

# Mineswept

by Aegel-maere Aetre

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### --Introduction

It all starts with an evil, almost microscopic character named Fatal Error, who lives inside my always-malfunctioning Compaq pc. You see, Fatal Error is one of many “ints” living in the “inthole.” There are soldier ints and worker ints, and then there’s Fatal. And whenever the whole int colony seems to be doing its best to carry out the commands of the queen int, who gets her orders from the human on the pc, Fatal is always there to screw things up.

### --Chapter One

The never-ending cycle of all-work-and-no-play began once more to take its toll on the workers in the inthole. Queen Pentium III, the sovereign int in the inthole, looked out on her loyal subjects to give them each today’s set of orders. First she addressed the soldier ints.

“Alright, let’s get to it, soldiers! The Human just pressed the ON button, so you know what to do next. Sergeant McAfee!” she yelled, addressing one particular soldier int. “Do the usual virus check. And be on the lookout for that rogue int, Fatal Error! He’s been giving our inthole a bad reputation with his pranks lately, and I don’t want him roaming around freely as long as the warranty is still good on this computer.”

“Yes, your highness,” replied McAfee with a bow. He then turned to his men and ordered each of them to their usual posts in what McAfee militarily referred to as Operation: Virus Scan.

The soldiers were busy, but the workers had a hard task as well. The queen gave them the direct order to “open Windows.” In response the workers scurried about frantically, trying first locate and then to open Windows, all in hopes of pleasing their gracious queen.

Amid the bustling workers, though, one int didn’t do anything but stand still, partly blocking the crucial intersection of Main Street and Information Highway, thus slowing down the whole process. With a confident smirk on his face, he coolly smoked yet another link from his endless chain of cigarettes, gathered his long coat more tightly around his small body so as not to be noticed, and stuck out a foot to trip one of the workers running through the crowded intersection.

The worker int fell flat on his face and dropped the information he had been carrying. Angrily he stood up, collected his information back up from the silicon pavement, and looked back to see the thing that had tripped him.

But he saw nothing... Fatal Error, the chain-smoking, obnoxious, and

psychopathic scum of the inthole, had fled back around the corner to avoid detection.

“Morons,” thought Fatal to himself, a puff of smoke escaping from where the cigarette rested between clenched teeth. “What do they think they’re doing, running around, taking orders day and night? And for what? So they can do it all again when the computer turns on later? Bah! Milleniumbug. I’ll show those ints what they’re really worth! I’ll devise a plan to bring about their ruin once and for all. And there’s no time like the present; I’ll just begin operations when these ints try to open their next program. Then I’ll get them all!”

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The queen smiled at her workers’ progress. Windows had been loaded, and the virus check was successful. According to McAfee, Fatal Error was nowhere to be seen.

“Hmm,” considered the queen. “That’s funny. Something tells me he’s out there somewhere. We’ll just have to hope that you’re right, McAfee, and that things will go smoothly in the inthole this time. Now, I’ve received another command from the Human. It’s a fairly simple one. Tell the workers to open Minesweeper.”

“Yes, your majesty,” said the faithful McAfee.

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Minesweeper! The rusty, backwards, and deranged wheels in Fatal Error’s head started to turn as soon as he heard the news about the command.

“Yes,” he thought to himself. “That’s the perfect program for me to start my operation in. It’s so simple: all I have to do is get into that program somehow...”

Fatal’s eyes started to turn red as the plan evolved in his tiny electronic brain. He grinned, rubbed his hands together, and laughed his usual cruel chuckle.

“Muhoowahahahaha! It just might work,” he said.

--Chapter Two

Gus “Smiley” Yellow, the happy, go lucky emblem of the Minesweeper board, woke up at the sound of his alarm clock. It was time to go to work! Enthusiastically he got out of bed to do his job: sit at the top of the board, smile, look nervous whenever he heard a clicking sound, and hope he wouldn’t get blown up that day. It was a dangerous job, but somebody had to do it. And if he was fortunate, he’d get to wear sunglasses at the end of the day.

So there he sat, smiling away as always, all the while never suspecting that his every move was being controlled by the will of an int colony in the computer. Neither did he suspect that the Rogue Int was currently sabotaging Gus’s Minesweeper board.

Now, on a normal day, Gus would only actually see one other living thing:

Arrow, pet mouse of the computer. The objective of Minesweeper (from Gus's point of view) is for Arrow to walk all over the game board. Every once in a while, Arrow has a habit of stomping his feet on the board. Gus hears a "click" sound whenever the mouse does this, and the floor below Arrow's feet gives in under the stomp. If Arrow "clicks" on a safe space on the board, Gus is one step closer to wearing the sunglasses. But if Arrow stomps on a landmine, Gus dies, only to be resuscitated by Arrow stomping on a "New Game" space outside the normal boundaries of the game board. Arrow could also click Gus's face to revive him, but Gus doesn't like that very much... that mouse's feet can hurt!

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Meanwhile, inside the computer...

*Two ints sit and eat, leaning against a wall in one of the side alleyways of the colony.*

Int A: Say, Joey.

Int B: (*munching*) Yeah, what?

Int A: Do you ever think to yourself that there's a bigger world outside the walls of this computer?

Int B: That's a silly question! Everybody knows that the only thing outside these walls is heaven. And only the Human can live up there.

Int A: Yeah, but y'know, I've been thinking about that. And I think to myself, what's this "Human" person like?

Int B: I dunno. But he watches over us and gives us orders, and he's perfect in almost every way.

Int A: But how do you know that? What if this "Human" isn't perfect? What if he's just living inside a bigger computer, and there's someone he looks up to in the same way, like a *really* perfect being of some sort.

Int B: (*considering*) Then we'd be at the bottom of the chain.

Int A: But if *that's* true, then why not go in the other direction? What if there are little creatures living inside our sandwiches that think we *ints* are perfect?

Int B: (*eating his sandwich*) Then I pity those little characters; they just got eaten alive!

Int A: Yeah, man. I pity anyone who actually looks up to us ints. Let's face it: we can't even run a computer right for three days without Fatal Error showing up.

The two ints had a good laugh at that idea and kept eating their lunches. Another int walked by the alleyway, though, a whole different thought on his mind.

He was Angus DeFrag, the janitor int, a short, quiet guy with a love for MP3 music. Right now he was listening to Jimi Hendrix with headphones as he swept the street, moving his broom to the beat of "Purple Haze." When the song reached the interlude, Angus picked up the broom and pretended it was a guitar. To ints A and B, who could not hear the music, he looked positively hilarious, hopping about on one foot as he played the "guitar" behind his back, over his head, and then while break dancing on the floor. Angus could not hear the laughter coming from the alley, so he kept going until the song ended. Then it was back to sweeping the street.

