

**TOP
SECRET**

EXTRACTION

Hey there! I'm Raj. Nice to meet you. Sorry again about your money. I'll bet you're wondering if I have it. Uh, no. I don't really have any money. I'm 10. But, I might be able to help you find it!

A few months ago, I got sucked into a game called *Cooper Hawke and the Secret of Phantom Island*. I think Phantom Island's secret is that it's a pretty great place for a vacation. It's got a tree house village, a real volcano, and a giant snake that would make the perfect pet if it weren't always trying to eat you. Everything on Phantom Island was great until two goons started making my life miserable. I fought back with bees, then a weird monster tried making me eat a berry, and then someone named "the Builder" turned the goons into green ones and zeroes. I actually wrote a story about the whole thing. Unfortunately, that story exploded.

After I escaped the game, I tried finding the Builder. He seemed like a real bad guy. If I manage to stop him, then I'll probably save the world, which means they'll make a movie about me. That's how I found myself at the library. I like using the library computers for my research because Ms. Welchman at the big desk always gives me a big smile when I sign in.

When I turned on the library computer, I did what I always do: look up old Bionosoft games. I know that's a weird way to save the world, but Bionosoft was the only lead I had. I logged on to a website where video game nerds could chat with each other without anyone calling them nerds and found a thread about *Cooper Hawke and the Secret of Phantom Island*. The first few pages were filled with people complaining that the game would never come out, but then Contra87 entered the conversation. Mr. Contra had a lot of information. Stuff that no one would know unless they played the game. My heart started racing.

I messaged Contra87 directly. He responded right away with more interesting tidbits. I asked a few more questions, then dropped the bomb.

HAS ANYONE TAKEN THE EDENBERRY YET?

I closed my eyes and pressed SEND. Nobody knew about the edenberry except me and the bad guys. There was a long pause. Finally, he messaged back one word.

JAKE?

Now, as a reminder, my name is Raj. No one has once called me “Jake” in my whole life, not even by accident. I responded with two words.

IT’S ME.

I’d like to point out here that I did not lie! It was, in fact, me. Mr. Contra wrote back quickly.

ARE YOU SAFE?

I smiled. That was an easy one.

YES.

I leaned forward and held my breath.

BEEEEEP!

I jumped when the library loudspeaker squawked.

“The library will close in 15 minutes,” Ms. Welchman said over the intercom. “Please make your final selection and check out now.”

No! I needed more time! I glanced at the clock, then back at the screen. Contra86 had one final message.

STAY PUT. I’M COMING TO GET YOU.

I jumped to my feet and searched for a hiding spot. Behind a bookcase? Under a table? Then, I noticed the story time room door slightly ajar. I sneaked inside and squeezed into the closet with a bunch of beanbag chairs just like a superspy.

Most kids couldn’t hide at the library after hours without someone coming to look for them, but I knew I’d be safe. Both my parents died when I was young, and I haven’t had a permanent home since. Some days I stay with an aunt, some days a friend, and some days a friend’s aunt. That’s not a great way to grow up, but it does let me sneak around without anyone asking questions.

An hour later, the library was dark and quiet, and I still had no plan for dealing with the bad guys. The best I could come up with was creating a dummy out of beanbag chairs as a distraction, but I hadn't gotten past that. Well, I had a name for the dummy: Beany Bobby. That's it, though.

I crept out of the closet to start building Beany when the library door clinked open. Yikes! I peeked out of the window. An unmarked van. This was it. I stood with my back against a bookcase and tried to slow my breathing. Then, I heard a sound I didn't expect.

Vrrroooooooooom!

Oh brother, it was the cleaning company. Of course. I shook my head and crept back to my beanbag nest. Then, I saw something in the computer section that stopped me in my tracks. All of the screens were dark except the one I'd been using. That one was flashing red.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

It started beeping. Loud. Like, even louder than the vacuum cleaner.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

"Shhhhh!" I shushed it. It didn't shush because it was a computer. It actually beeped louder.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

I shuffled over to turn it off. The vacuum stopped. "Hello?" the cleaner said. "Is someone there?"

