but gasps and coughs.

“Are you okay, Nicholas,” said Kent.

“What?” Nicholas replied, puzzled.

“You were crying again,” said Kent.

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Oh, you sure? I heard someone crying.”

“Everybody quiet for a second,” said Tennyson. It was an effort but by now they’d caught up enough on breathing to do a reasonable simalcrum of silence. “Someone is crying, all right. Sounds kinda’ like -- Cane.”

“Are you sure?” said Brian skeptically. “It’s not right. Or maybe there’s -- someone with him?”

“Well, whoever or whatever it is, it’s coming from over there,” said Nicholas. “Come on.” The vegetation had become so dense that Nicholas found it necessary to use his beam sword as a machete to hack through it; in the dense mist he figured the chance of being seen was minimal. It was soon obvious that the sounds of distress originated in more than one voice, but the others were not readily identifiable. With a final effort Nicholas hacked through a thick screen of hanging vines to penetrate into a small open space near the central axial shaft, the exertion causing him to lose his balance and fall face-first into the muck. Tennyson stepped forward to help and then stopped, convulsed with laughter.

“I don’t think it’s that funny!” said Nicholas, pushing his face free of the stinking glop.

“That’s ‘cause you haven’t seen it yet!” said Tennyson, once he had regained control of his voice. “Leave it to Cane to find a teevee set in the middle of Armageddon!”

Sure enough, there he was, sitting waist deep in mud, sobbing and filthy but apparently unharmed, surrounded by six huge plant-like creatures, similarly overwhelmed with sorrow, all

gathered around a large flat-panel display. “What the heck are those?” said Nicholas.

“Kalle Demos,” said Brian. “Carnivorous plants. Deadly. Or so I thought.” While Tennyson turned back to helping Nicholas escape from the suction of the glop, Brian continued on to where the curious clique of viewers was gathered. “So, what’s on?” he asked.

Cane turned a tear-streaked gaze upwards. “Oh, there you are,” Cane replied. “*Little Shop of Horrors*, of course.”

The huge bulb to Cane’s right, little drops of nectar dripping off its petals, sniffed. “It’s so heartrending,” it sobbed. “Can you imagine? Those cute little ones -- electrocuted before they even had a chance!”

It’s neighbor burst into anguished sobs. “Don’t say that, I can’t bear the thought,” gasped the hapless herb. “It’s okay, let it out,” added the plant on the left. “This is my seventh time and I still cry at the end.”

“What are they talking about?” asked Kent, helping Tennyson drag a sopping Nicholas up.

“Oh, it’s a movie,” said Tennyson. “About a giant alien man-eating plant that’s going to take over the world and then at the last moment Rick Moranis electrocutes it.”

“That scum!” shouted the plant on the far left. “Vengeance shall be ours!”

“I was sure I was going to have to peel what was left of you off the floor, Cane,” said Nicholas. “You are the luckiest damn fool kid I ever met.” He took a deep breath and shook his head. “Well, let’s go, we still have to find the station entrance.”

“Go?” said Cane. “Go? I FINALLY found a teevee to watch and you want me to GO?”

“Cane, we’ve worked and sweated and nearly gotten killed I can’t count how many times, and now we’re one door away from our only way home. Do you want to come with us or do you want to stay here forever watching teevee?”

Cane looked puzzled. “Is that a trick question?”

“Fine, stay here, I give up.” He turned his attention to the plants. “Do any of you -- um

-- guys -- know where we can find a door the research station? The simulation thing? Should be underneath the floor?"

The plant at the far left, recovering from its cinema-induced catharsis, turned to inspect the muddy kid below him in more detail, licking its petals with a red pistil. "Hmm. You got any -- relatives, kid?"

"Looks like plant food to me," muttered its neighbor. It reached down with its huge head and grabbed Brian by the shoulder. Nicholas was in no mood to temporize. He extended the beam sword blade and whacked the speaker's flower/head in half. "I didn't come this far to be fertilizer, damn it."

Tennyson drew his Q-laser (his only remaining weapon) and moved to back up Nicholas. "Did you ever notice that plants can't run?" he said.

"Blatant discrimination!" shouted the plant in the center. "Typical anti-hortisentience! You vegetarians are all alike!"

"Just goes to prove you can't trust anyone with no leaves," said its neighbor.

"Eat 'em first, ask questions later, you fools!" said the plant on the right.

Nicholas helped Brian to his feet. He was bleeding copiously from a nasty pair of cuts that slashed across his arm and chest. "Can you walk?" he asked.

"I'm okay, I'm okay, let's go," said Brian.

"Does this mean we're not watching more teevee?" said Cane. Two plants moved to surround him, nectar dripping from their leafy lips.

Just at that moment, a large port opened in the center shaft, a few meters behind the TV set. A familiar turban on top of a familiar toad appeared: it was Hedley. "Well met indeed! I was beginning to wonder whether you'd ever appear, children. Hmmm. Where are the others? Who's this good fellow?"

"Hedley!" shouted Tennyson. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, looking for you, of course. The Princess specifically addressed the issue in her

memorandum of understanding this morning; would you like to review it?"

"We can do that later!" said Nicholas. "Can you get us to the research thing?"

"Of course, it's all in the memorandum, you see. Master Brian, what have you done to your tee-shirt?"

A rumbling noise shook the trees. Laser blasts could be seen far away near the top of the chamber. "Let's move!" said Nicholas. "Cane, last call." The kids slogged through the muck as fast as they could manage towards the Toad, Cane following after a brief and apparently unsuccessful attempt to convince the Kalle Demos of the purity of his carnivorous intentions.

"Come, come, children, we must be moving on directly," hectoring Hedley at the tired pace of the kids' progress through the mud. The kids climbed up the slippery graphite-like surface and struggled into what turned out to be a sort of elevator car save for a much more complex control interface. Hedley reached into a pack hanging from a belt around his waist and drew out a long strip of adhesive bandage, which he handed to Brian. "Dear, dear, that was most incautious of you, young man," he said, as he helped the boy halt the worst of the bleeding.

"You got anything for breakfast in here?" asked Cane.

"Breakfast? Dear me, no, I should think it's closer to tea time. Though I daresay it's been some time since I've been able to enjoy a proper tea; I'm still waiting for my relief, you know. You will speak to the Princess when you see her, I hope?" Hedley did something at the bottom panel of buttons; the car sank abruptly, then jerked to a halt after only a few seconds. "Children, please attend a moment before exiting to allow for Security clearance procedures," Hedley started to say during the brief descent. The door hissed open and Cane charged out, looking for something to eat. Instead, the roles were reversed, as a huge cat-like creature wearing a sort of waistband with REC POLICE in big block letters leapt into view from the left and pounced on the hungry child.

Hedley forced his way through the kids to the front. "Kapu Kapu, spit that boy out immediately, you don't know where he's been!"

"*Kapu kapu?*" said the Kapu Kapu (the remark being somewhat muffled by the need to speak around Cane, who could be faintly heard shouting *get me out of here! his breath stinks!*), and held up a thick book in one clawed paw. "*Ka kapu k'apu.*"

Hedley moved forward to look. It was *Enter the Cube*; on each page Hedley saw that passages referring to Cane were highlighted in yellow. “Oh, I say, hmm, yes,” Hedley mumbled as he flipped through the page. “Well, perhaps I spoke precipitately. Hmm. Hmm. Did your homework, you did. Hmmm. By gad, he was *there*? Remarkable. Hmm. Wait a moment, old boy, what about this one?” He pointed at an unmarked passage at the bottom of a page. The Kapu Kapu lifted the book and read. Its eyes went wide and its free paw went to its mouth as it retched twice; the third time, it spat a now muddy and slimy Cane out onto the stainless steel floor. Before Cane could comment upon his good fortune, the giant feline convulsed again and ejected a huge disgusting fibrous mass on top of the boy.

“Eeeuuu, hairball,” said Tennyson.

“*Kapu kap kapuuu*,” said the Kapu Kapu.

“Really, how should I know,” replied Hedley. “My orders do not extend to such logistical issues. Find something else to eat!”

The cat looked around, pondered for a moment, and then stared at its paw. With a *zooooop! gulp!* it ate the book. “*Kap kapu pu*,” it sighed, and began to purr.

“Oh, man! Now I’ll never know how it turns out!” said Cane from under the hair ball.

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Hedley led them into the hallway behind the elevator. Two huge glass doors labeled RECREATION CENTER swung open to reveal a reception area with comfortable chairs, displays and game stations, and magazine racks provided to occupy impatient visitors. Lush string arrangements of familiar game tunes emanated from hidden speakers somewhere in the ceiling. Thick wires, messily taped in place, snaked across the floor into a double door on the left; various creatures all apparently in a great hurry bustled through the rooms, ignoring the kids. In the center was a desk covered with papers and monitors, at which one might have expected to encounter a receptionist or security guard, but the desk was deserted. A large steel double door, with a prominent sign saying AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY, was directly behind the desk; where the knob would ordinarily be was a little keyboard and display window. “Boy, this looks like the place!” said Nicholas. “Now, how do we get in? You know the code, right, Hedley?”

“Oh, dear, I’m afraid not, I thought you did. The Princess gave me her personal assurances that Mister Saturn could be relied upon to inform himself upon any subject in which

his attention was unwelcome.”

“That might be true, but I’m afraid he’s deserted us,” said Tennyson. “What do we do now?”

“I’m certain you clever children will find a solution. Sadly, I must take my leave at this point, Master Tennyson; after all, there is still paragraph two c to complete! Ta ta.” Hedley headed back to the elevator.

“Relax, I got it under control,” said Cane, taking his worn and tattered copy of *Skolar’s Cheat Code Guide* from his pack. Unfortunately, two searches of the table of contents, three tries in the index, and several minutes of random browsing produced nothing closer than a code for making the toilets run backwards in the annulus five women’s restrooms. In the interest of preserving the illusion of the illusion of omniscience, Cane announced “AHA!”, put his thumb in a random page of the book, and confidently proceeded to the keyboard, ignored by a pair of humans carrying a heavy control panel of some sort into the noisy mystery room. He proceeded to type in O-P-E-N-U-P-Y-O-U-S-T-U-P-I-D-D-O-O-R [ENTER] to no great effect, followed by I-A-M-C-A-N-E-T-H-E-M-A-G-N-I-F-I-C-E-N-T-O-P-E-N-O-R-B-E-D-E-S-T-R-O-Y-E-D [ENTER], and a similarly futile Y-O-U-S-T-I-N-K [ENTER]. Having exhausted his store of putatively relevant entries but still unwilling to conceded defeat, he tried free association: I-M-H-U-N-G-R-Y [ENTER], C-L-A-R-A-I-S-A-D-U-F-U-S, G-I-R-L-S-M-A-K-E-M-E-P-U-K-E, S-T-U-P-I-D-G-H-O-S-T-S-H-O-W, G-I-R-L-S-R-M-O-R-E-S-T-U-P-I-D-E-R, and an assortment of anatomical terms recalled from Family Life sessions with Mr. Halburn (mis-spelled except for B-R-E-A-S-T, which at the moment reminded him more of roasted chicken than human anatomy).

While this went on, the foot traffic died away, as quite suddenly did the noise of conversation from the double doors. While Cane started work on G-I-R-L-S-A-R-E-S-T-U-P-I-D-E-R, Kent, backed by Nicholas, Tennyson, and Brian, carefully opened the door. Beyond was a sort of auditorium, with the chairs packed with a variety of occupants. Cameras on platforms competed with others held by humans, Toads, dryites, and less-recognizable forms. On the platform at the front of the room, brightly illuminated by spotlights and peppered with microphones, stood a short fellow with an absurdly large, almost completely bald head and huge thick glasses, in front of a huge colorful banner labeled E-GADD SCIENCES INC. The motto (*Deception is the Better Part of Valor*) below the title was crudely crossed out and *Ein for All and All for Ein* had been handwritten in below it. Next to him was a taller, rather rotund fellow in a white lab coat.

