



Doc and the KidZaam Kommandoes

Part One: Science Fairs & Secret Lairs

Looking back on the whole thing--or, as someone's grandpa might put it, the whole *shebang*--started on a Friday in science class at the Nikola Tesla Middle School in Prescott, Arizona when Mr. Wilkins made an announcement: All science fair projects were due next Friday.

The announcement created a full-throated, school-wide groan that was reportedly heard for blocks. Leading the groan was the coolest girl in school, Pea Diatrack, better known as P.D. P.D. was the coolest girl in school because she was very athletic, attractive and intelligent, had a sense of humor and, most importantly, was nice and friendly to everyone.

The whole package.

Everything P.D. did or said was cool. (Especially her favorite word, which was, well, "cool." Her second favorite word: "sweet.") And especially cool was last year's science fair project, P.D.'s bar-raising study The Effect Of A 20 Pound Backpack On The Average Middle School Student's Posture. Expectations this year were off the chart. The pressure was on.

And P.D. had exactly zero ideas.

When P.D. got home from school she found a note from her mom: *Picking up a few things at the market, love Mom!* Lately P.D.'s mom has been into cooking, making frequent trips to the store for ingredients. And that reminded P.D. of her science project.

For which she had exactly zero ideas.

When nothing in the house or in the garage gave P.D. any ideas she went for a hike toward the empty sand lot at the end of her block. Almost like real desert, the field stretched for a couple of miles. It was popular with rabbits and coyotes and was where she and Taylor Feeney caught a gopher snake last summer. P.D. thought maybe another gopher snake could be her science project. Or maybe the discovery of a new species of centipede or scorpion or lizard. Things that were poisonous or wiggly never bothered P.D. and contributed (for Taylor and some of the other guys) to her coolness factor.

The hot cement pavement ended and P.D. turned left and walked into the field. Immediately the ground got rougher, full of holes and prickly bushes, sharp rocks and sticks that made P.D. have to concentrate on just walking. P.D. kept her eyes on the ground as she searched for prey.

How long had she walked? It was hard to tell, but suddenly the sky darkened. Looking up, she saw that the sun had slipped behind a building.

A building P.D. had never seen before...but one she had a word for:
“Sweet!”

P.D. was looking at the funniest building she had ever seen. She had no idea buildings could be purple! It had flags flying and wind socks socking and antennae sticking out all over the roof. *What is this place?* she wondered. Somehow, just sitting there, this strange building seemed to be *alive*. And enjoying itself very much.

P.D. had to get a closer look. There were no doors. P.D. saw only one window, up on the second story. P.D. guessed she was at the back of the building. P.D. approached slowly, even though there was no reason to be scared. This wasn't some spooky building. This place felt downright friendly. *If only I could get to that window.* P.D. noticed that a drain pipe running up the side of the building was really close to a work shed...which was really close to the window...

The shimmy-up was a snap for P.D. Crouching low she crawled across the shed roof, peeked inside the window, and saw a large, open room. Like a laboratory. But a bright, colorful one, too. Purple and blue and yellow, and full of scientific gadgets and gear. P.D. watched as a man with a wild mane of white hair and a matching mustache paced the floor. The man wore a white coat and tinted glasses and checkered pants and waved his hands as he talked, with lots of pointing and gesturing. *Who's he talking to?* P.D. wondered, leaning closer and scanning the room.

“Waa!”

That was the sound, somewhere between a yelp and a cry, that P.D. made when saw who the man with the white hair was talking to.

Strange beings from another world.

There were two of them. One was tall and blue and the other was tall and sort of orange-yellow. Both had stretchy, elongated bodies and arms and necks and feet and hands. The orange-yellow one was riding in some kind of high-tech, go-cart wheelchair. And, like Taylor Feeney and every other kid in school, both were dressed in shorts, t-shirts, tennis shoes and ball caps.

Unfortunately, P.D.'s “Waa!” did not go unnoticed. Microphonic sensors had picked it up, setting off an alarm of clanging bells and flashing lights. The strange beings and the man raced to a computer screen, turned and looked up at the window. The strange beings pointed. She'd been spotted.

“Uh-oh.”