Like all of the other ints, Angus knew by this time that only the Minesweeper personnel were required to be working, but the janitor loved his job and the free music listening time it afforded him. Besides, Angus knew what the other ints did all day on break: sit around and talk about what's outside the walls of the computer. Angus didn't care to think outside the box. Rather, simpleton as he was, Angus simply wanted to do his job right and stop to smell the roses along the way.

Speaking of roses, it's about time we were introduced to the heroine of the story, Brenda Presario. Like the other worker ints, Brenda had her jobs to do, but unlike Angus, Brenda preferred to take advantage of her time off duty. She was headed toward The Motherboard, a local food joint and popular hangout among ints, when she ran across the dancing Angus on the street.

Brenda had to chuckle at the sight of the janitor, who was now singing along to the music in his head: "I can't sing! I can't talk! Only thing about me is the way I walk..."

As soon as Angus saw Brenda, he blushed and wished he had been listening to a different song. He turned off the mini-mini-miniature MP3 player, and greeted Brenda as well as he could.

"Um, hi, Brenda," he said, taking off his headphones and fiddling with them nervously in his hands as he spoke.

"Well, if it isn't Angus DeFrag, working overtime again," she said with a smile.

Angus wasn't sure how to reply to that. He was working overtime, but he actually did it for free. He smiled back and apologized in case he had been singing too loudly.

"Don't be ridiculous," Brenda laughed back. "You might not be able to sing or talk, that's true, but would you like to walk with me down to The Motherboard? It'd be nice to have some company on the way down there. That is, of course, if you aren't too busy right now." Brenda indicated the music player attached to Angus's pocket.

"Of course not!" said an enthusiastic DeFrag. He set his broom and MP3 player aside. Then he and Brenda walked together in the direction of The Motherboard.

Angus couldn't understand why someone as pretty as Brenda would like

him, but he nonetheless appreciated her friendship. And while Angus couldn't relate to most of what Brenda said in conversation as they walked—talk of a Fatal Error, the activities of soldier ints, and other matters—somehow the sound of her voice made him believe he understood every word.

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“This is too perfect!”

In a secluded area of the computer, Fatal Error laughed as he unloaded the contents of a grossly oversized duffel bag that until this moment had been flung over his shoulder. What came out was an unconscious white lump: Arrow the mouse!

“Alright, Arrow, my big albino friend,” said Fatal aloud. “Let's get you chained to this wall. And from there, don't you worry about a thing; you just stay here, and the rest of the job is mine.”

Fatal pulled his other supplies from the duffel bag: some chains, a large amount of white fabric, and some sewing equipment. He took the chains and fastened them tightly to the wall. Then he attached Arrow to the other end. And when all of this had been done, Fatal picked up the white cloth and the sewing kit.

Fatal sighed and said, “It's a sad day in the Compaq when a villain has to resort to embroidery, but such is life.”

His evil plan had begun.

--Chapter Three

Angus and Brenda had almost reached their destination at The Motherboard, when suddenly they both heard a frantic squeaking sound coming from the next alley. The ints cautiously looked around the corner to see what was making the noise.

It was an enormous animal of some sort, completely albino, and chained to the wall. It yelped desperately in between attempts to gnaw at the gag over its mouth.

Angus was surprised to see any creature this large living in the inthole, but Brenda approached it so as to try and remove the chains.

“What are you doing, Brenda?” asked Angus.

“I'm trying to figure out what this fella's doing here.”

“I'm trying to figure out the same thing, but I wouldn't approach it like that,” said he. “Doesn't the creature strike you as being dangerous?”

“Dangerous?” Said she, “It's only a harmless white mouse. I think it's Arrow from the monitor world.”

“W-what's a creature from the monitor doing down here?”

“I don't know,” Brenda repeated, “but let's get it loose so we can find out.”

--

Gus Yellow was receiving the beating of his life. Arrow had been stomping on every bomb possible. Then, instead of stomping on the “New Game” space,

Arrow had been stomping on Gus's face to resuscitate him. It was a painful combination of blowing up and getting "clicked" on.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! What's wrong with you, Arrow?" Gus asked his pet with a sad, shocked voice—though because of his job, he kept smiling the whole time.

Arrow stomped on another bomb. Gus actually heard the mouse laugh with delight as it clicked soundly on Gus's face. Surely there was something wrong here. That wasn't the Arrow Gus was used to seeing in the game. What had happened to his pet?

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While all of this was going on, Angus and Brenda managed to get the real Arrow free from its chains. The mouse seemed relieved to be let loose, but it clearly did not know how to communicate its situation to the little ints that faced it.

Brenda tried to help out by asking it, "Who did this to you, Arrow? You are Arrow, right?"

The mouse nodded.

"Okay," said Brenda. "Is there some way you can tell us how you got here so we can get you back home?"

The mouse stomped the floor, clicking with considerable speed, all in Morse code.

Brenda turned to Angus and said, "I can't understand him. Do you know Morse?"

All janitor ints who know the first thing about defragmenting and decoding know Morse code, and DeFrag was naturally fluent in the language.

"He says a mean int in a trench coat kidnapped him and chained him to the wall," Angus interpreted.

"Oh, my," replied Brenda, half gasping at the thought of an int that could single-handedly kidnap an animal as large as Arrow. She continued, "Well, we have to get him back to the monitor. Angus, do you know where the Inter-hardware highway cable to the monitor is?"

Angus replied in the positive. He added, "And it's not far from here. The kidnapper probably dumped the mouse off at the first back alley he saw from the highway."

"Great," said Brenda. "Let's go!"

Arrow squeaked in agreement as only a mouse can, and the three were off to the Monitor world.

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Fatal Error decided he had tortured the smiling idiot Gus enough. Fatal was getting impatient, largely due to the fact that when he disguised himself as Arrow, he had to put out his cigarette before putting on the giant mouse suit. He was cranky. He was insane. And now he was ready to cause some real trouble.

Fatal took off his mouse suit and threw it at Gus so that it covered the emblem's face. Gus had no arms, so he could not take it off, and he just sat there

smiling, blinded by the Arrow suit over his eyes.

Fatal then lit a cigarette and went to work. As an int, he was small enough to step in the crack between the spaces on the Expert game board and squeeze his way under the tiles. The tile he had picked contained a land mine. The bomb character looked up to see who had entered its private hiding spot.

Now, bombs are not very personable creatures. And this bomb did not wait for Fatal Error to explain himself. The bomb didn't want to know just what Fatal was doing there. All it knew was that a tiny creature had entered into its domain. And bombs do not tend to like that very much...

So there Fatal stood on the edge between life and death as the land mine attempted to set itself off..

#### --Chapter Four

Fatal Error grinned at the pitiful sight in front of him. Here this bomb was, swelling up and trying to explode, when Fatal knew all too well that a land mine can only be set off by stomping on the space above it. For all the mine tried, puffing its cheeks and stressing itself out, it could not detonate on its own.

"You might as well stop doing that," said Fatal. "If I were a foe I'd have attacked you or run away by now."