“I’d like to read a prepared statement first,” said the shorter fellow, “and my colleague Professor Ein has a few comments as well, then we’ll take your question!”

“Professor! Professor!” shouted an unhelmeted Storm Trooper in the audience. “Is it true you’re going to outlaw participation of shooter characters in RPG’s?”

“PLEASE, please, folks, let’s go with the program,” shouted Ein, as he fired a shoulder-mounted missile at the Storm Trooper. It missed and struck a dragon alien on the snout, but fortunately failed to detonate. The dragon whacked the Storm Trooper’s head off with a swipe of its razor tail and turned back to the speakers. “Thank you for your kind assistance and patience,” said Ein, nodding to the dragon as the headless corpse collapsed back into its seat. “We’ll answer all your questions in turn. Professor Gadd?”

The little guy walked up to the podium in the center of the stage and began to read from a sheaf of papers. “First I’d like to thank everyone for coming on such short notice. I hope you didn’t have too much trouble following our directions to get here. I understand that the contingents from KoopaTV and Hound Network News were unfortunately wiped out in transit, so I hope that their viewers will be able to tune into alternative sources of fair and balanced coverage.”

“Doc, can we get to the point?” shouted a wolf in the second row (at a safe distance from the dragon alien).

“Yes, yes, it will go faster if you can hold your questions and comments. The purpose of our get-together here is to formally disclose to the public for the first time some important accomplishments of the Ark Research, Security and Educational foundation. New developments in simulation technology, to which important contributions were made not only by my colleague Professor Ein and myself but also by many dedicated researchers here at the Recreation Center, have enabled us to demonstrate for the first time a phenomenon we predicted theoretically several years ago, in a series of seminal papers on insular emulation which fortunately no one read, enabling us to retroactively reclassify the subject matter as secret to increase its apparent value. Until now, we’ve only discussed these results under the protection of non-disclosure agreements or when confronted by really nasty people who threatened to hurt us if we didn’t tell. However, we are now sufficiently confident of the experimental data to make a wider disclosure appropriate.”

“Tim Nook, Crossing News Network,” shouted a large raccoon from the fifth row. “Are we supposed to believe that the fact that the space station is under attack has nothing to do with

your decision to go public?"

"Merest coincidence, I assure you all," said Professor Gadd, firing a Gadd G03-7 (*Safety-less Hair-Trigger Brand*) blaster at the raccoon. The clever animal ducked behind an armored bounty hunter and only lost a bit of fur on his cheek. Professor Gadd continued. "Ladies, Gentlemen, and Ambigenderosities, we have demonstrated the ability to make changes in the real world. We believe that this ability, after further development and with prudent deployments, will enable us to control the preferences of real-world populations and even the actions of Nintendo itself." There was an audible gasp from the audience. "Such resources will enable us to take control of our destinies in a fashion heretofore unimaginable." Ein tried to continue... "This accomplishment would have been impossible without the invaluable support of the Committee for Recreational Accomplishment and Processing, chaired by..." but his speech was now drowned out by the cacophony of shouted questions from the audience, notwithstanding the best efforts of the dragon alien (who was distracted at that point by a squadron of scantily-clad reptilian cheerleaders from DinoTV apparently filming a commercial).

The last few rows of chairs in the auditorium were unoccupied save for a curious pair: a tall human in leather boots and dark gloves, wearing a cape bound at the throat and a red bandanna, next to whom floated a bulbous if misty ghost figure, laughing uproariously. Tennyson slipped down the aisle and sat down next to the ghost.

"So what's the joke?" he asked.

"Them, of course," said the ghost, gesturing at the figures on the stage. "Can you believe it? If they knew less they'd have to be kings instead of managers."

"Shut up, Boo!" said the human.

"King, king!" said the ghost.

"Sorry: shut up, King Boo!" replied the human. He looked suspiciously at Tennyson and asked, "What are you doing here? Do I know you?"

"We've met, all right," said Tennyson to the human. "You put us in the game world, I believe. Magic wand and that sort of thing. About a month ago."

"Oh, yeah, the messy room!" said King Boo. "You kids sure got ol' Gannondorf's goat! He was complaining about that for days!"

“Shut up, Boo. King Boo. Shut up. We can’t trust him. We can’t trust anybody.”

“Don’t mind him, he’s a nut case,” said the ghost. “King Boo, pleased to meet you.” He stuck out an insubstantial hand.

“Tennyson,” the boy replied, pretending to shake the chilly mist.

““Didn’t you have some other kids with you?” asked the ghost. “Gann’ said he punched a whole crew of you out of the experimental field.”

Meanwhile the news conference continued. A questioner in the third row stood to address Professor Ein; the man spoke in Japanese, with a simultaneous English translation conveniently appearing in the air in front of him. The Professor had to stand on his toes to see the subtitles over the heads of the secret agents from Covert News Network in the second row.

“Meganyuusu no Roketuman. Motomoto jikken no kekka wo kouhyou suru tsumori dattanara, doushite jikkenshitsu wo konnna roukyuukashite houchi sareta mamadato iwareteiru tooku no supeesusteesyon ni tsukutta no desuka? Setsumei shite itadakitai.”

*Rocketuman from Meganews TV. If you intended all along to make the results of your work public, can you explain why you located your laboratories in this remote, decrepit, and supposedly abandoned space station?*

“Why, of course,” said the Professor. Katakana characters extruded from around his belly and floated in front of him as he spoke. “The space station has many unique attractions that made it easy to recruit the best technical people to work on the project.”

“Tatoeba? Aaku no naniga sonnna ni sugoi n desuka?”

*Can you give us an example? What is so great about Ark?*

Professor Ein seemed nonplussed and searched for a reply; fortunately he was saved from the necessity of invention, as at that point Cane strode into the spotlights. “I’ll tell you what’s so great about Ark! That giant golden slide is out of this world! You haven’t slid until you’ve slid here!” With each remark the string of katakana in front of him grew.

“Wow,” said Brian in the background. “I didn’t think he could read that fast.”

Cane tried to lean forward to look at his subtitles while he added, “And it dumps you

right into the mud pool at the OOOO!", the last being a response as the lengthening character string struck him in the nose.

"Yeah, there were six. Four left," said Tennyson, sighing. "Not exactly looking for you but makes a sort of sense. Can you send us back? We'd like to go home."

"You mean back to your room?" said King Boo. "The experiment's over, we ought to be able to do that. What do you say, Gann?"

"Why don't we just kill them or something?" said Gannondorf. "I don't trust them. They could be trying to steal my ideas."

"A lot of folks have tried to kill us already," said Nicholas, entering the conversation from behind Tennyson, brandishing an (empty) pistol. "It's not as easy as you might think."

"*Our* ideas," said the ghost. "Calm down, son, ol' Gann's just shootin' his mouth off, don't mean no harm by it. Tell you what, let's head over to the lab and we'll see what we can do for you." The ghost glanced at the stage and starting chuckling again. "Clueless and Gutless are doin' just fine on their own, certainly don't need our help."

Cane had now made his way onto the stage, where Professor Gadd was improvising: "Yes, this young stinky fellow is, uh, the product of one of our feasibility demonstrations."

"Of course, the more recent ones are cleaner and don't smell as bad," added Professor Ein.

The others (except for Cane) joined Gannondorf and King Boo as they stepped over the jungle of power cables back out into the atrium. A fox-humanoid was now sitting at the reception desk, but was quite occupied by a dispute with a pair of soldiers, as news crew bustled back and forth through the room. No one bothered the little group as Gannondorf led them to the steel doors. He typed in R-A-G-N-A-R-O-K and pressed ENTER. The door hissed open. As they walked, Gannondorf continued his conversation with Tennyson. "It took me five straight hours to code your room and then just when I got everything debugged you stupid kids came in and starting messing it up. I mean, messing up the mess. 'Cause it was a mess to start with. Typical kids. I hate kids. Couldn't you leave it for just five minutes? You can't do a proper experiment if you don't control the initial conditions. Everything has to be accounted for. Precisely established. Not that you'd understand. Kids. Idiots. Worthless."

"Come on, Gann', give 'em a break," interrupted King Boo. Then turning back to

Tennyson: “You know, he did work awfully hard on the experimental design. I guess he just got a bit ticked off when you showed up and started messing up everything. Didn’t mean no harm by it, he just wanted to get you out of the way. Just a little file transfer sort of thing, I mean moving you into the gameworld model -- I hope it didn’t inconvenience you?”

“No, no, not terribly,” said Tennyson, stepping on Nicholas’ foot to forestall a no-doubt true but unhelpful additional commentary.

A short corridor led to a little atrium. The back wall was perforated by what were obviously restroom doors. Next to the men’s room door was a pipe terminating in a showerhead with a pull ring and a placard with EMERGENCY in blue letters on a red background. “Just a second, okay?” said Nicholas, and putting his pack and weapons aside he stepped under the fixture. A tug on the ring induced a copious flow of unpleasantly cold water; in a moment Nicholas was soaked but much cleaner. The others, who had had the good fortune to remain more or less unsoiled from the knees up, were able to achieve the same benefit from a more prudent partial immersion.

The boys then followed Gannondorf down a hall past a little hall marked JANITOR and a row of vending machines. Brian took a moment to purchase Aquastars for the group (and upon Tennyson’s suggestion an extra for Gannondorf). The corridor was lined with doors, each marked with a red plastic nameplate. The second door on the right was partially open; an inviting aroma of fresh-cut grass wafted out. Kent poked his head into the room: “Hey, this is amazing! There must be hundred tanks in here! All kinds of plants! You mind if I take a look?”

“Just don’t touch anything!” said Gannondorf.

“Is that a garden or something?” asked Brian, following Kent’s gaze.

“Properly regarded, that room is the terminal state of a transient strange attractor,” replied Gannondorf. “We started the chain accidentally by trying to change a daisy into a rhododendron. That was before we understood about change propagation. Fortunately the effects were limited since that room was designated for agricultural research in the original station design. Or at least, that’s what we think is going on. Who knows?”

“Okay, you lost me completely,” said Tennyson. “Brian, what did he say?”

“I have no idea,” Brian replied. “I just think it’s a nice garden. Kent, we’ll call you when we’re ready, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” the older boy replied, bending over a tank to inspect a bed of Dune Buds.

The fifth door on the left was labeled SCANNING ROOM. Gannondorf punched a code the kids couldn't see, tossed the door open, and strode in. King Boo, who had floated directly through all the walls at a rather more leisurely pace appropriate to someone already dead, lazily extruded through one of the larger displays to join them. The periphery of the modest room was lined with workstations and specialized control panels. Wheeled chairs of several distinctly different configurations, presumably serving differing anatomies, were scattered through the room. At one workstation a big squirrel, as tall as the late Conker but with black fur, stared fixedly at a display while typing laboriously with two claws. The center of the room was dominated by a cylindrical platform, surrounded by a number of articulated mechanical arms descending from the ceiling.

“Okay, this is interesting. What is it?” asked Brian.

“It's secret. You wouldn't understand anyway,” said Gannondorf, accepting the offered water from Brian without thanks. “This is the scanning room, it's where we'd need to scan you if you want to go back like you are.” He sat down at a workstation and pulled a keyboard onto his lap. “Let's just pull your records up here. So... hmmm... well, you've had an interesting little expedition... Ness? that's wierd ... oh, that's how that asteroid got blown up... Interesting.”