I ducked and held the computer's power button. Instead of turning off, it displayed a message that said, "COMMENCING EXTRACTION." Then, it revved up like a jet on a runway.

VroooooOOOOOOOM!

Finally, the noise stopped. I'd shut it off.

I sighed and crumpled to the ground. Now, I just had to figure out a way to sneak back to . . .

“Ah!”

Something grabbed my shoulder. I turned in horror to discover a blue digital hand coming out of the computer screen. I tried swatting it away, but it pulled me right through the screen.

EVIL IRON MAN

When I passed through the computer screen, the hand disappeared along with everything else. I tumbled through blackness, scared of what waited for me on the other side, but also a teeny bit excited to be back inside a video game. When I hit the ground, I spun around to fight the blue hand.

But there was no hand. I was all alone.

I took a minute to get my bearings. I'd landed in an all-white room that was either a spaceship or mental hospital. I really hoped for spaceship. The room certainly had enough technology for outer space. There were robot arms and panels of buttons and tangles of wires and . . .

Well, well, well.

At the center of the main console was a blue cube floating inside a glass dome. It had that glow video games use to point out important things. The dome opened on its own when I approached. I got real close to the cube and felt static electricity on my face, almost as if the cube had its own energy. This seemed like something the bad guys wouldn't want me to have. Without pausing to consider at least putting on gloves before touching a mysterious energy cube, I shoved it in my pocket.

BRRAANG! BRRAANG! BRRAANG!

Lights started flashing in time with an alarm. Uh-oh. I ran out of the room, turned down a hallway, then skidded to a stop when I reached a floor-to-ceiling window. Outside the window was a galaxy full of stars. Ten seconds earlier, I would have been thrilled to discover that I was indeed onboard a spaceship. Now, those stars meant I had nowhere to escape.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

Great. I had company. Judging by the sound of the footsteps, my new pal was an unfortunate combination of large and fast. I sprinted away from the steps.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

I dove inside the first room I saw and slammed the door. An engine room. It may not have been an armory full of blasters (that'd be too easy), but at least this space offered plenty of tight-squeeze hiding spots that only a kid could access. I found a tangle of pipes near the engine and wormed my way in. By the time the footsteps reached the room, I'd wiggled and squirmed so far into the pipe maze that no adult could possibly reach me.

CREEEEEEAAAAAK.

The door slowly opened.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

I lay as still as I could and tried to quiet my breathing. I stared up through the pipes at the white dome ceiling high above me, willing myself to be invisible. The footsteps thudded closer and closer until they were almost on top of me. And then, to my horror, I saw that they WERE on top of me. Someone outfitted in an Evil Iron Man suit was walking on the ceiling above me with oversized magnetic boots.

THUD. THUD.

Pause.

Evil Iron Man stopped, looked at a tablet in his hands, then looked in my direction. His helmet had a mirrored visor, which was perfect for letting me see my scared reflection.

WhiiiiIIIRRRR—SLAM!

Before I could so much as wave, Evil Iron Man reversed his boots' magnetism and slammed into the pipes above my head.

HISSSSSSSSS!

The pipes crunched under his weight and filled the room with steam. I couldn't see a thing, so I groped and clunked around until I touched something that felt like a lever. I pulled it.

WUUUUuuuuuummm.

The siren stopped. The steam stopped. The lights turned off. Even the ship's artificial gravity shut down. I must have stumbled onto an emergency shutoff. I used the lever to pull myself free from the pipe maze. Finding the exit felt hopeless since the room was pitch black. Or, nearly pitch black, I guess. There was a little glow coming from . . . Where exactly was it?

Oh no.