The mine gave up; the stranger had a point.

"Well, if you're not trying to get rid of us bombs," said the mine, "what are you doing down here?"

"Why, I'm here to help you, of course," replied the int in an all-too-sly manner. He added, "Yes, to help you and all your land mine friends."

"But you're an outsider," observed the mine. "Why would you want to help us?"

"Would you believe it's because I'm on a mission to take over the computer and rule it like a king, forcing thousands of other creatures to do my will, and because in order to do that, I need an army that's strong enough to help me win and yet stupid enough to follow me and believe that my winning will somehow help them, but I'll inevitably double-cross them in the end anyway?"

The mine paused to contemplate this.

"Yes," he said. "Actually, I would believe that."

"Good," said Fatal. He needed to take a few deep breaths after saying that last paragraph, during which he almost choked on his cigarette smoke a couple times. Then he asked, "So are you land mines strong enough and dumb enough to follow me?"

Again the mine paused to think it over.

"What's in it for us?" he asked.

"Freedom from those who have oppressed you, of course: Gus and Arrow."

"What about the flags?" said the mine.

Fatal had not thought about this before.

"The flags, hmm. I'll tell you what, if you take care of the creatures in the computer, I'll make sure the flags don't get involved. Besides, the only thing that can place a flag on a bomb is Arrow the mouse. And I've already taken care of him."

“You have?”

“Yep. All that remains is for you guys to follow me. Will you do it?”

“Yes, sir!”

Fatal sneered. “Good. And how do I know that *all* of the bombs will follow me?”

“Aw, don’t worry about that. We bombs have a mob mentality; when one of us goes off, all of us go off. And when one of us vows loyalty to an ugly little thing trying to take over the computer, all of us do the same.”

“Excellent.”

Fatal Error couldn’t believe how easy his plan was going to be. Nothing could stop him now!

## --Chapter Five

In The Motherboard, several ints were contently enjoying their break. Some were eating, most were talking, and others enjoyed a game of virtual billiards. Paula, owner of the joint, was trying to fix the reception on the television at the bar, thinking of how much easier this would be if the computer had a cable modem. Besides the reception, think of the *channels* she could be getting. Right now, the only channel that even broadcast to her bar was Channel 56-KCOM.

When she did get reception, however, Paula found that the station was airing an emergency news bulletin.

“Quiet down, everybody,” she yelled to the crowd. “I want to hear this!”

Gradually, people quieted down, and when they overheard what the reporter was saying, they quickly crowded around the bar, trying to see for themselves what was happening.

The reporter’s message was very plainly spoken: “We bring you a report right now of an emergency situation in the Minesweeper department of the Compaq. Apparently the work of long-known Rogue Int, Fatal Error, the game has not only frozen while in operation, but some very strange things have been sighted as well.

“Take, for instance, that Arrow, pet mouse of the monitor, seems to be stuck on top of the smiley face on the game board. And moments ago, reports came in of an int-like creature, quite possibly Fatal Error himself, walking on the board and squeezing between the cracks to some unknown location... Authorities say that if anybody sees Fatal Error, they are to consider him unarmed, but dangerous, and to contact Sergeant McAfee immediately. Here is Fatal’s file photo.”

A picture of Gus’s “blown-up” face showed on the television, eyes in Xs and everything.

“Sorry, we appear to be having some technical difficulty with retrieving the picture, which may or may not be yet another example of Fatal’s work.” He paused and said, “We now go live to a press conference where the sergeant is said to have the latest information, and will hopefully answer some of our questions.”

*The screen changes to show the press conference, where McAfee is already*

*answering reporters. And since there's really only one station in the entire PC, you can imagine he is rather fed up with answering the same one over and over again.*

McAfee: Okay, does anybody have any questions at this time?

Interviewer: *(jumping up and down)* Ooh, Sergeant McAfee, pick me! Pick me! I have a question!

McAfee: *(sigh)* Seeing as you're the only one here, I'll start with you.

Interviewer: How sure are we that Fatal Error is behind this?

McAfee: We're confident it's him. Even the Human seems to know it by now.

Interviewer: How do you know that?

McAfee: Because he has opened up Microsoft Word, wherein he is writing what we think is a fan-fiction article about Fatal's exploits and how dumb my soldiers and I are not to be able to catch him. Okay, does anybody else have a question?

Interviewer: Ooh! I do! Pick me again!

McAfee: *(under his breath)* God, this is pointless. *(aloud)* What is it?

Interviewer: So, would you agree with the Human's statements that you are indeed "dumb?"

McAfee: *(grimacing)* No further questions, please. Any and all other information will be handled in the briefing, with only the other reporters present.

Interviewer: But there are no other reporters.

McAfee: Exactly. Now, pardon me, but I must be getting to work.

*McAfee walks off as the scene ends.*

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Angus and Brenda looked about them in amazement at the Monitor world. Arrow had been a good mouse to let the ints ride on his back on the way up there. "Wow," said Brenda. "It's so spacious! Nothing like the crowded streets back home."

"Shh!" said Angus suddenly, causing Arrow to stop in this tracks. "I think I hear something up ahead."

Indeed there was a noise coming from behind a set of wires. And because there was an echo in the monitor cavity, the three could make out the sound of an

int's voice, often followed by the cheering of a mob. Angus and Brenda strained their ears to hear what was being said.

"Today we embark on a great mission of destruction," said the int-voice, "and you're just the bombs for the job."

A cheer went up.

"No longer will you suffer the agony of not having to explode! No longer will you be safe from harm! No longer will you sit quietly in your spaces living in peace!"

The crowd cheered again.

"Who are those people?" asked Brenda.

Angus shrugged and answered, "I don't know, but they're all crazy."

"Let's go in for a closer look."

At this suggestion by Brenda, the three cautiously moved in the direction of the sound. When they were close enough to see the speaker and the crowd, and while they crouched and hid behind a large clump of wiring, Arrow immediately recognized the speaker. The mouse lightly tapped his foot on the floor, with Angus listening.

"What's he saying?" said Brenda in a whisper, not wanting to get caught.

"He says that the speaker is the int that kidnapped him. You know, the guy in the trench coat."

"Oh my goodness!" said Brenda in surprise, accidentally not heeding the need to keep quiet. "Oops," she said, covering her mouth.

But it was too late. In a second, Fatal Error was standing over them, ninety-nine angry-looking land mines standing behind him.

## --Chapter Six

Four-star General Herman Flag rounded up his troops for battle. They were the few, the proud, the members of the Expert Game Board Flag Squadron. Their job? To stand their ground and de-mine the entire board under the direction of Arrow the mouse's "right-click" foot, thus pleasing the great Lord Gus Yellow, who smiled down on them so long as they did their job correctly. It was General Herman's job to see to it that all of his squadron's flags were in order for the day.