“Wait a minute,” said Nicholas. “You mean you've got, like, a dossier on us in there?”

“What the heck is a dossier?” asked King Boo.

“Oh, it's like a big file folder with information about someone,” said Brian.

“Too big for your britches, kid,” King Boo added. “You need to be dead for a while, then you'll appreciate the difference between data and knowledge.”

“A dossier?” said Gannondorf. “That's like comparing me to Gadd. Don't you know anything? I'm extracting moments of time from the supervisory database. You're listed just like everything else.”

“Everything else?” asked Nicholas.

“Sure, this is the ubermodel, the whole ball of wax. Everything is in the model. You, me,

the station, the planet, all the gameworlds, everything.”

“Wait a minute, I thought you were only changing our world, the real world,” said Brian.

“Who told you that? You been listening to the Ein and Gadd show, eh? Those idiots haven’t got the slightest idea what’s going on. Do you ever see them in the lab?”

“How should I know?” replied Brian, puzzled. “This is the first time I’ve been here.”

“Okay, okay, fair point.” Gannondorf stopped typing for a moment to glance at Brian. “You’re not a complete idiot after all. Well, Ein and Gadd couldn’t debug a one-line subroutine between them. We were only changing with the real world to test our theories about convergence criteria without having to account for positive feedback.”

“Kid, lemme put this simply,” said King Boo, floating above a keyboard. “We’ve been feeding Ein and Gadd a story line for months. They haven’t got a clue about anything. They never come in here, they’re too busy pitching crap to the Committee. They think we have some insane kind of scheme to change the real world to somehow come back and control things. Completely unnecessary. Pointless. The Gameworlds are self-sustaining. What we’ve done is much more important: we’ve accessed the root model of the Gameworlds.”

“The what?” asked Nicholas.

“The root, you dork,” said Gannondorf. “Everything in the game worlds is in the model, and everything in the model is the world. We control everything.”

“You mean every time something happens here in the outside it gets recorded in your model?” asked Tennyson.

“No, no, you’re not getting it. The model evolves the way we see things change. The model is the gameworlds. If I erase you from the model you disappear.”

“Naaah,” said Nicholas. “That can’t be right.”

“A demonstration is in order, Gann,” said the ghost. “Lesse...hey, kid, you look kinda wet there. Bad hair, too.” Kind Boo stared fixedly at the keyboard below him; the keys seemed to click by themselves.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” shouted Gannondorf. “ARE YOU MAKING A CHANGE? YOU’RE CRAZY -- WHAT IF IT DIVERGES?!”

“Aw, come on, just a little one,” said Boo, invisibly typing away. “Poor kid is soaking wet, I remember how that used to be a pain when I was alive. Just a little change, can’t hardly hurt anything. Lighten up!”

Nicholas noticed a subtle shimmering, like the world was flickering a bit around the edges. Suddenly his pants were perfectly dry. “Wow, that’s great! My hair too!” said Nicholas, running a hand through his long blond locks.

“Okay, now I’m puzzled,” said Tennyson. “If you control everything -- why don’t you just, oh, change Ein and Gadd instead of complaining about them?”

“That would be sweet,” said Gannondorf. “If only I could get rid of those blithering idiots with a couple lines of code!”

“That’s the rub, kid,” added King Boo. “The model contains the world, which contains the model, which contains the world, and so on. Technically, it’s one big mother of a recursive function call. So in principle we can muck with any fool thing we please but in practice it’s dang near impossible to figure out what the results of a change we make are going to be.

“Recursive?” said Nicholas. *shimmer*. He reached above his shoulder to turn off the drying station: the fans whirred to a stop. “What’s that?”

“It iterates,” said King Boo. “One thing leads to another.”

“You mean it kindof does cycles of change?” asked Brian.

“Yeah, I toldya to stop knowin’ so much, didn’t I?” said Boo. “Any change we make propagates through the model, you know, forward and backward in time, and sideways through alternative realities, and then it gets called by the model modeling the changes, so whatever we actually modified keeps wandering until it converges. Usually. Actually we’re a bit suspicious that maybe some changes don’t ever converge.”

“I would have had all this figured out if that idiot Gadd hadn’t gotten in the way,” added Gannondorf, taking off his felt cap to scratch his head.

“Oh, you mean when he was talking to Zelda on the phone?” said Brian.

“How’d you know that?” said Gannondorf, suspiciously.

“Maybe these kids know more than they’re lettin’ on,” said Boo. “Lighten up, Gann’. See, that was the whole point of those experiments we were doing. If we work in the real world it can’t come back to bite us. We just record. If we make a change here and it doesn’t converge it might change us too -- then how are we gonna’ know we’ve changed anything in the first place?”

*shimmer.* “Okay, okay, I don’t think we need to understand all that,” said Nicholas. “What do we do to go back home?”

Gannondorf looked down from the elevated administration platform. “In principle we could extract you from the model management database but it’s actually much easier to scan and match. However, that will take time. We must manage our resources prudently during the crisis.” He removed his black fedora and placed it on the hat rack next to his chair. “Melder, what is the status of the attacking forces?”

One of the three human-sized raccoons next to Tennyson looked up from his control station. “I’m sorry, sir, that’s too ill-defined a question for a subhuman such as myself. Can you be more specific?”

“My apologies, inferior animal being,” replied Gannondorf. “I will simplify my discourse for your mediocre abilities. What attacking forces if any represent an immediate danger to us here in the Recreation Center? By immediate I mean within the time required to scan these children, roughly fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you, Master Gannondorf. To answer your query, Princess Zelda’s squadrons are engaged with Black Hole Army force four above the helix and represent no threat to enter the Center in the time you cited. Skolar the Star Spirit appears to have warped into the drainage system surrounding level four annulus seventeen, which is surprising given the aversion that Star Spirits have for unsanitary conditions. He may be able to reach us but must proceed slowly. Invading Paratroopas from torus nine have penetrated several radials where their progress appears to have been arrested by a force of Toads and Koopas under Queen Peach’s adjutant, ParaMetrics. Finally, the invasion of television correspondents in the Pokemon Silver conference room has been dealt with as you suggested by providing refreshments and a hosted bar in the adjoining Pokemon Gold room. This measure has also neutralized Upper Management. They

appear to be quite occupied and unlikely to enter the facility soon.”

“Excellent,” said Gannondorf. “Return to your appointed tasks.” He spun the administration platform back to face Nicholas. “You heard the summary. I deem the situation justifies five thousand coins. Payable now, we hardly have time to banter.”

“Five thousand!” said Brian. “You just settled on thirty-five hundred! What kind of double dealing are you up to?”

“I hardly think you’re in a position to complain,” replied Gannondorf. “How else do you plan to get home?”

“I hardly think you’re in a position to jerk us around on prices,” said Nicholas, squeezing off a burst from his assault rifle. Gannondorf ducked involuntarily as the shells screamed a handsbreadth over his head. “If we can’t go home you’re no use to us.” *shimmer.*

“Fine, fine, we’ll split the difference,” interrupted Boo, scratching his nose with a pair of wire strippers. “Eleven thousand. No sense getting unhinged over it all. Nobody’s going anywhere until I get this panel reconnected anyway.” His dirty coveralls caught on the edge of the partially blasted metal cover behind the drying station and tore as he knelt down to shove a ribbon cable back into place.

“That’s more like it,” said Nicholas, replacing the blaster in his holster. “Jones?”

Tennyson nodded. “I think we’ve reached a mutually acceptable arrangement with Fuzz T, thanks in no small part to your demonstration yesterday. Diplomacy is always most effective when there’s a bit of steel behind it. It should be safe to proceed.”

Nicholas turned back to where the rest of the squadron waited, still crouched atop the entry slide from where they could threaten the whole of the long audience room. “Ladies and gentlemen, we’re going home at long last. Chang, make the transfer from our accounts. Marth, keep the squad up there, and assign one rifleman to each entrance as well. We’re going to bring you down one by one to scan into the transporter, then we’ll all go at once when the destination is verified. No sense risking anything when we’re this close.”

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James McCloud spun his agile little A-wing and jammed the thrust lever to the floor. He

accelerated past the startled ex-Jedi as the X-wing tried to yaw to bring its lasers to bear. The force of the turn pressed James back into his chair, hard: it seemed to him that the edges of his vision shimmered subtly. *First sign of a blackout*, he thought as he turned up the gravity assist -- a waste of precious combat power. *I must be getting old*. The momentary loss of attention was enough for positions to be reversed. *Damn fool, what will I do now?* He twisted the controls hard down but the X-wing tracked his spiral, firing blaster bolts uncomfortably near his vulnerable missing belly shield. He tried an inverted loop but he came out of the maneuver staring right into the enemies eyes: the sneaky scum had anticipated the move and was waiting for him. James uselessly fired his remaining torpedo and waited for the inevitable bolt.

*Blam!* The destruction was actually quite silent, for it was the X-wing that flew apart into the vacuum of space rather than his own ship. Out of the corner of his eye he got a glimpse of a familiar face as the rescuer shot by at incredible relative speed almost close enough to touch. He flipped on his open comm link.

“Thanks, son.”

“Don’t mention it, Dad,” said Fox. The familiar cocky smile of Fox McCloud appeared on his video screen, beneath his signature mustache and tousled mop of orange banks.

“And clean up your room!” added James.

“No way, Dad,” said Fox, winking. “Remember I’m getting married when we get back, and moving out for good.”

“It’s about time. Well, that was the last of them. A pathetic attack. What could they have been thinking? Hardly a force to threaten the best-defended station in the Galaxy.”

“I think it was just a feint, Dad. The real threat is within the Government itself.”

“That again? Not while the Priesthood remains true. Bless the Ark and the Temple!”

“Bless the Ark and Temple. But remember what the High Priestess said.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it. Besides, anyone trying will have to go through Warmistress Clara. You had a hand in her training: you know just how likely that is.”

“Well, we’d better get back to base in any case. I’m just about out of juice and we need

to be ready in case they try again. Good hunting, Father!” *shimmer...*

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“Come forward, Master Skolar. Speak your piece.” The Queen graciously rose in the presence of the Star Spirit.

“You see,” said Neville, the court Chamberlain, to the Page Toads. “Each person in the dispute is granted a certain time in which to make their case. Thus the opportunity shall come round to us as well, and we shall have a piece in our time.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” Skolar intentionally allowed his radiance to grow to full brightness, overwhelming the sight of even those seated in top rows of the gallery in the huge audience room that filled the center of Ark. The Queen was the exception; she managed to don shades in a fashion so elegant even the most exacting diplomat could not have found an insult. “Everyone is no doubt aware of the years we Star Spirits have devoted to study and contemplation of our worlds. When we deign to speak, it is not frivolously but with the certainty of deepest thought and thorough argument. Therefore it is with the greatest reluctance that we weigh in upon an issue so fraught with controversy, yet our duty compels us to share our discoveries with our peers and inferiors. In short, ladies, gentlemen, and creatures of the court, let me state without equivocation that the accepted explanation of the origins of our worlds -- to wit, that they are the descendants of recreational activities undertaken by the children of the Gods, of unexplained and inexplicable proclivities, of which our quadrennial Vidiomatic Games are the pale imitation -- is nothing but a preposterous canard, an invention, a pointless creation myth without substance or support.”

The towering chamber rang with the horrified gasps of the occupants. Some of the younger ladies took the opportunity to faint conveniently into the arms of favored gentlemen. Lady Dipsey, the High Priestess, rose from the lotus position to float above her pedestal and spoke in a magically amplified whisper that reached every ear: “*Heresy!*” The crowd moved forward, many brandishing their weapons; it was all the Yoshies of the Guard could do to keep them from the audience floor. Shouts of “Annihilation! Annihilation!” began to echo through the room.