The only light in the room came from the glowing blue cube in my pocket. Evil Iron Man would be able to spot me any moment! I curled into a ball to cover the glow, which caused me to clang my head against something hard, metal, and loud. I had to get out of this room. Now. I took a chance and pulled out the cube to use as a flashlight.

Whoa.

When I held the cube near the wall, something crackled, and the metal wall briefly turned into a neon digital grid. I had no idea why that happened but was thankful that it revealed the exit. I pushed myself out of the room and glided down the hall.

CLUNK!

Uh-oh. Sounds like Evil Iron Man found the exit too. I flapped my arms to float faster, but all that did was make me look silly. I finally found a ceiling air vent and hoisted myself inside. Evil Iron Man might find me up here, but he was way too big to fit inside the skinny duct. I started crawling deeper into the ship.

Crack-crackle-POP!

There it was again—the neon grid. I paused to push the cube harder against the metal duct to find out if something else might happen.

Boy, did something else happen.

The cube started glowing brighter. The cracking got louder. I felt something tingle up my arm. Then—

RRRRRIIIIIIP!

The neon grid tore open to reveal a blue, glowing rift. The longer I held the cube

there, the bigger the rift became. It finally grew wide enough for me to fit my hand inside. Should I? That's when something grabbed my leg.

“AHHHH!”

Evil Iron Man! I clawed for the rift. As soon as my hand touched the blue, I got sucked inside.

The tumbling that happened next felt exactly like my journey from the computer screen into the spaceship. Except when I landed this time, I didn't find myself in outer space.

I was standing on Liberty Island. And Lady Liberty's eyes were glowing red.

ATTACK ON NEW YORK

“Woohooooo!”

I made it to *Full Blast*! THE *Full Blast*!

You know *Full Blast*, don't you? That's the first game Bionosoft trapped people inside. They'd promised that it'd been destroyed, and yet here it was in all its glory.

Not only was I inside *Full Blast*, but I'd reached its most famous level of all: Attack on New York. Any second, a host of giant alien bugs would start swarming, and I'd race them to the top of the Statue of Liberty. I rubbed my hands in anticipation.

Uh-oh.

My hands.

Shouldn't my left arm be a blaster? Where was my weapon? No time to look—aliens had already begun crawling onto the island from every angle. I ran toward the Statue of Liberty but got cut off after only two steps by a giant praying mantis. I squealed like I'm sure many an action hero has squealed, then the praying mantis swallowed me whole.

The level restarted as soon as I died. This time, I took off right away. It didn't matter. The mantis cornered me again.

“BRAWWWWWK!” it screeched.

I pointed my blue cube at the alien. “Get back!”

The mantis looked at the cube, thought for a second with its tiny video game bug brain, then decided it didn't care. It lunged at me.

ZAP!

When the mantis got close to the cube, it shrank to the size of a normal bug. I squashed it flat.

More bugs had caught up. “BACK!” I shouted with more confidence.

ZAP!

This time, the cube didn't wait for the bugs to get close. It shrunk a whole bunch of them at once. I cackled and ran toward the Statue of Liberty. "I am INVINCIBLE!" I yelled as I raised the cube.

ZAP!

The cube shot a bolt into the air, transforming blue skies into a hurricane. Black clouds gathered into a circle and wind started whipping. "Wait!" I cried. "Reverse, reverse!"

The cube quivered in my hand, then completely ignored my command. It sent a blue energy wave toward the bugs that transformed them into weird mash-ups of each other. There were wasps with long spider legs, scorpion-tailed walking sticks, and something that just looked like a pair of eyes with wings. They were all scary, but nothing made me jump as much as the thing that happened next.

"What's going on in there?" a voice boomed from the sky.

Was that the Builder? I ran into the Statue of Liberty to take cover.

"Hello?" the voice said. "Is someone in there?"

Inside Lady Liberty, I climbed a flight of stairs, then leaped to a ledge.

"Oh no," the voice said, sounding much too scared to be the Builder. "Nonononono! Tito, are you seeing this?"