By now, the general was becoming impatient with the lack of commands coming from Arrow the mouse. But he and his flags could not do anything about it, nor could they see the current state of the game board. This is because all flags have to stay behind the board in hiding until they are called on one by one. Still, the general knew his duty was to stay and await command, and so he did this, using the extra time allotted him to do a thorough check of his troops. He walked among the ranks, shouting such things as, "You there! Stand up straighter!" and "Hey, you! Raise that fabric, mister!"

Then the general came across one particularly red-faced flag. It hiccupped at the same moment Herman approached it.

"State your name, private."

"Name's Bottleneck, sir," came the reply, with a stench that almost caused the two flags next to him to lose their color and faint.

“Private Bottleneck!” the general yelled. “Do you know what squadron of flags you’re in?”

The drunken flag considered this question a second and said, “No, but I bet it’s a good one, right?”

“This is the Expert Game Board Flag Squadron! Here we do not tolerate drunkards!”

“Well, maybe I should just leave and go to a squadron that does.” Thinking this was good logic, Bottleneck gave General Herman an ear-to-ear—er, that is to say, a corner-to-corner grin.

The general was furious at this remark. He screwed up his face, evidently trying to turn it red with anger, but because it was already red, well, this was a pointless task.

“TAKE THIS FLAG AWAY AND PUT HIM ON THE BEGINNER BOARD!”

The nearby flags followed this order immediately and carried Bottleneck off. Bottleneck yelled “Thank you!” back at the general, but Herman was no longer paying attention.

Instead, the general turned to the troops carrying the flag off and said, “Bring me back a worthy flag from the Beginner Squadron to take his place.”

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Back in the inthole, another military leader had his share of problems. Sergeant McAfee escaped from the press conference to go and meet up with his chief intelligence officials at the CIA (Central Intel Agency) to decide what steps to take against Fatal Error.

He walked straight through the agency’s corridors to the switchboard room, where her highness Queen Pentium III and several others had been waiting for him.

The “several others” included representatives from every department of the inthole that was currently active. Bob Letterman was head of the Microsoft Word department. Clyde Eightspace was head of Minesweeper. And George Palladian was head of Windows.

“Greetings, Your Majesty, gentlemen,” said the sergeant as he sat down. “I see everybody’s here except the sanitation department. Should we wait for Mr. DeFrag to show up?”

George Palladian fielded this question. “We are currently searching for him. He will come, I assume, as soon as he gets the call. In the mean time, I move that we start the session without him.”

The queen sighed and said, “Very well, although I don’t like facing Fatal Error without the sanitation department’s help. And Angus DeFrag is the best int I know of when it comes to cleaning and repairing a damaged system.”

“I assure you, Your Highness,” said McAfee, “we will brief Mr. DeFrag thoroughly in due time. Right now, I agree it is important that we get started. First, Mr. Letterman, what’s the latest news about the Human’s activities?”

“He’s still writing that fanfiction article, sir. He’s on chapter seven.”

McAfee was astonished. “How can he be on chapter seven? *We’re* not even on chapter seven yet!”

The queen interrupted, "But does he appear to be ready to save and quit, or even restart the computer?"

Palladian answered, "To be honest, Your Highness, we really have no way of knowing that. What I can tell you is that he hasn't done it yet, and it has been a long while since the Minesweeper incident first happened."

"Long enough for the Human to write seven chapters," said McAfee.

"He's pretty good with a keyboard, the Human is, to be operating Word without the aid of his mouse," said Eightspace, thinking aloud.

Letterman shrugged. "It's not that hard; all he really has to do is press the right buttons on the board in the right order, and he's got a document."

"Say," said Queen Pentium, getting an idea, "is there a set of buttons he could press that would possibly correct the error on the screen?"

McAfee answered her, "Quite possibly, yes. He could command us to run Scandisk or Defrag, and that might do the trick. The problem is that even if we did that, Fatal Error himself would still be running free. And besides, there's no way to tell the Human to run those programs."

Eightspace had something to say here. "We might not be able to tell him to *open* a program, but maybe we could get him to close it. Mr. Palladian, would it be possible to run a message across the monitor screen that reads 'This program has performed an illegal function and must be shut down?' Then at least we could get this Minesweeper thing done with, and concentrate on Fatal Error later."

Letterman agreed. The "illegal function" ploy had worked for his own program several times before.

McAfee and Palladian both nodded to the idea, and all four of the ints looked at Queen Pentium to get the final "okay." She looked back at them and said, "Alright, then. Let's get going."

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*Two ints walk along the Inter-hardware highway cable from the computer to the monitor. Int A is carrying a sign flung over his back that reads "This program has performed an illegal function, etc." Int B is now eating another sandwich.*

Int A: Say, Joey.

Int B: (*munching*) Yeah, what?

Int A: Do you ever wonder if the Human even knows we ints exist?

Int B: That's a silly question. Everybody knows it was one of the Human's own kind that created us in the first place.

Int A: Yeah, but y'know, I've been thinking about that. And I think to myself, did he create us only so we can do his will, or did he mean for us to be free and think for ourselves now and then?

Int B: I dunno. But he gives us a whole lot of orders, so I'd think the answer would be closer to the first idea than the second.

Int A: Now, see, that's interesting. Because while the Human gives us orders, did he not also give us the power to govern ourselves to an extent?

Int B: (*finishing the sandwich*) I suppose. So what's your point?

Int A: Well, if we were to find a balance and unity between the free will and the fate, perhaps we would discover a perfect harmony of life. And from there, we might find the meaning of life.

Int B: (*licking his fingers*) Wow, man. That's deep.

The two ints stopped where they were on the silicon roadway for a few seconds to contemplate this. Then, they started again, carrying that all-important message up to the monitor screen.

--Chapter Seven

Fatal Error marched at the head of his army, boldly making his way down the inter-hardware highway cable that led to the computer. Bored of the silence, he decided to make a marching tune. It went something like this:

Fatal: I don't know what I've been told!

Land Mines (in unison): I don't know what I've been told!

Fatal: But we're gonna win a war today!

Land Mines: Hey, that doesn't rhyme!

Fatal stopped his song and replaced it with a simpler "Left, left, left right left." At the same time, he tried to think of words that rhyme with "told." Let's see, there's "bold" and "sold" and "cold" and "mold..." not to mention "old..."

The land mine next to Fatal tried to help him out.

"Um, sir, maybe I can think of a marching tune," it said. Then it sang, "I don't know why I've been orange!"

Fatal closed his eyes, slapped his forehead, and yelled "HALT!" so loudly that his cigarette fell from his mouth. Turning to the mine, he began to lose his temper.

"ORANGE? There is no word that rhymes with orange! And even if there were, that song doesn't make any sense! Are you stupid or something?"

The bomb started to whimper, then sob. In a few seconds, it broke down completely. Another land mine patted it on the back and looked at Fatal scornfully.

"Now look what you've done. You made Bubba cry."