P.D. scooted backwards across the shed roof, grabbed the pipe and slid down. P.D. took off running and got about three and a half steps back away from the building when she heard a dull *clunk* sound and the ground opened up in front of her. Running 'way too fast to stop, the girl tumbled headfirst into the hole. While falling through the air P.D. braced herself to hit bottom when *bloommp!* instead of landing hard, she bounced and flew back into the air, easily clearing ground level on the way up. As she started to fall P.D. heard

another *clunk* and the ground closed. Just as she was about to hit a large net *swooshed* in, snagged her, and swung her high over the roof, where she was hoisted over a large dish and then dropped in.

Plonk! P.D. barely caught the edge and held on as the dish opened at the bottom where a tube disappeared into darkness. Suddenly a giant, mechanical hand appeared, grabbed the dish and gave it a good jiggle.

Aye-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi! P.D. tried, but her grip gave way, and down the tube she went, turning and twisting.

Shrrroooooooooom! P.D. slid and slid and slid, finally bursting through an opening and tumbling onto a cushy mat. The aliens applauded. The entire journey had taken only a few seconds but, like a rollercoaster ride, it had been a wild experience. P.D. jumped to her feet.

"That was so cool!"

"Well, at least we know the security system works!" The man with the white hair and matching mustache stepped forward and stuck his hands out.

"Hi, I'm Doc."

"I'm P.D. Can I do that again?"

"Sure! Break in any time!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I, uh, I didn't mean to--"

"Don't worry about it! Thanks for testing it for me!"

"You're...welcome."

"C'mere, P.D. Lemme see something. Lemme see your teeth. It's okay, I'm a professional dentist. Open." Gently Doc held P.D.'s jaw in his soft hands and the girl opened her mouth.

"Aaaah," she said, instinctively.

Doc peered in and turned her head gently this way and that, peeking at her teeth from several angles. He smiled and patted her head.

"Well done, young lady! A flosser! And not a big *sweeteater*, either!"

PD shook her head.

Doc winked. "You know, my dear, I can tell a lot about a person by looking at their teeth. You know how some people are mind readers? Well, I'm a teeth reader!"

"Yeah? So what do mine say?"

Doc winked again. "They say you and I are gonna be terrific friends!"

P.D. looked around the laboratory. It was clean, shiny, happy and colorful, full of tubes, valves, gauges, pipes, canisters, chemicals, computers, instruments, screens and tools. It was a place where thinking, science and fun obviously happen, and frequently. P.D. was so enchanted by the lab that it took a moment before she realized she was standing next to the two strange beings.

"These two. What planet are they from?"

Doc and the two strange beings cracked up.

"Haha," they said.

"That's a good one," the blue being said.

"Why is that a good one?"

"Because we're local!" said the orange-yellow being.

Doc stepped forward. "That's right. They're from our planet! Presenting two of the nicest white blood cells you're ever gonna find inside of anyone, anywhere, at any time...Limf and Node. Say hello, fellas."

"Hi. I'm Limf," Limf said.

"And I'm Node," Node said. Limf and Node waved and P.D. waved back. But she had questions.

"White blood cells? From a human? How'd they get, uh...*here*?"

"Oh, I made them bigger. A lot bigger," Doc said. "And now they help me in my disease-fighting work. In fact, I couldn't do it without them."

"Aw," Limf and Node said at the same time. It looked to P.D. like they were blushing, if it was possible for a blood cell to blush. Suddenly, an idea bubbled to the front of P.D.'s brain. P.D. turned to Limf and Node.

"How would you guys like to be in a science project?"

Limf and Node looked at each other and shrugged and at the same time said:

"Sure."

"Cool," P.D. said. A show-and-tell with giant, talking white blood cells? It will be the coolest science project ever. P.D. turned to Doc. "How'd they get so big?"

"Ah!" Doc had a twinkle in his eye. "That was my science project!"

As P.D. soon learned, Doc is the world's foremost inventor-dentist, or *invententist*--and has the proclamations, awards, degrees and patents to prove it. Doc is also a great example of the old saying: *Never judge a book by its cover*. Despite his wacky, absent-minded-grandpa-professor look, Doc was spry and athletic the way he bounded around the lab, demonstrating his inventions and talking about much how fun he has combining his three favorite passions: Science, Imagination and Creativity. P.D. couldn't decide if Doc was the world's oldest kid, or the world's youngest adult.

Between Doc's proton brushes, digital flushers, and solar squirters P.D. was pretty impressed. There was a world of wonderful science fair projects in here.

"But let me show you my greatest creation! So far, anyway." Doc waved his hand with a flourish, and a curtain parted. Limf and Node *ooohed* together, even though they'd seen it a million times before.