Mutant bugs poured into the ground-floor entrance and started climbing on top of each other. I swung to another ledge to stay ahead of them, then found a ladder.

"We have major decoherence inside of *Full Blast*," the voice said. "Performing a hard reset now. If someone's inside, you have 10 seconds to get out or be wiped with the rest of the data."

Ten seconds to reach the top of the Statue of Liberty? Impossible. I scrambled onto the next platform and held out the cube to open another rift.

“BRAWWWWK!”

A praying mantis dropped in front of me.

“NOT NOW!” I pointed the cube at the mantis.

ZAP!

Instead of shrinking, the alien grew bigger. Like, a lot bigger.

“Five seconds!” the voice called out.

I pressed the cube against the wall and held it there while the mantis grew larger and larger. Finally—

CRACK!

I wish that were the crack of an opening rift. I really do. Unfortunately, this was a much worse crack. It was the sound of the ground giving way underneath my feet. I tumbled toward the writhing mass of mutant bugs.

“Three.”

Something snatched me out of the air.

“Two.”

It was Evil Iron Man. He took the cube out of my hand.

“One.”

Evil Iron Man squeezed the cube. It flashed blue. Then, everything went black.

UNCOOL SAMUS

I tumbled through the darkness again. “Ugh, another video game?” you’re probably asking. I know! It’s a lot to keep track of. Next time, I’ll try to make it easier on you by having fewer things happen to me.

This new game involved a bullet train speeding through a futuristic city. I landed on top of said train across from Evil Iron Man. Now, he was the one holding the cube. I noticed the cube had turned from blue to a menacing blood red.

I spread my legs to keep my balance on the speeding train and raised my fists. If I was going down, I may as well put up a fight. But Evil Iron Man didn’t want to fight. Instead, he pressed a button to lower his visor. I gasped.

Evil Iron Man was actually—wait for it—Evil Iron WOMAN!

Yes, I realize that I shouldn’t assume everyone wearing high-tech robot armor is a man. I’ve played *Metroid*—I know about Samus. But the woman inside the suit didn’t look like Samus or any other video game action hero. She looked like an average, freckle-faced college kid who might play some soccer but certainly couldn’t pull off backflips while dual-wielding blasters.

Then she did something so uncool that no one could possibly take her seriously as a video game villain. She started saying something (by the look on her face, it was pretty important), and the wind whipped her hair directly into her mouth. She frantically shook her head and spit it out with a *thbbbbthhhh*, then reopened her mouth only to have it happen again. This time, she started coughing and choking. Finally, she held her hair back and shouted against the wind, “WHERE’S JAKE?!”

Jake? Who’s Ja—

Ohhhh. Jake. From the library computer. I mumbled and bumbled to come up with an explanation. “Uh, you see, I . . .”

I didn’t need to say anything else for her to understand that I had no idea who Jake was. She marched closer and pulled out a photo. “Jake,” she said.

My eyes widened. Jake was one of the bad guys I’d encountered on Phantom Island! I didn’t know his name at the time, so I referred to him as “Banana Bruise”

because of the hilarious banana-shaped bruise I'd caused by swinging a banana wrecking ball into his face. I didn't know how to tell this girl that Jake was dead or at least transformed into ones and zeroes in a way that looked pretty painful.

Again, I didn't need to answer for her to understand the look on my face. She opened a trapdoor near my feet and directed me into the train. Once we both got inside, she started talking fast. "My name is Liz. Jake is my brother. I don't care who you are or how you know my brother. Just tell me where he is now because we're running out of time."

"OK, well, hi, Liz. Nice to meet you. My name is Raj. So I don't know how to tell you this because I don't think you're gonna like it . . ."

"I said I don't care!" Liz yelled in a way that felt more panicked than angry. She held up the cube. "Thanks to you, this is minutes away from melting everything. So tell me where my brother is. Because I'm not leaving without him."

"He's gone," I said.

"What do you mean 'gone'?"