Fatal couldn't believe this. Really, he was beginning to question just how well he had planned this attack in the first place. He tried to regain his complacency as he lit another cigarette.

"Alright," said Fatal. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, Bubba. But from now on, you only talk when I tell you to talk, and obey my orders! This is a strong army for strong land mines, and I don't like sissies. Remember, all I'm trying to do is help everyone here out. You don't want to go back to the Minesweeper board, do you?"

All of the mines shook their heads.

"Good." Satisfied, Fatal was about to push forward when he heard two voices coming from the other direction. It was a pair of ints, and they were moving toward the monitor.

One was saying, "Hey, Joey, do you think there's something going on in the computer that we don't know about?"

"What do you mean?" asked the other voice.

"I mean, why do we have to carry this sign up to the monitor? I think the queen might be trying to hide something from us, Joey."

"Like what?"

"Like this guy Fatal Error. Why, I heard that Error guy's a real basket case. Legend has it he's an int, but he doesn't like ints at all."

"Oh, yeah. I heard about that... he went insane when everybody he asked out to the prom turned him down flat."

"And then there was that girl who ditched him. I still remember her last words to him: 'Geez, everything about you is byte-sized, isn't it?'"

The two ints started laughing hysterically. But as they looked straight ahead of them, suddenly the joke wasn't so funny anymore. Ninety-nine land mines were frowning and blocking their way. In front, one mine was in the midst of patting a sobbing int in a trench coat on the back.

"Look what you did," said the mine, who the rest of us know as Bubba. "You made Fatal Error cry."

Fatal raised his head from his hands, pointed at the ints, and said in a weak, un-Fatal-like voice, "Charge!"

Ints A and B looked at each other with widened eyes, simultaneously said "Uh oh," dropped the sign, and ran as fast as they could back down the cable. The ninety-nine bombs, who had all been briefed on the battle plan, hurried after them. But their leader, Fatal Error, stayed behind. He took a moment to stop his crying, and then he turned back to march up to the monitor. His bombs would take care of the computer, but in order to detonate them, remember, there must be a person to step on a land mine on the minesweeper board.

Again, Fatal Error exercised that habit of his which we authors find very convenient for getting into characters' thoughts: he started talking to himself.

"Alright, everything is going according to plan... or close enough, anyway. All I have to do is go back to the Minesweeper board and step on the square in the top left corner—that's the square where I met that bomb earlier. But now the land mine isn't under the tile; he's in the computer! And when I blow up the computer, there'll be nobody left to run it but me! Any survivors will become my slaves. Not even the Human can stop me now!"

Oh, is that a challenge, Mr. Error?

“What? Who’s saying that?”

Do you really think I’m going to let you win?

“Who ARE you? What’s going on?”

For your information, Fatal, this is a literary technique known as divine intervention. All I’m saying is, do you really think you can beat the author of this story?

“Ha! Nobody can beat me! Nobody, ya hear?”

Okay, Fatal, have it your way. But when I end this story by chapter 10, don’t come complaining to me that I didn’t warn you.

With that said, Fatal went on his way, unaware that the undoing of his plot had already begun.

--

Angus DeFrag and Brenda Presario were in high spirits, happy to see that such nice people—if one could call them people—had set them free.

“Thank you so much,” said Angus, when he had gotten the gag off his mouth.

The flag in front of him did its best to bow politely, though it soon found that it was stuck standing up straight, no matter how hard it tried to bend.

“Well, I’m glad I could help you two out,” the flag said. “Here in the Beginner Flag Squadron, we don’t get too many visitors. The Human usually plays on the Expert level. He rarely wins, but one has to give him credit for trying, heh heh.”

Brenda looked about her. There were ten flags, including the one talking to them now, all looking at them with a fixed gaze of curiosity. Then she realized something.

“Hey, wait a minute, where’s Arrow?” she asked.

“Pardon?” said the flag.

“You know, Arrow the mouse. He was taken prisoner the same time we were. Where is he?”

“Oh, yes, the mouse,” the flag remembered. “He didn’t belong here, so we sent him to a better place.” The flag looked up to indicate the sky.

“WHAT?” the ints both shouted.

“He’s back on the monitor screen above us, running around and clicking as usual.”

The ints sighed with relief.

Then Angus thought to himself for a minute, and then asked, “Oh no, he’s not playing Minesweeper, is he?”

“I don’t know,” said the flag.

“Listen, Mr. Flag—“

“Name’s Bottleneck. I used to be on the Expert Squadron, but I pretended to be drunk to get away from their squadron leader, General Herman.” Bottleneck shuddered. “That guy gives me the creeps.”

“Mr. Bottleneck, we can’t let the Human play Minesweeper. If he steps on even one land mine, the entire inthole will explode! Fatal Error has been up to some bad tricks, and we have to stop him.”

Bottleneck was confused. "Do you have to stop Fatal Error, or do you have to stop the Human, or do you have to stop Arrow?"

"All three," Angus answered.

Bottleneck and the nine other flags huddled together and spoke in an inaudible whisper. When they came out of the huddle, Bottleneck seemed resolved.

"Okay, we think we know how to do it, but we would need some help from an intelligence official in the computer, or the inthole, as you call it."

Angus was excited at this statement. "Okay, I think I can set up a line of communication. Do you have a message center somewhere in the monitor?"

"Sure. It's upstairs, second door to the right. Or, in int terms, take the green wire up to the second chip to the right."

"Thanks," said Angus. "And Brenda, I want you to stay here for now. Don't worry, I'll be back soon enough."

Angus ran up the green monitor wire as the flags and the int stayed behind, below.

Brenda looked on hopefully. "Good luck, Angus," she said.

## --Chapter Eight

Gus "Smiley" Yellow was getting tired of the white fabric over his eyes. "If I could only see what was going on," he thought, although he couldn't finish that sentence.

But what Smiley couldn't see, he could hear. And what he heard was a little "tappity, tappity, clickity, tap" that could only be one particular mouse scurrying along. Arrow ran and with its mouth lifted the cloth from Smiley's face.

"Arrow! It's so good to see you. You won't believe what happened to me today."

Arrow squeaked in a way that suggested he could believe anything at this point, and then looked around. Horror instantly struck the albino mouse as he saw none other than the Rogue Int, climbing up on top of the top-left space on the minesweeper board. Arrow quickly stomped on Gus's face as hard as he possibly could.

"OWW!!! Arrow, that hurt! What's the big idea?"

Arrow ignored his master's comment for the moment, and watched on as Fatal Error jumped on the space in the top-left corner.

--

Outside The Motherboard, two mysterious and very fat figures in oversized coats nodded and snickered to each other.

"Hee hee hee, Bubba, this gonna get some major screams."

Bubba giggled back. "I always wanted to try this."

"Okay, you go in, on three. I'll get the restaurant down the street if yours turns out successfully."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then I got your back, Bubba. I'll be out here until I see it work out."