"Presenting...the Minimaximizer!"

"Cool," P.D. said. "What's it do?"

"Well, the short answer is, the Minimaximizer makes real little things (like white blood cells for instance) real big, and real big things real little!"

"Sweet."

"See, ever since I was a small person I've liked to look at things," Doc punched a keyboard and a screen showed slides of cells. "Anything, everything in this amazing world of ours. It's all so fascinating! But it always bugged me not to be able to get, well, *up-close and personal* with the small stuff, like bacteria and viruses. So I invented the Minimaximizer."

Limf pushed a button on the wall and a curtain opened, revealing what looked like a small, compact flying saucer.

"Is that a flying saucer?"

"Looks like one, doesn't it?" A hatch opened, and Doc and P.D. climbed inside. It sure looked like a spaceship, with banks of computers and lights and dials and buttons and switches. P.D. noticed there was seating for four.

"This here's the Mini-Transportron. We get in here, the Minimaximizer shrinks us down, and then in we go. It's the best way I've found to take care of disease. Especially with these." Doc handed P.D. a sleek, two-handed ray gun called the Bacto-Zapper 3000. She wanted to try it real bad.

"Cooooool."

"See, when bacteria—which are usually microscopic to us—are now the *same size* as we are, things can get ugly. 'Course, I've got these two helping out." Doc tossed a thumb toward Limf and Node. Limf raised his hand and Node cleared his throat.

"What is it, fellas?"

"We were wondering."

"What?"

"If P.D. could join our club."

"You have a club?" P.D. said.

"Yeah, a small one." Limf said. "Well, it's small right now."

"How small?"

"Counting you? Let's see, uh..." Limf scratched behind his ear, or where an ear would be if he was a human and not a leukocyte.

"Four," he said.

"What's it called?"

Doc spoke up. "The "KidZaam Kommandoes!" he said.

"Catchy. Are there any uniforms?"

They all looked at Doc. Doc shook his head.

"Sweet," P.D. said. "Count me in. What do I have to do?"

"You have to recite the official KidZaam Kommandoes Pledge," Limf said.

"Okay."

"Repeat after me. I, state your name."

"I, Pea Diatruck. P.D. to you guys."

Limf led PD in reciting The KidZaam Kommandoes Pledge, which went exactly like this:

As a member of the KidZaam Kommandoes, I hereby pledge to:

1.) Brush my teeth twice a day, if I have them.

("See, not all of our KidZaam Kommandoes are gonna have teeth," Limf said, opening his mouth to make the point.)

2.) Fight disease and infection at all times.

- 3.) Be a good and loyal friend.
- 4.) Always do what you can to help others in need.
- 5.) Always read the directions.
- 6.) Get plenty of sleep and have lots of fun.
- 7.) Uphold the laws, by-laws, in-laws and out-laws of KidZaam Klub, wherever and whatever they may be.

“Congratulations, PD!” Doc said. “Welcome to the club. Here’s your membership card.” Limf draped a lanyard around her neck. PD looked at it. *KidZaam Kommandoes* was spelled out in bold colors above her picture—a good one, too. (Although it was difficult if not downright impossible to take a bad picture of P.D.) They even spelled *Diatrick* right, and hardly anyone ever does that.

Next Doc demonstrated the elaborate secret club handshake, which kicked-off with a standard shake but added two wrist-twists, a brief thumb-wrestle followed by a fluttering of the fingers, a snap and a backwards palm-slap before concluding with a wiggling, protruding hitchhike-thumb. P.D. practiced it with Node until she had it down cold. Then Doc cleared his throat and lowered his eyebrows.

“Now, P.D., before you start thinking its all puppy dogs and rainbows around here, I want you to sit and listen to a story. A story about my enemy and arch-rival.”

“Doc,” P.D. teased, “How could you have an enemy?”

“I know, huh?” Doc chuckled, and then nodded toward Limf and Node who threw a couple of wall switches. The lights dimmed and a screen rose out of the floor. Doc sighed. “But, unfortunately, it’s true.”

Doc pulled a laser pointer out of his pocket. The screen flickered on. Slides showed a pretty, tree-lined college campus. “Once, a long time ago, ‘way back in dental school, I had a certain, uh, friend. Acquaintance, really. His name was DK.”

A picture of a man appeared on the screen. In the “Before” picture, DK looked like any normal dentist-in-training.