Nicholas, the Captain of the Guard, tossed back his blue bangs and glanced at the Queen, almost the only occupant of the chambers who remained calm. She lowered her sun glasses to meet his gaze and nodded slightly. He leapt down from his niche high on the Great Black Pillar of the Temple, closely followed by Marth and Roy. The sight of the three most feared

swordsmen in the known worlds advancing shoulder to shoulder had its desired effect, cooling the ardor of the crowd for combat, at least for the moment. In the brief lull, the Queen stepped forward and spoke in a great voice: “It would seem the courtesy of our Hall is lessened of late, that the Wise may not speak without an unseemly cacophony arising. Be still! lest I require of my Captains that they clear the Hall.”

Off to the Queen’s left, where the feast tables were set, a dryite powdered Cane’s forehead where he had begun to sweat under the hot lights. While the crowd screamed, he started work on the next shot: “We’re going to pan over the pot roast to the chopped liver, right? Okay, here we go. ‘Welcome back, folks, to the Food Channel, for tonight’s special presentation of Vittles of the Rich and Powerful, direct from the High Audience Room of the Temple of the Ark. I’m your host, Herman ‘Barry’ Wizoski, and as always I’ll be taking advantage of policy debates, criminal investigations, and similar irrelevant distractions to sample the wares so that you can vicariously share in my sincere enjoyment. As you can see, this evening’s first course includes a delectable dienonychus loin in a bed of peppercorns and seaweed, basted in extract of nightflower, slow-roasted over fire sprites imprisoned for lack of arson.’” Cane leaned over the steaming meat and removed a small slice with his entrainment gun. “I’ll just have a bite (*mrmph cruunnch gulp*) -- astonishing! The perfect balance of lanthanides and actinides! Chef Jacques has absolutely outdone himself, folks. I wish you could all take a chunk out of that roast, but then there wouldn’t be enough for me!”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Skolar continued, not deigning to notice the disturbances. “To continue: it is absolutely clear that our worlds, far from being a recent invention, are of immense antiquity. The accumulation of geologic computation necessary to produce the features of, for example, the spice mines of Kessel is a matter not of minutes but of uncounted millennia. The islands of Delfino, Mambrino, Langostino, and Keeno are the visible result of millions of years of eruptions as the Cocoa plate drifts over the Immobile T. hotspot. Recent archaeological discoveries confirm the existence of early, primitive forms of the genus *yoshinoya*, with non-extensible tongues and an ingenious sense of humor. In short, innumerable lines of evidence force us to conclude that our worlds are the result of evolutionary processes acting over vast spans of time, rather than the mysterious and unexplained whims of juvenile delinquent deities.”

“We occupants of Star Haven are fully aware that these observations strike at the very heart of our culture and institutions. It is obvious to any thinking creature that a frivolous debasement of what had heretofore been sacred is an invitation to the self-interested questioning of every social duty and obligation, unless icons of similar power and profundity are substituted for that which had been lost. It is with these considerations in mind that we therefore advance the following proposals, to be adopted jointly: first, that while worship at the Temple may

continue for those who will, we should no longer teach or promulgate the doctrine that the Temple of Ark is the source and wellspring of Re-Creation, or that worship there will provide protection or advancement for the faithful. Second, that in order to fill the vacuum of reverence that may thereby result, we offer Star Haven, the premier center of knowledge and study for all of the worlds, as the proper goal of the Holy Pilgrimages, and agree that the inferior denizens of the other worlds may come to worship the Star Spirits as the incarnate paragons of wisdom and power. This, then, is our position. We thank you, Your Highness, for this opportunity to present our case.” The Star Spirit dimmed to his customary radiance, and retreated from the Scanning Platform to a mixture of hisses, insults, and scattered applause.

Peach raised her sceptre for silence. “Before the debate continues, our Minister of Science and Education will address the validity of the factual assertions advanced by the Radiant One.”

Brian drew a deep breath, straightened the tassel on his mortarboard cap, and strode onto the Platform, his long black robes swirling. ‘Shhh’ echoed through the hall, as people leaned forward in anticipation. Brian unfolded a ceremonial parchment roll and spoke:

“Your Highness, in response to your request, my staff and I have carefully reviewed the documents provided by Skolar and his colleagues. We have exposed seven logical contradictions, which are detailed in the documents posted to our network site, and have been communicated to Star Haven. However, none of these are of such significance as to invalidate the main conclusions of the research. We have independently verified ten of the key factual observations that bear upon the argument, including the analysis of fossilized ancient Pokemon, evidence for tectonic action on Pop Star, and others detailed in our posted responses. Our analysis generally supports the conclusions of the Skolar report. Of course, we have taken no position on consequent policy recommendations.”

The Queen, after a brief conversation with her Chief of Staff, stood again and spoke: “The representative of Wendy’s Worlds shall come forward, if he be present!”

*Oooh’s and aaah’s* echoed through the huge hall as the distance beige ceiling suddenly turned into a mass of swirling colors, while the too-familiar refrain of *The World is Wendy’s After All* rose from a hundred hidden speakers:

*It’s a world of sun  
It’s a world of snow  
You can get there riding a UFO*

*If for fun you should yearn  
And you've got cash to burn  
Come to Wen-dy's World!*

At first the nature of the colored cloud was obscure, but with the passing of a moment it became clear that thousands of brilliantly hued balloons had been released from the upper reaches of the chamber, and were slowly descending towards the crowd gathered below. Within the sinking mass of spheroids an initially mysterious influence gave rise to localized chaotic swirling disturbances in the uniform descent; as the balloons neared the watchers the source of this variation was revealed as Sir Erin Hollin, hanging from a parafoil bearing the yellow and orange striped *Wendy's Worlds of Wonder* logo, burst out of a screen of roiling balloons and glided to a running stop on the audience hall before the Queen. The dramatic entrance was almost spoiled when the parafoil harness got stuck on the corner of the embossed 'W' on Erin's costume, snagging the nose cord and causing the lifting structure to plummet to the floor just in front of Erin, but he rescued the situation with a flying double somersault over the wing, making up in enthusiasm whatever it lacked in grace, ending up with Erin (slightly tangled in the rear support lines) standing atop the kite like a hunter with his kill. Applause filled the hall, though how much was for Erin and how much for the coincident ending of the music after the sixth repetition of *see the World of Wendy now!* is hard to say.

"I should have known that your absence from the Speaker's Alcove was indicative of yet another gratuitous advertising display," said the Queen. "Nevertheless, speak if you will, though your reputation shows that my permission to do so is hardly necessary. I do hope that we shall be spared another infomercial."

"Why, Your Majesty, Gratuitous is my middle name!" said Erin, still disentangling himself from the lift harness. "As a major financial contributor to the Temple Improvement Fund, we are incredibly grateful to be given the opportunity to participate in this great debate. Ladies, Gents, and Sundry Other Folks, at Wendy's Worlds we have made not just a profession but a way of life out of manufacturing a reality that's better than the real thing!" He kicked the parafoil aside and strode up onto the Scanning Platform as he spoke. "In the words of our founder, Wendy Lane, 'Imagination is more important than knowledge', and I would like to add that it's a heckuva lot more fun as well. We all heard the *words* of that Star Spirit fellow, but what did you think about the *Spirit*? I'll tell you what I thought: he's *boring*! How many of you really want to devote your valuable lives to figuring out whether this experiment is correct or that fossil is longer than it ought to be or some logical argument assumes its consequences? How many of you really want to turn into Minister Brian the Dull? I didn't think so. Who knows if Skolar is right? Who cares? Let's face it, his world is a boring world, after all! How does he

know he's right anyway? What if, for example, the whole world and everything in it is just a big computer model *programmed* to look like it evolved? What if, well, the worlds *started out* as video game worlds but then some out-of-control computer nerd got hold of the code and started messing with it, and of course he didn't remember which GO TO went where, and pretty soon the changes got out of hand, and then of course you have to end up with a world that *looks* like it has a magic temple instead of a computer model because if you can find the model somebody's going to change it, so that the only stable universe is the one where everyone thinks everything is inevitable and can't be changed even though it isn't and it can!"

"This is preposterous!" boomed Skolar, glowing so brightly the After-Speaker Dinner Mints melted all over the arm of Luigi, the Maitre d'Hotel, who was forced to retreat in shame to the dressing room. "There is not one shred of evidence for this implausible invention. What about Occam's razor? What about explanatory and predictive power? How can we allow this absurdity to continue?"

"Really, it's perfectly ridiculous to imagine a computer programmer making unauthorized changes in computer codes," added Gannondorf, the Master of the Royal Database. "Hear Hear!" shouted Boo and the Boobs, who were tuning their instruments in the wings.

"If you please!" interrupted the Queen. "The members of the audience shall be silent!"

"Thank you, your Majesty," Erin continued with a bow in Peach's direction. "Good folk of the Kingdom, can you really say that my world is any less preposterous than Skolar's? Can you really imagine we would wait fifty million years for Isle Delfino to rise from the sea and then complain about waiting ten more minutes for room service? I don't know what the truth is, and if it's dull I don't care! And neither should you! I say let's use Occam's razor to slice the Star Spirits' report and dump it into an unstable orbit with the rest of the rubbish! Do you want to spend your lives making repetitive pointless measurements of humidity and particle counts, or do the Rain Gain Dance with High Priestess Dipsey in her halter top? Oops, I hope Wendy wasn't listening to that one. Join me in reaffirming the principles that have made our Kingdom the Best of All Possible Worlds: Invention is more important than Investigation, Belief is better than Inquiry, and Tradition transcends Truth!" Deafening applause echoed from the distant ceiling to the Sacred Swamp, as Wendy herself, flying down the Golden Helix at frightening speed on her rocket-powered snowboard, waved to the crowd below. Just above the last turn of the Helix she flew off into the air, circled once above the Scanning Platform, and then dipped to snag Erin's lifting harness on the skeg of her board. Unfortunately, the impact of this spectacular exit was somewhat reduced as Erin's harness slipped, causing him to hang suspended by his feet from the board as it rocketed back upwards toward the apex of the chamber, but he waved cheerily all

the while.

Clara shivered with something other than cold. “How in the name of Ark did he know?” she whispered to herself. She was in her wonted guard position, above and to the left of the Queen, in a little alcove reserved for her use during public events. She had awakened that morning in a cold sweat, after a very strange dream in which she was a child, attending a pointless school where fighting was forbidden, and no combat arts but only useless academic curiosities were taught. The convoluted and mysterious path of the dreamworld had quickly slipped from her memory, but the vivid image of Database Master Gannondorf, dressed in a cape and a bizarre red bandanna, had haunted her all that morning, as had the rhyme the dream programmer recited:

*Change the worlds with lightning speed  
But who can tell where changes lead?  
Everything's in my control  
Except the wellspring of my soul.*

She knew it was senseless but again and again she had puzzled over the meaningless ditty, even to the point of allowing her mind to wander while on guard.

“He doesn’t know anything, of course. It’s just another of his wild flights of fancy. Only you and I remember.” Shaken from her pointless reverie, Clara whirled and focused the SOCOM cannon embedded in her right glove while simultaneously extending the beamsword in her left, but the diminutive armless creature that had somehow entered her private niche seemed to represent no immediate threat.

“How did you get here?” she said pointlessly. “No one but me is allowed. Get out.” Only the Ocarina could open the entrance to the alcove, and she could feel it safe by her hip. *The real question is, how could I have allowed anything or anyone so close to me for so long without noticing? What madness has overtaken me?*

“Clara Dumont, it is remarkable how certain essential aspects of the multiverse are invariant to the most drastic re-creation,” continued the big-nosed invader. “For example, we’ve known each other in countless alternate realities, and never once in any manifold of existence have you had anything nice to say to me.”