Bubba nodded and said, "Ready, Hal?"

Hal nodded back. "Ready. One...two...three!"

Bubba burst in through the front door of the joint so loudly that it grabbed everybody's attention. He put his hand-like features on his coat and prepared to open it.

"Nobody move!" he yelled. "I... am a BOMB!" Then he opened his coat to reveal his land mine-like appearance. Everybody in The Motherboard screamed. Bubba looked back out the window, smiled, and nodded to Hal. Hal smiled back and went down the street to try the same thing in another restaurant... or maybe another department.

"Yes," thought Hal. "Another department would do much better. And because I'm on Main Street, I have access to every department on the computer. Let's see which ones haven't been taken by my other land mine friends already: the Central Intel Agency? No, Bertha has that one. The Video Department? No, that's Raul's job. Hey, there's one I don't think anybody has taken yet: the Audio Department!"

Hal marched through the door and into The Sound Card Music Shop. Inside, he found four ints, all wearing headphones and listening to music.

"Nobody move!" shouted Hal. "I... am a BOMB!" Some of the people looked up, but only briefly, as Hal opened his coat. But the people didn't scream. One int came up to him from behind the counter. He had a Grateful Dead shirt on and wore his hair in a ponytail that was half the length of his beard.

This int looked Hal over, but he didn't take off his headphones. "Wow, what have we got here? Some guy just comes walking into the store, and he wants to flash everybody. Let me guess: you're here for the latest Michael Jackson album, right?"

"No, I'm a BOMB!" Hal tried to sound impressive, but the store clerk still couldn't hear him over his music.

"Oh, you want the 'bomb.' Mariah Carey's in the second aisle. Just look for the bin that reads 'Sale: \$4.99.'"

Hal was confused more than he was infuriated. The int actually thought that Hal was one of its own. Hal buttoned his coat back up and tried to act like a real customer. Hal didn't have any money for buying music, but maybe he could try some stuff out while he was here.

"You don't have some extra headphones lying around, do you?" yelled Hal. This time, the int heard him.

"Sure," he said, taking off his own headphones and offering them to Hal. "Go ahead and try out anything you like. Just don't blow me up." The int smiled and winked at the land mine.

So he *had* heard the bomb the first time! Pretty clever guy, that music salesman. Hal smiled back. He adjusted the headphones to fit his giant head, and put them on. The song the clerk had been listening to was still playing on the MP3 player: "War! Huh! What is it good for? Absolutely nothing! Sing it again, y'all!"

Fatal Error laughed out loud as he stomped on the space. The tile gave way under him, so he waited to hear a giant explosion coming from the inthole. But he heard nothing. Fatal looked down at the tile: it wasn't a bomb! Fatal must have been mistaken or something. Nonetheless, the space had a big red 3 printed on it. So all he had to do was to step on one of the adjacent ones, and—

Arrow the mouse ran full speed into Fatal's side, tackling him and taking him off the game board and onto the desktop. When Fatal was able to get free, he ran toward the Minesweeper board. Arrow was slightly faster than the rogue int, so Fatal didn't have time to jump on a tile. Instead, he squirmed between the spaces, as he had earlier, going where the mouse was too big to fit in.

Fatal went downstairs, one floor, than another, than another. When he had reached the bottom, he was in the Beginner Flag Squadron's room. Brenda Presario shrieked as she saw him run through the doorway.

Fatal saw her standing on the other side of the room. "YOU!" he shouted. "How did you get free?" the evil int advanced on Brenda, but the ten flags stood in his way.

Bottleneck looked back to Brenda and said, "Run! We'll hold him off."

Brenda ran through another doorway, up another stairway, and didn't stop running. When she had climbed up the last flight of stairs, she found herself on top of the Minesweeper board.

Back in the basement, Fatal Error got an idea. He took out from his trench coat a miniature palm pilot and pressed a sequence of buttons. Instantly, the Minesweeper board was closed off from the rest of the monitor. Arrow the mouse was still on the desktop, so the little int was all alone where she was, except for Gus Yellow, who sat at the top of the board with his usual smile.

She could not go back down, and she could not escape to the desktop. As scary as this was, it was nothing compared to what happened next.

Brenda heard a beeping sound, and then noticed something out of the corner of her eye: the timer in the corner of the board, which had already been moving, reset itself. But it didn't reset to zero... it reset to 999, and started counting *down*.

To anybody who has ever played Minesweeper at the expert level, 999 might not seem like such a hard time to shoot for. But this was the first time Brenda had ever played the game. And now, if she made even one mistake, it would be Game Over for good.

998, 997, 996, 995...

## --Chapter Nine

Fatal Error was just about through with pressing buttons. Everything in the entire monitor was separated into two categories: those on the screen, and those behind the screen. The only door left open was the door between the Expert Board Flag Squadron and the Minesweeper board because, after all, that was the one door Fatal's palm pilot couldn't close while the program was open. And of course, all of the passageways inside the monitor, not linked to the screen, were still open.

This being done, the rogue int hurried back out the door from which he

had entered the Beginner Squadron's lair, and proceeded to try and find the communications center of the monitor so that he could see what was happening on the screen.

"Hmm, let's see," he said. "The communications center is usually right behind the screen. I'll go up one level, and start searching the halls for the right chip."

Just then he heard a voice coming from all around him, as if it were on a loudspeaker. The voice belonged to none other than Angus DeFrag.

"Okay, Brenda, can you hear me?" he asked. "Nod your head if you can."

On the screen, a miniscule figure nodded rapidly.

"Brenda, I'm in the communications center of the monitor, so I'm going to help you through this, alright?"

Another nod.

"I've just been tapping into the computer's audio system like I always do, and a guy named Hal answered on the other side of the line. He says he can help you clear this board. First, though, Brenda, I have to ask you, is there any way you can jump on the big X in the corner and close this program?"

Brenda tried, but found that her motion was restricted to the minefield. She couldn't hit the X just as she couldn't hit the File button to close the game—or at least select the Beginner level.

Angus sighed. "Okay, don't worry, Brenda, I'll put Hal on the line for you. Take it away, Hal."

Hal the land mine picked up the microphone attached to his MP3 player; Angus had told him to get the nearest one in the music shop and use it to communicate with him.

"Um, hello?" said Hal. "I'm not sure if you can hear me, but I'm a bom—er, that is to say, I'm a resident of the Minesweeper board, and I just realized that if you step on a land mine on the board, well, many of my friends and I will die in a massive explosion, so I'm helping you out. I can tell you how to clear the Minesweeper board. Are you listening? Um, good. Here goes: start at the bottom of the board and count three spaces from the left and four spaces up. You got that? Then jump on the square."

Angus interrupted, "Alright, Hal, just wait a minute until she does all that."

Brenda did exactly as she was told, moving three steps right, four steps up, and jumping. The tile under her body gave way to reveal nothing but a blank space. Several other tiles cleared, as well.