“For a couple of years, DK and I had all of our classes together and all of our labs together. And somehow, though it was never intentional or planned, we became rivals. I guess it was natural, being that he and I were the two brightest bulbs on the tree, if you catch my drift. But I never felt the rivalry, because I always finished first. I always got the top grade. And DK, he always finished second.” Doc looked at the ceiling. “I take that back. Once he came in third.”

Doc continued. “Science fairs, model building contests, spelling bees, crossword puzzles, you name it. I got the blue ribbon and he got *zip*. Or worse.

And boy, did it ever get him. Really ate him up. It made him crazy, and eventually, do crazy things. And the craziest thing he did happened at the Fourteenth Annual International Competition of Amazing New Inventions, the biggest invention convention in the world. The night before the competition, DK stole my Minimimizer—and tried to pass it off as his invention!”

“Oh! So that's how we got Pledge Number 5!” Limf said.

“That's right. *Always read the directions.* DK, in his haste to steal the Minimimizer, forgot to steal the manual! The directions! And lemme tell ya, it's a tricky little gizmo. But DK didn't have 'em, and when he turned the Minimimizer on he hit switch B-7 instead of switch B-5, a tragic error which created an electron mismatch in the plasma-capacitor buffing grid and caused a phenomena called a *humohazmatoma*, a fusing of human and germ. Just like that, DK became half-man, half-infectious disease. A human hazardous waste site! Behold!”

On the screen, the “After” picture came on. P.D. shuttered. Now DK was a slimy, green, multi-legged amorphous ball of pestilential goo.

Doc continued. “As you can imagine, among other things, DK's social life went *kerfloey*. And, of course, DK blamed the whole deal on me! So he vowed eternal vengeance on me and all dentists everywhere, pledging to wreak cavity-havoc by personally infecting teeth and gums, encouraging disease and spreading filth and putrescence throughout the world. How do you like that?”

“Not much.” P.D. said. “So where is he now?”

Limf and Node shook their heads. “If only we knew!”

Node nodded. “But we see his work all over the place.”

“It's in every mouth in town,” Limf added.

Doc went on. “My guess? DK's hiding out in a secret lair somewhere--the dirtiest, smelliest, most horribly-diseased laboratory in the history of laboratories, thinking up new ways to be bad.”

Doc called the first official meeting of the KidZaam Kommandoes to order. With Doc running things they got a lot of business done. They figured out their first official password, and brainstormed parts of the website design. They discussed the fun and practicality of using secret codes and secret messages—cryptography—for club correspondence. They also decided that all members were required to attend club meetings a minimum of twice a year, to brush-up on any new by-laws and for a quick once-over on the snags by Doc.

As P.D. got to know her friends better, the more she liked them, as strange as they were. Limf was really funny and smart and kinda goofy at the same time, and Node was really cool and a wiz on wheels, which he demonstrated on a prototype of Doc's newest invention, a skateboard with a tiny jet engine that ran on apple sauce.

“And now, for the final bit of new business.” Doc held up a poster. It was a big advertisement that read: *KidZaam Dentistry Grand Opening Tomorrow! Food, Games, Entertainment, Science & Surprises!*

“Yep, I'm finally hanging out my shingle!” Doc laughed. “It's about time I put my theories about science, creativity, fun and dentition into practice! One

thing's for sure, if DK reads the papers—and I'll bet you a glazed donut he does—he won't have any trouble finding us! I mean...me!"

"No! You mean *us!*" Limf, Node and PD yelled at the same time, and then they all burst into laughter. All for one and one for all. The Kidz Kommandoes were in this together.

Meanwhile, in an extremely remote part of the desert, the city dump festered. Like all city dumps everywhere, the dump was a living, stinking, ever-growing fact of life. To get within 200 meters of the place a normal person has to wear, at the very least, a gas mask and hazmat suit.

But the brothers known as Wear & Tear--who were *right now* zooming between mounds of rancid piles of garbage on Segways--wore what they always wore, their uniform: tattered, torn and disgustingly filthy cutoff pants (unbelted) shirts (untucked) and workboots (unlaced). The brothers' heads were, as usual, bare and unprotected as they snaked their way, single file through heaps and piles of decaying garbage, trash and paper, kicking up dirt, scattering flies and scuttling rats in their wake. When the brothers passed a large KEEP OUT, RESTRICTED AREA sign they smiled and waved and a tiny light hidden in the sign blinked. A camera followed and watched as they sped directly toward a huge garbage mound, the largest and oldest mound in the dump. Just before the brothers were about to smack head-first a hole materialized in the wall, and in they zipped, rubbish closing behind them.