"He, uh, turned into ones and zeroes."

Her eyes flickered for a moment, then her face hardened in resolve. "Well then he's not gone, is he?" she asked, her voice cracking. "So, here's what we're going to do. We're getting this cube to the back of the train, and we're not letting it touch a single thing until it gets there. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Nothing."

I nodded again.

"That part's very important."

"Got it."

She glared at me to make sure I truly understood, then deposited the cube into one of her suit's compartments and opened the door to the next car of the train. When she did, a massive robot spider wrapped itself around her face.

THE WORST THING YOU COULD DO

Liz's Evil Iron Man suit had a lot of things: headlamp, magnetic boots, more storage than most small trucks. But the one thing it lacked, apparently, was a single weapon. Liz tried wrestling the robot spider but found herself outmatched two arms to eight. The robot pinned her to the ground and looked like it was going to do something awful to her face.

That's when I spotted something on Liz's arm: a glowing button that looked exactly like the one the bad guys had on Phantom Island. I'd bet anything that button would take her back to the real world. Liz couldn't reach the button with her arms pinned, but maybe I could. I lunged to help.

Liz screamed when she saw what I was up to, then found a burst of strength and pushed the spider off of her. Before it could attack again, she grabbed one of its legs, swung it around, and threw it out the window. Then, she turned to me.

"Don't touch that either," she warned.

"Doesn't that take you back to the real world?" I asked. "I was just trying to help."

"That would be the worst thing you could do."

"I thought touching something with the cube would be the worst thing I could do."

"They both are."

"You're going to have to explain."

"No, you're going to have to trust me." Liz walked through the car.

"Why should I trust you? Don't you work for the bad guys?"

Liz cracked open the next door to look for more spiders. "I do work for the bad guys, but it's only so I can find my brother."

"You know your brother's bad, right? Like, he tried to kill me."

“Scoot back,” Liz kicked the door open and leaned backward to let two more robot spiders jump past her. She then hurried into the next car. I followed close behind and slammed the door.

“My brother is the only family I have,” Liz said. “I’m sure he’s made some mistakes, but he’s a good guy.”

“Again, he tried to kill me, and I’m a kid! You can’t kill a kid.”

“You’re making me want to kill you with all this talking.”

“All I want is to stop the bad guys,” I said. “I hope you know these are very bad guys.”

“I know, I know.” Liz peeked through the next door.

“I’m close to bringing them down, but you’ve got to tell me what you know,” I said.

“I know you’re in way over your head.”

“Why?”

Instead of answering, Liz opened a nearby window and climbed out. She must not have liked whatever was on the other side of the door. She flopped onto the roof of the train, then reached down to help me up. “Trust me yet?”

I still didn’t quite trust her, but I took her hand anyway. Liz pulled me up, then leaped to the next car of the train. She filled me in as we walked toward the caboose.

“Let’s start with the cube. Do you know what that does?”

“Sure, it’s like an infinity stone.”

Liz gave me a weird look.

“You know, from *The Avengers*.”

Liz shook her head. “I don’t watch that silly junk. It’s a quantum cube.”

“Quantum cubes sound just as silly as infinity stones!”

Liz sighed. “I know. We actually call it a ‘qube’ with a ‘Q,’ which is even worse. Anyway, this guy, the Builder, has six of them in . . .”

“There are six infinity stones!”

“. . . They’re inside towers buried in an underground bunker, and they power a quantum computer. When I started looking for my brother, I managed to get a job on the team that takes care of the qubes. That’s what the suit and boots are for.”

“If they’re in an underground bunker—”

“DUCK!” Liz interrupted.

I managed to lay flat just before the train entered a tunnel. When it reached the other side, I stood and continued my question. “If these qubes are so well protected in a bunker, how did I just walk up and grab one?”

“This isn’t the real qube,” Liz said. “It’s a virtual object entangled with the real qube. These virtual qubes inside of video games are the only way we can control real qubes and use the quantum computer.”