"Okay, Hal, she's got it. What next?"

Suddenly, Hal was cut off. So was Angus. Fatal Error stood in a corner of the monitor's communication center, twirling a pair of scissors in his hand.

"Looks like your connection just got cut, buddy," Fatal said, chuckling as smoke came out through his teeth.

--

"Oh no! Don't tell me I've just been cut off! The clock is down to 800 seconds, and I have no clue how to play this game. I'm doomed!"

“No you’re not.”

“Who said that?”

“Up here, above the board.”

Brenda looked up. To her astonishment, the smiley face was talking to her in ventriloquist-like fashion, keeping the same old smile while speaking.

“Hi, my name’s Gus. You can call me ‘Smiley.’ I might not know exactly which spaces are safe and which aren’t, but I can help you with playing the game.”

“Good, ’cause I need some help right now.”

“Basically, there are spaces with numbers on them all over the board. Each number indicates how many land mines are next to that space. You don’t want to step on a land mine, by the way.”

“I figured that much.”

“Good. If you see a space that you know is a bomb, just jump on it with your *right* foot, but *not* your left. That will deactivate that bomb. The game ends when all 99 bombs are deactivated... or you die.”

Brenda gulped. “I’ll take the first option, thank you.” She was genuinely nervous, but in a way she was grateful for Smiley’s help.

“So, let me see here: this space has a one on it, and it’s only touching one space that hasn’t been revealed yet. So, that space must be a bomb...”

--

In the Inthole, the land mine known as “Big Oliver” had been assigned to take out the two ints that were trying to carry the sign to the monitor earlier. At last he had cornered them—not an easy task for a guy named “Big Oliver” against two fast little ints. But here he was, closing in on them after they had reached a dead end.

Int A: Aaaah! No! We’re trapped, Joey!

Int B: I can see that, but there’s nothing I can do about it!

Oliver: (*walking ever closer*) You’re going down!

Int A: No! Please have mercy, Mr. Land Mine, sir. We never did anything to deserve any punishment!

Int B: Here, I have some sandwich material in my pocket. Would you like a sandwich?

Oliver: What’s on it?

Int B: Let’s see, there’s lettuce, tomato, cheese, ham—all made of silicon, of course, for that healthy int and land mine diet... yeah. All land mines love silicon, right? Heh heh.

Oliver: Does it have Miracle Whip on it?

Int B: I don't think so.

Oliver: In that case, you're dead!

Int B: Darn those truth-telling Miracle Whip commercials!

Oliver advances on the ints, but is all of a sudden stopped in his tracks. He is fading out.

Oliver: Wha-what's happening? I'm being deactivated! No! (his speech and movements become jerky motions, as if he is resisting some sort of unseen force) Dynamite... neutralized... Fuse link to game board... cut off... Bomb-like intimidating character and mojo... going... going... gone.

Oliver falls to the floor, unconscious.

Int A: Do you think he had a heart attack?

Int B: There's only one way to find out.

Int A: What's that?

Int B: Well, I saw on a Charlie Brown cartoon that you have to pound him on the nose.

Int A: Does this guy have a nose?

Int B: Good question. I say we just leave him here.

Int A: Agreed.

*They are about to walk away when Oliver gets up and smiles at the ints congenially.*

Int A: AAAAH! HE'S BACK! DEAD MINE WALKING! DEAD MINE WALKING!

Oliver: Hello, my little int friends. It's so nice to see you today. Would you please tell me what all you are yelling about?

Int A: (*blank expression on his face*) What did he say?

Int B: I think he's gone mad.

Oliver: No, I'm not mad. I'm me again. Normally, land mines such as myself are nice, gentle creatures. But whenever we're hooked up to the Minesweeper game, we get angry. I just got deactivated, which means I'm nice again now.

Int A: You don't say.

Int B: So, do you want that sandwich now?

Oliver: Does it have mayonnaise on it?

Int B: It's really more of a Dijon sauce.

Oliver: Grey Poupon?

Int B: No.

Oliver: WHAT?! That's it, ya little squirt, you're dead!

*The ints run past Oliver out into the open. Oliver chases them, chanting "No Miracle Whip and no Grey Poupon make Oliver an angry bomb" à la The Shining.*

Int A: (to Int B) You know, you really ought to use some higher quality condiments on your food. That's the second time this week someone's attacked you for not having Grey Poupon.

Int B: Hey, that's not true! The first time it was because I went to that Palamer house for a formal dinner and, in a western accent, asked the hostess to "please pass the jelly."

--

Brenda was getting the hang of this Minesweeper game. But now she was struck with a dilemma: there were only nine spaces left, forming a perfect square in the box, but all of the outer ones seemed to be bombs.

"Hmm, what do you think I should do, Gus? There are eight bombs remaining, and nine spaces. And because of the formation of numbers, I know that all of the ones attached to a number on the screen are land mines. Which one of the remaining four spaces should I choose?"

Gus shrugged at this question, that is to say, he would have if he had shoulders.

"I don't know," said Gus. "Maybe you should wait and see if your friend in the communication center can get back the phone line. Then he could tell you which space is safe."

"Oh, I hope he hurries," said Brenda. "There are only 100 seconds left!"  
99, 98, 97...

And now, the moment we've all been waiting for:

--Chapter Ten

“It’s all over, Angus DeFrag. You and your entire race will be wiped out in a few short seconds.”

“Not exactly,” said Angus to Fatal Error, who still stood in the doorway with the pair of scissors. “Ninety-six of the land mines have been deactivated. So only relatively minor damage will be done.”

Fatal laughed. “Not so, my byte-brained adversary.” Tired of standing, Fatal leaned against one of the machines in the communications center. He was completely unaware of the fact that when he did this, he pressed the Emergency Broadcast System button at the same time. Now his voice could be heard throughout the Monitor, Inthole, and other devices as he laid out his plan for Angus.

So all of the ninety-nine land mines heard their leader as he said, “You see, Mr. DeFrag, I’ve wired all of the land mines up so that even after deactivation, they can still explode. That way, I can make sure there aren’t any surviving mines to annoy me later. I gotta tell you, those mines were starting to get on my nerves. They’re all idiots! No good for anything except exploding and making a huge blast of it, too. Then the only ones left alive will be that girlfriend of yours, Brenda, and myself. Yes, Brenda will make a lovely Femme Fatale, don’t you think? Hahaha! She’ll never guess that the right space on the board is in the middle of the nine squares left! And as for you, janitor, I think it’s now time I showed you why I’m called Fatal.” Fatal pulled out a syringe. “It’s my latest virus,” he said, “And it’s waiting for you.”

Angus walked backwards as the Rogue Int advanced on him, until DeFrag found himself cornered. Angus had never dealt with a guy like Fatal before; that type of job was usually left for the soldier ints of the inthole. But Angus did know a thing or two about hand to hand combat; he remembered the days when he’d pretend his broom was a karate bo staff as he tapped into the music department to listen to “Kung Fu Fighting.”