The air inside the trash-cave was heavy, hot and fetid; a permanent greenish haze. The cave was dark and steaming, smelly, wet and disgusting beyond imagination. It was the heart of nastiness.

It was also the perfect secret lair.

Parking their Segways the brothers weren't aware of the bizarre creature that slinked with surprising speed through the shadows towards them until it leapt out and rasped:

"You're *late!*"

"*Wha!*" The brothers jumped two feet straight up. "I hate when you do that," Tear said. "Me, too." Said Wear.

"And that's exactly *why* I do it," said DK.

Even for the brothers, who were long-time employees, the legendary DK was difficult to take. Half-man, half-infectious disease, DK was green, toad-like and poisonous on top, crabbed and spiky on the bottom with six sharpened barbs where his legs used to be, B.M., or Before Minimimizer.

Wear tossed a paper bag at DK, who caught it greedily. "Just so you know, I think the guy at the bait shop might be getting suspicious," Wear said.

"I don't care," DK snarled, "It's my one extravagance." DK reached inside the bag and pulled out a handful of long, slippery red worms and tossed them

into his mouth. As he chewed, DK thought, *Yum*. One worm slipped and fell into the dirt and before it could wiggle away DK skewered the worm with his front leg and popped it into his mouth. *Yum*, he thought again.

Wear watched and made a face. “Ugh,” he said.

DK sneered, half-eaten worms oozing out through broken, decaying teeth. “Get to work,” he said.

The brothers crossed the room to a large console. Like everything in the cave, the cave was filthy, covered in dirt, grease and unnamed stickiness. Tear brushed some debris off of a keyboard and punched at it.

“Powering up!” Tear said and then he, Wear and DK slipped on sunglasses. Wear hit a switch and the Dump turned on.

Throughout the cave, one by one, lights began flickering *on* as a huge, huddled mass of old computer parts came to life. Rows and rows and rows of the collected innards of thousands of desktop computer towers, fax machines, and printers hummed, clicked and moaned. Along one entire wall of trash, a floor-to-ceiling video wall—made of hundreds of old video monitors—burst into brilliant, bright life. (Hence the sunglasses.) The Dump, as its creators Wear & Tear affectionately referred to it, was constructed entirely out of improperly disposed e-waste. The Dump was one of the largest, most powerful computer systems in the world.

And nobody knew about it.

“Hey, Deekay. Isn’t this your old buddy?”

Wear punched a few strokes on a keyboard. The video wall flickered and the front page of a newspaper, *The Daily Courier*, appeared. Wear scrolled down a few pages and stopped on a large advertisement.

DK gazed at the wall. “Is this today’s paper?” he asked.

“Yessir.”

There it was, right there in front of him, in big bold letters: *KidZaam Dentistry Grand Opening Tomorrow! Food, Games, Entertainment, Science & Surprises!* And there he was too—Doc! After all these years! DK fumed. And he’s still mocking me! With that same stupid hair and mustache and that same stupid smile!

“He’s asking for it, I tell you!” DK snarled, and slammed a fist on the console. “*And I’m gonna get him if it’s the last thing I do!!*”

“Yes, Master DK the Odiferous,” the brothers chanted sarcastically, and then laughed. DK’s eyes flashed.

“You mock me! How dare you!”

“Yeah, well, maybe you shoulda paid more attention to computers back in school, Deekay.”

DK fought the urge to skewer the wise-guy computer nerd with one of his legs. Unfortunately, he needed both of them.

“Speaking of... I have a job for you and your little friend there.” DK pointed at the computer. “I want Dumpy to tell me what to do about Doc. What

punishment would be the most appropriate to inflict upon him? Dumpy can do that, right? Cook up some outrageously evil plot, hmmm?"

Wear and Tear shrugged. "Don't know why not. All we have to do is program it--"

"Then do it!"

"It's gonna take time."

"You have until noon today."

"But—"

"Go!"

DK raised a spiked leg. The brothers spun back to their console and furiously began punching keyboards. *Sure is tough to get good help*, DK thought, picking at what was left of his teeth. Honestly, DK didn't give a hearty hoot what the computer recommended for Doc, what evil plot or dastardly plan of attack should be carried out. DK didn't care how long it might take, or even how much it might cost. No, DK only cared about three things: That the plot was permanent, fatal...and didn't fail.

Story by by Tom Child