I blinked a few times. “Um, OK, you can’t possibly think that sentence makes any sense at all.”

“Listen, I don’t get it either. All I know is the qubes need to stay on docks inside video games. You can take them off for a little bit, but if you start using them to blast holes in walls and shrink enemies, they break down.” She glared at me. “If that starts happening, you’ve got to return them to one of the docks right away.”

“Or else?”

“Decoherence.”

What’s that?”

She made an explosion motion with her hands.

I stopped. “Seriously? It blows up?”

“Probably worse.”

“That’s great! This is our chance to take down the Builder!”

Liz was starting to get agitated. “You don’t understand. We dock this qube and bring back Jake. THEN, we can figure out how to save the world or whatever.”

“SAVING THE WORLD IS NOT WHATEVER!”

“We don’t even know what the computer does. It’s probably something boring.”

“We both know . . .”

WHIRRRRR!

A robot with spinning blades for hands burst through the train’s roof a few cars in front of us. It flew way up in the air, then landed between us and the final car. It flexed and revved its blades menacingly, but Liz didn’t seem intimidated. Instead, she ran at the bot with her metal arm held in front of her face like a shield.

BZZZZZZ!

The robot tried sawing through it, but Liz’s metal suit held strong. “Raj! Go!” she yelled.

I slid between the robot’s legs, then dove through the hole he’d created in the train. Liz followed close behind, then led the way into the final car. I slammed the door.

We made it. There in front of us was another blue qube protected by another dome. Liz breathed a sigh of relief and approached the dome. It opened. She carefully removed the healthy qube from its dock.

BRAAAAANG! BRAAAAANG! BRAAAAANG!

An alarm went off, but Liz remained focused. She opened a compartment in her suit to reveal the qube I’d taken from the spaceship. In addition to its red color, it had now gotten all bulgy like it wanted to explode. I felt sick. The qube was so close to breaking down. We’d almost saved the world, and now Liz was going to waste the opportunity. I realized that this might be my final chance to destroy the qube and save the world.

So I took it.

When Liz grabbed the red qube, I lunged at the “RETURN HOME” button on her arm.

With a red qube in one hand and blue qube in the other, she couldn't stop me. There was a zap, a tingle, and then a long fall back into the real world.

THE FLOOR IS LAVA

I knew right away that I'd made a huge mistake. I'd sent myself directly to the Builder's lair with no weapons and no plan. I glanced at Liz for help, but she immediately turned away. OK, so no weapons, no plan, and no friends.

Also, probably no exit. The entire floor of the cavernous bunker appeared to be made of bubbling, blue lava. The only place to stand was on top of one of the six giant water tower-looking things that jutted out of the lava. Liz and I were stuck on top of one of those towers. The bunker looked exactly like something out of a video game, but I recognized this as the real-life home of the qubes based on Liz's description. I had to escape before any of her coworkers arrived. I leaned over the edge of the tower to look for a ladder.

"I wouldn't jump if I were you," a gravelly voice said. I looked up to see someone in another Evil Iron Man suit standing on the ceiling. He reversed his boots' magnetism and landed inches in front of me. "That's liquid helium. You'll freeze solid on impact."

"We've got a situation!" someone else said. I recognized his voice from the Statue of Liberty level. It was yet another Evil Iron Man. This one was standing in front of Liz with his hands raised. Liz held the blue qube to her side and the red one out like a threat. By now, the red qube had developed cracks and was pulsing like it had a heartbeat.

"Back up, Xander," Liz said.

Bad Guy Xander backed up. "Little help, Tito," he asked.

Tito, the gravel-voiced Evil Iron Man, walked toward Liz. "Hand that over," he said.

Liz stepped backward. "You knew Jake, right? He's my brother. I never told you that."

"Jake's gone," Tito said as he continued walking toward Liz. "Now, hand it over."

"I need this to bring him back."