The janitor adeptly batted the virus from Fatal’s grasp, at which point Angus turned the tables on our villain, so to speak.

“Take that! And that! And one of these, too!”

--

“Hmm, the space in the middle. Thanks, whoever said that!” Brenda had heard Fatal’s speech, even though she couldn’t recognize the voice for whatever reason. She now jumped on the space in the middle. When she didn’t hear an explosion, she looked down. She saw a giant black 8 on the space. “YES! WOOHOO! I did it! Hey, Smiley, I did it! All of the other bombs are flagged. We won!”

Smiley looked at her coolly through his sunglasses. “Believe me, I know. Wow, these are nice glasses. Won’t see these again for a while. Hey, thanks, little int friend.”

Brenda imitated Gus’s smile on her own face. “Don’t mention it,” she said. “Now, who was that on the loudspeaker calling me a ‘Femme Fatale?’”

--

Angus and Fatal were currently rolling about the floor in an all-out struggle, each with his hands around the other's throat. As they rolled out of the room and down some stairs, Fatal's palm pilot fell from his trenchcoat pocket. The micro-micro-computer smashed into pieces on the floor below, and all of the locks on the monitor were suddenly removed.

Then Fatal pulled a dirty trick—after all, is there a time when he *doesn't* pull a dirty trick?—and flung Angus over him and down the stairs. Fatal got up to finish the job, when ninety-nine landmines came up the stairs the other way. On instinct, Fatal ran back into the communication center to try and escape the army of mines. Then he found out, much to his dismay, that there was only one door leading in and out of the room; he was doomed.

“Only one exit?” Fatal yelled, dropping his cigarette for the last time in a long time. “That doesn't meet fire code! This Monitor is a deathtrap! Who in the world would design such a place?”

The author of this story, that's who.

“Oh, you shut up, Human.”

The name's Aetre, and I don't appreciate you telling me to shut up, thank you very much. Now I'm afraid I'm gonna have to kill you.

The bombs entered through the doorway, Big Oliver leading the group, his hand-like features in fists.

“Let's get him!” he yelled.

Fatal shivered at the thought of being beaten by an angry mob of land mines. He knew he had lost, and he knew that this time, it was permanent. Determined to end it all painlessly, he reached for the syringe he had brought into the building.

“Well, I hope this virus works as quickly as I designed it to,” he said. But because this is my story, and because I want to end the fic on a comical note, the virus didn't work. Nor did the land mines kill him.

Angus DeFrag saved Fatal's life from the mob of mines and the fanfiction author by yelling “STOP!” just as Oliver was about to do his thing. All of the mines looked at the janitor as he made his way to the front of the crowd.

Angus faced the entire army and shouted out, “Sure, we *could* kill him, but I've got a better idea...”

--

*Ints A and B sit at stools in The Motherboard. Once again, Int B is eating a sandwich.*

Int A: Say, Joey.

Int B: Yeah, what?

Int A: Y'know how all of these new people have been walking around the inthole lately? The land mines, the flags, and that little smiley face guy named Gus?

Int B: What about them?

Int A: Well, y'know, I've been thinking about how they've all been cut off from the Minesweeper program and welcomed here as members of our society. And I think to myself, what happens now if the Human turns on the computer and wants to play Minesweeper? He can't very well play it without any bombs or flags or smiley face, can he?

Int B: That's a silly question! Everybody knows that all of the characters have been replaced by inanimate pixel drawings on the Monitor screen.

Int A: True, but wouldn't that ruin the object of the game? What's the point if there's no real character to wear the sunglasses at the end of the game?

Int B: Ah, but that's the best part of all: now the objective of the game isn't to make Smiley wear the glasses, it's to blow him up!

Int A: I don't understand.

Int B: Y'know that int in the trench coat, Fatal Error? He's imprisoned behind the Minesweeper board, hooked up to ninety-nine electrodes, all attached to land mines on the screen. So whenever the Human blows up the smiley face, he gives Fatal Error a painful electric shock. And the Human enjoys doing it very much.

Int A: Oh, I get it! So that's why the Human keeps clicking on all those land mines every time he plays Minesweeper.

Int B: Why, yes it is. At least, that's his story and he's sticking to it.

A message from the author, Aetre:

And that, my friends, is why I wrote this story: to explain to the world why I can never seem to win at Minesweeper. No, seriously, I wrote this because I saw the category on the website, and I got curious. I hope you enjoyed this fic, especially because it's my first article to make it to the Internet in more than three years.

I have enjoyed reading all of your reviews, especially since they've all been good ones, and I'd like to thank all of you for having the good sense not to write a flame review for a PG-rated article.

As to those of you interested in a sequel, I welcome any fellow-authors to continue the saga at their own leisure. They may write a sequel, for I most certainly will not. Sorry, but sooner or later, we all have to admit that there's more to life than fanfics on Minesweeper. I'll be moving on to other things. But before I leave the imaginary world of the inthole forever, I'll leave you with this epilogue. Bye now, and come see me soon!

--Epilogue

Queen Pentium III, tired after a long session's work, issued the day's final orders to Sergeant McAfee.

"McAfee," she called wearily, "I've received the order from the Human to shut down for the day."

"Yes, your majesty," McAfee answered her. "I'll see to it we shut down properly."

As he was about to leave the throne room to issue the orders to the workers, the queen said, "McAfee, one more thing: what scheduled tasks do we have for the next time the computer turns on?"

"Why, there's nothing on the schedule except the Honors Ceremony for Angus DeFrag and Brenda Presario, those two worker ints who saved the whole colony."

"Ah, yes. Now I remember."

McAfee smiled lightly. For a Pentium, the queen sure was a forgetful creature. He added, "Next week, I understand they're getting married. We've all been invited to the wedding."

"Oh, good. I'm happy for them." The queen yawned and then said, "Do you think, McAfee, that there's a purpose to our work in this computer? Is it all for nothing, or are we really doing something important, living our little lives day in and day out?"

McAfee took his best shot at answering the question. "I don't know, your majesty, what all of our work amounts to, but what I do know is that it can amount to more if I just do what I can on my own. We can live our little lives, as you put it, conscious of what it does for ourselves and those around us. And when everybody works together, the society works like a well-oiled machine. And when there's a person out there like Fatal Error, trying to destroy that society, that's all the more reason to work together to stop him. That's what I think our work is done towards: a better machine, and a better way of life."

The queen had closed her eyes, and was about to fall asleep. In a sleepy voice, and with a kind smile on her face, she said, "Thank you. Go issue the command now, McAfee. Sergeant dismissed."

McAfee saluted her and walked out the door. Seconds later, the final message appeared on the screen, with new meaning now that Fatal Error had been stopped:

"It is now safe to turn off your computer."

The End