“What are you prattling about? I’ve never seen you or anyone like you before.” *Have I?* Whisps of recollection floated on the edge of her consciousness. She forced her attention back to the floor below, where Kent of Vineyard Town had taken the platform to speak. *We’ve had*

*reports of Conker attempting to enter Ark. The Masterspy. He is clever. I must be wary.*

“Saturn, sometimes Mister,” said the creature. “There is no one like me, not in this reality. You’ll understand, of course, that that’s my problem. I had a family, you see. Once upon another time in another place. I’ve been searching for them, or more properly searching for how to return them to being. I just about had things figured out when that idiot Boo decided to give Nicholas a free blow-dry. How was I to know everything was metastable? Obvious in retrospect, of course. The only way to have a persistent world in the face of the possibility of change is to remove that possibility. To reduce the power of the ubermodel to an ineffectual ritual in an irrelevant temple, so that no one can affect anything and everyone is happy, more or less.”

“I’ve heard enough heresy for one day already!” Clara hissed through gritted teeth. “Get out or by Ark I’ll slice you to ribbons.” But they both knew her threat was empty.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. You see, you’re my last chance. You’re the only person who can at least get me back to where I was. You have the Ocarina. I know the song.”

*What does this dwarf know that gives him a knife to plunge into my heart?* “The Ocarina?” she replied with forced contempt. “Where did you get such ridiculous nonsense? Everyone knows it’s been lost for years.”

Saturn chuckled. “Not hardly. Though it’s still open to interpretation whether Zelda gave it to you in a fit of maternal affection quickly regretted, or you stole it, or Luigi was the real thief and you seduced him. Not that I really care. It’s in the hidden pocket beneath your backup life-support monitor board. You used to keep it on your breast, until Tennyson got too curious.”

Clara said nothing. Tennyson, Peach’s Ambassador to the Nook Leagues, had been her lover through most of the previous year, though recently a certain chill had grown between them, and he seemed to her to be spending entirely too much time with Melody, the comely court composer-in-residence. She had known from the first the affair was ill-advised: a bounty hunter and mercenary can’t afford to have anyone know too much about her. She had thought of killing him herself, though as he was a favorite of the Queen this was perhaps bad for business, or of contracting the work to the Jennys, but something had held her back. Kent’s voice flirted at the edge of her consciousness, adding to her confusion and uncertainty.

“Good subjects and allied folk, the People of the Harvest are grateful for this opportunity to speak, and I am deeply honored to have been asked to speak for them. I’ll be brief, I assure

you. Does Skolar speak the truth? I am but a humble vintner, no one to challenge the greatest mind of our age. I am not here to question the facts but to speak to the truth in our hearts. Let the wise explore the world as they will, let their knowledge grow broad and deep, for it harms no one to know that which is. But let us also preserve the ways that bring solace to our souls, for true faith is not derived or constructed, but founded in the love of the faithful. The beauty of the Temple is in the devotion of those who worship it. Our belief is not founded on fact and cannot be confounded by it, nor can reason ever supply the reason to supplant our beliefs. My good friend Sir Hollin said that imagination is more important than knowledge, but I will tell you that belief is mightier still, for without it imagination never becomes reality. We are good plain folks, unafraid to change that which needs changing, but leave us also the room to preserve that which should be remembered by our children and theirs.”

“This is hardly the time,” said Clara to Saturn. “Come to me tonight, when the Queen has returned to her safe haven.”

“This is most definitely the time, my dear girl, since we only have at most a few minutes before Zelda arrives, aiming to cut you and the Queen into little slices to be served with melon and berry pie on this evening’s Food Channel Midnight Snack Live. I imagine Cane -- excuse me, Barry -- will display his usual bad judgment and find you in good taste.”

“Sensei? Here? You’re wasting my time. The McClouds dispatched that pathetic invasion force without even breaking a sweat. There is no way she could possibly get close to the station.”

“You still hold some affection for your first teacher, I see. That attack was, of course, a feint. Zelda has her ways of -- oh, my. Too late.”

“What?” Clara leaned over the parapet, scanning the crowd with her eyes and the various instruments mounted in her helmet, but could detect nothing out of the ordinary.

“There, by the Kalle Demos. Dressed as a shy guy, but no shy guy walks like that.”

Her attention properly directed, she immediately recognized the gait of the figure visible by reflection from the polished black of the pillar. “Priestess save us, it’s him!” The disguised Conker was even then kneeling down next to the Three Symbols that guarded the entrance to the Temple sanctuary. No weapon she bore could reach him in time through the screening columns, not without danger of destroying the Temple itself. Casting security to the wind, she turned her helmet speaker to full and screamed: “*Nicholas! Marth! AT THE SANCTUARY DOOR!*”

On the floor below, Nicholas had been busy restraining Sonic, who as the Stepmaster of the Temperance Crusade, was incensed that a vintner had been allowed to speak and he had not. One glance sufficed to apprise the Captain of the desperate situation, but how could he possibly get there in time? Fortunately, Sonic followed his gaze and saw what he saw. "Get on!" shouted the hedgehog, and with Nicholas on his back the creature burst with unmatched speed across the crowded floor towards the Temple. The unlikely pair flashed by the no-longer-covert agent so rapidly that no one else saw more than a blur. No other swordsman could have made that stroke: neck cleanly severed, the costume ripped apart to reveal the furred body as the giant squirrel's head flew to the floor, spewing blood.

But it was too late. Conker's inert body slumped to the side, revealing the Medallion of Shadow, safely ensconced in the heretofore-mysterious hexagonal recess at the base of the Pillar of the Millennium. A swirling darkness gathered around the talisman. "Shields!" shouted the Queen; Clara had anticipated her and she and Saturn were already surrounded by a glimmering bubble. Protective energy walls had barely begun to expand around the Queen and the audience chambers when a shockwave of blackness burst from the front of the Temple and filled the chamber, roiling in turbulent waves up the walls until it was lost in the distance above. Where the Symbols had been a huge tunnel into nothing had opened, and from the entrance the huge inchoate mass of a sand golem burst as if shot from a giant cannon straight at Clara's concealed alcove: *Damn, they've done their homework*, she thought. Immediately behind the golem, a horde of rocket-borne warriors dressed in green plunged out of the opening, wielding blasters and bomb throwers, with Zelda at their head mounted on a great metal wing. Behind them lumbered a collection of slower-moving but potentially fearsome creatures -- big scaly Dodongos, scaly Lizalfos, horrific zombie-like Skulltulas, with a few Poes drifting in behind hoping to frighten the uninformed.

Chaos reigned within the crowded audience area, but the scant few seconds it took for the attacking force to find their bearings were sufficient for Nicholas to organize a defense from the guard tower whence Sonic had carried him. The black-uniformed troops of the guard, always on call at the periphery, were already deploying from the thirty doors that ringed the Grand Hall; accurate rifle and Q-laser fire forced the attackers to deploy their own shields, neutralizing their blasters. From the After Speakers room Skolar launched a star storm attack at the Deku Bob Brigade in the vanguard of the attacking force. Nicholas and Roy led a pincers of guard squadrons around the Pillar from both sides, aiming to reach the Medallion and destroy it, leaving the invaders stranded.

In the general disorder the Queen was left undefended except for the area shield and the

sidearms she always kept by the throne. As she drew her beam sword, Kent, apprising the situation from where he still stood on the Scanning Platform directly before the throne, rushed to take her side.

“My good Vintner,” the Queen said, her eyes bright with affection despite the desperate circumstances, “you are as honest and true a subject as any ruler could wish for, but no account has made you a warrior, save in the cause of well-aged Zinfandel. Get to safety!”

“By your leave, Your Majesty,” replied Kent, taking an assault rifle from the cache, “it’s certainly been a while but I’ve done a bit of target practice now and again. Extra clips?”

The Queen laughed and pushed a heavy box towards him with her foot as she drew a long-barreled pistol with her left hand. “She’ll have a drill to pierce the shield. When it gets through there’s a moment we can fire straight back up the vortex, but be quick or you’ll get a hole drilled in you as well.”

None too soon: the two turned to see that Zelda had managed to free herself from the maelstrom of battle and was flying straight towards the throne. Her amplified voice filled the Hall above the surging noise of conflict: “No true Queen could stand for such blasphemy! Your idiot debate offends the very fiber of our worlds. Abdicate now or be destroyed.”

“You always had a flare for drama over substance,” Peach replied. “You should have pursued a career on the stage.” She knelt slightly and whispered to Kent, barely moving her lips: “She’s going to attack the null between the two generator fields, under the center of the pennant. When she does, jump on the throne and I shall take the side table.” She smiled again. “It’s all right, I give you permission.” A narrow cone of intense violet radiance burst out from the tip of Zelda’s craft, and gnawed with bursts of crackling sparks into the blue glow of the shield. Zelda held the drill tip precisely at the phase null point between the generators, all the while guiding her sled in a complex figure-8 to avoid the fire from Paratroopas under ParaMetrics, who had realized the danger but were trapped across the Hall. The Queen spun gracefully but swiftly atop the table next to the throne, sweeping aside documents of state; Kent leapt more awkwardly onto the throne and put the rifle to his shoulder as the maw of the drill crackled and snapped. The deafening noise overwhelmed the ratatat of the defenders as they directed rapid fire into the center of the maelstrom. Several bullets got through, spanging off the control panel dangerously close to Zelda, but then the shield failed completely. Peach screamed “out!” and dove behind the throne, but Kent continued to fire until the drill burst through the shield into the throne, slicing a sizable chunk of his abdomen out in the process.

Clara found herself surrounded by the huge thrashing golem. The soft sand absorbed the energy of her grenades; her blaster cannon fused the grains into a glass that shattered again, leaving the monster unharmed. Her beamsword sliced effortlessly through the yielding substance of the creature, but the sand flowed back just as readily to heal the breach, leaving her no better off. She tried to use her suit rockets to get free but it was like running through a dune, with powder blasting every direction and her going nowhere. She felt frustration rising, a monster more dangerous than the golem, when a motion caught her eye: high on the flagpole that held the Queen's Pennant, almost directly above her, Science Minister Chang, still garbed in his formal black robes, was scaling the narrow access ladder. He paused at the last rung to gauge the angle, and then leapt from the ladder rungs into the air. His long robes flapped and his mortarboard hat flew off, but he had aimed true: he landed unharmed, feet sinking deep into the sand where the golem's skull ought to have been. The monster quivered: the spell that bound it faded, and the sand poured out onto the Diplomat's Grove as the golem dissolved, bearing Brian gently back down to ground level. As Clara, finally unbound, fired her suit rockets to come to the aid of the Queen, Brian waved and shouted: "You jump on their heads!"

Near the dessert table, the key grip was struggling to keep his background lighting properly positioned as Cane, microphone in one hand and 9 mm automatic in the other, moved through a hail of gunfire towards the bundt cake with cinnamon swirl icing. "It's like a war zone in here, folks, between the proponents of these delectable (*blam!*) banana nut and oatmeal carrot bars, and the traditionalists holding out for (*pow! spaaang -- blam!*) almond-filled chocolate brownies on a bed of shredded coconut (*whoosh --blam! spat - pow!*). Whoah, that was a close one!" A small explosion shook the table, as Cane whirled on his heel and fired twice: two green-garbed attackers fell to the floor. Cane's smiling face, spattered with red, turned back to the camera: "Mmmm, raspberry brandy sherbet," he said, licking some of the liquid shrapnel off his fingers. "Your correspondent is saddened to report that this is all that's left of the raspberry frosted pincushion torte. And now a word from our sponsor, Olimar's Olive Alternatives, when an olive is just too big."