“And the boss needs it to finish his project,” Tito said. “We’re almost out of time, we’re almost out of money, and he’s getting desperate. If anything happens to that, you know what he’ll do to us, right?”

Liz had reached the edge of the tower. She dangled the red cube over the blue liquid. “I don’t care about the Builder or his project or anything except my brother. Now step back, or I’ll drop it.”

Tito did not step back. He reached for the cube.

Liz dropped it.

“NO!” Xander and Tito screamed at the same time.

The cube tumbled down, down, down until it splashed into the liquid helium.

WHOOOOSH!

When the cube hit the liquid helium, it sent out an energy ripple that knocked us all over. At the same time, a tower across the room exploded, vibrating the air in a way that made me feel like my atoms were rearranging. A red flash shot out of the tower and tore through the ceiling like a flamethrower. The liquid helium turned from blue to red and started bubbling faster. Then, a second tower started rumbling.

“CONTROL ROOM!” Xander yelled as he reversed magnetism on his suit. He shot up to the ceiling and started running toward a room I’d missed before. It was hanging from the ceiling in a place only accessible by magnetic boot.

Tito did not join his coworker in the control room. Instead, he grabbed Liz. “You’re not taking me down with you,” he snarled. Then, he snatched her remaining cube and tossed her over the edge of the tower.

EMERGENCY

“LIZ!” I screamed.

Tito turned, growled, and started marching toward me. “I blame you for this.” I raised my fists to fight back, but I didn’t need to. Our tower started rumbling. Tito’s eyes widened. He reached for his magnetic reversal button.

“Wait!” I dove and wrapped myself around his left leg just before he zipped to the ceiling.

WhiiiiiiRRRR—SLAM!

I suddenly found myself hanging like a bat from Tito’s boot 20 feet above the tower. Both Tito and I were surprised to find that my weight combined with the speed of the flip was enough to separate his boot from his foot. Tito dangled awkwardly from the ceiling in one boot and one sock, while I clung to his empty boot for dear life.

“Give that back!” Tito yelled.

I had no intention of giving it back. Mainly because I couldn’t, but also because I’d die if I let go.

“Tito!” Xander called from the control room. “I’m starting to stabilize the network! You have time to dock the qube! Do it now before the whole place blows!”

Tito, as I was discovering, was not the best at taking direction. Instead of going into a video game and docking the qube, he continued kicking and swiping at me. “Give it back! NOW!”

He made a mistake by lunging on “now.” He managed to grab my shirt, but also dropped the qube in the process. When the qube hit the tower, it flashed, disappeared, then—*BING!*—reappeared on another tower.

“I thought you said it was stable!” Tito yelled toward the control room.

“I said it was starting to stabilize!” Xander yelled back. “Get that qube, or the whole place blows!”

For once, Tito obeyed. He hopped across the ceiling with his one boot, but he was too slow.

BING!

The qube teleported to the next tower. Then something remarkable happened.

CLUNK!

No way! It was Liz! She'd come flying out of nowhere to stick to the side of the tower. Her magnetic boots must have saved her when Tito threw her over the edge. When Tito saw her climbing toward the qube, he started hopping furiously. They both reached the qube at the same time.

BING!

Before either could grab the qube, it teleported again—to the tower directly below me! All I had to do was let go of the boot and fall on top of it. I looked down.

Nope, nope, nope. Way too far. “The green button!” Liz called. “Press the green—OOF!” Tito tackled her in the middle of her sentence.

I looked at the boot. There it was near the heel: a small green button labeled “EMERGENCY.” This qualified as an emergency. I pressed the button, and the boot released its grip on the ceiling.

“AHHHH!”

Just before I hit the ground, the boot flipped, reversed magnetism again for a split second to cushion my fall, then landed gently. I dove for the qube.

BING!

Too late, it went to the next tower. Tito, Liz, and I stared at the qube for a moment before coming to the same realization all at once: The qube wasn't teleporting randomly. It was moving clockwise around the room. That meant it had three more towers to go before making it back to Tito and Liz.

WHAM!

Tito slammed into Liz. He wanted to make absolutely sure that he knocked her all the way down to the bubbling liquid this time. Liz tried dodging him, but he'd gone through evil henchmen training, and she had not. He pushed her all the way to the edge of the tower before she reversed her boots' magnetism.

BING!

The qube inched one tower closer.

Tito could have left Liz on the ceiling while he waited for the qube, but he wanted to finish her. He zipped up to the ceiling to continue the fight.

“TITO!” Xander yelled from the control tower. “FOCUS ON THE QUBE! I CAN’T HOLD THE NETWORK TOGETHER MUCH LONGER!”

BING!

One more tower now.

Liz wriggled out of Tito's grasp and reversed gravity one more time. Tito quickly followed. He was seconds from finishing her off, and they both knew it. Liz tried crawling toward the middle of the tower, but Tito pushed her back. I wanted to help, but what could I do from across the bunker with a single shoe?

“Jake was weak, and so are you,” Tito growled.

BING!

The qube moved to Tito and Liz's tower. If I was going to act, I had to do it now. I aimed the boot at Tito's head and pressed the EMERGENCY button.

Tito was so busy gloating over Liz that he never saw the boot.

BOOF!

The boot smacked Tito in the back of the head and sent him tumbling off the tower.

“TITO!” Xander screamed.

With Tito out of the picture, Liz rolled over to the qube, but she was too late.

BING!

It transported back to my tower. If I threw that qube off the tower now, I would blow up the bunker, take down the Builder, and get my movie. Finally, here it was: my chance to save the world.

I didn't take it.

BING!

"What are you doing?!" Liz yelled when I let the qube move to the next platform.

"Use it to save your brother," I said. "Then, let's save the world."

Liz used her gravity boots to zip to the ceiling and run to my tower. "Thank you, Raj," she said when she landed. She removed her boots and pointed to a vent across the room. "Use these to escape through that vent."

"You'll find me, right? Once you do what you need to do?"

"You have my word."

The tower began shaking again.

"DOCK THE QUBE! DOCK IT NOW!" Xander screamed from the control room. "THIS IS OUR LAST CHANCE!"

BING!

The qube returned to our tower. Liz took it, pressed a button on her suit, and disappeared into a video game.

SARDINES

Good news: I used Liz's boots to escape the bunker through the vent!

Bad news: The bunker's in a foreign country where no one speaks English, it's always cold, and everything smells like fish.

Better news: I now own magnetic shoes!

Worse news: They ran out of battery, and I can't figure out how to recharge them.

Best news: I derailed the Builder's plan by destroying a qube!

Worst news: He's got five more, and he's coming for me.

It's been five days since I escaped the bunker. People back home are probably just starting to realize I'm missing, but they have no way of finding me. The only person in the whole world who can help me right now is Liz, and she hasn't responded to any of my signals. I hope she's OK.

Right now, I'm hiding in a sardine factory. The only thing I knew about sardines before I got to the factory was that some people put them on pizza. I figured they were fancy pepperonis. There are worse places to hide than an all-you-can-eat fancy pepperoni buffet, right? Oh how I wish that were the case. Sardines, I regret to inform you, are not pepperonis. They are tiny, terrible fish. Can you believe there are people who put fish on pizza? They are monsters.

Speaking of monsters, I've got to figure out a way to take down the Builder before he can finish his project, whatever it is. Xander mentioned something about a network, right? I've always thought a network was kind of like the Internet, but after my sardines misunderstanding, I'm less sure. What I do know for sure is that the Builder is desperate. Tito said he's low on money and time, and now he's also low on qubes. I think he's going to try to steal the money. That's where you come in.

If you're reading this, there's still hope. Trace the money. Learn what you can about the Builder. We can take him down.

Also, if it's not too much trouble, see what you can do about finding me. I'll be the kid who stinks like sardines.