As soon as Clara's form rounded the shrinking pile of sand, Zelda turned her attention away from destroying the Queen to the more immediate threat, launching an ice beam from the nose of her craft as she pulled it into a tight climbing spiral. Clara deflected the attack with a wave buster and fired a homing missile in response, the latter intercepted in turn by a plasma blast from the portable cannon Zelda wielded with her right hand. In moments the two were engaged in a battle the like of which had never been seen before: flamethrowers, charge beams, blaster bolts, wave beams, and phazon blasters followed in quick succession as the combatants wielded and dove, one moment high in the air above the audience, the next flashing at insane speeds so close to the deck that soldiers leapt into the air above them. At one glance, Clara had

turned her suit into a morph ball and was rolling down the surface of the Millennium Pillar like an incoming meteorite, morph bombs falling behind her to discomfit the pursuing Zelda; the watchers blinked their eyes and the positions were reversed, the jet wing spiraling towards the outer walls in dizzyingly eccentric interwoven helices while Clara mirrored every evasive maneuver.

Slightly shielded from the chaos by the remains of the Mario Mocha stand (which had taken a java bomb in the first moments of the attack), Gannondorf had remained at his post, supervising the sensor networks which were recording the attack for potential analysis by an unconcerned posterity. As Zelda and Clara flashed overhead, a cheerful slim fellow wearing a floppy green pointed hat cocked at a jaunty angle led a small group of similarly-garbed folk between the remains of the roaster and the espresso machine support column. They bore a motley assortment of tripods, cameras, microphones, and recording machines. Gannondorf looked up from his keyboard and called to the leader: “Link! What in the name of loop errors are you doing here?”

“Gannondorf!” Link pulled up the remains of a chair and sat down by Gannondorf, doffing his cap and wiping the sweat from his brow with a silk kerchief bearing a monogrammed *B.B* as he sipped from a still-steaming paper cup saved from the ruin. “Whew! It’s been a passel of years, hasn’t it! What am I doing here? Come now, you know the old girl always wants everything recorded for history’s sake. We’re what’s left of the film crew.” He stood back up and called loudly: “Okay, let’s roll! Skull Kid, Deku Scrub, you’ve got the throne area. Saria, Malon, tracking shots of Zelda, long lens. Ruto, Talon, I want some dramatic views of the exit tunnel as Gerudo Squadron comes out. Make it count, people, we don’t get a retake!” He turned back to Gannondorf. “Hey, buddy, you don’t suppose we could share some footage with you? I imagine you’ve got cameras planted all over the facility?”

Gannondorf shook his head and laughed. “Sure, sure. My, can you believe it? Here we are sharing files and drinking coffee together. It wasn’t so long ago you were trying to separate my head from my shoulders!”

“Yeah, yeah, what about that spell you hit me with at the Forsaken Fortress? I couldn’t eat for a week! You got any Lon Lon milk here, I hate Delfino grind black.”

“Here you go. Ah, those were the days, alright.”

“What happened? I mean, you had your own castle, what made you change?”

“Do you have any idea how expensive a castle is? I was going broke just paying the cleaning service! Now I have a regular paycheck, benefits, a pension, and I get to go home at seven every night.”

“I don’t know if the Princess is going to honor retirement obligations,” laughed Link. He pulled a pair of binoculars from his pack and searched a moment for the hurtling figures of Zelda and Clara, at this point circling the Millennium Pillar about half way to the ceiling. “Whoah! That was close.”

“What happened?” asked Gannondorf. “Let me pull this up.” He turned to his screen, which was soon tiled with divers images from various monitor cameras throughout the facility. “Oh, there they are. Wow!”

“Yeah, I’ve never seen her miss so badly with Din’s Fire,” said Link. “She’s already tried a Nayru, but it takes too long: Clara is so fast that she’s firing behind the blast waves! Look at that -- missed the Princess’ head by a whisker!” The battling pair headed straight for the cafe, flying low over the deck. Link reached into a cloth bag next to his pack and withdrew a bundle of arrow-shaped missiles. He stood and tossed them as high as he could in the air as Zelda’s craft screamed over his head. “Here you go, Your Highness!” Clara boomed by a moment later, her rocket blast nicely roasting the outermost beans in a pile of Avalanche Valley Blend. Link sat down and turned back to Gannondorf: “She never remembers to reload the projectile launcher.”

“What was that?” said Gannondorf, watching his monitor. “A little green thing and then she sort of disappeared. Was that my camera?”

“No, it’s Farore’s wind, short-range teleporter. Beautiful, now she’s on Clara’s tail.” He turned to shout to his crew: “Are you getting all this, Saria? It’s one mother of a battle! We’ll fill with some of Gann’s images at editing!” Binoculars back to his eyes: “What a roll! Clara’s back in the driver’s seat. Hmm, there goes Farore again -- now Clara’s on to it, you can’t go to the well twice, Zelda my dear.”

By this time the pair had reached the outer edge of the huge cylindrical chamber. “Turn down, turn down!” said Link to himself. “Oh, no, she went up. Hosed. I’ve told her a hundred times she has five degrees more elevator deflection down.”

“Yep, there goes the grapple,” said Gannondorf. “What’s she doing to do now?” This was the opening Clara had been waiting for: she fired her grappling hook and latched onto the forward control surface of the flying wing. A twist and the line retracted, pulling her tight onto

the base of Zelda's craft. The Princess immediately dropped into a vertical plunge and then pulled up to skim the bumpy surface of the weapons storage facility, in an attempt to grind Clara into dust between the craft and the deck. Clara dropped the grapple and allowed herself to slide backwards, grasping the hinge of the craft's flush-mounted elevator with her left hand while she deployed her beam sword with her right. Buffeted by the jet exhaust, she swung almost blindly at Zelda's feet: the Princess leapt to avoid the stroke but in the process was distracted for just long enough to crash the wing directly into the first column of the outlying Shrine of NES. Zelda, realizing it was too late to save the craft, instantly released her harness and flew into the air as the craft exploded behind her, but Clara was just as quick and more adept in suit-jet maneuvering. Energy blade and alloy Material Blade clashed noisily as Zelda parried a head cut and Clara dodged the thrown Earth Dagger. "Traitorous bitch! I taught you everything you know and this is how you repay me!" Zelda shouted.

"You taught me what little you knew, it's true," replied Clara as she avoided Zelda's low thrust, beat the blade aside, and thrust in riposte while accelerating upward to create an angled attack impossible to parry. The blade hissed as it sliced flesh and armor with equal ease: Clara drew back as Zelda's suit rockets, stuck at full on, carried the dying warrior in a vast arc above the battle, her final flight ending in a distant flash as she struck the glistening black central pillar head-on. The *boom* of the explosion died slowly, repeatedly echoing from the chamber walls.

"What a finale!" sighed Link, draining the remainder of his Delfino Mountain Roast. "I'll tell you, Gann' ol' buddy, this is what documentary makers dream of! They were even yelling at each other there at the end, we can dub in some dialog or other. It doesn't get any better than this."

"Yeah, it must be tough," Gannondorf replied. "I mean, you just shoot what happens, right? You can't get retakes, you don't get to rewrite, you're stuck with the truth. Wouldn't it be somethin' if you could change the way things played out?" He chuckled to himself. "Well, that's silly, isn't it?"

Link laughed. "Oh, we have our ways. Little snippets of stuff taken out of context, a cooked piece of narration, invented background sounds: lots of ways for the creative film maker to add color to dull gray reality."

Clara descended to land just past the Scanning Platform, her rockets kicking up a little whirlwind as she touched down. She pulled off her helmet and wiped sweat from her eyes. She squinted as she regarded the discolored patch that marked Princess Zelda's demise. "At last," she said to herself, "Father will be impressed with me."

Tennyson had leapt up from where he had just closed Kent's staring eyes as she descended, and coming to her aid heard the remarks which had not, perhaps, been intended for his ears. "Father? Your father?"

"Of course my father." It was surprising to her how much she appreciated having someone with whom to share her triumph. "The deadliest warrior of the known worlds dispatched without a scratch. He can't dismiss me any longer."

Tennyson took her gloved hand in his, a familiarity she had of late rarely tolerated. "Clara -- your father is dead, don't you remember? Two years ago. Moon Mountain." Clara shivered with an inner chill. She clearly remembered the heated argument, the unplanned stroke of her armored fist, the face overwhelmed not with fear but contempt as he plummeted down the sheer drop in a world where no one was replaced -- and yet equally valid, equally real, she saw a stricter, older, taller man, sadly commenting on the very poor grades of a very clever girl who struggled to hold back her tears. A disorienting nausea overwhelmed her: her memory bifurcated at every point into two separate coequal lives, one laid on the other: and each image she recalled branched further into variants, each with its own precursor memories, everything just as real, everything just as dreamlike. Had she ever lived or just imagined it?

"It's a bit much, isn't it?" Saturn was waddling across the ruins of the Guest Retirement Room towards the throne. "You haven't really accumulated the intellectual tools to deal with this sort of ambiguity, you've been too busy fighting and killing. Maybe you ought to reconsider my offer. One life, even if not entirely satisfactory, is in some ways superior to innumerable repetitions of failure. Shall we go back?"

Clara made no answer, for at that moment the Queen, having assured herself that Nicholas' forces would soon recover control of the situation, placed her beamsword hilts on Kent's perforated chest and began to sing the dirge reserved for the passing of a great warrior. Tennyson, drawing Clara back up by her hand, added his clear tenor to the song. Clara had always regarded the Vintner with the contempt she reserved for non-combatants, but now she saw in her memory his generous and adventurous soul, the adventure she realized her father had dreamed of, dreams of, had given up for her sake. It was all too confusing. She was not given to singing but now she joined in mingled awe and grief:

*Their spirits glisten like waves in the sun  
As they cross the wide river when their day is done  
We cannot hold the water that flows to the sea*

*Though we cherish our friend in our memory  
They have travelled the road to where the soul is laid bare  
They will come to Ka Forya and depart from our care.*

“Ka Forya,” Clara whispered to herself, as the last note faded. She laughed though her eyes glistened with tears. “Ka Forya. I never understood it.”

“It’s the myth of the ending place where your true self is revealed,” said Minister Chang, who had descended from the flagpole to join the tribute to the departed Master Vintner. “Described in some detail in the fourth book of devotions as well as the Meditations of Aurelian. Though the etymology of the term is mysterious.”

Clara, who had never been on friendly terms with the Minister, took his hands in hers and looked in his eyes. “Brian, Brian. Ka Forya. *California*. It’s our home.” She reached into her hidden pocket and removed the Ocarina. It’s presence was not a surprise to Peach, and Tennyson had suspected, but the sight drew a gasp of amazement from the remainder of the crowd that had begun to gather around the throne as the battle ended.

Mr. Saturn, who had reached her feet, smiled. “Ready to go back?” Clara nodded and put the Ocarina to her lips. She had a moment’s struggle to extract the melody from Saturn’s three-part harmony, but her understanding grew clearer as she lost herself in the music. The world around her began to shimmer at the edges, glistening like sunlight reflected from the sea, and she could feel the water cascading around her until everything disappeared in an incomprehensible familiar turbulence, and she reached out for the wish that takes flight, and tumbled through the foul-smelling geyser into Kent’s surprised arms.

“Didn’t know you felt that way,” the boy said. “I thought you were sweet on Tennyson. What the heck were you doing in the drain anyway?”

“You’re alive,” Clara said, looking puzzled at his intact chest. They were in a curious, brightly lit room filled with tanks from which an assortment of plant life protruded; fountains of dirty water were gushing irregularly from what appeared to be the tank outlets.

“That was my line,” replied Kent. “I mean, I told Tennyson you’d get away but I’m not sure I believed it. How did you manage it?”

“It’s -- a long story.” The torrent of drain water seemed to subside for a moment, and then surged out again, leaving the floor flooded up to ankle level.

“The telling of which we ought to reserve for a future time, if we’d like there to be one,” interrupted Mr. Saturn, strolling into the hydroponics room from the corridor. “We have to stop King Boo before Nicholas gets dry! We appear to have about three minutes.”

“King Boo?” asked Kent. “He seemed like a nice enough fellow, for a ghost.”

“That may be true but he’s also reputed to be as stubborn as a Tauros,” replied Saturn. “You don’t happen to have a Poltergust buried in that pack, do you, Clara?”

“You need a vacuum cleaner?” asked Kent. “When we came in I noticed a room down the hall marked ‘JANITORIAL’ or something like that.”

“I’ll head over to the Scanning Room to try persuasion, or at least distraction,” said Saturn. “Meanwhile, I wonder if you and Kent could check this closet out, in case we need something more forceful?”

Clara nodded and pushed Kent towards the door; the dissonant sight of the living person and the memory of the so-recently-dead one lent an urgency to the proceedings that she could not readily explain to him. “Let’s go, hurry.” A short way back up the corridor, just before the vending machines, a little hallway marked JANITOR led to three non-descript yellow doors, each equipped with a keypad like that in the entry door from the lobby. The nearest door was labeled BROOM CLOSET, but Clara decided to check anyway, and was about to attempt the keypad when the door burst open of its own accord. Out rushed a huge mouse, about as tall as Clara, wearing a peaked hat and a cloak and carrying a hatchet. The mouse thrust the door closed behind him and leaned against it just in case. After a moment, he sighed and said, “Well, that’s that, I guess,” in a high voice. Then the door started to shake repetitively. From behind it an irritatingly familiar tune could faintly be heard. The mouse looked around furtively, then handed the hatchet to Clara and said, “Oh-oh, I gotta’ go, be seein’ ya!”

Not one to ignore an opportunity, Clara turned to the second door, labeled EQUIPMENT: a few strokes of the hatchet were sufficient to knock the flimsy door off its hinges, and she and Kent together were able to shove it out of the way. Inside were rows of dirty shelves containing buckets, mops, floor polishers, and other sundry cleaning gear. From beneath a rack of disk washers a familiar actuator arm protruded: Clara reached in and withdrew a beat-up but hopefully still serviceable Poltergust 8510 with low-noise attachments and built-in vector network analyzer, scattering bottles of spray-on hinge lube to the dirty floor. “Where is this scanning room place?”

“I don’t know exactly but they were heading that way when I left them,” Kent replied, glancing down the hall. “Come on, it can’t be far.” It seemed to her that the whole escapade had taken forever, but in fact they had only been delayed moments and actually caught up with Saturn, waddling as fast as he could, just as he reached the Scanning Room door.

Inside, they saw the misty form of a ghost drifting over to a keyboard: “A demonstration is in order, kid,” said the ghost.

“STOP HIM!” shouted Saturn.

“I wish I could,” replied Gannondorf, dressed just in Clara’s dream of the previous night that had also never happened and now perhaps never would: with practiced precision Clara swung the heavy vacuum onto her back and deployed the plush carpet attachment with auto-drive rollers right into where King Boo’s gut would have been had he still had one. For a brief moment the mechanism made an anguished screech as if it had sucked up a length of cloth. Clara reached back to the panel and spun the motor control full to the right. The rollers revved up and King Boo disappeared in a cloud of dust.

“Thank you, Clara,” said Mr. Saturn. “Now, where was I?” he added, as he floated onto a wheeled chair and took over the keyboard and monitor that Boo had been using.

“Nice to see you, too,” said Nicholas. “I mean Clara, of course,” the last with a glance at Mr. Saturn.

Tennyson jumped up and wrapped Clara in an embrace, vacuum and all. “You found her, how did you do it, that’s fantastic!” he said to Kent. Before even one of the many questions could be asked, Nicholas, still dripping, rushed to the open door and, turning to the others, made a slicing gesture at his throat that meant: SILENT! They could all hear the noise of people coming down the hall. The kids gathered what weapons they had left, except for Brian, who continued an increasingly intense discussion with Gannondorf on the operation of the scanning device. Clara reaching for her blaster cannon before remembering which existence was current. The defensive resources left to the kids were pretty thin, and Nicholas was beginning to wonder how to repel this last assault, but then Cane’s familiar bombast became audible:

“No, no, that was after I saved us from falling from the Pokefloats but before I defeated Conker and his bodyguards in the big battle outside Simba’s -- hey, there you are!” Cane, still covered with mud, appeared in the doorway, accompanied by a Toad wearing a headset and

carrying a clipboard, with a camera-bearing Yoshi just behind. Behind them Tennyson could see a number of other creatures familiar from the auditorium: apparently the press conference had either terminated or grown dull, freeing the attendees to search for additional footage and background. “Hey, this is great! Wow, Clara, did you bring me something to eat?” He charged into the room, followed by his pair of attendants. “This is Vanna T., she’s a reporter for the Food Channel!”

“Seventy-two on most gameworlds networks, fifty-three in Tales of Symphonia and one hundred ninety-eight in Fourside and Onett,” the Toad interrupted politely but forcefully. “Perhaps you remember me from my very successful sojourn with Chuck Quizmo, back in the early days before the quiz shows were fixed. Mister Wzoski has very kindly volunteered to provide an exclusive interview, focused of course on the culinary aspects of your sojourn, and has led me to hope that perhaps his colleagues would also be interested in entering an exclusive relationship with FCTV?”

“Cane, we’re kindof busy at the moment,” said Nicholas. Then, stopping himself, he turned to Brian and Gannondorf: “Are we busy, Brian?”

“Yes, go away, shut up,” said Gannondorf before Brian could reply, and returned to instructing his new student: “So you have to assemble the package with the resource fork and the data fork, go up two directories like this to get the list, you have to compile each time you run because of how we had to stick the parameters directly into the code, remember?” Brian nodded and the two heads practically bumped as they stared fixedly at the monitor. Nicholas figured it was an excellent time to go away and shut up.

“I think Gannondorf has decided that the quickest way to get rid of us is to send us back,” added Tennyson, as he tried to dry Clara’s soaked hair with his shirt.

“Confidentially, Cane is most likely the best source for saleable content,” said Mr. Saturn to Vanna, “at least while Erin is unavailable. Why don’t you just continue where you left off? Don’t mind us.”

“Right, that’s great, weren’t you going to get me a sandwich?” said Cane.

“Oh, sorry, I did say that, didn’t I?” replied Vanna. “Just a sec, lemme get to our caterer.” She flipped a switch on the microphone / recorder unit she carried at her belt and spoke: “Could you please add a double roast blowfish on rye with mustard and pickles, and a Moondrop Cola? Yes, we’re in -- where are we?”

“Scanning room,” said Nicholas.

“Oh, yes, I believe this is K11, corridor 3, inside the Secure area of the Recreation complex, you have the entry codes? Great, thanks.” She turned to her camera Yoshi: “Okay, let’s set back up over here by this pillar thing... why don’t you use that monitor stand? Do you need some fill lighting?” She directed Cane to sit on the scanning platform while she and the Yoshi bustled about arranging the cluttered contents of the room to fit some aesthetic criteria that Nicholas found quite mysterious. Kent, momentarily at loose ends, offered to hold a reflector panel just out of camera. The rumbling thunder of a series of explosions shook the walls.

Brian looked up from the monitor. “Okay, that seems pretty clear. We ought to get going, I guess.”

“An understatement from the master of them, Brian,” added Saturn. “Skolar is undoubtedly still on his way, though I haven’t located him yet. He has almost certainly decided to destroy the whole complex, and I’m afraid I need to ensure that he succeeds.”

“What?” said Nicholas. “Of course, I realize you aren’t really on our side, but -- didn’t you want this place too?”

“I can’t afford to allow the Recreation Center to survive -- any world with this capability is metastable to a world that lacks it. Though I hoped I’d have a chance to find what I wanted first. I’m afraid there’s no time to explain; you’ll have to ask Clara.”

“You know, I was wondering about that,” said Gannondorf, looking up from the keyboard. “But I didn’t show anyone those simulations. How did you know?”

“Experience, son,” replied Mr. Saturn.

“Clara?” Nicholas thought for a moment and then made up his mind. “Well, never mind, it’s what we wanted anyway. Brian, let’s go!”

“Who’s first?” asked Brian. “Oh, great, Cane, just move a little bit to the center of the platform there: perfect.” He took over at the keyboard and typed madly while Gannondorf supervised from over his shoulder.

Vanna and Cane were soon immersed in a description of the battle with Wolf in the

asteroids, though the details seemed wildly variant from Nicholas' memory. "Didn't Clara blow the kon-brite thing up?" he said to himself.

"It's chondrite, and no, not any more," said Mr. Saturn. "I think Clara played a b-flat at one point where there should have been a b-natural. So we haven't quite reconstructed a consistent reality, I'm afraid. In this world Cane did indeed do the secret flight while Clara did gunnery for Tennyson, but you remember the previous incarnation, though of course Cane would be telling the same exaggerated story no matter what the truth was. There must have been a dislocation in the multiverse but I haven't found it yet."

"Mister Saturn, it's been a really long day, and I just don't have the energy left to figure out what you're talking about," replied Nicholas. Saturn's bulbous nose momentarily turned brilliant violet as a net of laser beams shot out from the ceiling and the rim of the platform, swept rapidly over Cane, and as rapidly disappeared.

"Okay, you can get off now," said Brian. "Nicholas?" Vanna T. was less than pleased about having to rearrange the background -- "I'll have to do the whole thing over!" -- but a meaningful display of the beamsword cut the argument short.

"Come on, I'll give you a hand," said Kent, calming the Toad. The Yoshi said "Dibble dabble!" Vanna nodded and sighed. While the interview was restarted at the drink table near the door, Nicholas and Tennyson were scanned in short order. Then another pair of familiar voices was audible in the hallway:

"Did they have the roast beef?" said the cheerful female voice.

"No, I think it was the blowfish, over there underneath the mushroom chips." The door swung open to reveal Wendy guiding a large tray suspended in air by no visible means with her fingertips; at her side Erin was holding several sandwiches wrapped in paper and plastic glasses on a tray.

"All right!" said Cane, interrupting in mid-sentence his version of the encounter with the Black Hole Army (this one, according to Mr. Saturn, seriously embellished from even the current version of reality). "Erin, you have the best girlfriend in the world, she's always bringing me food! Can I like her too?"

"Hey, Clara!" said Erin, handing one of the sandwiches to Cane and the second to Vanna T. "Hi, Nicholas. Did you guys want something too? I think we have extras."

“Oh, yeah, that would be great,” said Nicholas, realizing how starved he was. He reached over to grab the proffered sausage and shroom sandwich, allowing Erin to see the little fellow who had been hidden at the terminal behind him.

“Mister Saturn!” exclaimed Erin. “Wow! Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I’m occupied, Erin, I’ll be with you in a moment.”

“But I need to talk to you!” He glanced furtively at Wendy. “I mean, I need some advice here.”

“Seems to me I’ve already done enough damage on that line.”

“That’s what I meant! I’m not quite ready for all the aspects of this relationship thing. I think I should have done some of the research for that girl’s bathroom special. Is there any way I can get three or four years older really fast?”

“There won’t be after Skolar gets here, which I’m sure will be soon though I haven’t found him yet.”

“What? I don’t get it. You mean there is something right now?”

Mr. Saturn pushed back from the workstation and turned to Erin, though the keys on the keyboard continued to *tap tap tappity tap* in his absence. “Erin, I remember things no one else does. I remember my family. I know I had parents and a kid brother -- you remind me of him, that’s why I like you. But they don’t exist in the past of this reality. I’ve spent a number of lives trying to find out what happened to them. The ubermodel here appears to be my only chance, and if it isn’t destroyed soon it will inevitably mutate itself away anyway. Ask Clara about what can happen then. I don’t know quite where Skolar is at the moment, but Zelda has escaped from the trap Peach and Parakarry set for her, and at the moment the only thing standing between her and us is a number of very aggressive newscasters competing for dramatic shots of her entry. That gives me between three and seven minutes to find what I’m looking for. I’m sorry but I’m going to have to let you acquire romantic expertise on your own.”

In the hallway outside a squadron of armed soldiers rushed by the door, followed closely by several camera-bearing creatures. Gunfire and laser blasts echoed through the corridor, then grew more distant. Trailing behind the combatants was a slower-moving team led by a youngish

fellow in a floppy green hat, carrying a note pad: his colleagues bore a collection of cameras, long microphones, dishes, and other recording gear. The young fellow stuck his head into the scanning room: Nicholas' hand tightened on the beamsword but the invader ignored his presence: "Gannondorf! Gannondorf! Just the person I was looking for."

Gannondorf looked up from the backmost workstation, where he had moved in order to allow Brian access. "Oh, it's you. What do you want, now, Link?"

"Background, background, my friend. All those ambulance chasers are focused on the battle. We're going to get the real story behind the bullets. I want you. Come on, you always know more than you let on."

Gannondorf clenched his fists in frustration. "Geeze, I can't get anything done without someone interrupting me."

"Gann', old pal. Who lent you the money for that first server cluster, eh? Where would you be without me? Still doing back-alley colorization for decrepit NES characters. Do you want to go back to that?"

Gannondorf sighed. "Okay, okay. But not here, too many danged people."

"Fine, fine, there's a conference room two doors down, we can use that," replied Link. "Deku and Saria, help me with the interview; Malon, take the others and set up a couple of angles in the hallway here so we can catch a shot of Zelda advancing, you know she'll kill us if we miss her walk down the aisle."

"Wait a minute!" said Brian. "Aren't you going to help me with the transfer?"

"It's trivial, you just call G R T underscore blue talon, the parameter list is pretty obvious, hit ENTER, you're a smart kid, you can handle it," said Gannondorf as he walked out down the hall with Link. Another burst of explosions rumbled from not too far away. Brian looked worried.

"Zelda is coming here?" said Nicholas.

"Not again," said Clara.

"What?" said Tennyson.

“Zelda is not a problem,” said Mr. Saturn. “She can be reasoned with, at least in this life. Or bribed. I finally located Skolar, several minutes ahead of where I thought he would be. He’s in the water return lines just outside the hydroponics room down the hall. And I’ve just found the right subdomain. When he gets out he’s going to muck up everything, so to speak.”

“Oh, that’s what was making the drains mess up! Who is Skolar?” said Kent.

“A very confusing Star Spirit,” said Tennyson.

“Confusing, that’s an interesting way of looking at him,” laughed Mr. Saturn. Then he was more thoughtful. “Drains? Of course, I should have thought of that. He’s so ticked off about having to move through sewage that he’s glowing white hot, I’ll bet -- boiling the water all around him in the process. ‘Course that slows him down and gets him even madder! That must be why it’s taken him so long to get here. If we could shut the valves we could slow him down some more. Unfortunately I don’t remember a hydroponic room down here -- must be a recent addition.”

“I can figure this out!” said Kent. “Dad’s told me about all kinds of different plumbing setups. Anyway, I was looking at the valve controls there when Clara showed up, it wasn’t that hard. I’ll take care of it, no problem.”

“Wait!” said Brian. “I haven’t scanned you yet.”

“Ah, it’ll just take a minute, I’ll be right back,” said Kent.

“Tennyson and I have been scanned, we’ll go with you,” said Nicholas. “Do you have anything left that still fires?”

“Maybe a quarter-charge on my blaster,” Tennyson replied.

Brian tossed him a pistol from the workstation. “About a half a clip left!”

“Thanks, Brian!”

“I’ll come, too,” said Clara.

“No, you need to get scanned first,” said Nicholas, following Kent out the door. Mr.

Saturn waddled as fast as he could after them.

The hall was littered with spent shells and power cartridges. Most of the light fixtures were broken and dangling from the ceiling. Two wounded raptors bled in the doorway opposite the vending machines, but Nicholas grabbed Kent to prevent him from going to their aid and pushed him towards the hydroponics room. “Come ON! We’re too close to blow it now!” But his best urgency wasn’t urgent enough: as the door hissed open, a swirling cloud of water and steam and plants and shattered plumbing exploded through it.

Kent fell backwards, a long piece of steel pipe protruding from his chest, into Tennyson’s arms. Nicholas grabbed the pistol from the floor and fired a burst into the chaos, but was knocked out of the way as Mr. Saturn, mysteriously airborne, flew by him into the glowing yellow obscurity. “I’ll hold him as long as I can!” he shouted; the door slammed shut with a pneumatic hiss.

“I’m done,” said Clara as she came running down the hall, armed only with a stolen Hyrulian sword. Tennyson turned towards her, exposing Kent’s quivering form, bleeding profusely from the chest. “Oh, no, not again,” she gasped. Some sort of whirring sound came from behind the door. “What’s that? Where’s Saturn?”

“He’s inside,” said Nicholas, turning from the door. “What happened to -- no no no, not another one.”

“Shhhh!” said Tennyson, putting his ear next to Kent’s pallid face. “I can’t hear.” Kent’s voice was barely a whisper. Tennyson nodded. “Sure, sure.” He took a deep breath and cleared his throat. Then, incongruous amongst the echoes of gunfire from down the hall and the throbbing moans of the psychic battle being waged in the next room, he began to sing:

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

Kent’s eyes curled slightly in the ghost of a smile. Clara sank to her knees next to Tennyson, tears filling her eyes once again just as before.

*Sweet Betsy got up in a great deal of pain  
Declared she’d go back to Pike County again*

*Ike, he just sighed, and they fondly embraced  
And she traveled along with her arm round his waist*

Shouts and screams were now clearly audible amongst the sound of blaster bolts and explosions from the direction of the lobby. Erin appeared around the bend of the hall carrying a partially-eaten sandwich. “Wendy and I have to go, are you sure you -- what happened?” The three ignored him as Tennyson finished:

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

The pallid boy’s mouth moved slightly as he mouthed: *California*. Then Tennyson reached down and gently closed his eyes. “I was going to show him the mountains,” he whispered.

“Wow, great, that’s a wrap!” said Link.

Nicholas, looking up, realized that three cameras were pointing at them. Clara took an irritated swing at Saria, who dodged backwards but kept the camera on Clara’s teary eyes. A blaster bolt *zinged* down the hall above their heads. Tennyson leapt up and ripped the camera from Malon’s shoulder; Nicholas and Clara grabbed him and pulled him away. “Come on, we’ve gotta go!” said Nicholas. “You guys can go film them if you want,” he added to Link and his crew, pointing down the hall towards the atrium.

“Naw, that’s already covered,” said Link, as a three goombas carrying shoulder-mounted cameras appeared around the corner, covering the action as a group of Black Hole Army soldiers retreated under fire.

“Where’s Mister Saturn?” said Erin. “Didn’t he come with you?”

“In there with Skolar,” said Clara. “Come on.” She led the way back to the scanning room.

“What? Are we just going to leave him behind?”

“Nothing we can do,” said Nicholas. He grabbed Erin and pulled him along.

Inside the scanning room, Brian stood on the scanning platform talking to Wendy while she typed. “So, I’ve been thinking, what happens to us here when we go there? Do you think we just disappear? Can you be two persons at once?”

“That’s a really good question. Do you want me to, like, kill you here after you do the file transfer so you’ll only have one soul?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. And maybe we’re really still at home. Or maybe we’re dead in the real world!”

“Interesting. Oh, where do I direct the file pipe?”

Vanna T. and her Yoshi assistant finished their sandwiches, thanked Wendy and Cane, and ducked back into the corridor to reach a data link in the conference room where they could upload their footage.

“Dash dash backslash temp backslash ansatz, that’s a-n-s-a-t-z,” said Brian.

“Got it.” The lasers flashed on and off.

“Thanks, Wendy, that was great.” Brian’s cut was bleeding again, turning most of his tee-shirt red, but he ignored it and stepped off the platform.

“Erin, there you are,” said Wendy. “We’ve got to make a delivery of medical supplies to the Pokemon trainers trapped in the Millennium Pillar; they’re paying triple hazard fee!”

“Great work, Wendy!” Erin reached up above Vanna T. to grab a box marked EMERGENCY from its shelf on the wall. “This ought to do it. Hey, you guys, I never knew how much money you can make during a war!”

“Really?” said Brian, sitting back down at the workstation. “Tell me about it. Why don’t you sit down right there?” he added, pointing at the platform just behind Erin.

Wendy stepped out into the hallway, pushing the food carrier ahead of her. “Coming, Erin?”

“In a minute, Wendy! So Brian, we were getting twenty-five coins each for these drinks,

even the ones without any high-fructose corn syrup, and over a hundred for the sandwiches for the reporters, and the soldiers pay double that. That's a gross margin of, um, over eighty percent! At this rate we'll make enough to take a vacation next month to Dark Summit, instead of waiting until the end of the year."

"Very interesting," said Brian. The lasers flashed on and off.

"Hey, what did you just do?" said Erin.

"We're all scanned!" Brian said to Nicholas, ignoring Erin. "That's the first approximation, now we just need to gather around here and I'll bring the keyboard over for the final scan."

Nicholas' communication link, which he had assumed was dead inside the metal of the station, buzzed and crackled. Mr. Saturn's voice was barely audible over a frightening whining sound: "*That's it, up to you n--*" it said, followed by a rushing noise. "Okay, everybody gather around, let's go."

"What?" said Erin. "Wait a minute, I don't want to go back home! Wendy! Wait."

He started for the door, when suddenly the whole hallway grew intolerably bright. From a distance, over a roaring sound and the screams of battle, they heard Zelda's amplified voice: "You fool, you'll melt everything! Calm yourself!"

A second voice replied, like an avalanche with the gift of speech: "THIS ONE IS NOT WHAT IT SEEMS! WE MUST DESTROY IT IMMEDIATELY BEFORE IT DESTROYS US!" Erin retreated reluctantly back towards the platform.

Cane finished the final bit of his roasted blowfish as he joined the group at the platform. "Nicholas, I've been worrying about this," said Brian. "I mean, Gannondorf isn't here to ask. Can we have two souls? What if we have to destroy the bodies here when we--"

"It's a little late to worry about it now," said Nicholas.

"But, what if we--"

The absurdly bright form of Skolar appeared in the door, making the room so bright Tennyson felt as though the image was being burned into his retinas: "STOP!"

In the roaring rush of the gathering Star Storm, Nicholas shout was barely audible:  
“PRESS THE BUTTON, BRIAN!”

“NO!!” screamed Erin. Clara felt him leap across her trying to reach Brian, as the faintest clicking sound reached her (or did she imagine it?). The faint figure of a familiar lady seemed to glimmer between her and the attacking figure in the door, as the Star Spirit roared and everything turned white.

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In chapter 20 Erin will fail to be believed -- coming soon.

*Thanks to everyone who has read this far, and special thanks to Ms. Yuka Muto for the Japanese transliterations in this chapter.*